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“Fight the Power” or Fear the Power? Perceived Levels of Political Agency via Musically Driven
Emotional Intervention

By

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Introduction

In 2002, Irish rock band U2 performed during the Super Bowl halftime show, combining their rock stardom with a tribute to the victims of 9/11, seeking to reach out and touch millions of Americans through song (Shales 2002). U2 performing at the Super Bowl, especially right after a national tragedy, was a calculated decision by the NFL. They wanted a band that could pull on the heartstrings of their viewers, while still rousing them with certified platinum hits. Bono, the lead singer of U2, was deeply aware of what it meant to be the Super Bowl headliner so soon after a catastrophe like 9/11, and he knew what direction he wanted to take the show in. While U2 launched into their hit song “Where the Streets Have No Name”, the video screens behind the band displayed the names of every individual that had lost their life in the September 11th attacks. When asked about the halftime performance and the use of the video screens in a 2023 documentary, Bono replied that he “wanted to use some exhortation, taking away normal spectacle and turning it into a monument of rolling names. Super Bowl Halftimes are a spectacle, but the greatest spectacles are emotions” (Aniftos 2023). The NFL wanted to combine music and emotions to illicit a particular response from its audience, and they believed U2 was the perfect band for the job. U2 was widely hailed for their performance, with reviews calling their politically and emotionally charged performance “moving”, and among the best halftime shows ever (Fetters 2017). It was a peaceful show, with audience members, both those in the stadium and those watching from home, feeling the emotional pull of U2.

Just a couple of years prior, rap-rock firebrands, activists, and musicians Rage Against the Machine (RATM) played a show in the protest zone across from the 2000 Democratic National Convention, taking place at the Staples Center. While RATM’s concert was rowdy, it

remained largely peaceful, albeit the band did make some claims that undoubtedly created anger and fervor amongst the crowd. Vocalist Zack de la Rocha spit fury into the mic, encouraging protest and resistance to a convention that many attendees felt was undemocratic and unrepresentative of what Democratic voters desired from their party. Not long after the concert ended, violence began. Members of the crowd began to throw rocks and bottles at police officers, and route exits were cut off as rubber bullets were fired into a crowd that had sparse options for dispersing themselves (Purdum 2000).

While certainly not the Super Bowl, the attendees at the 2000 Democratic National Convention likely numbered in the tens of thousands, and the protests were plastered on TV and news broadcasts. And so a question emerges: Why did a rock band like U2 garner praise for its peaceful display of “political unity”, while Rage Against the Machine, another kind of rock band, and similarly calling for a kind of political unity, dissolve into a night of violent clashing with police?

These examples provide interesting clues as to the ways that emotions and political agency surface in popular culture, and why some displays of emotion are received positively, while others garnish a much more negative reaction. Some displays of political agency are allowed, and others are not; And these allowances are not coincidental, but deliberate. In this paper, I argue that emotions evoked by popular music affect an individual’s level of political agency. Due to limitations imposed by the cultural hegemonic environment, some emotions are acceptable to evoke in politically charged popular music while others are received as hostile by the hegemonic class. This example is just one of many where emotions, music, and politics combine, and scholars of world politics should take increased notice of these occurrences. International relations is an emotional discipline. Fear, hope, anger, sadness, anxiety, and more

are all emotions that international relations scholars address, and by illustrating the ties between emotions, music, and political agency, international relations scholars can observe how many individuals are interacting with political events directly through a changing emotional landscape. Music as a highly emotional medium demonstrates the importance prevailing emotions have when individuals deal with events of political importance, and the external factors that impact the level of individual political agency.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, to help explain the intersection between the different mobilizing and demobilizing effects that negative emotions have on an individual's level of political agency, and how these emotions are in some ways "weaponized" by international and institutional actors to influence the agency of the individual. Second, to further investigate the systems-based constraints on an individual's sense of political agency that go beyond simple compulsory power-based explanations. While hegemony can be a physical phenomenon that is often imposed on an individual, it often rears its head in a multitude of ways, including through culture. In this sense, we can seek to investigate the less visible ways that hegemony constricts the agency of the individual.

The paper will proceed as follows: First, I will examine the literature of previous scholars that have laid the ground work in emotions and political agency research, and how these findings have been applied to pop culture and now, music. Second, I will develop a theory on the intersection between negative emotions, agency, and music, centering on concepts such as Theodor Adorno's "culture industry" and cultural hegemony, first introduced by Antonio Gramsci. Lastly, I will conduct a discourse analysis to demonstrate the intersection between music, its performance, and the individual levels of political agency that are affected by it.

Emotions and Political Agency

The cross-pollination between studies on emotions and international relations is a combination that has blossomed in recent years. This change is a welcome one, with some IR scholars such as Ronald Bleiker noting that it does not make sense to exclude emotion from security studies research, as some aspects of these studies, such as terrorist attacks, are a “highly emotional phenomenon”(Bleiker 2005). Several scholars, such as Neta Crawford, have laid down intricate and detailed blueprints on how the IR community might proceed with emotions-based research, suggesting such site of inquiry as “emotional relationships”, or the preconceived feelings that may dictate how groups and individuals act towards each other (Crawford 2000, 134–35). Indeed, many of the realist cornerstone concepts that have come to dominate the field of study such as anarchy can be conceptualized through the lens of emotion, such as the way that Simon Koschut theorizes security communities around the world, like NATO, as emotional communities (Koschut 2014). Security communities, like any other community around the world, follow a set of norms that are primarily emotion based. Thinking of such entities as the state as a group with emotional capabilities, in the way that Brent Sasley does (Sasley 2011) creates avenues of investigation that goes beyond the idea of states and international actors as cold, unfeeling, and purely calculated in their decision-making capabilities. This notion is amplified by the research done by Daniel and Musgrave, who find that individuals engage with fictional sources of information the same way they engage with non-fiction information, suggesting that their worldviews are constructed by both real and imagined realities (Daniel and Musgrave 2017). These examples suggest that perhaps some aspects of security should not be solely rationalized, but rather “emotionalized”, and put into the context of the kinds of feelings that would cause these actors to conduct themselves the way they do. Emotions in IR provide a way to explain how individuals respond to the system, rather than looking at how the system

responds to the individual. The emotional responses evoked by political stimuli point toward varying levels of individual agency, and how emotional identities are formed not only through institutional interactions, but personal experiences as well.

Political agency is an inherently emotional topic. It is imperative, especially in the context of a democracy, that the public *feels* they can participate in political issues, and that their participation matters (Degerman 2022, 25). This is known as internal political efficacy; Having a high level of internal political efficacy means an individual understands how to get involved in politics, and are aware of the challenges that come with it (Valentino et al. 2009, 308). Political agency is not static; Rather, it is incredibly dynamic, with the level of political agency many individuals report having as being directly tied to their current emotional state.

Different emotions provide different perceptions of personal control. Anger has a strikingly different motivational factor in relation to other negative emotions, such as sadness and guilt: Anger increases the sense of control one has, pushing an individual to feel more assured and confident of their future choices. Some scholars, such as Lerner and Tiedens, have even posited re-evaluating anger as a positive emotion, as it provokes a higher sense of optimism than pessimism, and angry individuals feel more confident in tackling what is making them angry in the first place (Lerner and Tiedens 2006, 130). This higher level of confidence is supported by research detailing how angry individuals are more likely to take risks in comparison to sad individuals (Lerner and Keltner 2001), suggesting that anger provokes a sense of action as opposed to complacency. The possibilities of anger are not lost on the groups perpetuating hegemony. Henderson writes that anger “may be considered to be the greatest threat to the status quo” (Henderson 2008, 32). As opposed to other negative emotions, anger possesses the ability to enable, and therefore encourage, a desire for change.

While anger proves to solidify and amplify sentiments of confidence, fear and shame are reinforcement mechanisms due to the loss of political agency that accompanies them. These emotions have the capability to lower the individual sense of self and by extension, political agency, as these emotions reduce certainty when engaging with sources of structural power such as local and national government, law enforcement, and other sources of authority. Prior evidence suggests that when fear is the dominant emotion elicited by a political advertisement, the result is lower levels of political participation, interest, and discussion (Weber 2013, 422). Put in a different way, fear essentially acted as a political de-mobilizing agent, reducing the likelihood of an individual engaging with politics in almost every way. This suggests that when an individual is engaging with a political stimuli, whether that be an advertisement, speech, or news story, they are doing so in relation to their *current emotional perception* in relation to the political issue. The emotions that the stimuli makes an individual feel will dictate their course of action in responding to the stimuli.

The emotions that individuals tend to feel in these political situations are not created out of thin air. Rather, emotions are learned phenomena. Emotions largely form the basis of cultural analysis. Their relationship is so closely tied, in fact, that some scholars such as Pierzchalski argue that “Emotions in this regard are socially learned intellectual constructions. People living in given cultural conditions learn emotions from others through imitation to react similarly to stimuli or situations” (Pierzchalski 2020, 69). Emotions are shared behaviors. If emotions are learned through imitation, then engagement with political stimuli would be stipulated upon which behaviors are deemed acceptable and which are not. This implies that culture can be and is used as a kind of testing ground for emotional priming. The rules of engagement, especially in politics, are set by this crossover between culture and emotion, specifically negative emotions.

Music and Pop Culture

International relations scholars have, in recent years, paid decidedly more attention to the overlap between its discipline and popular culture. Pop culture has the ability to shape world politics, and vice versa (Grayson et al. 2009). The interactions between these two topics of interest are increasingly intertwined as it becomes more common to see such phenomena as celebrity diplomats (Cooper 2008), where popular public figures such as Bono exercise tremendous influence on the world stage, despite gaining their clout from their artistic creations, not from being elected to public office. Popular culture can inform scholars of what political events the public is paying particular attention to, helping direct research to areas that hold both academic and public importance. The emotional reactions to these cultural entities can have great importance for international relations scholars who are trying to piece together the public's feelings towards world politics.

Popular culture informs the worldviews of millions around the world who may not ever engage with some foreign political issues directly, but rather through fictional creations that inform their perspective. Countries around the world engage in this kind of diplomacy to shape foreign opinion. The Japanese government utilizes cultural exports such as anime and manga in hopes of attracting people to conduct a deeper dive into other aspects of Japanese culture (Kanji 2016, 41), while simultaneously allowing viewers to form community with Japanese anime fans and animation studios (McKevitt 2010). Turkish television, namely dramas, has found success in numerous areas of the world, such as Latin America and Western Europe, helping to shape expectations of Turkish society (Donelli 2019, 126). The lavish and machismo image of international spy hero James Bond has served both as an image of the British empire through the novels of Ian Fleming, as well as an example of American hegemony (Shin and Namkung 2008).

Popular culture, in the 20th and 21st centuries is used as a way of shaping expectations and realities, of employing fictional worlds to affect how individuals view these cultures in real life. The once localized nature of culture meant that while it would once take extended periods of time to notice external cultural influence (Seo et al. 2006, 320), culture has ballooned into a globalized and digitized phenomenon, that is no longer confined by borders, but by levels of internet access and connectivity to global markets (Pooch 2016). Distance is no longer a factor when it comes to cultural reach, and countries are increasingly utilizing cultural globalization to create imagined communities that are not bound by nationality, but rather similar interests.

With the connection between political engagement and negative emotions in mind, music becomes a cultural medium that is overflowing with examples of emotions being mobilized both for increased and decreased political engagement. Music like “non-corporatized Hip Hop” acts as a counter-hegemonic force through its direct engagement with social issues such as police brutality and socioeconomic struggle (Nocella 2014, 214). Punk rock and its usage of fanzines specifically intended to serve as a way of “democratizing youth cultural practice” as opposed to the corporate and manicured messages endorsed in mainstream music magazines (Worley 2015, 81). Music that is originally intended to be a message of resistance runs the risk of being swallowed up by the overwhelming power that the cultural hegemon wields through its use of capital and influence. The goal of the cultural hegemon in the context of musical political engagement, is to equate *experiencing* with *doing*. Through its endorsement of sub-culture creation, music can be a site of expressionism and counter-culture, where the creation of sound that is in opposition to what is popular becomes a source of opposition (Street 2003, 121). Popular music does not appeal to listeners simply because it sounds good or is aesthetically pleasing: It reaches the ears of so many individuals because it fulfills a cultural need, a

sociological desire that the listener is not even fully cognizant of. Music is almost entirely an emotional medium of communication. Sound, vibration, and rhythm are meant to evoke feelings that words cannot do on their own accord. In this sense, music fills a sociological need, a niche of cultural creation.

American cultural hegemony has a seemingly endless reach through such mediums as music, art, film, literature, and television. There is some debate, particularly regarding music, on if American hegemony has truly solidified itself musically when many of the large record labels and sources of music distribution come from a wide variety of different countries (Seago 2000). There is less debate, however, on the overall influence that American music has abroad, and level of permeation it has achieved on a worldwide scale. No music awards show rivals the influence and cultural reach of the Grammys, consistently referred to as “music’s biggest night”. While there are almost 100 different awards handed out during the ceremony both on and off-screen, the most prized Grammy’s are “Record of the Year”, “Album of the Year”, and “Song of the Year”. In their own separate category is the “Latin, Global, African, Reggae & New Age, Ambient, or Chant”, where the majority of non-American based music is lumped together. While it is technically possible for an album in this category to also be nominated for such prestigious awards as “Album of the Year”, it has never happened and is unlikely to happen any time soon. The message to the global music community in this awards ceremony is simple: The best they can hope for is American music approval, not inclusion. American cultural hegemony decides what is and is not worthy of recognition within its own ranks. In other words, American music is world music. The universalism of the American music industry and therefore its cultural reach cannot be mistaken.

Internally, the Grammys are a reputation builder within the music world. Through the accumulation of awards, an artist's reach and clout is extended and maximized. A Grammy award continues to hold a significant amount of artistic weight because "it simultaneously proclaims a disinterest in commerce while enabling commercial exploitation that comes from improved artistic reputation" (Watson and Anand 2006, 54–55). A Grammy is a win-win for both artist and record labels because it allows the artist to increase their popularity without necessarily appearing to "sell-out", while record labels reap the rewards of higher sales due to the Grammy win. This is crucial for artists that want to climb the ranks of the music industry while also maintaining credibility with their fanbase as being "genuine" and "authentic."

Outside of the Grammys, the American music industry has been mobilized to provide support to world crises. Such events as "Live-Aid", in the 1980s, meant to garner support for starving children in Africa, stands as a testament to the dissemination of American hegemony through song. The song "We are the World" suggests a universalism of American values such as free-market capitalism and democracy, speaking to the fact that in some cases, American culture has become synonymous with world culture (Kooijman 2013). There is little follow-up, however, on how songs like "We are the World" can condition individuals through the suggestive nature of its lyrical and performance-based content. Understanding what these songs makes people feel provides new perspectives on how music can be used as a kind of tool of political conditioning through the targeting of certain emotions.

Potential for Music as Cultural Critique

While music does have the potential to be a kind of rallying cry against the status quo, it is often used to reinforce those wielding power. Music that is created within the constraints of hegemony, and serves the hegemonic class, seeks to attract individuals to a "spectacle" of

resistance. The music in this case exists to instill a momentary experience that feels powerful, but the resistance begins and dies with the performance itself. There is no engagement outside of engagement with the music itself. Theorizing culture's ineffectiveness to create change was spearheaded by the Marxist Frankfurt School. One of the most vocal members of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, felt that no piece of art or culture could be created under a capitalistic system while also raising the consciousness and level of social awareness of the general public (Martínez 2015, 198). This was the fault of the "culture industry", which Adorno describes as having achieved its goal of ensuring Americans can never reach the elusive enlightenment that it promises in the first place:

"Human dependence and servitude, the vanishing point of the culture industry, could scarcely be more faithfully described than by the American interviewee who was of the opinion that the dilemmas of the contemporary epoch would end if people would simply follow the lead of prominent personalities. Insofar as the culture industry arouses a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry, the substitute gratification which it prepares for human beings cheats them out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects" (Adorno and Rabinbach 1975, 18).

Adorno directly attacked sites of the culture industry that he felt responsible for the deterioration of public consciousness, one of the most infamous music examples being his scathing rebuke of jazz music (Gracyk 1992, 528). While many of Adorno's critiques can be quite extreme in nature, the core of his work points to the connection between the creation of cultural artifacts and their usage as tools of cultural hegemony. While art was supposed to be a source of elevated thinking for those consuming it, the idea of the culture industry and the

broader concept of cultural hegemony insinuates that art is doing nothing more than reinforcing the status quo.

Expanding on Adorno's central ideas, pop culture's potential as a cultural critique is atrophied by a hegemonic system that saps individuals of their capabilities to use art as a form of dissident expression. Culture under hegemony becomes nothing more than something to be consumed, a product that makes an individual aware that they are feeling certain emotions for the duration of time they are consuming the art. But, once these experiences end, so does an individual's engagement. Culture created under hegemony can and does conjure emotions in the listener and the audience, but the audience member feels no responsibility to act on the emotions that are bestowed upon them. Under these constraints, the consumer believes that these emotions are part of a commodified cultural transaction. In other words, the consumer is simply getting what they paid for:

“We do not have to impose stereotypes on the movies, songs, and stories of mass culture, comparing them to other cultural critiques we have had, or analyzing them to see how they both fit into *and challenge* our existing conceptual frameworks. Rather, in the ultimate triumph of style, they already come to us prepackaged for our immediate consumption. Films and television programs, radio broadcasts, and popular music have been so extensively organized, sorted, and classified that there is nothing left for people to schematize. The cognitive dimension of cultural experience is limited to the mere sorting of sensations into a crude schematic according to the labels firmly stamped upon them at the point of production” (Gunster 2000, 53).

As a consequence of this cognitive erosion, cultural critiques within the constraints of hegemony do indeed still exist, but because the public's ability to utilize pop culture as a medium

of assessing societal shortcomings has been drastically reduced, these critiques exist in a vacuum. The public becomes incapable of engaging with a piece of art's societal critique and is only able to engage with the art itself. Pop culture critiques, instead of becoming a means to an end, are forced to be an end in themselves.

And so, when pop culture is attempted as a critique of societal ills, the messages communicated by it often appear as surface-level and performative. Individuals work to ensure that others are aware that they have consumed the pop culture critique. They are eager to show that they have engaged with a piece of culture that is making the rounds, and that the movement or art has made them feel a certain way. For instance, in 2020 individuals participating in the social media "Blackout Tuesday" trend arguably did more harm than good, as the millions of black squares drowned out the videos and photos that showcased the ongoing police brutality many protesters wanted to share via the internet (Willingham 2020). The 2025 "economic boycott" that took place on February 28th, was widely shared via social media, but resulted in slightly higher Amazon sales than usual (Lin-Fisher, 2025). These kinds of political "participation" are contingent on individuals feeling that they are contributing something novel and are part of a network of resistance-there is a sense of emotional involvement in these kinds of performative activism. It feels like something is being done, with little risk of any actual backlash from the status quo. These "stunts" create the ambience of "sending a message" instead of formalized and consistent mass movements, and those in power-the hegemonic class-are free to ignore them as they please (Nagle 2017).

Amber Frost posits an explanation for why individuals get involved in what she calls "Hashtag Activism". "For the more earnest social justice advocate", she writes, "Twitter allows them to participate in 'the conversation,' where they can bear witness to suffering among like-

mindful people, even if it results in little more than a collective, therapeutic wailing into the privately owned digital void” (Frost 2020). It is this cathartic, faux participation that the status quo actively fosters because it draws attention to a problem but does not actually do anything to solve it. “The conversation” that Frost alludes to is precisely what popular culture as critique becomes under hegemony: It is reduced to a conversation piece, an acknowledgement that it created some sort of emotional response, but nothing more. Individuals become more concerned with demonstrating that they consumed the critique “correctly” and are experiencing the proper emotions that the critique meant to evoke instead of acting on what the critique attempted to draw attention to.

Popular music as a form of pop culture is particularly vulnerable to hegemonic cultural interference due to its combination of various forms of artistry: Lyricism, performance, showmanship, and visual components make popular music a true spectacle in itself. These elements can combine to become exactly the kind of “art as consumption” that Adorno feared, and it is relatively common for popular music to become a site of faux critique. It needs to be reiterated that there are no musical artists that are *intentionally* reproducing the conditions and emotions that make it easier for the status quo to thrive and maintain control. Rather, popular musicians often have benign intentions, seeking to use their platform to call attention to an issue of political importance that they feel should have higher levels of awareness. But, if they are operating within the hegemonic system, then awareness is all that they can hope for.

It is this key point that allows us to separate music into two categories, as Max Paddison does: The first category is music that systematically reflects “the collective tendencies of society itself.” The second category is music that actively rejects the tendencies of popular music, and seeks to “retain a necessary tension between subject and object” (Paddison 1982a). Even within

these categories, some flexibility can be granted. Some popular music can fall into the second category, and can “contain a moment of genuine protest” (Paddison 1982b, 208). However, popular music that falls into the first category, simply reflecting the status quo, is much more common. The two bands that will operate as case studies in this paper, U2 and Rage Against the Machine, occupy spaces in both categories, with U2 being in the former and RATM in the latter. While both bands are certainly examples of popular music, their engagement with the public through their fame and clout as pop music icons differed immensely. Much of U2’s engagement with politics and current events was through a post-reactionary lens, where U2 would reflect on events of the past with sadness and anger for the bloodshed and loss of life that occurred. There is little call for institutional change, but rather cries of dissatisfaction and anguish for what has already occurred. In this sense, it does make sense to place U2 in the first category of popular music, as a reflection of the tendencies of society. U2 serves as a kind of musical reminder of societal failures, but rarely offers corrective measures; Instead, they offer emotional distraction, collective catharsis, and disillusionment with the possibility for institutional change. Such artists as U2 evoke fearful and anxiety-laden imagery and lyrical content that de-mobilize their listeners, countering the anger evoked by such music as punk. of U2’s songs, were experiences that equated to political action for many in the audience.

Paddison’s second category, music that rejects the tendencies of popular music, can include some popular artists that create music which appeals to the masses. Rage Against the Machine’s purpose as a band, as illustrated by testimonies from band members themselves, was to create resistance and protest what they perceived to be societal injustices that affected not just the United States, but the world at large. Detractors will, and understandably so, argue that RATM gave up their radical politics to achieve mainstream success with their music. However,

in the words of guitarist Tom Morello, “there has never been a band with politics that radical on the top of the charts” (Andy Greene 2023). Popular music is, in many ways, designed to sterilize the political viewpoints of bands that enter its charts. For a band like Rage Against the Machine, a band that commonly wore hammer and sickle hats on stage, achieving mainstream success was nothing short of a miracle. In terms of the categorization of Paddison, it can absolutely be said that RATM’s music contains genuine protest, and more than just a moment’s worth.

Emotions, Music, and Cultural Hegemony

When identifying the differences between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic music and its motives, there are several key differences. Hegemonic music is ambiguous, non-offensive, and exclusive. There is a large focus on the spectacle of hegemonic popular music, and a hierarchy that reflects society at large; The band is in control, and are the only ones allowed to make and disseminate messages to the crowd. The audience has no active participation in these scenarios, and has no capability for responding to what the band is telling them. This is a top-down hierarchy, and one that is reflected in international institutions. Counter-hegemonic music is participatory, specific, and potentially (and perhaps purposefully) offensive. There is much less of a focus on hierarchy, and counter-hegemonic bands are much more likely to allow the audience to actively participate in the performance. These bands make pointed and specific critiques to political issues, and guide the audience to channeling their emotional response to the music in the correct place, i.e. towards protesting, criticizing elected officials, etc. Counter-hegemonic music does not censor, and is not afraid of offending in many cases.

Popular music that does primarily engage the emotions of fear, shame, and guilt gain favor with individuals and elites due to prevailing notions regarding cultural hegemony. For individuals, these emotions are akin to political participation. By simply feeling scared or guilty,

there is a sense of engagement, even without any actual action to accompany these feelings. Elites utilize these emotions because they immobilize (Valentino et al. 2009) the subordinate classes, allowing the hegemonic class to solidify control. Robert Cox writes extensively on the possibilities of applying the teachings of Antonio Gramsci to the cultural realm. Cox, building on Gramsci's foundations, defines hegemony as the capability to control both civil society and the state, "bridging the gap" between the two to ensure that the social group in power maintains it through both structural and cultural channels (Cox 1983, 215).

While music that primarily employs the emotions of fear, shame, and guilt are suggestive of political disinterest and solidify hegemonic control, counter-hegemonic music counters this insecurity of self by strengthening levels of individual agency. Previous research findings suggest that anger as an emotional response provides the opposite effect to that of fear, meaning that it increases political participation rather than decreasing it. As Coan et al discovered, in response to a threat, the emotion that is primarily elevated will determine the kind of information seeking that an individual engages in (Coan et al. 2021). Anger additionally drives individuals to seek more punitive behavior, (Petersen 2010) which when combined with the finding that it also drives political participation on a much larger level than fear or enthusiasm (Valentino et al. 2011), there is plenty of inquiry left to be done regarding "angry" music and the kind of emotional mobilization that occurs as a result of it.

Some genres of music that are explicitly counter-hegemonic in nature provide alternative avenues to the status quo, and almost always prioritize the emotions of anger and indignation aimed at the structures and institutions that are attributed blame for the ills of society. Punk rock, a genre borne out of anger for failing socioeconomic conditions, aims to demonstrate the mobilizing effect that music can have. As Matt Davies points out, one of the strongest qualities

of punk rock that ensures it continues to thrive is its potential as a source of “disalienation”, where people seek out community and a sense of belonging in an increasingly isolating and globalized world (Davies 2005). The aesthetics of punk, when combined with the agency-increasing qualities of anger, demonstrates the mobilizing possibilities of counter-hegemonic music. While punk can be considered a popular music movement, it rarely breaks into the mainstream due to its abrasive nature and commitment to the counterculture. However, some bands, such as Rage Against the Machine, combined elements of punk with more mainstream melodic tendencies to garner approval of the masses. Rage Against the Machine utilized their platform to promote a vicious and continuous attack on the status quo, and saw themselves as catalysts for social change, seeking to do more with their band than just make music (Green 2015, 397). Rage’s mobilizing capabilities were met with appropriation and co-optation by hegemonic forces, seeking to remove the political messaging of their songs from its anger.

Musicians that create mainstream, popular music has to choose between maintaining its artistic agency and subjecting itself to what the hegemonic class has decided is the purpose of art under its rule; Consumption. Artists seeking to create reliable streams of income face increasingly slimmer ways to do so. This is especially true in the music industry, where turning a profit means working to “turn an artist into a brand” (Satran 2012). Artists, when entering the mainstream, have no choice but to use their art not as what makes them an income, but instead must market *themselves* as to why their art is worthy of consumption. Returning to Paddison’s differentiation between music that endorses or rejects the status quo, a band seeking to achieve maximum success must consider themselves as a member of the first category, the music that systematically reflects the tendencies of society (Paddison 1982b). But choosing this route also means that artists are accepting that their art, and in this case their music, is doomed to be

commodified and are signaling that they are willing to play within the limits of the hegemonic class in an effort to find success.

One of the most surefire ways to know that a band is counter-hegemonic in method is to observe the popular and media response to their music and actions. Cultural hegemony thrives on ambiguity. As previously demonstrated with the example of hashtag activism and culture as product, there is no harm done to the status quo if the emotions that an individual feel are shouted into a collective and harmless void. However, when a band is telling their audience who to be angry at, and why they should be angry, the hegemonic class responds by attempting to redirect individuals back towards the path of ambiguity, and towards cultural outputs that are not calling for deeper, systematic change. The most recent example of this took place in the aftermath of Coachella, where Irish firebrands Kneecap, a band deeply committed to holding Israel accountable for their actions against the Palestinians, displayed messages denouncing Israel and called for a “Free Palestine” during their Coachella set (Stockwell 2025). The band received criticism in both musical and political spheres; Some individuals, such as music industry giant Sharon Osbourne, voiced their discontent for Kneecap’s activist strategies, calling for the “uneducated” musicians to “follow the master’s, who are U2” (Dunworth 2025). There is a lot to unpack from this short statement, but several key themes emerge that reinforce the difference between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic examples of emotional intervention. First, there is a clear distinction of class and difference in social standing. Here, Bono and U2 are referred to as “masters”, while Kneecap are meant to be ostracized for their conduct. Second, there are limitations imposed on who is allowed to invoke these political connections. The hegemonic class acknowledges that Bono and U2 are not a threat to their overall standing and can therefore make speak freely of political matters with no fear of consequence. Kneecap,

however, does not have this allowance, and individuals are told to not listen to them, but to a band that is already embedded within the cultural hegemonic structure.

Methodology:

To study the impacts of music on the emotional state of concert audience members, I employ a three-fold discourse analysis of lyrical analysis, performance reviews, and interviews of band-members and concert-goers to determine the emotional change that occurred before and after the show. First, I will conduct a lyrical analysis, discussing the role of fear and shame in music, involving songs from U2 such as “Sunday Bloody Sunday”, “One”, and “Like a Song”. Songs that endorse anger and indignation from Rage Against the Machine, like “Bulls on Parade”, “Freedom”, and “Testify”, will all be used as examples of emotional mobilization through song.

Then, I will investigate the role that the performances of these songs and the imagery that accompanied them had on how concert goers perceived the meaning of these songs through newspaper reviews of the concerts, fan blog reviews, and promotional material. Analyzing the individual response to these concert experiences will provide insight into the malleability of song, and how the aforementioned songs within the lyrical analysis may contain the same lyrics, but their thematic content and subject matter can be molded to whatever current event is at hand.

Lastly, I will examine the interviews of band and audience members in order to properly reflect the intended emotional effects of the music and the actual effects the music had on audience members. By examining what the band members perceived the role of their music to be and how it was received by fans will reveal, to some degree, the level of intervention that music can cause in terms of emotional change in relation to political agency.

U2:

In this section, I will analyze songs by the rock band U2 to analyze themes and motifs present in their lyrics that serve to reinforce cultural hegemony. These songs are selected from the albums *War*, *The Joshua Tree*, *Achtung Baby*, and *Zooropa*. The ten-year span in U2's career from *War* to *Zooropa* is among the most political in the band's history. More than in any other period, the lyrical content of these albums takes aim at social and political issues directly.

But even with politics being at the forefront of U2's music, there is always a highly emotional quality to these songs that almost supersedes the political messaging. As Alan McPherson explains, U2 has a tendency to "look at, for instance, a couple that is in love and it is being torn by these politics or they will look at sort of a mining disaster and how that affects an individual specifically. And so they are very much interested, like all artists, in bringing up emotions, but they will tie it to current political issues" (KGOU 2016). By keeping the music based on the individual, U2 manages to make their music feel highly personal and specific, but it is also then quite malleable and can be applied to a variety of political scenarios since the lyrical content is primarily emotions-based, with politics providing the backdrop.

It is important to note U2's use of opposing pronouns depending on the emotional context of the song. In other words, when the song is generally more positive and upbeat, U2 takes on themes of universalism and unity, but when the melody conveys a more negative message, the band places blame on the listeners for not doing enough to make a difference. For example, in "Sunday Bloody Sunday", a song that recounts January 30th 1972, a day where 13 Catholic men were gunned down in Derry by British paratroopers, adding to increasing tension between Irish Republicans and Unionists (Bradby and Torode 1984, 73), On Bono laments: "I can't believe the news today/Oh, I can't close my eyes and make it go away" (U2 1983b). Here, Bono is

lamenting both the continuing and inescapable bloodshed that continually blurs the lines between what is real and what is not. Later in the song, he calls out in anguish for a unifying force: “Cause tonight, we can be as one, tonight” (U2 1983b). As U2 balances between grief and sadness, the lyrics maintain a general ambiguity as to who is exactly at fault for the bloodshed. This is not the case in “Like a Song...”, another track off of their album *War*. Here, U2 is much more explicit in who they feel is to blame for the division and strife that Ireland experienced, and they aren’t exactly pointing fingers at the hegemon. Bono wags his finger at his countrymen, singing “But I won’t let others live in hell/As we divide against each other/And we fight amongst ourselves/Too set in our ways to try to rearrange” (U2 1983a). It is noticeable in this song that Bono chooses to chastise the individual for failing to find peace, and not those in power. By utilizing “we” and “I”, Bono simultaneously positions himself as one of the individuals experiencing the violence, but also as someone in a position of power, as somewhat of a leader. There is no mention of a “them”, in this song: It is consistently depicted from the level of the individual, with all of the blame and shame falling on Bono and the rest of those caught up in conflict. From these two songs, we can observe that U2 tends to focus their political messaging on the level of the individual, eschewing societal structures and instead placing blame on the people that “decide” to engage in bloodshed and division.

One of U2’s most successful songs ever, “One” captures the band’s desire to delicately balance the anxiety of political issues with universalist thematic throughlines of their music. The power in this song and how it has managed to maintain its relevancy for so long lies in its lyrical ambiguity, and its ability to be applied to almost any political situation depending on the accompanying imagery.

During their 1992-1993 ZooTV tour, U2 commonly played “One” after their live-link satellite calls with Sarajevo. At the show in Marseilles, France, on July 14th, 1992, U2 made their first live call to Sarajevo. At the end of the conversation, Bono passionately sends a message to his counterpart on the other side of the satellite call, director Bill Carter. “Well, I just want to say one thing to you tonight, Bill. We are ashamed tonight to be Europeans and to turn our backs on you and your people.” U2 immediately jumps into “One” as the call ends (Bill Flanagan 1995, 303). In Bologna, Italy, Bono offers a similarly shame-filled message before launching into “One”:

Well the truth is we don't have anything to say to you. We are dumb. We just wanted you to know that here in Bologna, Italy, at this moment we're thinking about you and we pray for an end to your troubles and we pray that Europe will take the people of Sarajevo more seriously than they are now. They are leaving you, they are ignoring you, we are betraying you (Bill Flanagan 1995, 304).

Once again, U2 and Bono are very specific in who they attribute the blame to for the Sarajevo crisis. In both the messages at Marseilles and Bologna, Bono explicitly attributes shame and stupidity to himself and the crowd for witnessing and hearing about the atrocities that are occurring in the Balkans, but this is the extent of their responsibilities. Bono interestingly juxtaposes the shame that the audience should be feeling with the evocation of Europe as a whole, who he blames for inaction on the subject. Here, it can only be assumed that by “Europe”, and “they”, Bono is blaming the leadership of European countries for their lack of political action regarding the Balkan War, while ascribing shame and idiocracy to himself and his audience members for being witnesses to the crisis. In other words, Bono and the audience members should be feeling shame and anxiety for sharing the same nationalities as the political

leaders that are allowing the Balkan War to continue, but only the politicians are shamed for not taking any action. The individuals in the audience are only shamed for not *feeling* worse about what they are witnessing.

The irony of “One” is that the song title leads the listener to think that it is indeed about the universality of humanity, and its ability to find common ground with one another. Instead, it speaks to the unequalness of humanity and to the blame that we place on one another. “I don’t buy into the homogeneity of the human experience”, Bono writes in his memoir. “I don’t think we’re all one. We can be one but I don’t think we have to see things the same way for that to be so” (Bono 2022, 268). It is this sentiment that seems to drive Bono’s logos for the Sarajevo Satellite transmissions thirty years prior. Bono sees himself equal with his audience, but not the same. He sees political leaders as neither equal nor the same, and therefore on a different level than the individual. Here, the individual’s only job as a part of these satellite transmissions is to feel, and to feel worse. The transmissions did exactly that. As Bill Flanagan quips, “There is nothing like having a genocide shoved in your face to ruin a crowd’s partying mood... The audience is so shaken that the music can hardly recapture their enthusiasm” (Bill Flanagan 1995, 307).

Audiences witnessing U2 were treated to a spectacle. In many of U2’s live shows, it is abundantly clear that the band, and more specifically Bono, is the main attraction. The audience is there to watch, listen, and experience, but not to participate as much as one might at a Rage Against the Machine show. In 1983, U2 performed “New Year’s Day”, a song about the Polish solidarity movement, at Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado. There is certainly energy at the show; The audience is engaged and bobbing their heads along to the music, clearly feeling the bassline and following along to the rhythm of the music. However, the crowd is not on the same

level as the band. As the camera pans throughout the audience, fans are not only reaching out to Bono as he sings, but reaching *up* to him. There is a clearly delineation between him and the crowd, with Bono acting as a leader, orchestrating the crowd's reaction (U2 2023). It is not unusual for rock stars to be seen as "walking legends" that have an air of importance about them. In the context of a political band such as U2, however, moments such as the performance at Red Rocks reinforce the hierarchy between the band and the audience. The crowd is there to experience U2, absorb the feelings of the music, and then go home. The art is consumed, the transaction is completed, and the status quo remains intact. The songs that U2 sings may touch on relevant political topics, but the crowd remains transfixed on the band instead of the message. They are there to experience something that remains above them, and with the hierarchy re-established, concert-goers agency remains low.

In interviews with the press, Bono rarely does more than lightly chastise those in power, both on a national and international level, for the role they play in global turmoil. Rather, Bono is much more likely to *praise* political leaders for their efforts in reducing poverty, increasing income, and other initiatives. He describes globalization as something that has led to "remarkable jumps for quality of life for human beings", but does acknowledge that "it's also fair to say that certain communities really paid the price for that" (Coyle, 2025). Even when attempting to be clear in his critique, Bono cannot help but to maintain the same ambiguity that appears in his songwriting. Ambiguity is crucial to keep the emotions closer to fear and anxiety. Bono describes the current international political climate as a time "when the world has never been closer to a world war in my lifetime" (Coyle, 2025). This is not to say that Bono necessarily *should* have the solutions to international crises that jeopardize peace around the world. It is instead the fact that Bono, and by extension U2, are willing to position themselves as reliable and

trustworthy voices on these topics, but always falls just short of making recommendations or solutions. Bono and U2's music and performances maintain a level of political awareness and gravitas that invites the listener or audience member to trust them. The emotionally charged political discourse audiences receive maintains a reactionary tone will always identify a problem, but never a solution. Listeners and audience members of U2 are always given a reason to feel fearful or shameful, but never a way to stop feeling that way. The feelings are reinforced, but not resolved.

Rage Against the Machine:

“To listen to RATM is to be immersed in a world of perpetual global injustice, in which barely a crumb of comfort exists for the consciousness” (Green 2015, 393). Rage Against the Machine is a band from Los Angeles, California, consisting of Zack de la Rocha, Tom Morello, Tim Commerford, and Brad Wilk. From their inception, the band was formed with a purpose of creating seething, politically charged music that represented the interests of disaffected youth. RATM released three albums of original music while together: Their self-titled debut in 1992, *Evil Empire* in 1996, and *The Battle of Los Angeles* in 1999. Throughout these three albums, RATM became more targeted and more pointed in their critiques of what they viewed to be societal and international shortcomings.

Rage Against the Machine charted a completely unique path as a contemporary popular music act. In a 1999 interview with Rolling Stone, de la Rocha and Morello admit that if the band wasn't so focused on politics and being a vehicle for political action, they likely would have left the band years ago (Fricke 1999). De la Rocha acknowledged that the band had become an “alternative medium of communication for young people”, and spoke openly about utilizing RATM's platform to raise awareness of the Zapatista movement in Mexico (“Interview with

Zach La Rocha (Rage Against The Machine) * Jul 8 1998.,” n.d.). Tom Morello had no disillusionments regarding what the purpose of RATM was:

"I was aiming to bring down governments. Seriously. If you had a band with the politics of Rage Against The Machine who were bigger than Led Zeppelin what might that mean for the world? If you played a free concert somewhere and then said ‘This is now a march, and we’re going to depose the governor’, could that happen?” (Doherty 2023).

On *Rage Against the Machine*, their debut album, the band was immediately ready to create controversy. The album cover captures the moment that Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Quang Duc self-immolated in protest of repression of the Buddhist religion under the Diem regime (King 2000). The music was nearly just as intense as the album cover suggested. RATM’s debut album focuses on the institutions that the band believes have failed to uphold and support the public. On “Freedom”, a song meant to highlight the incarceration of indigenous leader and activist Leonard Peltier, de la Rocha repeats the mantra “Anger is a gift” and repeatedly questions the veracity of the liberty afforded to Americans (Rage Against the Machine 1992b). “Take the Power Back” is a scathing rebuke of the education system, with de la Rocha referring to the American curriculum as Eurocentric and colonialist. “Killing in the Name”, perhaps RATM’s biggest song, warns the listener that some of the same police officers that were sworn to serve and protect are also participating in racist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan (“Some of those that work forces/Are the same that burn crosses”).

In direct contrast to the intentional ambiguity of much of U2’s lyricism, RATM often utilizes language in their songs that signal equality between the band and the listener. The songs often read as if de la Rocha is speaking *to* the listener, not *at* them. This sentiment is further solidified with the plentiful use of words such as “we” and “us”. When de la Rocha references

political shortcomings and institutional failings, the lyricism ensures that the listener and audience members are aware of their agency, and that they hold the ability to cause and create change. For example, on “Bombtrack”, de la Rocha’s lyrics read more like a speech you would hear at a protest than anything that is typical of stadium-level rock shows: “See through the news and the views that twist reality/Enough, I call the bluff, fuck Manifest Destiny/Landlords and power whores, on my people they took turns” (Rage Against the Machine 1992a). RATM is consistently aware of and constantly trying to push home the fact that there is a divide in society between the haves and the have-nots. And they are always talking directly to the have-nots, trying to offer an alternative vision through song. RATM is aware that hegemonic control thrives on the ignorance of the classes below it. And so, being made aware of hegemony is a crucial step towards trying to create change, something the band tries to instill in the listener over and over again. To do so, they utilize a “us vs. them” mentality, but in this case, the “them” is the hegemonic class at large. The ostracization of the ruling class is made clear: “Their existence is a crime/Their seat, their robe, their tie/Their land deeds, their hired guns/They’re the crime” (Rage Against the Machine 1999). Rage gives their listeners a place to target their anger. The lyrics are saturated with seething, unmistakable anger, and there is largely a Marxist (and therefore Gramscian) interpretation of class division present in Rage’s interpretation of who is at fault for societal failures. The directness of Rage’s politics and desires as a band are what separates them from another political band like that of U2; Where there is no call to action in almost any of U2’s songs, RATM is practically screaming urgency at its listener, begging them to realize how desperately the political situation they are drawing attention to needs to change..

Audiences craved the loudness and bluntness that RATM brought to the table. Hanging onto every word that Zack de la Rocha uttered, fans of the band vociferously endorsed the

political message that Rage carried with them at every show. During their show at the 2000 Democratic National Convention, de la Rocha started their set by welcoming the crowd to the “Battle for America”, informing the crowd that “our democracy has been hijacked”, and declared that “we are not going to allow these streets to be taken over, by the Democrats or Republicans.” The crowd responded to these claims with thunderous cheers, to the point that de la Rocha is difficult to hear over the roar of the crowd (Rage Against the Machine 2018). While performing “Freedom”, de la Rocha slightly changed the lyrics of “anger is a gift” to “your anger is a gift”, and ended the song by repeating the phrase “Freedom for Mumia”, referring to Mumia Abu-Jamal, the broadcast journalist and former Black Panther that some believe was wrongfully and unjustly sentenced to death in 1982 (Rage Against the Machine 2018). Much of RATM’s ability to mobilize their audience and galvanize their anger lies in the fact that de la Rocha utilized the live performances of the band as a conversation with the audience, speaking directly to them, ensuring they understood that the lyrics of Rage’s songs were meant to be put into practice. Rage Against the Machine almost never used any stage props, instead opting for a minimalist and simplistic approach; Four band members, four instruments, and connection with the audience. Nearly a decade later, at a free show in Finsbury Park, England, Rage proved that the same formula they stuck to throughout their career still provided the most engagement and connection with the audience. As they launched into the opening song, “Testify”, the audience jumped and bounced so feverishly it appeared as if waves were rippling throughout the crowd. The audience hung on every word they offered up, and while de la Rocha spit out the lyrics, Tom Morello lifted his clenched fist to the heavens, proudly wearing his hammer and sickle hat and sporting a guitar that says to “arm the homeless” (Rage Against the Machine 2015).

Where Bono and U2 aim for ambiguous solutions to the political issues they put forth in their music, Rage Against the Machine couldn't be clearer in what they think is the most direct and effective solution to the problems they present. During the song "Roll Right", RATM states that the way to deal with those in the ruling class that perpetrate exploitation and violence is to "Send 'em to the seventh level", referring to the seventh pit of hell as mentioned in Dante's *Inferno* (Rage Against the Machine 1996b). In "New Millennium Homes" the band justifies the use of violence when dealing with oppressive conditions, reasoning that "Violence in all hands, embrace it if need be", and declaring that "A fire in the master's house has been set" (Rage Against the Machine 1996a). Anger and direct action consistently occupy the forefront of Rage's music, with all possible forms of resistance to hegemony, even violence, being reserved as a potential option.

While working to reach as wide of an audience as possible, Rage made it clear that they had no desire to reform the existing hegemonic system they were operating under: They wanted complete change. Speaking about his time as the scheduling secretary for then-California Senator Alan Cranston, Tom Morello vividly remembers the futility of the position:

"That was sort of a last-gasp effort to work within the system," he remembers. "Cranston was probably as far left of a senator [that] you're going to get, but it really didn't matter. Despite the fact that he had progressive views on the environment or immigration, he spent all day on the phone calling the wealthy and powerful, exchanging favors for campaign money. I realized that once he was elected, who would he owe? Would he owe single mothers of the homeless and the guy working at Kentucky Fried Chicken, or would he owe ITT, GE and other savings and loans tycoons?" (Brannon 2019).

Morello and the rest of RATM weren't necessarily gunning for mainstream success, but they knew that to achieve what they were hoping to achieve, which was practically a sonic revolution, they would need a large swath of the public on board. At no point was Rage's message watered down or co-opted to fit in what was considered "acceptable" within the hegemonic discourse. There were attempts to do so, but Rage always insisted on keeping their credibility as a band in staunch opposition to the status quo. In 1996, RATM were the musical guests on *Saturday Night Live*, while Republican presidential candidate and billionaire Steve Forbes was the host. In protest of Forbes' accumulation of wealth and politics, Rage planned to hang American flags upside down for their songs on the show. The flags were taken down right before they performed their first song, and the band was subsequently not allowed to perform again, and have never been invited back (Galiher 2025). Morello later explained that the inverted flags were meant to illustrate that "American democracy is inverted when what passes for democracy is an electoral choice between two representatives of the privileged class" (Lewry 2023). Even on the biggest stages, Rage remained committed to their message and were deeply against censoring their message to satisfy the hegemonic class. And so while Rage did become rather "popular", even winning a few Grammys, they did not use this clout as a way to increase sales; Rather, the more popular they became, the more they sought to make the public aware of the influence of cultural hegemony on individual political agency. Through their lyrics, performances, and interviews, it is abundantly clear that Rage Against the Machine, while still being popular music, contained considerably more than just a "genuine moment of protest."

Conclusion

Did Rage Against the Machine "sell out?" This depends on what one considers the definition of "selling out" to be. Semantics aside, RATM were not the first band to emerge from

a musical subculture and be accused of one of the cardinal sins of any band that considered themselves students of the Punk rock ethos. Danny Fields, manager for the proto-punk group the MC5, found this out the hard way when ordering the band luxury transportation to a gig:

“So I called ABC Limo Company. We arrived downtown in the midst of [radical East Village group] the Motherfuckers banging on the doors of the Fillmore to be let in free. And right at that moment comes this big symbol of capitalist pigism, a huge stretch limo, and the MC5 get out. The Motherfuckers start screaming. ‘TRAITORS! BETRAYAL! YOU’RE ONE OF THEM, NOT ONE OF US!’” ((McNeil & McCain 1996, 61).

Members of subcultures tend to be more aware of what it means to choose to align with the collective tendencies of society as an artist. Subcultures like Punk highly value characteristics of the movement that prioritizes the art over its ability to be consumed. Punk is about “doing for the sake of doing.” There is no focus on playing well, just playing fast, hard, and loud. The Do-it-yourself ethos” drives the genre from the creation of music to its distribution (Davies 2005). This hyper-focus on art for art’s sake means that followers of these subcultures are able to better identify what it means an artist from the underground decides to sign the proverbial “social contract” of making art within the limitations of hegemonic control. Letting corporations use an artist’s music, appearing in corporate-sponsored commercials and promotions, and even signing with a major record label were seen as direct affronts to the counter-movement. Individuals that support musical subcultures are aware of the precarious nature of one of “their own” making it big. They aren’t upset or afraid of losing their status of liking a band before it was “cool”, but rather cognizant of the fact that a band moving from a subculture to the mainstream means that commodification of the art they once loved is inevitable and indeed mandatory for success.

Counter-hegemonic bands, bands that exist in subcultures, use art to provide an alternative to the reality of the art created under hegemony. Leaving a subculture for the mainstream, no matter how well-intentioned or committed a band might be, means sacrificing personal identity and convictions for profit. Rage Against the Machine tried, time and time again, to ensure that they were on the side of what they believed to be righteous: They played free shows. They furthered the cause of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. They interviewed leading leftist thinker Noam Chomsky. And yet, they were still one of the favorite bands of former Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan (Abad-Santos 2012). This is possible due to the cultural disconnect that a band enters when it breaks through to the mainstream. Consumers of art are able to consume without ever having to think critically about the subject matter; Lyrics fly over the head of listeners distracted by catchy melodies. Music videos favor flash over substance. Hegemonic control over mainstream culture, and in this case mainstream music, relegates even the best of efforts to challenge the status quo to the top 40 hits radio station.

It is not only compulsory hegemony, such as through militarized domination for example, that can influence the emotional sensibilities and levels of agency an individual has while operating under the rule of a hegemon. Cultural can be just as powerful of a tool by the hegemonic class to constrict an individual's perceived levels of political agency in a much more covert and sly manner. By not seeming to be involved in the emergence of culture, or less involved than more compulsory means, a hegemon can quietly influence an individual's agency and emotional state in regards to political activity.

While a wide variety of cultural sites are vulnerable to this hegemonic intervention, music is particularly easy for a hegemon to interfere in, due to its combination of songwriting, performance, and showmanship. To suggest that the music that is populating the airwaves around

the world could somehow be completely organic and free of corporate and political influence is of course unrealistic. However, the ability of the status quo to reach millions of listeners in a way that is much less abrasive and more well-received should not go unnoticed. Music and musicians will continue to face pressure to conform to the standards of the music industry and the status quo. Offering cultural alternatives is not all that far removed from offering political alternatives. Through the music they listen to, individuals are reacting to a variety of political stimuli. The type of music that is being listened to will influence the reactions to these stimuli, and the ensuing emotions that are conjured from the music will influence the way that an individual processes their engagement with political content they consume during the period of heightened emotional sensibilities induced by the music itself.

The musical mainstream will continue to be incredibly difficult to break into for bands that want to offer this cultural alternative, as the case of Rage Against the Machine demonstrates. Maintaining integrity, independence, and conviction in values that may be the antithesis of what the hegemonic mainstream offers the consumer means that success is contingent on abandoning these values on some level. U2 is likely not aware of the way that their music reinforces the prevailing hegemony; The band maintains to this day that they have stayed committed to their punk roots and try to honor that in both their music and message (CBC 2023). But the success they have achieved, both as a band and individually in the case of Bono, has come at the cost of corporate brand deals, book deals, international lobbying, political appearances, and more. It is these truths, in *conjunction* with the emotionally-laden music that they create, that has led them to become a band that reflects society, but does not criticize it.

Implications

Identifying culture, and specifically music as a prominent place for hegemony to be extended to implies that all sources of popular culture face similar pressure from the status quo. Movies, TV shows, theater, fashion, and sports are just some of the examples of popular culture sites that could display similar levels of hegemonic influence and control that influence the perceived levels of individual political agency.

The utilization of Rage Against the Machine and U2 are meant to only be a starting point for the analyzation of agency and emotions through music. There are plenty of other musical genres and popular artists who have had a profound political impact on their fanbases, and their lyrics and performances can be examples of the galvanizing or debilitating effect on an individual's sense of agency. Some artists such as Public Enemy, Bob Marley, Bruce Springsteen, and Johnny Cash were all outspoken in their careers politically, and created a variety of songs and albums that reflected their personal convictions. Moreover, it may be prudent to further investigate musical artists that do not display a particular political stance in their music, but are *perceived* as such by fanbases that interpret their actions as being for or against a particular political stance.

This paper demonstrates the importance of counterculture in maintaining a robust and localized opposition to the cultural and political viewpoint offered by the hegemonic class. Subcultures such as punk offer a largely de-centralized and insulated network that is free from the influence of the mainstream, and by extension, influence of capitalism and capitalist driven motives. Subcultures largely remain based on “doing for the sake of doing”, and lack the distinct profit and political motivations that dominate mainstream cultural discourse, choosing instead to operate “underground”, away from the interference of the cultural hegemons. Popular music and the emotions it creates has a much deeper importance than just being enjoyable to listen to: By

understanding its impact on political agency, it becomes apparent that individuals are interacting with the power of hegemon in multi-faceted forms; Including when they put on their headphones.

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