

# European Theories in Former Yugoslavia

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*Trans-theory Relations between  
Global and Local Discourses*

Edited by

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and Andrija Filipović

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# JACQUES ATTALI'S CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MUSIC IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECORDING INDUSTRY IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

MARIJA MAGLOV

This text examines the concept of the political economy of music first discussed by French economist and theorist Jacques Attali in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*.<sup>1</sup> The concept is observed here in the context of the recording industry in former Yugoslavia, because in my opinion, Attali's ideas, grouped around this problem, can provide new and interesting insights into the role of recorded music in Yugoslav society. Thus, I shall first present Attali's thesis and one particular part of his narrative, focused on the problem of repetition and related to the condition of the recording industry in general.

The main idea of Attali's book is that music can, in a way, announce future developments in society and history. For him, music "heralds, for it is *prophetic*. It has always been in essence a herald of times to come" (Attali 1985, 4). The specific duality between music and noise is an important issue in Attali's book, as he sees music, *qua* any organisation of sound, as a "tool for the creation or consolidation of a community" (Attali 1985, 6). In that sense, music shows that society is possible. Noise, then, is a dissonance in the social order, an act of violence that may and eventually will break that existing order. A specific "leitmotif" in Attali's book, Pieter Brueghel's painting *The Fight between Carnival and Lent*, is used to illustrate this constant battle between Harmony and Dissonance, Order and Disorder (Attali 1985, 21). But, as illustrative as this painting may be, Attali still gives precedence to music, to the audible over the visual, when it comes to understanding the world surrounding us (Attali 1985, 3). This is because

styles and economic organization [of music] are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible. (Attali 1985, 11)

What this quotation shows is that Attali thinks of music not only as a work of art. Instead, its economic organisation in different periods has a distinctive role in Attali's narrative, although particular activities of artists, "classical" and "popular" alike, are certainly important in his discourse as well. Obviously, for him, music is not an autonomous activity, but nor is it "an automatic indicator of the economic infrastructure" (Attali 1985, 5). Rather, Attali emphasises the role of music as a herald, because, as he argues, it is in music that the possibilities of a given code of a social order can be first noticed, or, more precisely, heard. On the other hand, the future breakdown of that order is first recognised in the noise and dissonances that occur in the existing order. Fredric Jameson duly recognised the unconventionality of Attali's conception, when he wrote in his foreword to the American edition of Attali's book that Attali is the first "to have drawn the other possible logical consequences" of the Marxist model of the relationship between base and superstructure (Attali 1985, xi). Instead of following the traditional approach to this relation, which implies that the superstructure is always affected by the base, Attali argues that the superstructure may also announce future social, political, and economical developments.

So, what are the exact orders through which Attali traces the changing modes of the political economy of music? It is important to note that Attali acknowledges the simultaneity of different codes and overlapping between periods, forms and styles, which certainly makes his narrative a sort of exciting noise in itself: it is neither clear nor systematic, but rather fragmented, rich in examples with overlapping observations, not exactly delineated in terms of a specific time period, although one may trace a certain line in time, as the orders in the end do replace one another. Thus, Attali distinguishes between three different orders, referring to "three strategic usages of music by power": first, music as *ritual sacrifice*, serving to make people forget violence; second, music as *representation*, making people believe in order and harmony, finally, music as *repetition*, serving to silence and censor all human noises (Attali 1985, 19–20). The fourth order, that of composing, of greater freedom and improvisation, in music and society alike, is yet to come, as Attali concludes and predicts by listening to the music and noise of his own time. Whether that final, utopian aspect of his narrative has proved right remains open for

discussion. Here, I shall focus on the relationships between music, power, politics, economy, and society given in the order of repetition.

As Attali explains, “repetition began as the by-product of representation” (Attali 1985, 85). Although it was meant as a way of preserving a specific network (representation), recording was to create another (repetition) and thus “heralded an immense mutation in knowledge and politics” (Attali 1985, 90). Speaking of the phonograph, the development of which marked the beginning of the new technology of recording, Attali comments that “the dominant system only desired to preserve a recording of its representation of power, to preserve itself” (Attali 1985, 92). Instead, this technology imposed a new social system, completed the process of the deritualisation of music and heralded a new economy and politics, in music as well as in other aspects of society (Attali 1985, 89). These were the economy of leisure and the economy of signs, and the music industry, with all of its derivatives, was their precursor (Attali 1985, 37). For Attali, music was “undoubtedly the first system of sign production”. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was becoming obvious in more and more aspects of society that representation was not enough, as the new economy required accumulation. That is why “in order to accumulate profit, it becomes necessary to sell stockpileable sign production, not simply its spectacle” (Attali 1985, 37). The idea of the mere possibility of saving and stockpiling at home, where the pleasure resides in accumulating something that is not essential for living, marks the economy of post-WWII society (first in America, then globally). American musicologist Robert Fink explains that, after the Second World War, “rising productivity threatened to flood industrialized economies with a glut of goods”, which is why attention shifted to the creation of desire and hence to the rationalisation of a society dependent on advertising – repetitive marketing strategies (Fink 2005, 10).<sup>2</sup> Of course, Attali finds the first traces of this in music (Attali 1985, 106–09). Fink credits Attali for his unmatched insights in the ways in which “technological advances in production and reproduction engender pervasive repetition in consumer society”, although his own insights into this culture of repetition differ somewhat from Attali’s (Fink 2005, 8). Nevertheless, we may conclude that repetitive processes are strongly connected with the capitalist, consumer, mass-media society of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Attali notes that one of the effects of technology repetition is the reduction of music to a simulacrum of its original, ritualistic function, where reproduction presents the death of the original and the triumph of a copy, which conditions the forgetting of the foundation that was once represented (Attali 1985, 89). This “triumph of a copy” bore consequences

for the reception of music. Recordings made music available to all, which meant that accessibility replaced the exclusivity of the festival and that listening to music became a more individualised activity, in contrast to its erstwhile collective reception (Attali 1985, 100). Due to this change, the value of music no longer depends on the ritual, but on its commerciality, on its ability to attract buyers. Of course, collective listening did not disappear, but the reception of music was deeply influenced by this new, individualised practice. Inseparable from that practice is the new, more abstract form of aesthetics, which the listener begins to require because of the production criteria imposed by technology (Attali 1985, 106). A clinically pure acoustics becomes one of the most important qualities of music. Quality, purity, and the elimination of all noise, the emptying of the body of its needs and reducing it to silence are all characteristics that, according to Attali, constitute the new musical ideal (Attali 1985, 122). Thus, the use of music as a tool of power for censoring human noises, mentioned above, is thereby confirmed.

While the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States and other Western societies was, as was mentioned before, marked by capitalism (and still is), Yugoslavia was a socialist republic. In the dominant socialist rhetoric, the values of capitalist society were criticised, although Yugoslav socialism was more open to the West than were countries belonging to the Eastern Bloc. Bearing in mind that repetitive practices, including the recording industry, are more closely connected to the capitalist order, questions could be raised about the status and role of the music recording industry in the socialist context of former Yugoslavia. While, as is well known, Yugoslavia fell apart and its former constituent republics have been transitioning to capitalism, my position is that Attali's model of "hearing" the future through music and its practices might be used retroactively and interpreted as heralding the capitalist order that was eventually to come. The examples I use stem from my research of the archives of the PGP-RTB recording label.<sup>3</sup> Although not the only such institution in Yugoslavia, PGP-RTB was certainly one of the biggest and most important, so insight into its production yields relevant information about Yugoslavia's recording industry at the time. I will focus on their classical music recordings as well as recordings of socialist mass songs and other forms of music featuring socialist content.

Socialist rhetoric regarded classical music, among other products of high culture, as something belonging to the entire society (this, of course, does not apply to socialist societies alone, but must be noted here). High culture was supposed to be equally distributed to everyone (Zlatić 1977,

38), and the role of classical music in the formation of the “emotional and moral world of the new man” was emphasised (Popov 1980, 35). The role of the recording industry in this context was conceived as “the realisation of the cultural mission that is expected from this production” (Plavša 1977, 205). Licensed editions covered a wide range of canonical classical compositions, often grouped according to the stated aim of the popularisation of this music,<sup>4</sup> while Yugoslavia’s own production was focused on local composers and performers. Despite emphasising the educational role of recording, the final result of Yugoslavia’s recording industry did not differ much from those of capitalist societies. Regardless of its stated rationale, Yugoslavia’s recording industry resulted in the formation of a market and a repetitive production of signs, which eventually led to a different economic order.

But it is the production of mass song recordings and other music related to socialist themes that really draws our attention. This music was meant as a celebration and representation of socialist society and its symbols (Tito, the revolution, the Army, the workers, etc.).<sup>5</sup> It certainly strove to emphasise collectiveness and equality as qualities of socialism. That said, what was actually achieved by recording this music and making it commercially available to the solitary listener? By attempting to preserve representation, with the recording as its by-product, and by making it available to all, the idea of accessibility truly replaces the festival. The recording produces a simulacrum of the original function of this music, silencing its possible noises and corporeality, in the aesthetic ideal of purity immanent to recordings. Finally, the representative role of this music is reduced to a sign as a product intended for the market, with the music’s original meaning muted. One recognises here Attali’s description of the effects caused by recordings. Thus, in the case of Yugoslavia, the technology of reproduction heralded the transition to a new order. The question of the relationship between socialism and capitalism in Yugoslavia is complex; the specific paradoxical situation of Yugoslavia was that its dominant socialist rhetoric, which gave the impression that the society was headed toward communism, collided with a political and economic reality that inclined toward capitalism, as Vesna Mikić explains in her contribution to this volume. In music *qua* practice that explores the possibilities of a given code before other social practices, as we saw in Attali (Attali 1985, 11), and in its economic organisation, this paradox is even more evident. By following Attali’s example and accepting that the world is for hearing, not for beholding (Attali 1985, 3), we might learn, either retroactively or presently, more about the intricate relations of politics, economy, and society, with music as their inseparable part.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first French edition was published in 1977 as *Bruits. Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* by Presses Universitaires de France and translated into English in 1985 as *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester University Press in the UK and University of Minnesota Press in the US). The second, revised edition was published in 2001 by Fayard.

<sup>2</sup> Fink's study is concerned with the problem of various musical practices, among them minimalism, in what he calls the culture of repetition.

<sup>3</sup> This acronym stands for "Produkcija gramofonskih ploča Radio televizije Beograd" (Belgrade Radio Television Gramophone Records Production). It was founded in 1951.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. vinyl editions with titles such as *Music of the Millions* and *I Love Music* (both by Philips). The mere fact that these were licensed editions, originally published by a major European label, confirms that there was no great difference between Yugoslavia's music recording industry and those of Western European countries.

<sup>5</sup> Some examples of these vinyl editions: *Pesme o Partiji* (Songs about the Party, 1979), *Da nam živi, živi rad* (Long, Long Live Labour, 1976, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of youth work actions), *Himna pobjede* (The Victory Anthem, dedicated to the victory over fascism), *Pesme o Titu* (Songs about Tito), etc.

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