

THE ROLE OF LOUD POPULAR MUSIC IN REVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROCESSES: SOME INITIAL CONCEPTUAL IDEAS

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Abstract

There is a burgeoning literature on the causes of autocratic breakdowns. There is also at least anecdotal evidence that loud popular music has preceded, or at least been associated, with radical political changes in authoritarian regimes, the dissolution of the Soviet Union being perhaps the most illustrious example. But very little is known about the causal mechanisms that could account for these effects. This is the lacuna that this paper seeks to fill by addressing the following questions: What is the causal link between loud popular music and authoritarian unravelling? What are the physiological, psychological and social processes at play?

Introduction⁴⁶

Since its inception in the 1950s rock'n'roll has been perceived as a music of rebellion, even revolution (Friedlander 1996). There is also a widespread belief that it – or loud popular music (LPM) in the parlance of this paper – played a key role in the revolutionary processes that resulted in the dissolution of the Communist power in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites (Campbell Robinson et al. 1991, p. 30; Ramet 1994; Rinne 2007; Wicke and Shepherd 1993, p. 25; Woodhead 2013). Ramet (1994) has gone as far as to argue that the same applies to all revolutionary processes:

Every revolution has its music. The American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Bolshevik Revolution all produced stirring and riveting music, usually marches. Political revolution, it seems, is a powerful progenitor of certain kinds of music. The uses of and role played by such music are clear enough. Indeed, *one may go so far as to say that without music, there cannot be a revolution.* (p. 1, emphasis added)

That rousing music and public cultural events do play a role in revolutionary social and political processes is not in doubt. But we know far less about the specific mechanisms – social, psychological, even (neuro)biological – that could account for these effects. This paper seeks to make a contribution to this debate by seeking to sketch and outline some initial conceptual starting points that will act as the basis for future theoretical and empirical investigations of the topic. In particular, and drawing from a variety of different starting points ranging from neurobiology and psychology to musicology and social theory, the paper addresses the following questions: What, if any, is the causal link

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between LPM and authoritarian unravelling? What are the physiological, psychological and social processes and mechanisms at play?

This paper proceeds in two stages. First, the so-called enabling and catalysing functions of LPM in revolutionary processes are discussed. This is then followed by a call for a more detailed research programme that should be pursued in future to shed empirical light on the usefulness of these conceptualisations.

The enabling and catalysing functions of loud popular music in revolutionary processes

In order to understand the role that music can play in a revolutionary process we must first define and refine the terms. To begin with, *music* is a combination of frequency, beat, density, tone, rhythm, repetition, loudness and lyrics (Trappe 2012, p. 103). Instead of rock'n'roll a more generic term loud popular music is used throughout the paper. It remains agnostic about the myriad of different sub-genres in rock'n'roll (see Walser 1993) and is not too interested in drawing a rigid boundary, for example, between pop and rock. Instead, by loud popular music we simply mean artefacts and other products of music that share the following features: loud, pulsating rhythms of (usually) electric and bass guitars and drums as well as lyrics that usually contain certain escapist elements, enabling the reimagining of alternative future realities for the person(s) listening to that music. More will be said about all of these qualities and their possible effects on revolutionary processes below.

Turning to the question of revolutionary processes, Calvert (1996, p. 3) has suggested four useful ways to think about a revolution:

- As a *process* by which people become disenchanted with the incumbent government;
- as an *event* in which an existing government is overthrown (and a new one established in its stead);
- as a *programme* of change instituted and carried through by the incoming government;
- and as a *myth* later describing the previous stages and in effect legitimising the new status quo.

Arguably popular culture, and perhaps LPM in particular, has played a role in all of these stages. We have seen images of anti-government protesters marching to the tune of various music; afterwards we have heard songs praising and mystifying the revolutionary feats of successful revolutionaries – and everything in between. Yet it would most definitely be an exaggeration to suggest that LPM directly *causes* revolutions. Obviously, revolutionary political processes are rooted in and stem from a myriad of background factors, economic, social or even ideological (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Yet at times artefacts and other products of popular culture can act as important intervening variables in these processes. It is argued that it is especially in the first two meanings of revolution above that the potential impact of LPM is probably the biggest. In essence, it can be seen to have two main functions in revolutionary processes: enabling the *process* and catalysing (or even triggering) the *event*. In other words, LPM can play an important role in, first, making people ripe for a revolution and, second, by bringing them together and catalysing the revolutionary mood in triggering or at least hastening the actual event. These two functions are discussed next in turn.

But before proceeding one should acknowledge the biochemical and neural origins of most of the effects and mechanisms discussed on this occasion (see Koelsch and Siebel 2005; Peretz 2001; Trehub 2003). That said, it is worth pointing out that this is not the primary interest of this paper. On the contrary, the existence of these issues is largely taken as a given and are used to tease out mechanisms that are relevant in terms of revolutionary social and political processes which are the key concern. Therefore this is a piece in social and political science that uses neuroscientific and psychological insights but does not make a claim that the former can or should be subsumed by the latter.

Enabling the process of revolution

Before a revolution gets underway, usually three things must have transpired: (i) the state must be in a crisis; (ii) the elites must be in conflict with each other; and (iii) a significant part of the population must be mobilised for protest (Goldstone 1995, p. 45). It seems clear that these three processes are inter-linked and indeed mutually reinforcing. It is argued that it is the third facet where LPM can play the biggest role: in enabling and in the final instance mobilising and even triggering revolutionary processes that involve popular protest.

To understand why this is the case we need to look at a number of different mechanisms through which rock'n'roll can have an effect on these processes. Frith (2007, p. 309) has suggested that music in effect 'constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives.' It is argued that by seeking to conceptually account for all these different facets of the musical experience a compelling case can be made concerning the active role that the artefacts and processes of popular culture can have in revolutionary social and political processes. It should also be pointed out that these kinds of investigations entail embracing the multi-level and indeed the multi-causal nature of the issues at stake.

In the following the possible effects of LPM are discussed, firstly, on the level of individuals and then, secondly, on the level of groups and collective action. First, music in general and LPM perhaps in particular has been found to elicit strong emotional and empowering responses in individuals (Nater, Abbruzzese, Krebs and Ehlert 2006). Harris (2004, p. 152) has gone as far to argue that no other kind of media hooks into emotions more strongly than music (for a comprehensive treatment of the topic, see Juslin and Sloboda 2001). On the first level of analysis, there are the immediate physical effects of listening to such forms of music. As was mentioned, rock music in general, and hard rock and heavy metal in particular, is characterised by the loud, pulsating rhythms of electric and bass guitars and drums (Strasburger 1995, p. 81). In this respect, especially the high tempo and the very loudness of LPM are of particular interest as they usually are associated with intensity/power, tension, anger and joy (Gabrielsson and Lindström 2001, pp. 235, 240). Physiologically listening to these kinds of sounds has a vitalising affect that in the words of Koelsch and Siebel (2005, p. 581) entail the activation:

of the autonomic nervous system (i.e. regulation of sympathetic and parasympathetic activity) along with the cognitive integration of musical and non-musical information. Non-musical information comprises associations evoked by the music, as well as emotional (e.g. happy) and bodily reactions (e.g. tensioned or relaxed).

By and large the sensations associated with listening to rock'n'roll and other forms of loud popular music have been found to result in arousal that is similar to the fight or flight reaction. It pumps the person (those who enjoy those kinds of sounds, to be precise) with adrenalin, resulting in feelings of exhilaration and energy, sometimes even with rage, disappointment and propensity towards aggressive behaviour (Trappe 2012, p. 103; Anderson and Bushman 2002, p. 39). That said, also lowered levels of anxiety have been noted in some studies. In general, it is not uncommon to hear people characterise musical experiences resulting in increased feelings of joy, elated mood and energy (Lingham and Theorell 2009, pp. 157-158). It has also been noticed that listening to music can induce the so-called peak or flow experience – intense engagement involving some loss of time and place, heightened pleasure or even altered states of consciousness (Trehub 2003, p. 672) – that can often induce feelings of a complete loss of fear, anxiety, inhibition, defence and control (Gabrielsson 2001, p. 431). It goes without saying that these sentiments go strongly against the grain of everyday realities in authoritarian, let alone totalitarian societies and especially the peak experience can act as a springboard for radical actions against the present, oppressive order.

One should also note the differing short- and long-term effects of listening to particular kinds of music. Labbé et al. (2007, p. 167) have noted how listening to music, heavy metal in particular, repeatedly for long times can have both short-term and lasting emotional and cognitive effects on the listener. A useful distinction in this respect is one between emotions and moods where the more fleeting emotive states can be seen to bias particular instances of action while long-term moods bias cognition. The causal chain goes from individual emotional states triggered by, among other things, listening to particular kinds of music to more stable moods that tend to shift the mode of information processing in ways that can influence memory, decision-making and evaluative judgments. What is more there is a certain feedback loop at play between the two in a sense that certain moods can alter the probability that particular emotions will be triggered. (Sloboda and Juslin 2001, p. 75) In other words, listening to rebellious rock can result in a long-term rebellious mood and a basic disposition that can trigger further rebellious emotions and even acts under otherwise propitious circumstances. Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, it cannot be ruled out that LPM can play a significant enabling, even triggering role in revolutionary processes in individuals.

It should also be pointed out that even the simple physical qualities of music are not necessarily entirely void of meaning and ideational components. Walser (1993, p. 49) has noted how the 'oppressive' 4/4 beat that characterises much of commercial rock is akin to a military march that can be seen to inculcate single-mindedness in its listener. By contrast, he notes, the guitar solo – which seems to be an almost mandatory aspect of hard rock and heavy metal – acts as a liberating and empowering vehicle against the monotonous beat of the song (Ibid., pp. 53-54). In this sense the basic dissonance of oppressive conformity and violently eruptive individuality are built into the very musical fabric of rock'n'roll.

These interpretations, although arguably somewhat impressionistic, nevertheless brings in the second level of analysis of music playing an important role in the emotional and ideational empowerment and consequent socialisation of people (Lingham and Theorell 2009, p. 151; Strasburger 1995, p. 82). These affects can be discerned on two levels, individual and the collective. On the level of individuals, through music a certain personal identity or worldview is

formed, renewed and promoted (Trappe 2012, p. 103) that often acts as a powerful symbol of anti-establishment rebellion, be it parents of the wider society. It should also be noted that usually – but not exclusively – the avid consumers of rock'n'roll are adolescents and in particularly young males, a demographic that has also been found the most likely cohort for revolutionary tendencies (Goldstone 2013; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, Ch. 4). What is more, there seems to be a certain mutually reinforcing process at play where particularly sensation-seeking, even reckless personalities are drawn towards loud popular music which then, in turn, further reinforces, sediments and gives an explicit channel of expression for these sentiments (Arnett 1992; Nater, Krebs and Ehler 2005).

In addition to basic dispositions, music can also help to shape the identity and worldview of its listeners. In this respect the lyrics are of particular importance. Lyrics can act as a rallying point for popular consciousness and even call for political action (Campbell Robinson et al. 1991, p. 266). What is more, there seems to be increasing evidence that repeated exposure to some of the rebellious, even aggressive content in popular culture can 'prime' other semantically related thoughts, resulting in a situation where other issues or stimuli can be associated with the same cognition *that can also spur actual action* (Fischer and Greitemeyer 2006, pp. 1166, 1175; Anderson and Bushman 2002, p. 42). In other words, for example, the Judas Priest song "Parental Guidance" that simply extolls the virtues of being free from such overweening guidance in the life of an adolescent can easily result in a re-interpretation where the parent is replaced with the governmental Big Brother and the imaginary adolescent with the person who is doing the listening and who then feels empowered, perhaps even compelled to act on this idea.

A caveat is in order here. It can be debated whether notions of rebellion are in fact the mainstream of rock'n'roll lyrics. On the contrary, the dominant theme in rock'n'roll has been romance (Friedlander 1996, p. 285). What is more, there is also some debate about the extent to which people actually pay attention to lyrics when listening to music (Ibid., p. 267; Frith 1996, p. 164). Yet it is worth pointing out that these findings mainly apply to the Western consumption of music. In fact, the evidence we have about the usage of music in the former Soviet Union is that not only music but also the lyrics were particularly important: they were seen as conveying the expressions of individual freedom and other Western values, and were as such seen as being in stark contrast to the mundane realities of the Soviet Union, even revealing the fraudulent nature of the whole socialist experiment (Rinne 2007; Woodhead 2013).

It is also important that these effects do not take place solely on the level of individuals. Humans are intensely social creatures and even solitary music listening always evokes feelings that are embedded in a wider social context (Trehub 2003, p. 671). Music helps individuals to identify with a certain peer group based on certain shared ideas, ideals and practices. Music may also lead to synchronous behaviours within groups (Lingham and Theorell 2009) and can also organise social and collective action. Simply getting together to listen to, practice, record or disseminate music, organise (often forbidden) public hearings of records or even live concerts or simply debating the music with like-minded others are all powerful fora for peer-group formation. Also the romantic and sexual entanglements associated with rock are of significance in this context. For example, in the Soviet Union a whole clandestine network of people formed around the question of producing and exchanging tapes and other discs. What is more, engaging one-self in these usually illicit activities

created a sense of bonding and common purpose among the individuals (Rinne 2007; Woodhead 2013).

North and Hargreaves (1999) have called musical preferences a badge of identity that individuals use as an indicator of their own personality as well as the broader social groups that they identify with. Here Social Identity Theory shows the way by alluding to the process of group-formation and difference between certain groupings as the basis of individual and in particular social group identity (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2006, pp. 24-25). In a similar vein, Grossberg (1984) has argued how music can help people to form what he has called affective alliances that result in practices of strategic empowerment that stand in stark contrast to the hegemonic structures in their everyday lives. If this has been the case in the liberal and pluralist West, then it can be argued that the empowering effect has probably been much more pronounced in authoritarian, let alone totalitarian societies that do not allow any space for public, sometimes even for private dissent. In these circumstances putting on a forbidden record and letting it rip is in itself an act of rebellion that pushes that person beyond what is acceptable in the System. This is not to argue that every single individual engaging herself in these activities is a proto-revolutionary but that there definitely is a certain process at work here that results in an irreconcilable tension between the act of listening to LPM and remaining within the accepted bounds of conformity in an authoritarian system.

Indeed, the contextual side of the issue is probably of paramount importance. The effects, in this instance the revolutionary potential of rock'n'roll, of any form of music is crucially dependent on the social and political context in which it is embedded (Grossberg 1984, p. 226). For example, Negut and Sârbescu (2014) have showed how many of the allegedly negative outcomes related to rock and hip-hop seem to stem more from the negative stereotypes associated with these types of music than from any of the objective qualities of the music styles as such. In a similar vein, in liberal and pluralist societies LPM may only act as a conduit for teenage angst and rebellion against the authority of the parents and/or school (Arnett 1992) but in authoritarian, even totalitarian societies it can gain more over political meanings that make it a conduit, even a forum for a more systemic political opposition against the current regime. In this respect, the reactions of the state and its apparatus often play a key role in the politicisation of music: the decisions to shun, ban or otherwise stigmatise LPM has paradoxically often resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy of the very politicisation of music that the authorities have sought to avoid in the first place (Ramet 1994, p. 3). For example, in the case of the Soviet Union, the people's love for popular music was in effect a slippery slope that pushed them to the margins and even outside of the Soviet system by default and turned one into a proto-revolutionary in the process (Rinne 2007; Woodhead 2013). The paradoxical reality behind this state of affairs however was that, and when taken on their own merits, most of the actual songs were by and large politically innocent, dealing with themes such as love and sex and the trials of growing up, very much like in the West, and they acquired dangerous qualities partly because the authorities chose to view them dangerous and subversive (Ramet, Zamascikov and Bird 1994, p. 208). That said, it cannot be denied that many who are drawn towards the rock scene in authoritarian societies do so precisely in order to find a serviceable vehicle for some form of opposition to the system (Ramet 1994, p. 5).

Finally, a note about the intentional agency of the rock musicians themselves is in order as well. Even though rock'n'roll has often been seen as 'revolutionary', this does not mean that the rockers themselves necessarily have aspired to such a function or status. On the contrary, instead of promoting social change, often the musicians themselves have been more interested in their own musical self-expression and material well-being, even simply their own hedonistic pleasures they get out of playing and performing (Persson 2001, p. 277). For example, Simon Frith has noted how for the majority of Soviet musicians perestroika was not a golden opportunity to foment revolution but a period of chaos that made them worry about the sustainability of their own careers instead (in Campbell Robinson et al. 1991, p. 281). The same applies to the Beatles that in the words of Leslie Woodhead 'Rocked the Kremlin' (2013): a thorough analysis of their entire career has betrayed that apart from a certain anti-authoritarian bent very little overtly political coherent thinking can in fact be found (Collins 2014). Frith (1996, p. 165) has argued that this need not matter: the history of popular music is littered with 'protest' songs whose political power has bored little or no resemblance at all to their intended messages. This mismatch between the thoughts and intentions of those who make the music and the interpretations attached to it by those who listen to it is another paradox alongside the unintentional politicisation of music already mentioned above. Walser (1993, p. 31) has gone a long way towards explaining this when arguing how

ultimately music doesn't have meanings; people do. There is no essential, foundational way to ground musical meaning beyond the flux of social existence. Ultimately, musical analysis can be considered credible only if it helps explain the significance of musical activities in particular social contexts.

The prerogative of the listener to interpret or decode the message(s) of the music as she likes is part of the empowering features of music: reactions to music depend on one's prior knowledge, experiences and prejudices (Harris 2004, p. 184) and therefore the reception and eventual political impact of music – if any – is highly context dependent. But at the same time it is also a fact of life that makes the 'objective' analysis of the issue that much more difficult. It also means that when looking for the social and political effects of music the songs and their lyrics themselves are paradoxically not the natural or at least the only place to begin. On the contrary, one must look at the whole range of different mechanisms and practices flowing from and associated with music. In this respect popular music is a reflection of the society and culture from which it emanates (Friedlander 1996, p. 284) – or where it is received and consumed. It also means that although many of the physiological, psychological and social effects of music uncovered in this paper probably apply across time and space, their actual manifestations vary across the cases. Therefore we also need to accept that at least to a certain extent the political affects ascribed to LPM on this occasion fit perhaps best, but not solely, to the case of the Soviet Union and its dismemberment. This is a topic to which we must return on a separate occasion.

Catalysing the revolutionary event

Thus far we have been mapping the different mechanisms through which loud popular music can play a role in enabling revolutionary processes. Next we briefly look at the possible ways it can play a role in catalysing, perhaps even triggering a revolutionary event. The extant research has convincingly shown that, other things being equal, the causes of autocratic breakdowns are by and large domestic and internal (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014). Usually the

crucial component is the mobilisation and organisation of a large number of individuals (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, p. 18). It is argued that although LPM does not cause the background factors that result in a situation where the population is 'ripe for revolution' but at least on certain occasions it can play a discernible galvanising and catalysing, even triggering effect that results in a revolution.

To understand why this could be the case, we must take a look at some of the mechanisms at play. First, it is useful to be reminded of the essentially social nature of music. In this respect, the coming together of people whether for listening of records or live concerts and the feeling of togetherness and bonding that these events afford are of particular importance (Campbell Robinson et al. 1991, p. 268). Rock concerts and other public hearings of music can act as fora in which people are exposed to the reactions of others to the music. What was previously a private experience is turned into a shared experience where the reactions of others can be observed, followed, even emulated. Indeed, through a process called social referencing the observed emotions of others can play a crucial role in influencing people's emotions and even actual behaviour. Sloboda and Juslin (2001, p. 86) have argued that emotions are 'contagious' in a sense that people are 'extremely ready' to 'catch' the emotions they observe in others. Anyone who has ever attended a rock concert knows how contagious and overwhelming the emotional response of the crowd is when the lights go out at the beginning of the show (for a colourful description of one such event, see Gabrielsson 2001, p. 437). There is no reason to expect that this effect is necessary any less effective when it comes to actual music and performance that will be offered throughout the actual concert.

This affective aspect should be combined with the cognitive content of the show. In certain respects, rock can be used to convey explicit political messages of resistance and rebellion and can even be used to incite a revolution. In this vein, Ramet (1994) has suggested that rock music, while in a strict sense not inventing or creating revolutionary ideas per se, had a 'prophetic' function by giving the feelings of discontent and disaffection in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe articulation that helped to support and reinforce the revolutionary tide (p. 2; see also Attali 1985, p. 11). In a word, this alludes to the catalysing and potentially even triggering functions of LPM, the topic which requires further conceptual and empirical work.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to tease out some initial ideas concerning the causal pathways through which loud popular music can play a role in revolutionary social and political processes. It was suggested that the potential avenues for such an effect are several and that an essentially multi-causal understanding of these processes are required. The present paper does not allow for a systematic testing of these ideas. Instead, a few chosen snippets have been presented to mainly illustrate the potential usefulness of these ideas. In future more rigorous and systematic empirical work is required to test drive these ideas properly.

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