
Book Reviews

Radicalism and Music: An Introduction to the Music Cultures of al-Qa'ida, Racist Skinheads, Christian-Affiliated Radicals, and Eco-Animal Rights Militants

Jonathan Pieslak

Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015; 320 pages. \$85.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8195-7583-8

The subtitle to Jonathan Pieslak's marvelous new book, *Radicalism and Music*, suggests that it is merely an "an introduction" to the subject matter, but the author is far too modest; it is considerably more than that. Opening by juxtaposing the remarks of two activists from ~~two~~ very different political perspectives—an animal liberationist and a white supremacist—about the role of music in their political education, Pieslak captures the promiscuous power of song, in all its forms, to shape the views of, and generate agency in, political actors, radical and otherwise. This is, of course, not a new claim—as Plato famously observed in *The Republic*, "never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being moved" (424c)—but what is new about Pieslak's study is the depth of his analysis and the meticulousness of his attention to detail. What could, in lesser hands, have been an attempt to situate diverse groups within a one-size-fits-alike analytical framework becomes a

rather more nuanced set of meditations on the ways in which music can serve as a political *paideia* for different groups, one that, while capturing the many similarities across political movements, nevertheless engages these groups on their own terms. Most obviously, the author makes considerable efforts to identify distinctions and nomenclatures that are important to the groups themselves. This in part, perhaps, explains some of the access he appears to have gained to organizations that many readers might find unsympathetic, but one never gets the impression that he has sacrificed analytical rigor for inside information. Indeed, one of the many triumphs of the book is Pieslak's ability to capture what is at stake for these organizations without ever appearing condemnatory or overly sympathetic. For those who like their scholarship doused with liberal amounts of didacticism, this is bound to be frustrating, but for those concerned with understanding how music serves the process of radicalization, it is a considerable asset.

As the title of the book suggests, Pieslak engages with four different types of militant groups: Islamic extremists, racist skinheads, Christian-affiliated organizations, and eco-animal rights activists. The analysis of the last three groups is particularly compelling. In most of the cases, the author offers near ethnographies of the movements—and their various different splinter groups—that adds considerable depth to his account of the role that music plays in their radical politics. Most compellingly, he identifies the ways in which music can serve as a form of community for the isolated or disaffected that may then serve as a conduit for the conduction of ideology. Once within the group, moreover, Pieslak shows how music serves to strengthen the bonds of solidarity and, indeed, to intensify and reinforce the commitments of its members. He shows, for example, the role that music played in the girding of Anders Brevik for the 2011 mass murder he carried out at a Labor Party youth camp in Norway in which 69 people died. Likewise, he offers a similar set of observations about the role that music continues to play in the self-programming of Islamic extremists, up to and including its part in acts of suicidal terrorism. It should, perhaps, be noted, however, that the chapter on Islamic radicalism suffers in comparison to the other three case studies—it is telling that it is the shortest of these chapters. This is, no doubt, a product of the problem of access. It might have been better to end rather

than open with this case study, allowing the insights derived from the other three to cast critical light upon it. This is, nevertheless, a small complaint about an otherwise excellent book.

Pieslak concludes with a set of reflections on the power of music to serve the interests of these different political groups that gestures toward future study. In the final paragraph of the book, he points to the danger that lies “in assuming that music cannot be dangerous” (252). What might, in abstract, sound like the observations of an Allan Bloom or Tipper Gore gains credence from the preceding analysis. One can but hope that such future study is carried out with the care, nuance, and sagacity of this author.

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