

Spitting Dialectical Analysis: Boots Riley's Radical Critique of Contemporary Hip Hop and American Culture.

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[要約]

米国カリフォルニア州オークランドを拠点とするヒップホップ・グループ「ザ・クー」を率いるラッパー、ブーツ・ライリー(Boots Riley, 1971-)は、共産主義者を名乗り、自分の音楽活動の最終的な目的は体制の根本的な変革であると公言し、様々な労働運動、反人種差別運動に身を投じている。都心の貧困地区に暮らす黒人と移民のサブカルチャーとして出発した歴史を持つヒップホップは元来政治的メッセージと無縁ではないが、アメリカの資本主義体制を否定するような急進主義は決して一般的ではない。またライリーが音楽活動を始めた 1990 年代には、新自由主義政策の下でアメリカの音楽産業の統合と寡占化が進み、ヒップホップという音楽ジャンルもポピュラー音楽の主流に取り込まれ、政治色の強いヒップホップ・アーティストが商業的な成功を収めることは既に困難になりつつあった。こうした中、ライリーがポピュラー音楽市場におけるアーティストとして四半世紀にわたるキャリアを築いていることは特筆に値する。本稿は、ライリーの作品群とメディアでの発言を主な資料とし、彼の標榜する「共産主義」はいかなるビジョンであるのか、現代のヒップホップとアメリカ社会にいかなる批評を加えているのか、そして、いかに作品の批評性と、活動の維持に不可欠なエンタテインメント性を両立しているのかを分析する。

1. Introduction

On August 23, 2014, Mahall's in Lakewood, Ohio, was hosting its annual Lakewood Music Festival. Prior to the show, Boots Riley of the Coup from Oakland, California, and Kelly Flamos, Mahall's owner and show coordinator, were invited for an interview at the local Fox 8 Cleveland studio. Autumn Ziemba of Fox 8 opened the interview with a kind of question any interviewers would ask, "Tell us a little bit about your band and the lineup that people are gonna hear today." Riley answered in a soft-spoken, cordial manner:

Riley: Uhm, we are punk, funk / communist revolution band.

Ziemba: Okay...

Riley: And we are from Oakland, California. We make everybody dance, while telling them about how we need to get rid of the system, how exploitation is the primary contradiction in capitalism, and that if we wanna express our power, we're gonna have to be more radical in our actions. We're going to have to be able to withhold our labor collectively, to be able to demand and affect the changes that we need to make.

Ziemba: Okay, so but people are gonna hear the whole lineup of bands today?

Flamos: Oh, yeah.

Riley: Not just us, yeah. ("2014 LKWD Music Fest: The Coup, The GZA and the Awkward Interview")

Although the three were all smiling during this awkward exchange, Ziemba clearly looked baffled. Later in the day, the producer of Fox 8 morning show sent Flamos an angry email accusing her of allowing Riley to perform a "political rant," telling her that it hurt the "credibility" of the festival as well as Fox 8. Flamos forwarded the email to Riley, and they exposed it on Facebook and Twitter. On the following day, the local news site Lakewood Citizen covered the story with the interview video clip. The video went modestly viral on social media, entertaining those who found the reaction from Fox 8

hilarious, as well as attracting angry comments from those who did find Riley's words inappropriate for the occasion.

Raymond "Boots" Riley (1971-) has been a lifelong political activist and self-professed communist. Growing up in East Oakland, Riley became a community organizer at the age fifteen. Serving on the central committee for the Progressive Labor Party, he led various organizing efforts including Youth International Committee Against Racism and California's Anti-Racist Farm Workers' Union. By the age nineteen, he started rapping at local venues as a way to propagate his political ideas. With like-minded activists and artists, he formed the Mau Mau Rhythm Collective, which presented politically conscious "edutainment" concerts. Out of the featured performers on these concerts, Riley recruited MC E-Roc, his co-worker at UPS where he had a day job, and DJ Pam the Funkstress to form the Coup.

After its first EP in 1991, the Coup has released six full-length albums: *Kill My Landlord* (1993), *Genocide and Juice* (1994), *Steal This Album* (1998), *Party Music* (2001), *Pick A Bigger Weapon* (2006), and *Sorry to Bother You* (2012). While the group has never achieved platinum or gold sales figures and has experienced hiatus periods and member changes, it has expanded an audience base well beyond the Bay Area local scene. The Coup albums have been included in the year-end Top 10 lists of *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. They have received "Album of the Year" honors from the Washington Post. *Billboard* magazine declared the group "the best hip-hop act of the past decade." In the lyrics, music, album imagery and videos, Riley exposes the social reality and economic conditions of underclass America suffering from racism and

police brutality. And unlike most politically “conscious” hip-hop artists, not to mention those on the commercial mainstream, he does this in explicitly Marxist terms. The wealthy elites as the symbol of the oppressive capitalism, the need for a democratic control and redistribution of wealth, and the necessity of a proletarian revolution are the constant themes in his verses. In recent years he has been active in Occupy Oakland and Black Lives Matter movements while touring nationally and internationally both as a musician and a public speaker on issues involving race and class struggles in America (Hess, 274-277).

The resilience and longevity of Riley’s career as an openly communist, revolutionary artist in the popular music market is all the more remarkable when we consider the transformation of hip hop in America over the last two decades. While hip hop’s share of the popular music industry as a whole has risen sharply, the commercial mainstream of hip hop has increasingly become a showcase for overblown, violent and hyper-sexualized black male and female stereotypes that pioneering hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose has called “gangsta-pimp-ho trinity” (Rose, 5). One of the decisive factors was the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which promoted massive corporate media conglomeration. As the vast majority of nation’s radio airwaves came under a handful of corporations, much of the community-oriented, socially and politically “conscious” messages in hip hop have been relegated to the local “underground” venues (Folami).

How has Riley advocated communism and revolution and at the same time managed to stay and even thrive in the music business? What exactly are his communist thoughts like? What kind of rhetoric and imagery has he employed to convey them to the

hip hop audience and beyond? In what follows, I will interpret Riley's body of work, including interviews and writings as well as lyrics and performances, as his communist critique of contemporary hip hop and broader American culture. With his rich humor and versatile musicality, I will argue, Riley has been functioning as Gramscian organic intellectual, communicating a lucid, accessible version of dialectical materialism that resonates with an audience well beyond hip-hop listeners and leftist intellectuals.¹

2. On "Gangsta," or the Black Criminality Stereotype

The "gangsta" character was already a dominant figure in the commercial mainstream of hip hop when Riley and the Coup debuted in the early 1990s. Since the late 1980s Los Angeles area groups spearheaded by N.W.A. popularized what we now call gangsta rap. Exposing the widespread gang violence caused by deindustrialization, poverty, systemic segregation, drug abuse, and police brutality, these rappers did "a sort of street ethnography of racist institutions and social practices...in the first person" (Kelley, 190). At the same time, however, their rhymes tended to indulge in glorification of drugs, women, money, and violence against enemies and the police. Gangsta rap quickly became one of the most debated topics of the 1990s Culture Wars. Conservatives denounced its embrace of violence, illegal business, and vengeance against law enforcement officers, while the defenders insisted that the rappers were simply "keeping it real" in depicting their daily life. Some on the left, such as civil rights activist and the head of the National Political Congress of Black Women C. Delores Tucker, aligned with white cultural conservatives to join the war on gangsta rap, calling out its misogyny and

violence among other things (Chang, 450-3).

The Coup styled itself closer to the political hip hop group Public Enemy, whose lyrics promoted the revival of Black Nationalism and whose backup dancers wore outfits inspired by the Black Panthers. With his trademark afro hair, Riley placed himself in the lineage of Oakland's Black Panther legacy. Also, unlike Public Enemy, he put much larger emphasis on the socialist, anti-imperialist legacy of the Panthers than to its cultural nationalism. The first track "Dig It" in the Coup's debut album *Kill My Landlord* (1993) begins with Riley's declaration of war on capitalism. "Presto, read *The Communist Manifesto*," says Riley, and he surveys the history of revolutionary thought from Marx and Mao to Kwame Nkrumah, H. Rap Brown, Frantz Fanon, and Geronimo Pratt. Throughout the album, his verses analyze the local community issues of Oakland including unemployment, poverty, and police brutality within a broader economic structure. These themes have been consistent in Riley's lyrics throughout his career.

Riley and the Coup in their earlier years shared some of the braggadocio and machismo of gangsta rappers, and they often sampled the gangsta rapper Ice Cube. And like gangsta rappers, Riley occasionally embraced violence and illegal activities in his lyrics. Instead of gun fights and assaults on women, however, his recurrent themes were and are riot and looting. The track "The Coup" in *Kill My Landlord* depicts an urban riot presumably instigated by the band's music. It begins with a telephone conversation between a magazine reporter who asks if Riley feels responsible for the chaos on the street, and he answers that it is a "progress, not chaos" if the poor go out in the streets and take property from big businesses. The music video for the track "Takin' These" in

the second album *Genocide and Juice* (1994) likewise visualizes fantasy looting scenes where tens and hundreds of poor black men led by Riley and E-Roc flock into rich, powerful white men's high-rise offices and big mansions and ravage their properties.

The Coup's overtly political messages and the disturbing image of a crowd of the poor assaulting the rich often resulted in their reduced exposure in media outlets, but they also sparked a national controversy in 2001. When the attacks of September 11 shook the nation, the Coup was just about to release its fourth album *Party Music*. The album cover art, which had been finalized in June, featured Riley and DJ Pam the Funkstress in front of the exploding World Trade Center twin towers. Riley in the picture held the bass tuner as if it was the detonating controller, while Pam held two drumsticks as if they were a pair of electrodes. The similarity of the image of the explosion and the actual terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was entirely coincidental, but the distributor immediately suspended the album release. The cover art had to be replaced before it was finally released in November. A week after 9/11 Riley made it clear that the cover art was "more of a metaphor for destroying capitalism," that the revolution he espoused was not about hurting people but about organizing people, that he did not condone terrorism, and that he had the deepest sympathy for the victims. At the same time, he said he would have kept the original cover art if it had been up to him, as a way of stirring more controversy so that he could make more people aware of the United States' historical role in the world that led to the terrorist attack (Goedde). Conservative commentator Michelle Malkin described *Party Music* "a stomach-turning example of anti-Americanism disguised as highbrow intellectual expression" (Malkin). For some time

Riley was the most infamous man in American popular music, and amid the controversy, he made a couple of appearances on national network TV shows such as *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher. There and elsewhere, he never apologized for his intent in the original cover art—that he was using his music to blow up capitalism. “Because I said what I said,” Riley recalls, “I didn’t get invited back” (Raymer).

In addition to suggesting a different way of imagining violence and illegal activities, Riley’s lyrics occasionally provide a direct critique of gangsta rap. The track “I Ain’t the Nigga” in *Kill My Landlord*, for example, asks what it means “to be a Nigga With an Attitude” and questions the unrestrained use of the N-word among gangsta rappers. He firmly refuses, however, to blame gangsta rap for promoting crime and violence in the black community or elsewhere, as he believes that the fundamental problem is material and structural. “Capitalism needs a reserve force of unemployed workers to keep wages low,” says Riley. The unemployed workers, or those who fail to find employment in legal business, turn to illegal business in order to survive. Whereas legal business is regulated by the police force, illegal business needs to be regulated by the workers themselves. One of his favorite hypothetical situations is that of a drug dealer who found that the 80% of the bag of cocaine he had purchased turned out to be baking soda. He could not go to the law enforcement and demand restitution. Likewise, another drug dealer could not go to the city zoning commission when he found too many competitors in the same block. All businesses, whether legal or illegal, need violence to regulate itself. The inner-city violence is an inevitable outcome of the capitalist status quo.

Riley employs a Marxist base-superstructure model in criticizing the efforts to

regulate or control cultures like gangsta rap before tackling the inequality in material conditions. “You try to teach a fishing village an agricultural song,” says Riley, “it’s not going to make them start all of a sudden digging up the ground” (Ball). If the livelihood of the inner city youth continues to rely on illegal business, they will continue to write songs about illegal business accordingly. Too many people, he argues, fail to recognize this causal relationship and accept the argument that inner-city African Americans have developed a culture of poverty and crime, and what they need is a cultural change. Riley argues that this widespread argument is a racist ideology that buttresses the status quo by deflecting people’s attention from the structural inequality under the capitalist system. He laments that many well-meaning leaders and volunteers in African American communities subscribe to the same idea.

While Riley admits that some gangsta rappers also embrace the idea of the black culture of crime, he is more often critical of the “conscious” tradition in the hip hop community. Many politically progressive campaigns by hip-hop artists, such as the Stop the Violence Movement led by rapper KRS-One in 1989 and relaunched in 2008, for Riley, were destined to fail as they focused on the internal transformation among the youth of color and did not address the economic problems they faced. More recently, Riley called out Kendrick Lamar for what he sees as an excessive self-reflexivity. Lamar is arguably the most critically acclaimed rapper today who has achieved an exceptional success in the commercial mainstream while writing politically charged verses. His Grammy 2016 performance vividly depicted the on-going problem of mass incarceration of black men and resonated well with the Black Lives Matter movement. Riley, however,

argues that Lamar's introspective style, in which he calls out his own "hypocrisy" of mourning Trayvon Martin's death while not addressing black-on-black violence, buttresses the status quo by reiterating the old idea that African Americans need to uplift themselves before protesting. Here again the conscious rap, Riley argues, mistakenly attributes the cause of poverty and crime to the culture of the poor instead of the economic system (Riley, "Hip Hop & Struggle").

3. On "Pimp," or Black Materialism

The celebration of "pimp" character, or a street hustler who gets rich by taking advantage of others within the black community, especially vulnerable women, is another widely controversial aspect of the mainstream hip hop. While the critics of hip hop generally problematize the materialism symbolized by the pimp character, Riley takes a different approach. The 1994 track "Pimps (Free Stylin' At The Fortune 500 Club)" in *Genocide and Juice* depicts how J. D. Rockefeller, John Paul Getty, and Donald Trump would engage in a freestyle rap battle at a luxurious party. The track begins with a conversation among Rockefeller, Getty and an unnamed female guest all in patrician accent performed by voice actors. She has heard that the two billionaires are practicing rap recently as their pastime and prompts them to show off their skills. Rockefeller decides to go first. The chamber music in the background turns funky at his request. "Let me see if I can get my voice like those rappers," he says and clears his throat. As he begins his pimp rap, his voice is taken over by Riley's:

Long as the money flow
I'll be making dough
Welcome to my little pimp school
How you gon' beat me at this game?
I made the rules
...
See I'm running shit
Trick all y'all muthafuckas is simps
I'm just a pimp (Riley, *Tell Homeland*, 164-5)

John Paul Getty, whose rap is performed by E-Roc, follows with his verses on pimphood. When Getty is done, Donald Trump arrives at the scene, and the two billionaires of aristocratic upbringing try to avoid the boorish billionaire. Without being asked, Trump tells them he too can rap, and starts a powerful, ragamuffin reggae style pimp rap that is all about his outrageous wealth. The idea here is that the billionaire capitalists are the true pimps who make their own rules and win the game, and the masses, including self-styled pimps, are in fact all “hoes” destined to be taken advantage of under the capitalist system. This is a playful but powerful critique of the mainstream rappers and their followers who often celebrate entrepreneurship and conspicuous consumption to the effect of defending the neoliberal status quo (Ogbar, 176-7).

While mocking the celebration of street entrepreneurship and conspicuous consumption symbolized in the pimp character, Riley defends hip hop consumers' desire for material well-being. “When people love Jay Z,” he explains, “because he is all of a sudden putting out an example of someone that doesn't have to worry about paying the bills, somebody who's not going to get evicted. And that sounds like freedom” (Riley, “Extended”). He argues that gangsta and pimp rap overshadowed conscious and political rap precisely because the latter groups, including highly recognized groups like Public

Enemy and X-Clan, failed to initiate or work with social movements specifically aimed at improving people's material conditions. "[You] could wear the African Medallion," which is a symbol of Afrocentrism and Black Power, "and go home and there is no food in the refrigerator and you are struggling to pay the rent," says Riley. Gangsta rappers became more relatable for the people in his eyes because they at least talked about making and spending money (Jam).

"Underdogs" from *Steal This Album* (1998), which has become Riley's signature song, is filled with images of daily material needs of the working poor:

There's certain tricks of the trade to try and halt your defeat
Like taking tupperware to an "all you can eat"
Returning used shit for new saying you lost your receipt
And writing four figure checks when your accounts deplete
Then all your problems pile up about a mile up
Thinkin about a partner you can dial up to help you out this foul stuff
Whole family sleepin on a futon while you're clippin coupons
Eatin salad tryin to get full off the croutons (Riley, *Tell Homeland*, 149)

In this song, Riley refers to the well-meaning, secular and religious organizations as "some folks" and a "gang of preachers" who either try to "front" or "scream sermons." "They'd tear this motherfucker up if they really loved you," he says. The "motherfucker" is the capitalist system itself, and it is him as a communist who really loves the poor and is willing to tear up the system (Riley, "Radicalizing").

Embracing people's desire for material well-being, for Riley, is a key to revitalizing not only political hip hop but also overall leftist radicalism in the United States. He argues that the New Left movements of the 1960s drifted too far away from class struggle. Whereas the radicals of the first half of the twentieth century fought their

battles in their workplaces through militant strikes, the New Left placed too much emphasis on making spectacles, demonstrating their grievances on the street but failing to provide concrete, material changes. This has in the long run alienated the large part of the working-class Americans regardless of race. Leftist movements once again need to focus on improving material conditions of the people, and the only way to do so is to start organizing labor movement at workplaces. More specifically, Riley advocates for a solidarity strike which is currently illegal in the United States and unlikely to happen under the leadership of most existing trade unions. Having been involved in Occupy Oakland and more recently Black Lives Matter movement, Riley is optimistic that younger generation of Americans is more willing than ever to express their grievances. His best hope, however, does not lie in a demonstration but in a strike. The fast-food worker's movement since 2012, for example, has a chance to develop into substantive solidarity strikes that target whole regional outlets (Riley, "Radicalizing").

Riley believes that electoral politics is practically powerless, as elected politicians have only a small "wiggle room" under capitalism. Until people's desire for material well-being is channeled into a new, radical labor movement, the system will not change. Materialism is a key principle for him to propagate his message to the audience with clarity and simplicity. When asked if he considered himself a Marxist in 2009, Riley replied that he was a communist, not Marxist, meaning:

I find people that sometimes call themselves Marxists or Leninists, you know, they go back to those folks' writings as if it were the bible. And what I say is we are all still learning and we are all still figuring it out and what I want is for us to not only have electoral democracy, where we elect someone who supposedly represents us, but for capital, for profit to be democratized, for

wealth to be democratized so that the people can democratically control the profits that they create. (Jam)

Without getting into any theoretical complications, Riley focuses on democratic control over profits/wealth as the ultimate goal.

4. On “Ho,” or Misogyny in Hip Hop Culture

Sexism, misogyny, and homophobia have been a consistent problem in hip hop. Although gangsta rappers were not the first to use misogynistic narrative to validate their own manhood, they certainly represented the lineage of troubled black masculinity. The exaggeration of a male bonding, ironically, exacerbated their homophobic culture as well. It is no doubt that the references in hip hop to verbal abuse of black women and homosexual individuals are in part a reflection of actual lived experience in black communities devastated by post-industrial transformation, but their overwhelming dominance in hip-hop verbal landscape is undoubtedly due to the excessive commodification of blackness after the Telecommunication Act of 1996. Many critics who sees hip hop as detrimental to black community base their arguments on this aspect of contemporary hip hop (Rose, 76).

In this context, Riley has written songs and verses that challenge sexism and misogyny in hip hop and broader American culture and at once connect them to class struggle. “Me & Jesus the Pimp in a ’79 Granada Last Night” in *Steal This Album* (1998), for example, is a story of a boy who is raised by a prostitute mother. One day Jesus the Pimp beats her to death. The boy grows up taking to Jesus as a father figure who knows the way out of poverty, but eventually the boy gets revenge by shooting him in the car.

In Riley's own account, this was his first attempt to write a song about sexism that hurt the men as well as the women. He also meant Jesus to represent "the myth of Black capitalism," the idea that entrepreneurship would uplift the black community (Riley, *Tell Homeland*, 136).

"Wear Clean Draws" in *Party Music* (2001), written for Riley's daughter, discusses the future revolution and women's place in it:

The star is the future
That we gon create
Where nobody steals money from the things
we make
The revolution takes time and space
But you
as a woman
gotta know your place:
That's in the front baby (Riley, *Tell Homeland*, 100)

Here the end of capitalism is imagined with the end of sexism. In one occasion, Riley has also touched on LGBT issues. "Violet" in *Sorry To Bother You* (2012) is a story of a transgender prostitute named Violet. Financially troubled and depressed, she finds an ephemeral relief in an unrequited love (Riley, *Tell Homeland*, 44).

Riley's interest in progressive gender politics is reflected in the roles played by the female members of the Coup. Pam Warren, better known as DJ Pam the Funkstress, was the original member of the band. After *Pick A Bigger Weapon* (2006) she stopped touring with the band to run her catering business but has remained Riley's close collaborator. Deejaying is one of the most male-dominated fields in hip hop, and Warren had to go through difficulties in earning recognition and respect from her male colleagues. The further she improved her skills and win contests, Riley recalls, the worse the

problem was. The male deejays felt “they couldn’t get beat by a ‘girl,’ by a woman, and they had to...claim that it wasn’t fair or this or that.” Because of the tension with her male colleagues, Warren had to stop participating in competitions. Riley recruited her to form the Coup together nonetheless, as he believed that she was simply “one of the technically best deejays in the world at the time” (Riley, *Tell Homeland*, 201). In the Coup performances, Warren played the leading role in setting the tone of the group’s music and imagery. She occasionally uses her womanhood playfully to the humorous effect on stage, as when she scratches the turntable with her breasts, but she always keeps her dignified presence as Riley’s equal collaborator.

The Coup in its recent incarnation without E-Roc and Warren features the female vocalist Silk-E. As a featured singer of the band whom Riley characterize as “young Tina Turner,” Silk-E also presents herself as his equal collaborator in the band. The music video of “Guillotine” from *Sorry to Bother You* features the Coup as the characters of “The Wizard of Oz.” The visualized story is feminist as well as anti-capitalist. Riley as Scarecrow, who was hung on a basketball hoop, is led by Silk-E as Dorothy. They march yellow brick road with Tinman, Lion, and a guillotine. They arrive in Emerald City to find a huge Wizard’s Mask. The mask looks powerful and it sends strong wind to blow Dorothy and her mates away, but the power of their music and dance stops the wind. The party drags out the wizard hiding behind the mask, and he turns out to be a cowardly white man with a sack of dollars. The story ends with the wizard’s execution with the guillotine.

The music video for “Magic Clap” features former member Pam the Funkstress

as well as Silk-E. At the outset of the video, the law-enforcement officers kidnap Riley into their secret prison and torture him with an electric shock. Pam, disguised as one of the guards, sneaks into the prison. She beats the guard and the interrogating officer unconscious and lets Riley escape. In contrast to the “bitches” and “hoes” in the mainstream hip hop, women in the Coup refuse to be oversexualized objects. They take leading roles in people’s revolution, including the physical confrontations with the law enforcement forces.

At the same time, the confrontations in the Coup’s videos rarely take a bloody form. Pam’s fight against the officers are staged more like a comedy skit. This leads us to the final point of humor and optimism in Riley’s production.

5. Humor, Optimism, and Musical Eclecticism

During the last few years, Riley has been reaching the broadest audience base in his career. In 2015, Riley published a book titled *Tell Homeland Security—We Are the Bomb*, consisting of his song lyrics, commentaries, and backstories, from Haymarket Books that is specialized in leftist, provocative books. He is currently working on a film production of *Sorry to Bother You*, for which the Coup’s 2012 album will be the soundtrack. Riley has published a full-length screenplay and earned Spring 2015 and Spring 2016 San Francisco Film Society / Kenneth Rainin Foundation grants. It will be a surreal comedy staged in dystopian Oakland where everyone is unemployed and living in RVs. The protagonist, performed by Riley, becomes a rising star at a telemarketing firm with his ability to emulate “white” voice, as his friends and girlfriend start

organizing a strike to protest wages (Bien-Kahn).

As Riley's revolutionary vision is now taking material shapes in a book and a film script, the level of recognition and expectation for Riley within the leftist intellectual circle is also higher than ever. The back cover endorsements on *Tell Homeland Security* came not only from fellow activist musicians like Tom Morello and Talib Kweli, but also from academicians such as historians Vijay Prashad and Robin D. G. Kelley, and philosopher Slavoj Žižek (Riley, *Tell Homeland*). Riley seems to have been successfully playing the role of the Gramscian organic intellectual, whose responsibility is to transmit the class consciousness to those who do not belong in the intellectual class (Forman).

Many of Riley's political positions are distinct and would not be easily embraced by many on the left. His advocacy for an illegal strike and the use of physical force against scabs, for example, will not be acceptable for most existing labor organizers today. Some will find his imagery of riot, looting, and violence against the wealthy offensive even when they are meant to be rhetorical. His detachment from electoral politics would also disappoint supporters of progressive politicians. Riley is also against gun control advocacy, as he believes it deflects attention from the real cause of gun violence in the black community, that is, the lack of economic opportunities (Riley, "Guns Don't"). And above all, communism has been a hard sell for most of American history, and certainly today.

How does he sell his radical and often unpopular views? Other than the clarity and accessibility of his language, humor and optimism seem to be important factors. Compared with other underground rappers known for Marxist worldviews, such as

Immortal Technique, Paris, Dead Prez, and Lupe Fiasco, Riley produces works that are distinctively lighthearted and humorous. Adam Mansbach, author of the bestselling *Go the Fuck to Sleep* who contributed a foreword to *Tell Homeland Security*, testifies that Riley's wordplay is so hilarious that if "he penned battle raps, or if the stories he dropped...glamorized conspicuous consumption instead of critiquing it, he'd be on everybody's list of the funniest motherfuckers in the game" (Riley, *Tell Homeland Security*, 9). Some of the Coup's album covers, especially the banned edition of *Party Music* and *Sorry to Bother You*, are clearly meant to be comical. The humor prevents Riley from looking and sounding didactic or preachy, and help those who would not agree with him all the time at least get the gist of his ideas. Above all, humor is fundamental in his class-based worldview. The capitalist system is supposed to be funny in the eyes of a communist. "Contradictions are humorous," Riley explains, "The system is nothing but contradicting" (Arnold).

As for his optimism, Riley not only writes songs with a victorious ending like "Guillotine" but also injects hope even into the songs of hardship and despair like "Underdogs." He learned early as an organizer that making angry people angrier does not help them becoming a part of a movement. A lot of protest art, he observes, does just that. "Often we are told the system is evil, which it is, but in this conspiracy sort of way where there are five people in a room that control the world and there's nothing you can do about it," there will be no hope. Looking inward and changing your inside won't help, either, as you would be angrier when you discover that the world has not changed accordingly. People instead need to be reminded that there are smaller, winnable battles

over their material conditions, such as their wages, housing, and education (Harris).

Last but not the least, Riley's musical versatility has been crucial in constantly cultivating new audiences. The Coup's sound in their early years was in the tradition of Oakland hip hop, sampling primarily funk music of the 1970s, particularly P-Funk. He also made frequent use of live instrumentation both in the studio and in live performance. During the 2000s Riley moved closer to rock music. Street Sweeper Social Club, which he and Tom Morello formed in 2006, was a hard rock band featuring a rapper as the vocalist, the same style as Morello's earlier project Rage Against the Machine. The Coup since the production of *Sorry to Bother You* in 2012 is not so much a hip hop group but a funk/punk/rock band with full live instrumentation, featuring a rapper and a female singer in the front. Obviously, Riley has been trying to reach out to the audience broader than the hip hop community.

Tricia Rose has warned hip-hop aficionados to watch out for "the Manipulation of the Funk." Catchy beats and rhythms can often cover up the nature of images and messages contained in the music. Many consumers, she observes, fall in love with songs without fully paying attention to the lyrics that often celebrate crime, violence, conspicuous consumption, male dominance, and hypersexualization (Rose, 262-64). If the catchy beats and rhymes have the power to disseminate toxic stereotypes, however, they could also be used to propagate more constructive ideas to an otherwise unlikely audience as well. As a political organizer, Riley believes in being friendly and getting to know people who do not already agree with him, because "a revolutionary movement can't be made by forging an insular culture" (Harris). His musical evolution reflects the

same philosophy.

Conclusion

Boots Riley is a living proof that leftist radicalism has survived and may even thrive on the fringe of the popular music market in neoliberal America. The recent surge of mass protests including Occupy movements and Black Lives Matter movement has reaffirmed the widespread frustration and desire for change among the younger generation of Americans. While the pent-up feelings of those in the movements have yet to inspire a kind of radicalized labor movement Riley hopes to see, he is as optimistic as ever about their potential to do so.

Hip hop industry itself may have made a turn in 2015 when Kendrick Lamar received multiple Grammy awards and the film *Straight Outta Compton* revisited the early history of gangsta rap and its relevance to police brutality. Rap artists are now more likely to be rewarded with sales for addressing socially and politically relevant topics over guns, money, and hoes (Robinson). Whether this resurgence of the conscious rap will simply lead to more of the introspection over black-on-black crimes which Riley is strongly critical of, or result in more of the radical critique of the capitalist system is yet to see. In any case, Riley is not invested in the future of hip hop as much as in the revolution he espouses. Whether or not hip hop moves toward the direction he wishes it to, he will keep producing rhymes and images that are both disturbing and humorous, that will defy the gangsta-pimp-ho stereotypes, and that will make the audience dance to the idea of revolution.

Notes

¹ Historians of popular music have often applied Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual," who grows out of a subordinated group and attempts to build a coalition of oppositional groups united around counter-hegemonic ideas that challenge existing power relations, to explain the struggle of an artist with a political agenda in a market economy. See, for example, George Lipsitz' discussion of Chicano rock musicians (Lipsitz) and Robin D. G. Kelley's analysis of the early gangsta rap (Kelley).

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Summary

Raymond “Boots” Riley (1971-) has lead the Oakland-based hip hop group the Coup since 1991. While the group has never achieved platinum or gold sales figures and has experienced hiatus periods and member changes, it has released six full-length albums, toured nationally and internationally, and expanded an audience base well beyond the Bay Area local scene. Meanwhile, Riley has also been a lifelong labor and anti-racist activist who openly calls himself a communist. While hip hop has always been political in reflecting its roots in the marginalized inner-city African-American and Latino communities, anti-capitalist radicalism has never been a popular idea. Besides, the music industry has experienced massive corporate media conglomeration over the last two decades and much of the community-oriented, socially and politically “conscious” messages in hip hop have been relegated to the local “underground” venues. Given this context, the resilience and longevity of Riley’s career is all the more remarkable. This paper will examine Riley’s body of work, including interviews, lyrics, and performances, and analyze how Riley has successfully blended entertainment with his radical ideology and critique of contemporary hip hop and broader American culture.