CONTROVERSIAL METAL AND CONTROVERSIAL RELIGION: THEORISING THE CONNECTIONS

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Abstract

Does listening to heavy metal music incite Satanism and, consequently, drug abuse and ritual murder? As unlikely as these claims sound, the process where popular culture products (metal music) become controversial because of alleged controversial religious outcomes (Satanism) is an established part of the broader discussion on 'media effects'. In this chapter, I provide a conceptual model for analysing what makes metal music and/or religion controversial, and how the connections between controversial metal and controversial religion can be theoretically examined. I argue that the link is not entirely artificial, but that it is controversiality itself, rather than substance, that encourages the appropriation of controversial metal for controversial religious purposes.

Revisiting 'Gate Theory'

Academic research on controversial metal, controversial religion and the connection between the two has so far concentrated on debunking the excesses of the idea that there is a somehow unproblematic causal connection between popular culture products and religious belief and behaviour. Theoretically speaking, this is a straightforward example of the *fallacy of internalism*, the idea that we can know the effects of texts (broadly conceived) simply by their contents (Hjelm, 2014, p. 94; Thompson, 1990, p. 105).

There are, however, two issues that make one wonder whether there is something to this kind of 'gate theory', after all. Firstly, where the 1980s Satanism Scare could be easily shown to be overblown and most of the time lacking a factual base, things changed in the 1990s. The 'satanic' symbolism of Black Sabbath and Ozzy Osbourne was ambiguous at best, but the early Black Metal scene in Norway seemed to confirm the connection between music and Satanism: not only was the music sonically disturbing and lyrically explicitly satanic, the practitioners and scene members openly professed to being Satanists and even claimed the music to be a way of spreading this infernal message (Moynihan and Søderlind, 1998; Hjelm et al., 2009). The scene's excesses, including church burnings and murder, made more than just the small circle of perpetrators controversial. Black metal, but also metal more broadly, became suspect and indeed seemed to confirm Evangelical moral crusaders' warnings (Phillipov, 2013, p. 154–158). If causality still remained ambiguous (were they Satanists first and black metallers second, or the other way around?), at least there was a correlation. These, of course, tend to get mixed up in public discourse.

Secondly, in academic terms, there seems to be a discrepancy between the attitude of the earlier debunkers and the emerging paradigm that argues that popular culture and the media are important—perhaps even primary—sources of

religious identity formation in late modernity (Clark, 2003; Partridge, 2004). Surely the argued connection with non-controversial popular culture and religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices must apply to controversial popular culture and controversial religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices as well? I am of course not suggesting that the proponents of the popular culture–religion link are claiming anything as simplistic as the Evangelical 'gate theory', but logically speaking, *some* connection should apply to controversial and non-controversial popular culture alike.

Indeed, I think that there is a connection. However, against the 'gate theory' of popular culture leading to certain religious outcomes, my argument is that controversial religion—I use 'religion' as shorthand for religious and/or 'spiritual' beliefs and practices—can be the unintended consequence of the social process where particular popular culture products are constructed as controversial. I am here basically putting a sociology of religion twist to theorisations of 'secondary deviation'. This classic concept from the sociology of deviance is shorthand for a process whereby a person or a group internalizes the controversial label given to them from the outside and starts to act according to role expectations (Lemert, 1967, p. 40–41).

In order to argue that a process corresponding to 'secondary deviation' is indeed what is happening with controversial popular music and controversial religion, I will first outline a theoretical approach to 'controversy' and, second, discuss what I call the reflexive and reifying responses to controversy, utilising the concepts of counterculture and subculture in a new way. The exercise is conceptual and theoretical in the sense of offering a robust heuristic model, rather than a 'theory' in the sense of offering testable causal links. I will apply these conceptualisations to a discussion of the links between metal music and Satanism.

Controversies as social movements

Drawing from theorisations in the sociology of deviance and social problems (e.g. Mauss, 1975; Spector & Kitsuse, 2001; Hjelm, 2014, 37–56), I define controversies as the *activities of individuals or groups making public claims about conditions that are perceived as a threat to certain cherished values and/or material and status interests*. This definition has four elements: First, controversies are '*materialistic*' in the sense that ideas as such do not create controversy; it is people who create controversies. Second, controversies have a definitive *public* element. Angry words directed against a political commentator on television by a lone individual in his or her living room do not constitute a controversy. Individuals can, however, be the progenitors of a controversy by raising awareness of a putatively problematic condition by, say, getting exposure through letters to the editor in national newspapers, writing a blog, etc. Third, controversies are *discursive-symbolic*, because raising public awareness is a process of claims-making (Specor & Kitsuse, 2001, p. 76) and these claims are primarily discursive. However, an 'extra-discursive' element is also important. For example, images of concerned (Christian) parents burning heavy metal records in the USA in the 1980s convey a powerful symbolic message—a claim—that these particular cultural products are inappropriate, even evil. Similarly, contemporary crackdowns on the metal community in Iran, for example, have targeted heavy metal on a symbolic level by confiscating 'satanic' paraphernalia such as t-shirts, and forcing metalheads to cut their long hair—a central symbol of metal culture (LeVine, 2008, ch. 5). Finally, controversies are *subjective* in the sense that it is the *perception* of a condition that

provides the framework for claims-making. Perceptions of inappropriateness, deviance, and threat can be independent of the actual conditions, but they can also be influenced by particular 'trigger moments' (see below) which create concern. In any case, the above definition does not presuppose any objectively shared values and also adds the dimension of material and/or status interests. Thus, controversy is seen as the product of a claims-making process. The goal of social problem movements is to raise awareness of a subjectively perceived problem and in the process objectify and reify their definition of the problem.

Reflexive and reifying responses to controversy: Redefining 'counterculture' and 'subculture'

The above discussion on controversy has been an attempt to theoretically refine a concept that has (at least implicitly) surfaced in previous research and public discussion on controversial popular culture. Thus, it should be seen as a new path through familiar ground. Considerably less theoretical attention that goes beyond simple debunking has been paid to the impact of controversial popular culture, that is, how controversies affect the self-identification of the consumers of controversial popular culture—in this case the focus being on the putative religious responses. For these purposes, I will discuss the usefulness of *'counterculture'*, a concept with a somewhat troubled history and lacking a sufficient formulation that would be in accordance with the conceptualisation of controversy outlined above.

In the aftermath of the 1960s, 'counterculture' became a catchword for almost anything deemed out of the ordinary. It is exactly because of this that the concept lost much of its power as a sociological tool and has subsequently disappeared from sociological vocabulary. The concept is still used in micro-level organizational sociology, where 'dominant' and 'deviant' are perhaps more easily definable. Otherwise, there have been few attempts to redefine the term beyond the original definitions which themselves must be seen as products of a particular time (1960s) and social context (USA).

One of the most comprehensive attempts at defining counterculture is Kenneth Westhues' book *Society's Shadow* (1972). It is very much lodged in the discussion on the hippie culture of the times and although aiming at conceptual clarity, presents a definition that is not only rigid, but also so exclusive that extremely few movements qualify as 'proper' countercultures. Westhues defines countercultures on two different levels:

On the ideological level, a counterculture is a set of beliefs and values which radically reject the dominant culture of a society and prescribe a sectarian alternative. On the behavioral level, a counterculture is a group of people who, because they accept such beliefs and values, behave in such radically nonconformist ways that they tend to drop out of the society (Westhues, 1972, p. 10–11).

There are several critiques that could be raised, one major one being the perpetual hen and egg question of values influencing action (see below). I will, however, engage with Westhues' definition only indirectly below. At this point it is worthwhile to note that despite the fact that Westhues talks about the 'phenomenology of countercultures', his definition is an 'etic' one and unproblematically presupposes a set of dominant values and 'rationality' which groups that conform to his list of characteristics (communism, deviant sexual and family relations, social isolation, etc.) oppose. As an alternative to explai-

ning and understanding reactions to controversies, this definition is too rigid and essentialising.

Although criticised by Westhues, Milton Yinger's definition of 'contraculture' is more helpful for our current purposes. Yinger (1960, p. 627) defines counterculture (used here synonymous with contraculture) as 'the creation of a series of inverse or counter values (opposed to those of the surrounding society) in face of serious frustration or conflict'. Interestingly, the 'creation' part of the definition—the dynamic construction of counterculture—is mostly left unexamined by Yinger. It is exactly this part that I want to look at more closely.

The most fruitful approach to countercultures is analogous to the conceptualisation of controversy: cultures become countercultures only inasmuch as people define them as such. In effect, then, from the wider society's perspective, controversies create countercultures. In this sense 'counterculture' is subsumed under controversy; the goal of controversies is to point out conditions perceived as threatening and thus these conditions (cultures, communities, styles, etc.) become countercultural by definition. In other words, countercultures are not created by virtue of a set of characteristics (vis-à-vis Westhues), but only if a controversy is successful in labelling a culture deviant. However, in order to avoid confusion, I would reserve the use of 'counterculture' to describe a particular type of reaction by a labelled culture. Even if a culture is successfully labelled, it does not mean that the self-identification of the culture conforms to the public image. From the 'antagonist's' (that is, the culture labelled as deviant) perspective, there are two possible responses to controversy: reflexivity and reification.

A response to controversy is *reflexive* when the representatives of the labelled culture recognise—explicitly or implicitly—the contingency of the controversy. That is, there is a sense of external threat, but also an understanding that the controversy does not reflect the opinions of *everyone* else and that the culture can continue to exist alongside other ways of life in a social context even if it is deemed controversial. Another effect may be a strengthened sense of belonging to a specific community, but the community is not seen in stark opposition to the wider culture. The concept of *subculture* best covers situations such as this (cf. Blackman, 2005; Kahn-Harris, 2007).

Like Yinger, I see countercultures as a form of subculture. The difference between subcultures and countercultures is a different self-definition vis-à-vis a perceived outside threat. In relation to controversies, the same dynamics of claims-making apply, but the response of the labelled group is different. Instead of reflexively putting controversies into context, *reifying* responses affirm the claims made and adopt opposition as part of their self-identify. Put differently, *countercultures are created when the perception of external threat creates or reinforces a sense of otherness, opposition, and alienation*. It is in this sense that 'counterculture' can be reinstated as a useful tool of sociological analysis. Instead of arguing for shared beliefs or values that a counterculture possesses, this definition emphasises the fact that while members of the counterculture might not be able to articulate their countercultural beliefs or values, they share a sense of opposition. Depending on the cohesiveness of the counterculture, a more coherent system of beliefs or values may be constructed but opposition itself is the primary shared countercultural value.

Yinger usefully reminds us that a distinction should be made between cultural values and norms on the one hand and behaviour on the other hand (Yinger, 1960, 628). With the exception of tightly controlled communities, values and norms do not translate symmetrically into behaviour. This is relevant especially in cases where the community is an 'imagined community' and has no 'ideology' to speak of, except for a sense of opposition. In other words, a sense of opposition translates into different kinds of behaviour depending on the personal profiles of the representatives of the counterculture. To take the infamous court cases against metal music inciting suicide: if heavy metal inspires or—to put it more strongly—causes suicide as a consequence of listening to a sound recording, should not the death toll be in the millions (Walser, 1993, p. 146)?

So, does listening to black metal make you worship satan?

Whether the issue is 'occultism', Satanism or sexism, heavy metal seems to wallow in controversy. These controversies, however, have to be qualified by putting the scene in context. My thesis is that during the first controversies in the 1980s it was the *content* of heavy metal (primarily lyrics) *in itself* that was perceived as offensive and dangerous to youth in particular. The culmination of this concern was the congressional committee hearing in 1985, instigated by Tipper Gore, the wife of Senator Al Gore and spokeswoman of the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC). The hearing, which received wide coverage in national news media in the US, targeted heavy metal as one of the threatening genres (McDonald, 1988; Walser, 1993, p. 138–145; Wright, 2000). Considering the PMRC's lack of factual information on heavy metal (McDonald, 1988, 305), it is valid to argue that unless metal had been as mainstream as it was, it would have attracted little attention from the PMRC and its likes. Because of the sheer popularity of the genre, the controversy became a battle over wider values in society and about the boundaries of 'appropriate' (youth) popular culture. While at the time as the PMRC managed to gain favourable media attention for its views, the social problem movement against metal withered alongside the popularity of its nemesis in the 1990s.

After the peak and subsequent waning of the genre's popularity, the controversies over metal can be said to have become qualitatively different. Even after its partial re-emergence in the 2000s, heavy metal *per se* has received little attention in public discourse. For example, whereas the quite innocent use of crucifixes by Black Sabbath was a cause for dread in the 1970s and 1980s, very few—or rather, none—death or black metal bands have made headlines with their explicitly satanic and/or pornographic imagery. Claims about the content of metal have had little chance of developing into a full controversy in post-1980s Western culture. Instead, it is in situations where the genre is dislocated from its perceived place in culture that controversies arise. In other words, heavy metal becomes a topic of public discussion because of *external* reasons. It is only on these occasions of cultural dislocation that I call 'trigger moments' that music, lyrics or image *as such* may become a topic of controversy (cf. Ellis, 1990).

The black metal culture in the early 1990s Norway offers a good example. Beginning as a small and marginal subculture, black metal eventually developed into a national—and to some extent, international—concern, with the transgressive violence of the scene making headlines not only in the music media, but in mainstream media as well. However:

What made Black Metal interesting news was not ideas as such, but an escalation in internal competition for transgressive, subcultural capital that ended in two murders, multiple church arsons and episodes of assault. This, combined with a militant, anti-Christian, anti-social attitude, made Black Metal an ideal example of the Satanism that the Evangelicals had warned about (Hjelm et al., 2009, p. 522).

This observation raises two points that are relevant for my current argument. First, it was the deviant *actions* of the members of the black metal subculture that caused controversy, not the perceived deviance of black metal as such. Church burnings and murder triggered the controversy and, by moving black metal from the arena of musical subcultures into the arena of crime, focused attention on a small group that most likely would have remained marginal had these events never occurred. Second, although black metal might not have been considered controversial as such before these actions, these trigger moments gave voice to an interest group (Evangelical Christians) that held fixed beliefs about the evilness of heavy metal in a wider, absolute sense. The content of black metal *did* become a topic of controversy, but only after certain trigger moments. What is apparent is that as a consequence of the globalization of metal, situations analogous to the 1980s controversies over the content of metal have surfaced and will surface anew in contexts where the lyrics and imagery are in stark contrast to local cultural values, as in the contemporary campaigns against metalheads in Islamic countries (LeVine, 2008).

What can we say about the role of heavy metal in creating countercultural religious beliefs and actions, then? The reflexive response to controversies over heavy metal is, I would argue, by far the most common one. In this sense a heavy metal subculture is created when the fans' (and artists') definitions of the genre challenge controversial stereotypes. PMRC –type labelling is ignored, laughed off, or used ironically. Despite the fact that popular images and even some scholarly studies prefer to portray metal culture as an outcome of social and moral alienation and heavy metal shows ('the sensory equivalent of war', Arnett, 1996, p. 7) as ritualistic, it is safe to say that most metal fans have never considered becoming Satanists because they listened to 'satanic' music. I have previously (Hjelm, 2004) used the term *secondary symbolism* to refer to reflexive responses to metal's controversiality. This means that symbols, paraphernalia, t-shirts, etc., which are considered 'satanic,' are displayed because it is part of identifying with the genre, not because of a personal commitment to a particular worldview.

Where reflexive responses challenge, ironize, or ignore externally imposed controversial labels, reifying responses affirm them and create a counterculture that fosters a sense of alienation and otherness. Black metal especially has been closely connected with Satanism, giving it a more 'ideological' character than many other metal genres. While it is true that some black metal fans consider themselves Satanists on some level, it is opposition itself that forms the strongest 'ideology'—should that concept be used at all—within this group. It is also in black metal culture that countercultural values have translated into countercultural action. While in some cases the sense of opposition, otherness and alienation that 'counterculture' entails is translated into violence towards the self (e.g. the suicide of 'Dead', black metal band Mayhem's vocalist), the early black metal scene in Norway directed its symbolic and real violence towards the rest of society and ultimately towards other members of the scene as well (see Moynihan and Søderlind, 998; Kahn-Harris, 2007).

Of course, even if we could point out that the controversiality of black metal creates and/or reinforces satanic *beliefs* (as per countercultural/reifying responses outlined above), we have to be careful about postulating any simple causality to 'satanic' *actions*. The relationship between belief and action is dialectical, but in no case is there a direct link between 'satanic' popular culture and action. Rather, Satanism can be used as an *a posteriori* religious legitimation of action. This observation reinforces the argument that opposition, the *anti*—whether anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, or anti-human—is the most significant outcome of reifying identifications.

In summary, the above discussion can be presented as a figure where the horizontal axis represents the type of controversy and the vertical axis the type of response to controversy. As stated above, controversies can be widespread and long-lasting or triggered by a specific event in which the object of controversy is socially and culturally 'displaced' in some sense. All controversies eventually either wither away or change their focus—such is the 'natural history' (Blumer, 1971) of social problems/controversies—but widespread controversies often leave a lasting mark (such as 'parental advisory' stickers on album covers) and they concern social and cultural values more broadly than controversies that are triggered and centred around a single event, which may or may not develop into a more broad controversy.

Figure 1: The dimensions of controversy and responses to controversy
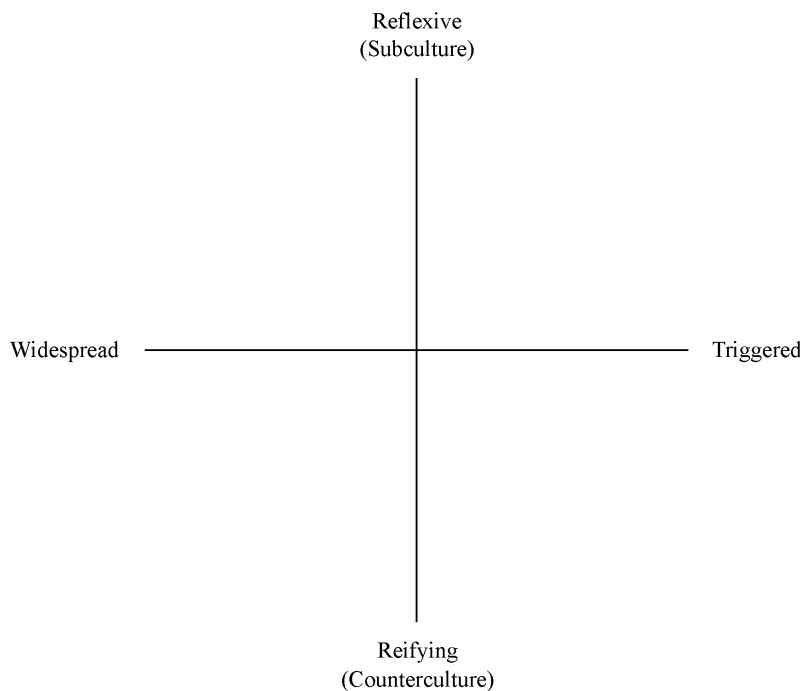
The second axis represents the two ideal typical responses to controversy. At the one end are reflexive responses that either implicitly or explicitly recognize and acknowledge the contingency of controversy. This is the background for subcultural identity where the controversial character of metal may create a sense of community in the sense of shared fandom. At the other end are reifying responses which not only live up to the image constructed by controversies but might be inspired to push boundaries even further. However, unlike previous sociological definitions, counterculture understood in this sense is not a cohesive, isolated community, but unified only in its perception of other-

ness and alienation. Finally, the position of individuals, groups and communities on the two continuums is not static, but depends on continuous negotiation and renegotiation between external labels and internal identifications.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed a heuristic conceptualisation of controversy and a concurrent reformulation of counterculture for the purposes of theorising the connections between controversial popular culture and controversial religion. I argued that the controversiality of popular culture (or religion) is an outcome of a social process of claims-making. Consequently, theoretically speaking, the 'effects' of controversial popular culture should be always considered—against a 'gate theory' that postulates religious belief and action as a straightforward result of popular culture products—in the context of the construction of controversies. In this context two ideal typical responses to controversy emerge: reflexive and reifying. Where the former takes an ironic position vis-à-vis controversy, the latter embraces it with the possible result of creating or reinforcing beliefs and inspiring action. It is, however, the controversiality of popular culture itself that should be seen as the source of controversial religion.

So what is new? On the one hand, not much, really. Similar thoughts have been voiced from a psychological perspective, where the appropriation of controversial popular culture for religious purposes is seen as empowering (Steck et al., 1992). Again, in the case of 'satanic' popular culture, Bill Ellis has discussed what I refer to as reflexive responses through the concept of ostension (Ellis, 1991). Yet, on the other hand, the current discussion focuses on the crucially sociological element of controversy in a way that enables avoiding both the simplistic claims of 'gate theory' *and* the narrow debunking of earlier scholarly approaches. Following Max Weber (2001[1905]), who famously argued that the 'disenchantment' of modern Europe was an unintended consequence of the Protestant Reformation, controversial religion can be the unintended consequence of controversial popular culture—not because of the substance (or text, if you will) of popular culture products, but because of the social reaction (controversy) itself.

Acknowledgement

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