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978-0-521-62966-9 - Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century

Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison

Excerpt

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Introduction

In April 1995, we attended a memorial celebration for Ralph Rinzler, a central musical activist in the 1960s social movements, at the Highlander Center, outside Knoxville, Tennessee, where Pete Seeger and Bernice Johnson Reagon and many others who had known Rinzler sang their songs of union organizing and civil rights struggle. Appropriately enough, it was there that the ideas in this book suddenly began to take form. Seeing and listening to Seeger and Reagon, along with “Doc” Watson, Mike and Peggy Seeger, Eric Weissberg, Jim Rooney, Hazel Dickens, and so many others, at the Highlander Center helped us to formulate the central arguments in this book. We saw, and felt, how songs could conjure up long-lost social movements, and how music could provide an important vehicle for the diffusion of movement ideas into the broader culture.

It was at Highlander, which, since the 1930s, has contributed so much to so many political movements, that the main point of this book became clear, namely that social movements are not merely political activities. Perhaps even more importantly, they provide spaces for cultural growth and experimentation, for the mixing of musical and other artistic genres, and for the infusion of new kinds of meaning into music. At Highlander, we saw some of the “results” of the movements of the 1960s, and the enormous influence that the mixing of music and politics had come to have on the popular culture. Out of the efforts of Ralph Rinzler and other “movement” intellectuals, bluegrass, gospel, folk music, even rock and jazz had been substantially reconstituted. At a time when the movements of the 1960s no longer have any meaningful political influence, the artists on the stage were living testimony to the cultural power that the sixties had harnessed and spread on into the broader society.

The central social process is what we term in this book the *mobilization of tradition*: in social movements, musical and other kinds of cultural traditions

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are made and remade, and after the movements fade away as political forces, the music remains as a memory and as a potential way to inspire new waves of mobilization. And perhaps no movement has been so important for this mobilization of tradition than the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, in which Reagon and Seeger and Rinzler played such an active role.

In a recent book, Robert Cantwell has offered a very different way of seeing the music of the 1960s (Cantwell 1996). Like many other cultural and musical historians, Cantwell stresses the apolitical nature of the music of the sixties, the generational longing that first led young people to folk music and later to rock, the spiritual vacuum that inspired the so-called “folk revival” and the counterculture. This nostalgia for a better, more innocent time “when we were good” is widespread in contemporary society, both among sympathizers like Cantwell and among “reborn” conservatives like David Horowitz – but, whether friend or foe, the love-it-or-hate-it relation to that tumultuous decade tends to miss, or at least downplay, some fundamentally important connections between culture and politics, which continue to represent the “sixties” in the popular consciousness.

For Cantwell, the Kingston Trio and their hit song “Tom Dooley” symbolize the period, and he begins his book by tracing the development of that song during the various waves of folk revivals in the twentieth century. While Cantwell’s account fascinates in its passion and enthusiasm – and we will be referring to it on several occasions in the pages that follow – it ultimately frustrates in its separation of the folk revival from the political movements that were taking place at the same time. The civil rights movement is mentioned, as are the antiwar and student movements, but they are not central to his story. For us, however, the central meaning of the 1960s was the visionary, collective project of the civil rights, student, and antiwar movements, and their composite program of political and cultural liberation: direct democracy, personalized politics, racial integration and equality, and respect for other cultures. And it is the songs of those movements – and of the singers, musicians, composers, and other artists who contributed their talents to them – that continue, throughout the world, to represent the spirit of the 1960s rather than the largely forgotten folk songs of the folk revival.

The evolution of the song, “We Shall Overcome,” which more than any other expresses the project of the sixties, provides an instructive example of the mobilization of tradition in social movements, showing how traditions can link social movements, providing a river of embodied ideas and images between generations of activists. That song, which began as a spiritual, was picked up by the labor movement and, through contact between labor movement activists and civil rights activists at the Highlander Center, was

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transformed into the anthem of the civil rights movement and since then has found new “uses” in many other movements around the world.

A brief look at the history of that song can well set the stage for the pages that follow. “We Shall Overcome” emerged out of the collective song tradition created by African slaves in the United States. There was a gospel song, “I’ll Be All Right,” which was known in the late nineteenth century and sung among African-Americans in religious services in the South. A similar song appeared in written form in 1901 as “I’ll Overcome Some Day” with a more European-style melody and slightly different words. Written by Charles Tindley, a black reverend in Philadelphia, it would be published along with other “modernized” spirituals in sheet music form in the first decades of the century, when spirituals achieved a degree of popularity not only as church music, but also as concert music. It was the older, more traditional song that survived in the collective memory, however, and that was later adapted into a song of labor activism. A major shift occurred in the 1940s when the song was taken up by the black Tobacco Workers Union as part of its mobilizing campaigns during labor conflicts in the South. The title was changed to “We Will Overcome.” The collective pronoun replaced the singular, reflecting a shift in the locus of redemption, from sacred to secular, or at least from the individual to the group. And the tempo was slowed down, which helped to give the song a greater feeling of dignity and significance (Seeger 1993: 32–35).

In 1947 a second major shift occurred as the song was transformed into a white union organizing tool at the Highlander Center. Zilphia Horton, the music director at Highlander, had heard the song being sung among black workers, and it soon became one of her favorites and was taught and sung in the cultural programs that she had initiated at Highlander. Symbolically, the title was altered to the more grammatically correct “We *Shall* Overcome,” probably by the Harvard dropout Pete Seeger, then active at the Center, which served as an institutional base in the struggle to keep the labor movement alive in the extremely hostile rural South. In his own rendition of the transformation of “We Shall Overcome” from spiritual to civil rights anthem, Pete Seeger has written, “No one is certain who changed ‘will’ to ‘shall.’ It could have been me with my Harvard education. But Septima Clarke, a Charleston schoolteacher (who was director of education at Highlander and after the Civil Rights Movement was elected year after year to the Charleston, S.C., Board of Education), always preferred ‘shall.’ It sings better” (1993: 34).

It was at the Highlander Center, which not only was one of the very few activist educational institutions in the United States, but also one of the even fewer to recognize the value of music to social movements, that the

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song was eventually passed back to blacks and to the civil rights movement. In 1959 at the end of a workshop at Highlander the local police burst in, and somebody started to hum “We Shall Overcome.” In the heat of the moment, a young female high school student from Montgomery, Alabama, began to sing a new verse, “We are not afraid,” and, according to Bernice Johnson Reagon, this helped give the song “new life and force.” It soon became what Reagon calls the “theme song of the Movement, it was used wherever Movement activities were carried out” (1975: 82–83).

From Highlander, it was carried into the streets and jailhouses of the South, and of course its form of presentation was modified and what Reagon calls its “range of usage” expanded in the process. Eventually recorded by popular folksingers like Joan Baez and Peter, Paul, and Mary, the song has become part of a global culture of dissent and is usually sung in a ritualized way, as a sing-along, with the audience linking arms as they sing. In the United States, the traditional call-and-response technique of African-American musical culture is also usually used. In this style the leader, such as Pete Seeger in one of many live recorded versions, “calls” a verse and the audience responds with the well-known chorus.

At the Rinzler Memorial celebration, it was Bernice Johnson Reagon who led us in singing “We Shall Overcome.” We sang it SNCC-style, the way the activists in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee sang it in the 1960s: arms crossed and joined, swaying back and forth, and with a caller – Reagon herself, as she was on so many occasions in the 1960s, when as a college student, she brought her magnificent voice into the civil rights movement. Intriguingly, Reagon was joined on the stage by many of the stars of contemporary country music, usually considered apolitical or even conservative. In the 1960s, Ralph Rinzler had been one of many musicians who had been led to folk music for both musical and political reasons, and he had, like so many others, seen the connections between tradition and dissent, between oldtime musics and contemporary political struggles. Indeed, it can be suggested that the resurrection of bluegrass music, as well as many other traditional musics, was inspired by the civil rights movement, and its actualization of history, its linking of the past with the present.

In any case, in April 1995, we saw the various strands of the 1960s “mobilization of tradition” gathered together on one stage. This book is an attempt to place the experience of that weekend into a theoretical and historical context, and, in particular, to show how the combination of music and politics that takes place in social movements is an important, if often overlooked, source of cultural transformation.

In this book, chapter 1 recapitulates the cognitive approach, and traces

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recent developments in social movement theory. We discuss the current “cultural turn” in sociology, while noting the continuing separation between those who concern themselves with political movements and those who study culture and its various shades of movement. The following chapter places our effort in relation to the ongoing debates about modernity and tradition. We present an alternative interpretation of traditions, and of their underlying rationalities, as a way to overcome the neglect that social theorists have shown in the contemporary fascination with traditional knowledge, ways of life, and music.

The next three chapters are substantive analyses of the mobilization of music, and the making and remaking of musical traditions, within social movements. We focus first on the folk musics of the United States, tracing them back to the country’s multiethnic inheritance and, more specifically, to the populist movements of the late nineteenth century, which, we claim, provide the historical subsoil out of which so much of twentieth-century popular music has grown. The following chapter examines the movements of black music, characterizing an essential tension in African-American musical traditions between secular and sacred, highbrow and lowbrow, commercial and non-commercial. The movements of cultural nationalism in the 1920s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s are seen as central moments in the resolution of these tensions, and in the subsequent reconstitution of black music, which now, as rap music, is having once again fundamental repercussions on global culture. Chapter 5 focuses on the 1960s. Here we analyze the changing relations between politics and music – from the reborn interest in folk music in the first half of the decade to the cataclysms of the so-called counterculture, which both mixed black and white musical traditions and articulated a new generational consciousness. Our reading of the 1960s stresses the movement roots of rock music, which unfortunately have not attracted the attention they deserve. Our chapter thus offers an alternative explanation of the contribution that the movements of the 1960s have made to world culture.

Chapter 6 attempts to bring the story up to date, by focusing on the diffusion of rock music from the sixties to the nineties. We use the case of Sweden as an illustrative example of the contemporary contradiction between a global commercial music industry, on the one hand, drawing the rest of the world under its control, and the rise of alternative folk, or roots, musics, on the other, which oppose but are often integrated into the commercial realm. In Sweden, this contradiction has been particularly visible, and was mediated, in the 1970s, through an explicit “progressive music movement.” Our concluding chapter recounts the arguments, and seeks to connect our material to cultural theory.

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On social movements and culture

The new sensibility has become a political factor. This event, which may well indicate a turning point in the evolution of contemporary societies, demands that critical theory incorporate the new dimension into its concepts, project its implications for the possible construction of a free society. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (1969: 23)

Social movements and cultural transformation

Social movements are interpreted in this book as central moments in the reconstitution of culture. In the creative turmoil that is unleashed within social movements, modes of cultural action are redefined and given new meaning as sources of collective identity. For brief, intensive moments, the habitual behavior and underlying values of society are thrown open for debate and reflection, and, as the movements fade from the political center stage, their cultural effects seep into the social lifeblood in often unintended and circuitous ways.

It is our contention that both the culture of everyday life – the values, mores, and habits that form the basis of social behavior – and the “art worlds” of cultural expression are deeply affected by the innovative activities, the exemplary cultural actions, that take place in social movements. In the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse emphasized the aesthetic dimension of the movements of the time, suggesting that it was primarily in art and music that social movements “re-membered” traditions of resistance and critique (Marcuse 1969). More recently, Richard Flacks, in his analysis of the American “tradition of the Left,” has indicated how social movements have often been more important as cultural than as political actors (Flacks 1988). This book continues along the lines staked out by Marcuse and

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Flacks by offering a theoretically informed reflection on the relations between social movements and culture.

Our claim is that, by combining culture and politics, social movements serve to reconstitute both, providing a broader political and historical context for cultural expression, and offering, in turn, the resources of culture – traditions, music, artistic expression – to the action repertoires of political struggle. Cultural traditions are mobilized and reformulated in social movements, and this mobilization and reconstruction of tradition is central, we contend, to what social movements are, and to what they signify for social and cultural change.

These processes have generally been neglected in social theory and in cultural studies, where responsibility for change is usually attributed either to anonymous, universal forces, such as modernization, capitalism, or imperialism, or to charismatic leaders and powerful individuals. This book argues, in opposition to these dominant approaches, that the collective identity formation that takes place in social movements is a central catalyst of broader changes in values, ideas, and ways of life. We intend to give social movements the recognition they deserve as key agents of cultural transformation.

In the following chapters, we will consider the culturally transforming aspects of social movements primarily in relation to music. Music and song have been important in the formation, and remembrance, of a wide range of social movements, but these musical components of collective identity have seldom been examined explicitly in the social movement, or broader sociological, literature. By focusing on the interaction of music and social movements, we want to highlight a central, even formative aspect of cultural transformation. And we want to offer a new kind of contextual understanding for students of popular music and culture.

We conceive of these relations between culture and politics, between music and movements, as collective learning processes, in continuation of what we have previously characterized as a cognitive approach to social movements. In our previous work, we have sought to identify the knowledge-producing activities that are carried out within social movements, and have attempted to indicate how this “cognitive praxis” has affected scientific research programs and professional intellectual identities. Social movements have provided contexts for the politicization of knowledge, and the effects have often been profound on scientific theorizing, disciplinary identities, and even technological developmental trajectories (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). The aim of this book is to redirect the cognitive approach to music and to consider musical expression in social movements as a kind of cognitive praxis.

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8 On social movements and culture

The labor movement, the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the feminist and environmental movements have all largely disappeared as living political forces in our societies, but they remain alive, we contend, in the collective memory. These and other social movements have all been more than merely political actors; their significance has been also – in many ways even more so – cultural (Darnovsky, Epstein, and Flacks 1995). Reducing them to politics, as most students of social movements tend to do, is to ignore a great deal of what social movements actually represent. In essence, it is to relegate them to the dustbin of history, to a nostalgic activism that at best can serve to inspire new politics, but all too often evokes little academic or political interest. The attempts, for example, by Doug McAdam (1988), to revive the spirit of the civil rights movement, and by Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks (1989) to trace the impact of the “sixties generation” through empirical analysis of the life histories of activists have unfortunately fallen victim to changing political and academic fashion. The other tendency typically followed in cultural studies and the humanities, namely to limit attention to artistic or literary movements, frequently downplays the political basis, or underlying motivation, for many cultural innovators. Among sociologists like Howard Becker (1982) and Diana Crane (1987), for example, artistic creation is placed in social contexts of “art worlds” or “avant-garde movements,” but the broader links to politics and social movements are barely noticed. The political movements have thus generated one sort of academic literature, while the cultural movements have generated very many others, subdivided and differentiated along genre, disciplinary, and national lines. It sometimes seems as if politics and culture were pursued on different planets.

The few analysts who have tried to link the two have provided us with some important starting points. Alberto Melucci, following in the tradition of Alain Touraine, has long stressed the centrality of the cultural aspects of social movements, as did earlier students of “collective behavior” (see Melucci 1989). For Melucci, movements are characterized as a kind of symbolic action, by which new forms of collective identity are created. The emphasis is on the psychological attributes of identity formation, on the meanings that individuals derive from participation in movements, and the results of movements are seen as codes or signs that challenge the dominant political order. It is an impressive sociological theory that Melucci presents in his most recent work, a major achievement in linking structure and action, and in infusing meaning into the study of social movements (Melucci 1996). And yet the actual cultural work that is carried out in social movements is given little attention. By viewing social movements through the deductive, or rationalist, lens of what C. Wright Mills once called

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“grand” sociological theory (Mills 1959), Melucci unintentionally transforms social movements into abstract concepts: into fields, arenas, forms, logics, frames, and symbols.

The work of R. Serge Denisoff, and, more recently, Ray Pratt, provides us with another point of departure (Denisoff 1972, Pratt 1990). Here the emphasis is on the cultural work of social movements themselves, the songs and the singers, to be precise. Like Crane and Becker in the world of art, the sociologist in this case is a descriptive categorizer of reality, giving particular songs and singers social functions or roles, and thus practicing a form of what Mills termed “abstracted empiricism.” The many other students of musical and cultural movements who have provided so much of the “data” for our effort here are not to be faulted for neglecting the cultural activity that takes place in social movements. The problem is rather that the empirical material is separated out from broader patterns and conceptions of social change, and, indeed, separated from other domains of social life, becoming part of a sociological subfield, the sociology of music, art, or culture.

Our effort attempts to find a middle ground between grand theory and abstracted empiricism. Like Melucci, we seek to link politics and culture, but we want to lower the level of abstraction. Rather than imposing a language of discourse and coding onto the substance of social movements, we want to extract the cultural aspects from real social movement activity. Rather than constructing a grand sociological theory of social movements, we want to link social movement theory to cultural studies. By considering the cultural aspects of social movements as cognitive praxis, and thus viewing them through the lens of a critical theory of knowledge, we seek to avoid the opposite danger of abstracted empiricism. Our examples are, as it were, “theory laden”; they are selected to answer a theoretical question, namely how do social movements contribute to processes of cognitive and cultural transformation?

We have earlier argued that social movements are important sources of knowledge production, both scientific and non-scientific, and that it is, in large measure, through the knowledge interests of social movements that paradigmatic, or cosmological, assumptions about reality, as well as scientific approaches to nature and technology, are given new substantive content. Social movements provide an important context for at least some of the scientific revolutions, the formulation of new scientific paradigms, that Thomas Kuhn brought to widespread attention in the 1960s (Kuhn 1970). In our day, feminist theory and women’s studies, African-American studies, and the wide range of environmental sciences and social ecological theories have been strongly shaped by the cognitive intervention of social

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movements. These social movements, like the labor movement in the past, have also provided new career opportunities, as well as training grounds for the testing of new ideas, which have later been translated into professional activities by academics and other intellectuals.

In this book, we want to extend our approach by examining the ways in which social movements contribute to processes of cultural transformation, particularly in relation to music. On the one hand, social movements challenge dominant categories of artistic merit by making conscious – and problematic – the taken-for-granted frameworks of evaluation and judgment. This they do on a discursive level as well as in performance practices, by experimenting with new aesthetic principles and creating new collective rituals. On the other hand, social movements utilize the media of artistic expression for communicating with the larger society and, by so doing, often serve to (re)politicize popular culture and entertainment. In music, art, and literature, social movements periodically provide an important source of renewal and rejuvenation, by implanting new meanings and reconstituting established aesthetic forms and genres. In more general terms, through their impact on popular culture, mores, and tastes, social movements lead to a reconstruction of processes of social interaction and collective identity formation.

Political movements or cultural movements?

These cultural political activities are not necessarily progressive nor need they always be morally commendable. In the twentieth century, traditions have been mobilized by movements with a wide range of political agendas, from the fascist and communist movements of the interwar years through the new social movements of the 1960s and on to the movements of ethnic nationalism of the 1980s and 1990s. The cultural work of many of these social movements has been regressive, if not reactionary, in that the selective transformation of tradition has often been aggressively directed toward the non-privileged others, those who have fallen outside the culturally defined categories of acceptance. The “reactionary modernism” of the Nazis, as well as the religious intolerance that is to be found in many contemporary forms of fundamentalism, is derived from mobilizing cultural traditions for political purposes in ways that are directly comparable to the “progressive” movements that we take up in this book – movements, we admit, with which we share a basic sympathy.

Whether progressive or reactionary, what is at work in almost all social movements, we would claim, is an active reworking of cultural resources, both an inventive, creative work of artistic experimentation and a critical,