Analogies of Political Structure in Ethnomusicological Writing

By Brian Fairley (New York University)

Theories of political organization in the West have long had recourse to metaphors of form and function. Plato's *Republic* gives us the classic "ship of state" trope, while Aristotle, the consummate biological taxonomist, tended toward the model of the organism when discussing political structure. The organicist model persisted through the Renaissance with such ideas as "the body politic" (Christine de Pizan, Francis Bacon, and others), eventually augmented during the Enlightenment by mechanistic models of physics, physiology, and social organization.[1] The ecology of metaphor in music writing likewise sounds changes on these organicist and mechanistic themes, whether in anthropomorphic visions of musical instruments or in the celestial clockwork implicit in the Harmony of the Spheres.

At times, these two conceptual worlds meet when forms of political organization—like democracy, tyranny, or anarchy—are employed rhetorically to elucidate forms of musical organization, and vice versa. These meetings constitute the theme of this essay. By understanding in broadly synoptic terms the theoretical orientations that account for such analogies, we can turn a critical eye to the cross-domain comparisons so common in an interdiscipline like ethnomusicology. In turn, the recent application of the political and aesthetic theory of philosopher Jacques Rancière to music studies (Moreno and Steingo 2012) may point to the limits of such formally analogic thinking for understanding music as either a reflection of politics or political action.

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A Facebook post I recently saw reminded me that one popular object (target?) of political analogy is the Western symphony orchestra, employed by Christopher Small (1998, 68–69) in his influential *Musicking* as a model of industrial production and hierarchical rule. Likewise, in *Tiv Song*, ethnomusicologist Charles Keil (1979, 183–86) quotes at length Elias Canetti's (1963) depiction of a symphony concert as a totalitarian state, with the authoritarian figure of the conductor at its center. One of Keil's aims in citing Canetti is to demonstrate the inadequacy of Western analytical frameworks—implicated, like the symphony, in hierarchical relations of political dominance—for studying Tiv "life energies," which, Keil argues with characteristic exuberance, is "temporal-aural-horizontal-egalitarian" (1979, 183). Reading this passage today, Keil's aggressive Other-ing of his interlocutors and their worldviews comes off as something like a hegemonic move itself. Setting that aside, Keil's use of the symphony/authoritarianism analogy fits a larger disciplinary anxiety in ethnomusicology, eager to stake a claim for methods that subvert the dominance of Western-oriented musicology.

By far the strongest twentieth-century statement of isomorphism between musical and political organization was Alan Lomax's cantometrics project (1968; 1976). Classic critiques of Lomax (McLeod 1974; Feld 1984) reveal weaknesses in the predictive power of Lomax's song/society categories, which have generally not been accepted within academia.[2] Even so, Lomax's work may be seen primarily as an extension or amplification of the dominant anthropological school of structural-functionalism, expressed by Alan Merriam in his defining text *The Anthropology of Music*:

> [A]s human behavior, music is related synchronically to other behaviors, including religion, drama, dance, social organization, economics, *political structure*, and other aspects. . . . In a very real sense [the investigator] finds that music reflects the culture of which it is a part. (1964, 47; emphasis added)

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Analogies of Political Structure in Ethnomusicological Writing

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Chief among these persistent, unspoken assumptions was the idea of homeostasis or equilibrium: that all the different parts of a society work together for a period of time to keep everything in balance (as long as everything stayed in its proper place). Analogies with political structure likewise presume a kind of homeostatic cooperation. Even in an article exploring the connection between musical improvisation and anarchism (Bell 2014), the different musical backgrounds and knowledges of a group of improvising musicians serve to work together toward a kind of utopian whole.

The lingering influence of structural-functionalist thinking leads, I would argue, toward such off-hand comparisons as the one that appears in the second edition of Bruno Nettl's venerable "red book," *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*:

> In the culture of Carnatic music in Madras (Chennai), the term *kaccheri* is used for a large concert with an ensemble. . . . It's a kind of event that has always struck me as a reflection of the older Hindu social organization, the caste system, no longer legally operative but still in evidence. The ensemble reflects a variety of castes, and even the outcastes are represented by the tamboura. Parallels can be drawn at various additional points, but suffice it to say that structurally, the parallels are clear. (Nettl [1983] 2005, 350)

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This is a classic demonstration of the lure of the explanatory paradigm. The Indian caste-system remains the seductive sociocultural model *par excellence*, even as scholars demonstrate how rooted it is in colonial modalities of knowledge production and control. As Nicholas Dirks writes about the mid-nineteenth century, "caste came to be viewed as the primary institution—and sphere of social relations—that articulated the legacies of tradition, standing in place of the historical-mindedness that was seen as absent from Indian sensibilities" (2015, 39).

Caste is not the only way to do this work, however. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (2002) employs Marxian analysis in order to ask the question, "is Hindustani music feudal?" In Marx's history of political economy, feudalism was primarily significant as a precursor to capitalism, yet Qureshi extends this framework to look at the systems of feudal patronage that helped shape the world of hereditary musicians in North India. Although Qureshi does not see feudalism reflected in "the music itself," choosing instead to focus on modes and conditions of production and value creation, Peter Manuel (2002, 45) makes such a leap, arguing that "formal structures in Western music reflect a general aesthetic conditioned by social economy." In particular, Manuel is concerned with "closed musical structures" like sonata and song forms, and the narrative structures of development and closure which are distinct, in his view, from additive, strophic, or ostinato forms typical of pre-modern musical life. Mindful that "on the whole, musicologists, like most other mainstream scholars, have tended to regard theses about sociomusical homologies with suspicion, if not outright derision" (46), he nevertheless cites developments of industrial modernity like timepieces, printing, and widespread literacy for these forms' appearance.

In the interest of space, I only nod toward one of the major mobilizations of political analogy in recent music history, namely the use of jazz in Cold War diplomacy as a metaphor and intended catalyst for democracy and anti-Communist freedom. Much excellent work has been done to critique the premises of this analogy, both for the way it misrepresented power structures within jazz ensembles and served to obscure the reality

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Analogies of Political Structure in Ethnomusicological Writing

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of racial segregation in the United States (Davenport 2010; Von Eschen 2004; Monson 2007). I also skim over the development of semiotic theories over the past three decades by Thomas Turino (2008; 1999) and others, which promise an overarching framework for interpreting the signs at play in musical performance on equal terms as the significant structures of social and political life. A representative passage in Turino's *Music as Social Life* (2008, 190–219) contrasts the use of unison choral singing in Nazi Germany—among other practices—with the "call-and-response" structures of some gospel songs used during the Civil Rights movement. "Like all interlocking practices in participatory music," Turino writes, formal structures like call-and-response "both articulate and are the result of social coordination and unity" (217). To be sure, there is still much scholarly energy invested in mapping social structures onto musical structures, even without the guiding orthodoxy of structural functionalism or Marxist cultural analysis.

Enter Jacques Rancière. In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Rancière (2004) sums up two pillars of his thought. First is his idea of the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*), that is, a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception" which establishes, at a given historical moment, both "something common that is shared and exclusive parts" (12). Second is Rancière's historical scheme of "regimes of art": there have been three so far, namely the *ethical* regime, the *poetic* or *representative* regime, and the *aesthetic* regime. In an illuminating essay, Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo (2012) elucidate Rancière's regimes and their particular application to music, noting that music does indeed serve as "a model of the political community" (489), insofar as, like society as a whole, music identifies certain sensory experiences as proper to itself and enacts divisions within those experiences. Specific forms or genres of music, however, do not have inherent significance for politics. Moreno and Steingo cite the example of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (Lewis 2008), whose members reject the connection of African-American music to any particular rhythmic or formal aspects. In this way, the AACM asserts the principle of radical equality which, in a process Rancière dubs *dissensus*, has the power to catalyze a shift in political life (Moreno and Steingo 2012, 491–92).

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While Steingo draws on Rancière for *Kwaito's Promise* (2016), his study of South African popular music and musicians, an argument could easily be made that Rancière's aesthetic theories are too bound up in a Western distribution of the sensible and are of limited usefulness outside the Euro-American intellectual milieu. Rancière's significance for ethnomusicology, I propose, lies not in simply making his political aesthetics fit whatever musical practice we happen to investigate. Rather, his work on the aesthetic regime of art, in particular, points to an intellectual lineage in which all of us doing ethnomusicological writing participate. Rancière (2009, 9) sees in eighteenth- and

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Analogies of Political Structure in Ethnomusicological Writing

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early-nineteenth-century writers like Vico, Schelling, and—importantly for us—Johann Gottfried Herder, the celebration of art as the expression of an "anonymous collective power." This is the elevation of the anonymous to a place of aesthetic consideration, a decisive break from the representative regime. Herder's folk-song collections, long considered "foundational for the history of ethnomusicology" (Herder and Bohlman 2017, 5), established the idea that music could reflect the true social, religious, and political character of a people. In a very real way, such attention to "anonymous" or everyday music made ethnomusicology possible. However much distance, then, we put between our field and the reductive frames of Herder's *Volk* or Lomax's culture areas, we may still be drawn by the play of resemblance to see our politics playing out in sound.

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Endnotes

1. For these and other early metaphors, see Saccaro-Battisti (1983).
2. For an insightful overview of this period of Lomax's work, see Gage Averill's (2003) essay for a selection of Lomax's writings.

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Analogies of Political Structure in Ethnomusicological Writing

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Politics & Music

An Annotated Bibliography

By Wangcaixuan (Rosa) Zhang (University of Pittsburgh)

The study of the interrelationship between politics and music is not a new one. Long before the rise of ethnomusicology in the 1950s, scholars, from Aristotle in *Politics*[1] to Alain Locke in *The Negro and His Music* (1936),[2] had been exploring the topic. However, the scope of this research was limited and focused largely on political and dissident musical utterances. By reconsidering the political as power relationships reiterated through daily life practices, and re-defining music as culture, scholarship considering music and politics has extended to studies on ethnicity, gender relations, cultural politics in people's daily musical practices, and more.

Such developments in scholarship provide a path toward gaining more fresh perspectives and understandings of communities and their musical cultures. For example, while mainstream popular music has often been deemed non-political in Western contexts, popular musics have, for example, served as

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1. Aristotle, in his *Politics*, especially book VIII, discusses the influences of music to one's characters and ethos, which are crucial to governance. He mentions music as part of education and provides a detailed analysis of musical affect in terms of musical modes and harmony.

2. Alain Locke, an American writer, philosopher, educator, as well as an activist of the Harlem Renaissance, explores racial politics in America through African American musics. See Locke, Alain. 1936. *The Negro and His Music*. Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education.