

Music, Money, and the Man: A Comparative Case Study of the Political Economy of
Music in Cuba and Argentina
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Political economy is an interpretive framework which has been applied to many different areas in a wide range of societies. Music, however, is an area which has received remarkably little attention; this is especially surprising given the fact that music from various historical periods contains political messages. An American need only be reminded of songs such as Billy Holliday's "Strange Fruit" or the general sentiments of the punk movement of the 1970s and 80s to realize that American music is not immune to this phenomenon. Cuba and Argentina are two countries with remarkably different historical experiences and economic structures, yet both have experience with vibrant traditions of music which contains political messages, which will hereafter be referred to as political music.

That being said, important differences exist with respect to both the politics and economics of the music industries in the two countries. Whereas Cuban music as a general rule makes commentaries on specific historical events and political situations, its Argentine counterpart is much more metaphorical in its lyrics, and much more rhythmically and structurally influenced by American popular music. These and other differences can largely be explained as resulting from the relations between the community of musicians and the state, more specifically state structure and ideological affiliation in both cases, with the addition of direct state control over the music industry in the Cuban case, whereas the Argentine music industry is dominated largely by multinational concerns in a liberal democratic state. More specifically, whereas Argentine music tends to be highly critical of the neo-liberal political economic structure, Cuban political music remains within a context framed by the 1959 Marxist-Leninist revolution and the social, political and economic changes caused by Soviet collapse. These

differences exist largely as a result of different state structures and economic frameworks through which the respective countries have passed in recent years.

Definition of Political Economy

Before analyzing the political economy of music from various countries, it is necessary to reach a working definition of the term and its theoretical implications. Political economy historically has been thought to refer to the relationships between production, labor, custom and law; scholars such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx are considered some of the leading proponents of various schools of political economic thought. The term has come to be construed by contemporary political economists in a theoretically Marxian light, submitting that political ideology can explain market and other economic forces; thus, the nature of capitalist versus non-capitalist modes of production, for instance, could be decisive from the standpoint of attempting to deconstruct particular industries; such is the purpose of this investigation.¹

The Political Economy of Cuban Music

Cuban music has been directly influenced by political economy ever since the very early days of Spanish colonization, and that influence does not appear to be in danger of lessening any time soon. As Ned Sublette describes in Cuba and its Music: From First Drums to the Mambo, the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought millions of African slaves to Cuba, most of whom were from Central Africa; indeed, the Spanish empire issued various edicts against enslaving Africans from regions wherein Islam was the dominant

¹ For a good definition of political economy see:
Peter Groenwegen "'political economy' and 'economics'," The New Palgrave: Dictionary of Economics, 10 May 2009,
<http://www.dictionaryofeconomics.com/article?id=pde2008_P000114&goto=politicalEconomy&result_number=1332>.

religion, due to the greater propensity of such slaves to rebel.² Important Cuban instruments, most of which now form the base of Cuban percussion were also brought from Africa because of the slave trade; the Cuban musical style of guajira, which contains a 10-line poetic structure, may even have been originated by slaves as a means of imparting religious traditions between generations.³ One cannot help but admit that slavery, by its very definition, is an inherently political and economic construct. It is based on the belief that one person can be made to work for another in order that the master can achieve the greatest possible economic gain as a result of the labor of the slave. When one takes the incredible importance of the Cuban sugar industry and the fact that slaves were the primary labor source on Cuban sugar plantations into account, the decision to use slave labor cannot help but be examined in the light of political economy. From the slave trading period until the 1959 Cuban revolution, the music of Cuba continued to be influenced by political events and address political situations. When Cuban musical theater emerged as a genre, plays and other theatrical works often made political or otherwise satirical statements criticizing social ills from the racism ingrained in Cuban society to Spanish colonial domination.⁴ Various 19th century Cuban musicians and other artists were also involved in political activism of various sorts during the century, especially the poet and independence leader José Martí, who became famous in various countries for both his activism and poetry on behalf of Cuban independence, and who was later killed in battle in the rebellion leading up to the Spanish American War.⁵

² Ned Sublette, Cuba and Its Music From the First Drums to the Mambo, (New York: Chicago Review Press, 2007) 77.

³ Sublette 93-6 for one of various examples.

⁴ Sublette 129 and 138.

⁵ Sublette 136-151 and 272.

From the Spanish American War to the Cuban revolution of 1959, the dominant political and economic power in Cuba was the United States. By 1905, just four years after the war ended, American private citizens and business interests owned 65% of the land as a result of the loss of property titles during the war by Cuban peasants, and malnutrition was a pressing concern for large segments of the population.⁶ Such circumstances lead to the rise of Marxism and other branches of socialist thought in the country; music was not immune from this change, as evidenced by the composition by Rosendo Ruiz Suárez of *Redención*, considered the first socialist anthem in Latin America.⁷

The revolution of 1932, which saw the replacement of Dictator Gerardo Machado with various governments leading eventually to the 1959 Cuban revolution was a previously unprecedented event. Not only did the revolution inspire politically motivated music, but such music also effected the course of the revolution. Nico Sequito, actually named Antonio Fernández, wrote “El Vaiven de Mi Carreta”, a song protesting the terrible working conditions on Cuban sugar plantations; although the song was originally banned by the Machado regime, it became a number one hit on Cuban radio after the revolution and was widely circulated underground during the revolution itself.⁸ This is a perfect example of music both effecting and being effected by political events; the song talked about disastrous working conditions in an industry upon which Cuba was dependent for its economic livelihood. Moreover, the fact that the song was circulated during the revolution itself indicates that popular sentiment was along the same lines as the song, demanding change. While the fact that change occurred cannot be directly related to the

⁶ Sublette 292-5.

⁷ Sublette 303.

⁸ Sublette 409.

publication of a song, the song appears at least to have had enough emotional currency to contribute to the morale of those who supported the revolution. Otherwise, it could not have achieved such fame.

Music continued to be influenced by politics during the 1959 Cuban revolution. Singer Carlos Puebla was often referred to as “el cantor de la revolución”, (the revolution’s singer)⁹ because of his songs praising the revolutionary project.¹⁰ As with “El Vaiven de Mi Carreta” a majority of Puebla’s songs refer to specific events or situations. Three perfect examples of such songs are “La OEA Es Cosa de Risa” (the OAS is Something to Laugh At) regarding Cuba’s expulsion from the Organization of American States, “Y En Eso Llegó Fidel”, regarding the changes made by the Cuban Revolution in the country’s political system, and “Hasta Siempre” (For Always), regarding the death of Ernesto Guevara.¹¹ Furthermore, and unlike other musicians, Puebla’s lyrics are almost documentary in their specificity. “Y En Eso Llegó Fidel”, for instance, lists all of the injustices of the previous government of Fulgencio Batista, and contrasts them with the revolutionary period by merely saying at the end of each verse “Y En Eso Llegó Fidel” (And with That Fidel Arrived”. A lyrical example of this will be here provided translated into English: “Here they thought they would carry on playing at democracy, while the people got on with their dying in disgrace. And they would keep on in this cruel way, without even bothering with the formalities, with robbery as the norm, and with that Fidel arrived. And the fun was over. The comandante arrived and made it all stop.”¹² This not only contrasts the pre-revolutionary period with a revolutionary period Puebla obviously

⁹ All translations are the author’s own unless specified.

¹⁰ Playing Castro's Tune, British Broadcasting Corporation, England, 7 Jan. 2009.

¹¹ Carlos Puebla. Hasta Siempre. Columbia Records, 1997.

¹² Carlos Puebla, Y en Eso Llegó Fidel, Columbia Records, 1997.

considers far more favorable, but also lists off the injustices of the pre-revolutionary government in order that a record can exist of them in song. In “La OEA es Cosa de Risa”, Puebla says in part: “In my song, I ask that man who screams so very much. Good sir from the OAS, what happened in your little meeting?”¹³ Although it is not explicitly stated, the “little meeting” to which Puebla refers, is presumably the one at which Cuba was expelled from the Organization of American States in 1961; it is the last meeting in which Cuba has participated, and therefore presumably the one to which Puebla refers. The contempt he has for the organization is extremely obvious, and by expressing it he also implies that Cuba can survive perfectly well outside of the organization. Finally, in “Hasta Siempre”, the chorus of the song is enough to reveal its true sentiments. “Here remains the clear, the inestimable transparency of your beloved presence, Comandante Che Guevara.”¹⁴

Another Cuban musician whose political music was recorded in mostly the same period is the late Ibrahim Ferrer. Although most people know of him from his work done with the legendary group Buena Vista Social Club, he recorded various political songs early in his career in a band called Los Bocucos, after a drum popular in eastern Cuba; the most inflammatory of these songs is “Súper Raton”, (the Super rat), which compares the history of the United States to the life of an old western gun-slinger and its foreign policy to the actions of a rat terrified of being eaten. “The Superrat was born in a residential neighborhood, one of those where the color black tends to scare people. There was a lot of luxury, modern cars, wide streets, and he was always protected from poverty by the cops. They didn’t let him go out into the sun like the other kids, because they wanted to

¹³ Carlos Puebla, La OEA es Cosa de Risa, Columbia Records, 1997.

¹⁴ Carlos Puebla, Hasta Siempre, Columbia Records, 1997.

protect the color of his skin. And he grew big even though they ignored that he was a man, and in the west made his name as a gunfighter.”¹⁵ Another song “A Los Cien Años”, (To the Last 100 Years) recorded during the preparations for the 1970 sugar harvest exhorts Cubans not to leave the sugar plantations for the cities because their country needs them, and compares their sacrifice to that of various heroes of the Cuban independence struggle. “I’m not leaving the sugar plantation, because my country needs me to cut cane ... Thus, emulating Céspedes (a hero of Cuba’s first war of independence) you eat Maseo and Martí (two other Cuban patriots).”¹⁶

The style known as nueva trova is one of two distinct musical genres important to the development of political music in Cuba. It is especially important from the standpoint of political economy because, unlike other types of political song throughout Latin America, nueva trova is subsidized and regulated by the Cuban state.¹⁷ That being said, many nueva trova musicians view their music as political in only the broadest sense of the term, much in the same way love or any other facet of every-day life is political.¹⁸ Perhaps most importantly, nueva trova is famous for the poetry and metaphorical nature of its lyrics and its rejection of commercialism.¹⁹

Before investigating nueva trova in greater detail, a note about the Cuban state’s policy toward music will not be deemed out of place. In the late 1960s, a National Cultural Advisory was created by the revolutionary government, which would later be transformed into the current Ministry of Culture; the ministry’s purpose is to create

¹⁵ Ibrahim Ferrer, *Súper Ratón*, Dynamo Records, 2006.

¹⁶ Ibrahim Ferrer, *A Los Cien Años*, Dynamo Records, 2006.

¹⁷ Lina Benmayor, "La "Nueva Trova" Cubana: New Cuban Song," *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, 1981: 11.

¹⁸ Benmayor 12.

¹⁹ Benmayor 13.

national unity under socialism through the organization of music festivals, the regulation of airplay on radio, and the hiring of musicians to write overtly political lyrics.²⁰ The aforementioned works of Puebla and Ferrer would be perfect examples of such lyrics. This effort to control music is presumably because material incentives such as pay packages do not work in a socialist society where almost all workers receive nearly equal wages, and discrepancies in individual capital accumulation would effectively do away with Marxist egalitarian values; the emphasis must by definition shift to the provision of moral incentives, one of which is patriotic music.

As for the growth of Nueva Trova as a musical style, American and British rock appears to have been highly influential from a purely musical standpoint, particularly in the early years of the movement; this goes a long way toward explaining why the style was frowned upon by the government and the communist party elite in the early years, and may also explain why the influence of rock diminished somewhat as official recognition and subsidies to the genre increased.²¹ The works of Silvio Rodríguez, perhaps the most famous participant in the genre is particularly influenced by foreign musical styles such as rock; his style has, in fact, often been compared to that of Bob Dylan, particularly in the way he plays the guitar.²²

The ideological relationship between the nueva trova and the state is worthy of some attention. Nueva trova's early years were full of lyrics that were either overtly or covertly critical of government policy at roughly the same time that a very similar debate was occurring within the government itself; this may also explain why the genre was

²⁰ Robin Moore, "Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova, 1965-1995," Society for Ethnomusicology Winter 2003: 2-3.

²¹ Moore 7.

²² Moore 8.

originally criticized, only to gain official acceptance later.²³ Haidi Santamaría, a veteran of the military phase of the revolution and director of Casa de las Américas, (Cuba's largest publishing house) served as an important supporter of the nueva trova movement within the state apparatus.²⁴ It is small wonder, therefore, that the movement was originally accepted, although it appears doubtful whether it would have ever received official recognition without the support of a revolutionary whose loyalty to the state was beyond question. That being so, many nueva trova artists were subjected to intense harassment including imprisonment in many cases as the government accepted Soviet economic aid in return for enforcing a harsh brand of socialist orthodoxy, part of which included restrictions on cultural expression.²⁵ Nueva trova therefore can truthfully be said to have gained popularity not because of government policy, but in spite of it. Even after the government began to accept the genre in the early 1970s, it was largely embraced on the government's terms rather than those of the musicians, the regulation of airplay and concert bookings often being exchanged for more respectful lyrics from the musicians.²⁶ The songs of Silvio Rodríguez are particularly useful to analyze in the context of the nueva trova, both because they are perfect examples of the movement, and because their political message is highly debated. As previously mentioned, Rodríguez employs a modern and cosmopolitan style similar to that of international rock music. However, his lyrics have undergone a noticeable change which is presumably in proportion to his growth in popularity with the government. One of his best remembered songs is entitled "Ojalá" (I Wish). It is usually considered to be a song criticizing the personality cult

²³ Moore 12-5 and Playing Castro's Tune, Part II.

²⁴ Moore 15-6.

²⁵ Moore 12-20.

²⁶ Moore 21-4.

around Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, but Rodríguez himself has asserted that it is a love song dedicated to his first love; the lyrics are simply so metaphorical that over time, they have been interpreted as the listener desires, rather as they were originally meant.²⁷ An example of these metaphorical lyrics is the following: “I wish that your constant look, those precise words and that perfect smile would all go away. I hope something happens soon that erases you, a blinding light, or an assassin’s bullet. I wish that at least that death would carry me away, so that I wouldn’t see you so much, so that I wouldn’t see you all the time, in every second and every vision.”²⁸ However, in his song “Se Partió en Nicaragua” (It Started in Nicaragua), the lyrics very plainly refer to the Nicaraguan revolution, and the evils of the United States. “In Nicaragua, another burning shackle was broken. In Nicaragua, another burning shackle was broken, with which the eagle gave his orders to the people.”²⁹ It would appear from this lyric that the eagle is a clear reference to the United States, assuming that Nicaragua was viewed by the Cubans as subservient to the United States before the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution.

The case of Cuban hip-hop and its relationship with the government is similarly interesting; it should be noted here that relatively little Cuban rap is available outside Cuba, and that therefore the primary source material for this section of the investigation is rather limited. Nonetheless, ample information exists to determine that rap is undergoing a similarly uneasy relationship to the Cuban state to what nueva trova previously did.

²⁷ “Ojalá,” *Silvio Rodríguez - La Coctelera*, Dec. 2005, 3 May 2009, <<http://silviorodriguez.lacoctelera.net/post/2005/12/14/ojala>>.

²⁸ Silvio Rodríguez, *Ojalá*, EMI International, 1978.

²⁹ Canción Urgente para Nicaragua.

It appears that rap first came to Cuba in the very late 1980s or early 1990s, and was originally limited to being played or smuggled into the country on cassettes for use in small social gatherings.³⁰ Since 1991, however, the movement has come into contact with both Cuban state institutions and transnational record labels, which have both contributed to making the art form both more complex and commercially viable at the same time that rap gains popularity among the Cuban youth.³¹ At the very time that this process is occurring, however, there is also a concurrent process of marginalization of afro-Cuban segments of the population due to the inability of their families to access dollars through the growing tourist industry, and therefore an increase in racial prejudice in a country whose revolutionary system set the abolition of racism as an early policy goal.³² This marginalization process, in turn, leads to a tendency on the part of some rappers to sign contracts with transnational record labels in order to get out of a situation in which they are limited by scarce resources; this is seen by some, however, as a form of selling out to a sort of transnational economic colonialism perfectly contrary to the goals of the broader rap movement in Cuba.³³

The group Orishas is a classic example of this very dilemma. Considering themselves to have an artistically restricted future given the previously mentioned state controls on airplay and their critical attitude toward the state, the group signed a contract with the transnational label EMI and are now living in Paris.³⁴ Like most other Cuban musicians outside of the nueva trova genre, their lyrics are direct and uncompromising, but Orishas

³⁰ Fernandes "Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers Transnational Crossings, and State Power in Contemporary Cuba," *Anthropological Quarterly* 2003: 576-7.

³¹ Fernandes 576.

³² Fernandes 577-9 and 583-7.

³³ Fernandes 580-3.

³⁴ Fernandes 579.

tends toward harsh criticisms of the revolution rather than praise of its achievements. In their song “La Calle” (The Street), they tell of an afro-Cuban man forced onto the street and harshly discriminated against both on the grounds of his race and his status as a homeless person in a country where racial equality was supposed to have been reached long ago and homelessness was supposed not to be a problem; they condemn the governments efforts to provide food and representative government for the population as useless, and condemn the entire society as both corrupt and systematically unjust.³⁵ The following lyrical example is a good indicator of some of the aforementioned sentiments: “Go tell them how many freeze to death! They are disgraced! These bastards make you pay their bribes and then they screw you at every turn! They make you bear witness to false crimes and triple suicides that can’t possibly happen! How can somebody live in a city ... where they arrest you reject your humanity and nothing happens to them!”³⁶ Even though Cuban political music in recent years has taken an increasingly critical stance toward the state, the state continues to be heavily involved in both the politics and economics of the music being recorded; this is especially true of the music being recorded in the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the state has been in desperate need of revenue from every possible source. On the one hand, this has forced the state to accept and market a musical style, rap, that it would never ordinarily have had an interest in marketing due to the critical nature of the lyrics. On the other hand, underground rappers have at times felt economically pressured to reduce their criticisms

³⁵ Orishas, La Calle, Universal Latino, 2005

³⁶ Ibid.

of the state in order to have a chance at being marketed and possibly signed by a major transnational label.³⁷

An interesting point that has not been well investigated is the level of unionization or other forms of collective action among Cuban musicians, especially rap artists. In the Nueva Trova style, the Ministry of Culture has established an organizational structure for the movement at the local, provincial, and the national level, which serves generally to organize the musicians from a given area, provide them with employment and when necessary hire them to produce certain works.³⁸ No such official union exists presently with rappers, the closest example of collective action being a partnership in the early 1990s between individual Cuban rap artists and the Black August Hip-hop Collective, a network of underground American rappers originally formed in the California prison system to spread resistance as part of the American black nationalist movement; since then, other groups of rappers (particularly underground rappers) have emerged in Cuba, but none with the official state sponsorship of nueva trova as a genre.³⁹

It should be noted here that the author has encountered various difficulties in the investigation of political music in Cuba that have made providing more accurate information or supporting evidence nearly impossible. On the one hand, the author was unable to obtain information on record sales, or the percentage of Cuba's gross domestic product represented by the music industry; requests to the Cuban interest section in Washington, D.C. for such information were met with either silence, or statements that the provision of such information to a foreigner would compromise state secrets.

Requests to record companies for such sales information were similarly fruitless; the

³⁷ Fernandes 593-4.

³⁸ Moore 2-3 and 14.

³⁹ Fernandes 580-1.

companies either failed to respond or cited contractual obligations to the Cuban government which would prevent the release of such information. There is also little literature, academic or otherwise, regarding the proceedings of Cuban musicians unions or other collectives; not knowing specifically what goes on in such proceedings hinders an understanding of the reactions between the Cuban musical community and the state, the state and the transnational record interests, and the musicians themselves and the record interests. In short, the lack of transparency provided by both the state and the transnational corporations, and the presumed inability of musicians to express their grievances (or lack thereof) outside of Cuba makes an understanding of the political economy of Cuban music quite difficult; nonetheless, it remains a field worthy of investigation, especially given the possibility of a thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations and the potential that information regarding the Cuban music industry could become widely known.

In conclusion, both the Cuban government and musicians find themselves in something of an odd position regarding the country's musical history, and its rap in particular. It is obviously advantageous, if for no other reason than propaganda value, to demonstrate to the outside world that Cuba is a culturally diverse country with a vibrant musical landscape. However, especially in times of crisis, the state has shown itself to be intolerant toward political or ideological criticism. The prospect of international recognition and finance is therefore something of a double-edged sword for the state. It provides the state with cultural capital in a society where the accumulation of monetary capital by individuals is difficult to reconcile with orthodox Marxist values, but also with some of the very monetary capital the state needs to continue to function. The state is

therefore caught in a classic prisoner's dilemma between whether to clamp down on cultural expression and risk the loss of foreign exchange funds on the one hand, or to permit an openness of cultural expression and face criticism that may (given Cuba's history of revolutionary music) force political change from within. Interestingly, the state has chosen to attempt both paths, which shows that it is in dire need of both the recognition and finance brought by a sometimes critical community of musicians, and the need to maintain social order. Musicians find themselves in a similarly interesting situation; they can either remain underground and face the possibility of harassment, or write music that is acceptable to the state in hopes of gaining economic benefits from state subsidies and multinational record contracts. Like the state, the musical community has chosen to attempt to strike a balance, although it is a balance that inevitably leads to friction. Thus, both the state and the musicians in Cuba are in a political and economic environment largely framed by the ideology of the 1959 revolution on the one hand, and the necessities of the period since Soviet collapse on the other. Whereas neither group appears exactly happy with the framework, it is a model that allows coexistence between the two groups, and also one which appears somewhat self-perpetuating.

Argentine Political Music

With the exception of the involvement of transnational concerns, the case of Argentine political music could hardly be more different than the Cuban case. The ideology of the great majority of Argentine political musicians is quite easy to categorize, the music itself is quite rhetorically different from its Cuban counterpart, the history of direct state

involvement in political music is far shorter and less ridden with inherent contradictions, and the political economic picture is frankly much more understandable. Unfortunately, however, there is very little academic literature on the subject of Argentine political music; while a great number of sources mention it as a source of inspiration for other Latin American countries, or examine periods of crisis in the country with very brief references to music, almost none actually investigate the politics around the music itself, let alone its political economy. In order to create a truly accurate picture of the political economy of music in Argentina, therefore, more investigation remains to be done. That being said, a goodly amount of information can be drawn from primary source material, and the little academic literature that exists in order to construct a fairly coherent picture. It is not particularly clear when the tradition of Argentine political music started. There was little if any involvement in Argentina on the part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which would therefore appear to eliminate the possibility of any great influence from African musical styles or beliefs; indeed, as will be explained later, the available primary source evidence very much supports this conclusion. It is a matter of consensus that late 19th and early 20th century immigration to Argentina and Uruguay was largely responsible for the formation of the tango as a musical style, but the lyrics of tango appear largely apolitical, talking mostly of love, seduction, treachery, machismo, and the value of the long-suffering mother as symbolic of the ideal woman.⁴⁰ That being said, it is interesting to note that many tango musicians were members of the anarchist movements of their time, those movements presumably having spread from industrialized

⁴⁰ See the collective recordings of Carlos Gardel and Polaco Goyeneche for typical examples of tango and its lyrics.

Europe to communities of European immigrants in Buenos Aires.⁴¹ Since tango was a music which developed originally in poor areas of Buenos Aires and therefore around marginalized people, there is also a very much understated class dimension worthy of further analysis.⁴² Politicians also used the music to draw potential voters to political rallies and community meetings due to its popularity with the general public, particularly those of the lower social classes.⁴³ The tangos written in the 1930s during the global economic depression, Gardel's work being a classic example, also spoke of a deep-seeded frustration hard to categorize as overtly political if one examines its lyrics, but difficult to categorize as anything else given the historical context.⁴⁴ The persona of Carlos Gardel has also become a focus of Argentine nationalism; he is seen as an almost universal symbol of the completely urbanized, fearless, and self-made Argentine male who rose to success in a society where the odds were very much against him.⁴⁵ Thus, while the tango is not by any means overtly political, the fact that it has political undertones is rather difficult to ignore.

The cuarteto is another Argentine musical style not generally considered at all political, but which had the potential to become political in the past, and which one could argue has done so recently. Since the cuarteto developed in Córdoba province, a hotbed of popular support for the governments of Juan Domingo Perón, the musical style as a whole was heavily censored under the military dictatorship between 1976 and 83, and sales of cuarteto albums were banned outright during Argentina's hosting of the 1978 World cup; furthermore, singer Carlos Jiménez, long considered the leading individual

⁴¹ Julie M Taylor "Tango: Theme of Class and Nation," *Ethnomusicology* 1976: 280-1

⁴² Taylor 276-9 and 282-3.

⁴³ Taylor 283.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Taylor 285-6.

figure in the genre has a massive following not much distinct from that of an extremely charismatic political party boss, and he has been frequently outspoken in his support for candidates who favor a roughly Peronist political agenda.⁴⁶ Other cuarteto singers have also made overt political statements. In his piece “Que Vuelva Carlos Menem”, Walter Olmos supports the candidacy of former Argentine president Carlos Menem in the country’s 2004 presidential elections. “I, who had a home, who had a job, a future, and happiness. I, who lived safely, who didn’t know about strikes or protests or roadblocks or fighting in the streets. I felt proud to be an Argentine man. Now I live incarcerated in my own country, living off the handouts that the state gives me. Enough of all these lies, all this misery, all these problems, all this injustice.”⁴⁷ This states rather obviously that the current Argentine state is incapable of providing for the singer’s needs, and that the singer wishes former President Menem to resume his office. During the 2004 Argentine election campaign, Peronist candidate Carlos Menem staged a campaign rally at which Olmos performed a cuarteto entitled “Que Vuelva Carlos” (that Carlos should return) in support of Menem’s candidacy for the presidency, despite the belief of many Argentines that Menem bore primary responsibility for the Argentine economic crisis of 2001, in which the economy lost nearly a third of its value and there were five national presidents in approximately two months.⁴⁸ The cuarteto therefore appears to have as much political potential as any other style in modern Argentina.

The two most important and most recognizably political musical styles in Argentine history, however, are the nueva cancan (new song” and rock nacional (national rock)

⁴⁶ Florine, Jane L, “Cuarteto: Dance-Hall Entertainment or People’s Music,” Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana, 1998: 31-46.

⁴⁷ "YouTube - Que Vuelva Carlos Menem por Walter Olmos." YouTube - Broadcast Yourself. 21 June 2008. 03 May 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxTZCd9a8UY>>.

⁴⁸ The Take, Dir. Naomi Kline, DVD: First Run Productions, 2004.

genres. Perhaps the most famous participant in Argentine nueva canción is Mercedes Sosa, whose career has spanned over three decades.⁴⁹ Nueva Canción, in its various national incarnations (there is one for almost every Latin American country which has experienced a process of social reform followed by a military dictatorship) is a style which has come to be inextricably linked with the Latin American political left, touching upon themes as diverse as general social awareness, popular solidarity at all costs, resistance to oppression, demands for human rights, and anti-neo-liberalism.⁵⁰ An analysis of her song “Si Se Calla el Cantor” (If the Singer should Fall Silent) is particularly appropriate for an investigation such as this, as evidenced by the following lyrical passage. “If the singer falls quiet, so does life, because what is life without song. If the singer falls quiet, hope, light, and happiness all die of fright. If the singer falls quiet, the humble paper boys are left all alone. The workers in the port will resign themselves to fate, for who will be there to fight for their salaries?”⁵¹ This passage therefore appears to call upon the socially aware musician to fight for the rights of others, especially those in marginalized groups of society along with the rights of other activists such as journalists. As is evident to anyone with a cursory knowledge of Argentine history, the period between 1976 and 1983 was a period when many such abuses were committed in the context of a bureaucratic authoritarian military dictatorship; given Sosa’s history as a musician and political dissident, it appears rather obvious that the abuses under the military dictatorship inspired this song, as well as a great number of others.⁵² Like many

⁴⁹ Mercedes Sosa, *30 Años*, Polygram Records, 1994.

⁵⁰ José Manuel García, “La Nueva Canción Chilena,” *CANCIONEROS.COM - Diario Digital de M.* 2001. LiteraMúsica. 04 May 2009 <<http://www.cancioneros.com/lmveure.php?NM=4>>..

⁵¹ Mercedes Sosa, *Si Se Calla el Cantor*, Polygram Records, 1994.

⁵² Guillermo O’Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966-1973 - In Comparative Perspective*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1988.

other Argentine political musicians, the previously cited piece by Jiménez being an exception to this rule, Sosa's lyrics are generally highly metaphorical and symbolic, not at all unlike those of Silvio Rodríguez and other nueva trova artists from Cuba.

Nonetheless, they are generally not so metaphorical as to be easily construed for what they are not, and are quite distinctly leftist in their political orientation, as is the work of nearly the entire community of musicians involved in Argentine political music.

The other distinctly political style of music coming from Argentina is the rock nacional (national rock) style. The third most exported rock style in the world after those from the United States and Britain, rock nacional is a style of music that despite many musical transformations over its history has always attempted to push the social envelope and the boundaries of social acceptability; this has led to a politically radical attitude and a sense of anti-institutionalism on the part of many of its musicians and fans, but there is also a segment of the genre which has acquired considerable commercial success, in part because of the genre's radical politics.⁵³ While the music is not exclusively political, and while its lyrics are similar in their level of abstraction to those of other Argentine musical genres and the Cuban nueva trova, rock nacional is generally considered to possess a certain directness which other genres lack, both in terms of its music (which tends to rely on electronic distortions) and its message (seen as highly critical of both the Argentine military dictatorship and the country's current experiment with liberal democracy).⁵⁴ Indeed, this criticism of the government placed the musical style as a whole under heavy censorship from the military authorities, and debates about whether to stay underground or sign a commercial record deal were common in the genre's musical circles, much as

⁵³ Pablo Vila, "Argentina's Rock Nacional: The Struggle for Meaning," Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana, 1989: 1-28..

⁵⁴ Vila 1-5.

they have been in Cuban political music.⁵⁵ One important differentiating feature between the Argentine experience and the Cuban experience is that the vast majority of those killed or disappeared in the Argentine military dictatorship (Villa cites a figure of 68%) were between the ages of 18 and 30, which are the ages at which rock is most typically listened to; rock nacional as a musical genre may well have been influenced toward political activism more by this fact than by the directness of any specific lyrics.⁵⁶

As two musical groups who define rock nacional in a truly exceptional manner, and who also happen to be at different ends of the musical spectrum, Sui Generis and Patricio Rey y los Redonditos de Ricota will be examined. Lead by Charly García, Sui Generis's most politically developed album is "Pequeñas Anécdotas Sobre las Instituciones" (Little Anecdotes about Institutions). The original intent of the album was to publish a song about each of what they viewed as the major institutions in Argentine society; however, two of their songs, "Juan Represión" (John Repression) about the police and "Bodas Locas" (Crazy Weddings) about the army were scrapped from the album due to censorship, and two other songs were drastically changed in their lyrical content for the same reason.⁵⁷

That being so, the album is still analyzable both musically and politically. The common rhetorical thread in all of the songs is that traditional and respected institutions are essentially taking over society and stifling it with the rigidity of tradition, with special scorn placed upon the government, thus the removal of two songs dealing with governmental institutions by censors. Musically, the album is harmonically extremely complex for a rock album, not at all unlike the psychedelic rock popular in the United States and Britain in 1974, the year of its original release. While the lyrics approach

⁵⁵ Vila 21-6.

⁵⁶ Vila 2.

⁵⁷ Sui Generis, Pequeñas Anécdotas Sobre las Instituciones Sony, 1974.

institutions in an extremely metaphorical and abstract manner (presumably due to censorship), any listener sufficiently familiar with Argentine Spanish can easily interpret the metaphors for the damning criticisms they truly represent.⁵⁸

A good lyrical example from the album comes from the song “Instituciones”, the album’s title track. “I watch for the day that will come as beautifully as the sun shining in the city. And if you listen hard, I think you’ll understand why I wait in vain for you to take my hand. Humanity can save itself with my bones.”⁵⁹ Given that the song is entitled “institutions”, there would appear to be a metaphorical reference to the abolition of social constraints with the mention of a new and glorious day dawning. The idea of humanity saving itself with the singer’s bones would appear to therefore refer to the deaths under the military dictatorship, that most extreme form of institutional repression of any society.

Patricio Rey y los Redonditos de Ricota, by contrast, employs a totally different sound, obviously heavily influenced by American blues, Jamaican ska, and the punk rock movements in the United States and the United Kingdom. Their songs are generally faster, and their references to politics are slightly more direct than those of other rock nacional groups. This can be explained by the fact that the group has not been around long enough to have been effected by the military dictatorship and its censorship, and therefore has the liberty of writing in a relatively free environment. This does not mean, however, that their work is without political messages. In their song “Blues de la Libertad”, (Liberty’s Blues), they talk of the difficulty of remaining free, the costs of liberty as opposed to authoritarianism, and the fanaticism necessary to preserve liberty in

⁵⁸ Sui Generis, Pequeñas Anécdotas de las Instituciones, Sony, 1974.

⁵⁹ Sui Generis, Instituciones, Sony, 1974.

a fundamentally unfree world. “My love, liberty is a fever. It is fastidious prayer and some good luck, that’s just inviting some other social vulgarity, always equal, all equal, all the same. ... My love, liberty is a fanatic. She has seen so many dead brothers, so many crazed friends, that she can no longer support the fact that it’s always equal, all equal, always the same.”⁶⁰ In another song, “Una Piba con la Remera de Green Peace” (a Rich Bitch in a Green Peace Shirt), the song talks of an upper class girl who has fallen in love with the environmental movement, realizing its significance as the one thing that provides meaning for an otherwise sheltered lifestyle entirely devoid of hardship.⁶¹ In general, the state of Argentine political music is somewhat hard to categorize at this stage. The majority of the music appears to be inspired, at least to an extent, by the memory of the Argentine military dictatorship, which is an event that an increasing portion of the national populations has not lived through. Although there are most certainly current bands with a political message, Patricio Rey y los Redonditos de Ricota and the recent work of Carlos Jiménez and Walter Olmos being classic examples, there appears to be a danger that political music as a category will simply cease to exist in the Argentine framework; throughout the research for this investigation, the author attempted to locate current examples of political music, indications that music is being purchased with politics as a motivating factor, internet message boards or blogs referring to Argentine political music, academic literature on the subject, and the like, but only very occasional references were found. When attempting to study the political economy of Argentine music more specifically, only the most general information was available. Regarding record sales and the like, the author encountered similar obstacles to those of

⁶⁰ Patricio Rey y los Redonditos de Ricotta, Blues de la Libertad, DBN, 2001.

⁶¹ Patricio Rey, Una Piba con la Remera de Green Peace, DBN Argentina, 2002.

Cuban music, except that it was the record labels rather than the Cuban state which declined to release information. As can be seen in the reference list, the Argentine music scene is very much dominated by multinational labels; this fact has simply not been studied, to the author's knowledge, in the relevant academic literature regarding Argentine political music, which makes all but the most general assertions regarding its political economy extremely difficult to substantiate. When the lack of academic study is combined with the failure of transparency regarding record sales (which are usually considered public domain documents and made accessible to the general public), one cannot help but speculate as to why this may be. However, the fact that Argentina is a liberal democracy which has endured important periods of economic flux in recent years, when taken together with the fact that Argentine rock is considered the third most popular in the world indicates several possible conclusions regarding the political economy of the music industry. First, the regulation of the music industry in Argentina does not appear to be political (as in outright censorship) but economic, in that the primary goal of any musician must be the sale of their product. By definition, therefore, political considerations are somewhat sidelined in the Argentine music industry, much more so than in Cuba, for example. In short, the reason the state does not appear to be intervening in the political economy of Argentine music is that it simply does not need to when economic considerations presumably limit the political effect of Argentine music at this stage of the country's economic development. Furthermore, given the fact that Argentina is a reasonably functioning liberal democratic society, there is room to question whether the state would have either the desire or the capability to intervene if such intervention somehow became necessary. That being said, there is a legacy of Argentine music being

influenced by political considerations, and also a legacy of the music itself influencing political decisions in Argentina, the banning of cuarteto during the World Cup being a good example; this indicates that while political music may not present or be perceived as a threat to the existing political economic order in the country, that does not mean that it cannot eventually regain this status and influence.

In conclusion, the theoretical lens of political economy can be used to study both the Cuban and Argentine experiments with political music. A study of the histories of political music in both countries reveals that political and economic considerations have played important parts in both cases; furthermore, state structure and policy prove to be decisive factors in the determination of the measure of development of political music in each case. When a neo-liberal economic system is combined with a once repressive state structure in Argentina, the result is an abstract, mostly metaphorical, but nevertheless highly critical brand of political music heavily influenced by music from outside the national borders which becomes in danger of losing its cultural relevance after the repression of the state has eased into liberal democracy and economic rather than political forces are allowed to run their course. By contrast, when a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist state structure is introduced in Cuba which combines a need for culture to provide a moral incentive for its populous to produce with a need to preserve social order and limit criticism lest it erode the credibility of a revolutionary project and a desperate need to acquire foreign exchange in a capitalist economy, the result is a tenuous but apparently unbreakable symbiosis between the state, the musical community, and the multinational record interests that provide the money which continue the cycle.

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