

## In Praise of Vulgarity

### How commercial culture liberates Islam and the West

Charles Paul Freund

Who will ever forget the strangeness of the first images out of post-Taliban Afghanistan, when the streets ran with beards? As one city after another was abandoned by Taliban soldiers, crowds of happy men lined up to get their first legal shave in years, and barbers enjoyed the busiest days of their lives.

Only a few months earlier, in January 2001, dozens of barbers in the capital city of Kabul had been rounded up by the Taliban's hair-and-beard cops (the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) because they had been cutting men's hair in a style known locally as the "Titanic." At the time, Kabul's cooler young men wanted that Leonardo DiCaprio look, the one he sported in the movie. It was an interesting moment in fashion, because under the Taliban's moral regime movies were illegal, Leonardo DiCaprio was illegal, and his hairdo, which allowed strands of hair to fall forward over the face during prayer, was a ticket to jail. Yet thanks to enterprising video smugglers who dragged cassettes over mountain trails by mule, urban Afghans knew perfectly well who DiCaprio was and what he looked like; not only did men adopt his style, but couples were then celebrating their weddings with Titanic-shaped cakes.

DiCaprio was out of style, even in Kabul, by the time the Taliban's rules were being swept away along with the nation's beard clippings. Men were now measuring their freedom by the smoothness of their chins. "I hated this beard," one happy Afghan told an A.P. reporter. Being shaved was "like being free."

Although it's omitted from the monuments and the rhetoric of liberation, brutal tyrannies have ended on exactly this note before. When Paris was liberated from the Nazis, for example, one Parisian cadged a Lucky Strike from an American reporter, the first cigarette he'd had in a long, long time. As he gratefully exhaled, the Frenchman smiled and told the reporter, "It's the taste of freedom."

Afghan women, of course, removed their burqas, if they chose to, and put on makeup again. But some Afghan women had been breaking the morals laws throughout the period of Taliban bleakness; according to a memorable CNN documentary titled *Beneath the Veil*, they did so at the risk of flogging or even amputation. Courageous women had not only been educating their daughters in secret, but had also been visiting illegal underground cosmetic parlors for the simple pleasure of self-ornamentation and the assertion of self-fashioned identity that lies behind it. (See "Free Hand," page 82.)

Still other Afghans filled the air with music. The most frequently played tapes, according to press reports, featured the songs of the late Ahmed Zaher, a 1970s celebrity in the Western style. *The Village Voice* has described Zaher as "Afghanistan's Crosby, Presley, and Marley rolled into one," and credited him with introducing original pop compositions into the nation's culture (before Zaher, the usual practice had been to record classical verses set to traditional instrumentation). Enthusiasm for Zaher's work -- including his English-language covers of American hits such as "It's Now or Never" -- was one of the few things that the country's many ethnic groups had in common. The model of celebrity he established was later imitated by other local singers, including, notably, women.

Afghan shop windows suddenly displayed blow-ups of Indian actresses, who often pose for cheerful cheesecake pinup shots. India's films are very popular in Afghanistan, and Bollywood, as India's Hindi-language movie industry is known, lost almost 10 percent of its total market when the Taliban closed the theaters. When a Kabul theater quickly reopened, mobs of men assembled to see the only print of a Bollywood extravaganza remaining in the country. Crowds grew so large that soldiers had to intervene. For those who couldn't get a ticket, a video store suddenly opened to offer such fare as *Gladiator*, *Police Story*, and *Independence Day*.

Other Afghans exhumed the TV sets they had buried in their yards to save them from the autos-da-fé of electronics the Taliban staged in Kabul's soccer stadium. A few Afghans examined the homemade satellite dishes -- hammered out of old paint cans -- that were arrayed in the streets. Those who didn't have TVs anymore ran out to see what they could get from sellers who had put their black market stocks of electronics on open display. The shoppers were looking for a boom box or for any machine that would help return pleasure to their lives.

In short, the first breath of cultural freedom that Afghans had enjoyed since 1995 was suffused with the stuff of commercially generated popular culture. The people seemed delighted to be able to look like they wanted to, listen to what they wanted to, watch what they wanted to, and generally enjoy themselves again. Who could complain about Afghans' filling their lives with pleasure after being coerced for years to adhere to a harshly enforced ascetic code?

The West's liberal, anti-materialist critics, that's who.

### The High Culture Sputter

"How depressing was it," asked Anna Quindlen in a December *Newsweek* column, "to see Afghan citizens celebrating the end of tyranny by buying consumer electronics?" Apparently, if you're somebody like Quindlen -- who confessed in the same column that "I have everything I could want, and then some" -- the spectacle was pretty dispiriting. Liberty

itself descends on the land, and the best thing its people can do is go shopping? It was just too vulgar.

Pulitzer Prize winner Quindlen had given voice to the Cultural Sputter of the *bien-pensant*, a well-known reaction afflicting people of taste forced to live in a world of vulgarities. It's an act with a very long pedigree. Eighteenth-century aristocrats by the palaceful were appalled when professional writers first appeared. Writing in exchange for money, they thought, would be the ruin of letters. John Ruskin, King of Victorian Sputterers, couldn't stand Rembrandt because the Dutch master's paintings lacked "dignity": All those paintings of self-satisfied, bulbous-nosed burghers made Ruskin gag.

The sputter is endlessly adaptable. A notorious space-age version choked Norman Mailer half to death. He was watching astronaut Alan B. Shepard walking on the moon in 1971, when Shepard suddenly took out a secretly stowed golf club and launched a drive at the lunar horizon. Mailer was spiritually mortified. Humankind should have been humbled, literally on its knees, as it entered the cathedral of the universe; instead it drove golf balls through its windows. What's the matter with people? Give them infinity, and they make it a fairway. Give them liberty, and they reach for a Lucky. Or they go shopping.

There are a lot of sputterers like Quindlen, and they too condemn the substance of Afghanistan's national liberation celebration. Why? Because they think that cultural consumerism -- whether nascent as displayed in Kabul or full-blown as in the hedonist West -- is the serpent in freedom's garden. When culture and commerce meet, they believe, both democracy and prosperity are poisoned. As for true culture, it hasn't got a chance.

Hence, when Hillary Clinton, then still the first lady, addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, a couple of years ago, she argued that "there is no doubt that we are creating a consumer-driven culture that promotes values and ethics that undermine both capitalism and democracy." In fact, she said, "I think you could argue that the kind of work ethic, postponement of gratification, and other attributes that are historically associated with capitalism are being undermined by consumer capitalism."

Leave aside the spectacle of making such a speech to some of the world's richest and most privileged people gathered in a highly exclusive Alpine resort. Clinton's message was actually a restatement of a well-known and highly regarded thesis. She'd lifted her text straight out of Daniel Bell's classic 1974 study *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Capitalism was built on an ethic of work and duty, Bell argued, but it yields a culture of self-involved pleasure that undermines the attitude necessary for disciplined achievement.

The man of the hour at this nexus of culture, democracy, and commerce, however, is Benjamin R. Barber, a political science professor now at the University of Maryland. As cultural darkness descended on the Afghans, Barber published a 400-page sputter called *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (1996). His argument was that tradition-bound, often blood-based anti-modernism ("Jihad") is one of two powerful forces in the world undermining true democracy. The other rogue force? "Unrestrained capitalism," especially of the sort displayed by aggressive, resource-depleting, soul-destroying multinational corporations ("McWorld"). Their encounter, he argued, would explode at the expense of the noble communitarian ideal of civil society. Barber's tome was illustrated with a striking image of a woman clad in a black burqa holding a can of Pepsi, the Western drink of "choice" throughout most of the Arab and Islamic world.

Barber's approach to this tangle of issues is in some ways the flip side of the school that derives from Daniel Bell. While Bell's group sees capitalism under threat from its own debased culture, Barber, drawing on the critique of the old Frankfurt School of cultural Marxists, sees not only democracy but culture itself -- in the grand sense -- under siege by an inevitably debasing capitalism.

"McWorld," writes Barber, "is a product of popular culture driven by expansionist commerce. Its template is American, its form style. Its goods are as much images as materiel, an aesthetic as well as a product line. It is about culture as commodity, apparel as ideology." It is, in short, about the imposition of Americanized, commercial meaning on daily life, an act those Jihadists, who take their meaning from the transcendent, are bound to resist by any means necessary.

If one takes these complementary critiques as a set, one cannot escape an overpowering conclusion: The capitalist system is doomed, suicidal. In fact, it has been destroying itself since its appearance. These critics have isolated democracy, capitalism, and culture from one another, and have each of them surrounded by the others. Real democracy can't survive because it is choked by a capitalist "culture" driven by money and power; true culture can't survive because it is destroyed by capitalism's manufactured populism; capitalist prosperity can't survive because it is undermined by the anti-democratic forces of self-absorption that it unleashes.

In other words, whichever route one takes in this intellectual landscape, it descends into the same perdition. As for the Afghans, they're halfway to hell despite -- or more precisely, because of -- a national aftershave shortage.

### **Taste and Distaste**

But wait. Barber has a solution to commercial damnation. Salvation, he has suggested, lies in good taste. Strangely enough, his good taste.

*Jihad vs. McWorld* made few ripples when it first appeared, but it found its readership in the wake of September 11, when it was reprinted in a large new edition. Despite its "Jihad" paradigm, and despite a cover featuring a veiled woman, Barber's book is only incidentally about Islam.

Nevertheless, as the United States began its military assault against the Taliban regime, Barber was suddenly in great demand, offering audiences and interviewers a Big Picture analysis of what was going on in the world and what we should do about it.

One of the things we should do, Barber argued, is to stop defiling the world with the crass products of our cultural machine. Why should we stop? Because Barber thinks it's all "garbage."

"I mean, we don't even export the best of our own culture," he sputtered to *The Washington Post* in November, in the course of an admiring profile. Our cultural best, thinks Barber, is "defined by serious music, by jazz, by poetry, by our extraordinary literature, our playwrights -- we export the worst, the most childish, the most base, the most trivial of our culture. And we call that American."

Of course, cultural artifacts and styles that are "base" and "trivial," according to Barber and others like him, are exactly what many Afghans longed for while under the Taliban heel and what they turned to the minute they had the chance. They wanted to adorn themselves according to fleeting style, to hear pop hits, to watch escapist movies. A lot of the things Afghans sought were American products, and those that weren't are recognizably based on commercial models developed in the United States (e.g., Bollywood movies). Afghans may have thought their troubles -- at least those troubles involving small pleasures -- were over. Barber explains why their troubles were only beginning.

By immersing themselves in such made-for-profit vulgarity, Barber argues, people -- be they Afghans or any other benighted group -- undermine any hope they might have of achieving a just, civil society. Instead they enslave themselves to the West's cultural marketers (or their Eastern imitators). Instead of pursuing a democratic civil ideal, people will waste their time and money on a poisonous bath of selfish consumerism. The Afghans were buying consumer electronics before the shooting stopped; tomorrow or the next day, they'll be manipulated into wearing \$200 sneakers. If there's one thing that critics of consumerism know, it's that neither Afghans nor any other people "need" such things.

The notion that there are consumerist "needs" is a founding capitalist delusion. As Barber puts it, consumer choice is a "charming fraud."

What, then, is the appropriate cultural path to democracy? Barber told the *Post* that if the U.S. must export culture it should at least export its "best." There's an obvious problem with the list Barber offers, since many of his examples of cultural quality -- jazz, novels, Broadway theater -- were themselves assailed as intolerably vulgar by contemporary critics who were disgusted at their appearance. But Barber surely realizes that, so we can assume he's getting at something else. He's singing in praise of culture that doesn't pander, of culture that teaches and leaves us thinking, of visionary art that lifts us morally and makes us better by challenging us. In short, he's a champion of what might be called contemplative art. That is not an art of commerce; it is an art of patronage, of enlightened taste. If you can imagine those Afghan video smugglers loading their mules with fewer copies of *Titanic* and more dubs of PBS programs, then you can imagine Western liberal critics being more optimistic about the prospects for Central Asian democracy.

Is Barber right? He is about one thing: The issue here is taste. But taste in this case has nothing at all to do with perceived quality. To approach it that way is to run an endless round of Hell's nine circles, only to arrive back at oneself. Thus Barber concludes that what the world should do now is attend his favorite plays.

What this taste debate is about is meaning, the meaning that style and artifacts have for those who seek them out and consume them. The reason many critics see the world devolving into vulgar chaos is that they see a world filled with artifacts, nearly all of them disposable, that have no meaning to them. It's all just "garbage": the "base," the "most trivial," the "worst." But what if these disposable artifacts actually do have meaning? Does the devolving world suddenly look any different? Do democracy, capitalism, and culture still have each other surrounded?

As it happens, the 20th century conducted a series of real-life experiments on just this subject. At various times and in various places, commerce, culture, and freedom have been isolated from one another, while taste was allowed to compete with meaning. For those who lived through some of these experiments, the experience was one of extended misery. Indeed, for some, that misery continues. But the lessons are fascinating, and the West has yet to absorb them.

### **The Style of Anti-Stalinism**

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union was confronted by a wave of Islamism in its Central Asian Republics; it was exactly the same phenomenon that was to break the Soviets in Afghanistan. Moscow thought it knew just how to combat it. It started beaming Western rock music in Islamism's direction, the idea being that sensual degeneracy (in Soviet terms) would undermine the appeal of religious transcendence. This is Benjamin R. Barber's thesis turned inside out, but for all that it may be its best example in real life. "McWorld" was really at war with "Jihad," though the forces of McWorld had been marshaled by the anti-capitalist Soviets against a Jihad supported militarily, at least in Afghanistan, by capitalist America. Who says communism lacked a sense of irony?

The Soviets' rock gambit didn't work. Why? Because you can't export meaning the way you can export anti-aircraft Stingers. To move culture, you need an array of tricky requirements, from willing early receivers to adapters who will transmute it into local terms (like the singer Ahmed Zاهر) to diffusionists who will spread it. But even with all

that in place, you're still not moving meaning. You can't export meaning at all.

By the 1980s, the people who should have understood these issues better than anyone were the Soviets themselves, because they had been on the receiving end of a cultural transfer that had largely undone them. The Soviets even should have known how and where meaning can arise in such a process.

In the USSR, it was low, disruptive culture that generated a "consumerist" demand for the artifacts that embodied its values as well as a popular demand for the freedom to engage in its activities. Because neither consumerism nor democratic freedoms existed in the country, shadow versions of both eventually developed. The entire process, from beginning to end, was founded on vulgarity. Here's what happened.

Some extraordinary and totally unexpected figures appeared on the streets of Moscow in 1949 and in other major cities of the Soviet Bloc soon afterward. They wore jackets with huge, padded shoulders and pants with narrow legs. They were clean-shaven, but they let their hair grow long, covered it with grease, and flipped it up at the back. They sported unusually colorful ties, which they let hang well below their belts. What their fellow Muscovites most noticed about them, for some reason, were their shoes, which were oversized, with thick soles. There were some women in the movement as well, notable for their short, tight skirts and very heavy lipstick.

Although they were Russians, they called each other by such names as "Bob" and "Joe." In Moscow, they referred to their hangout, Gorki Prospekt, as "Broadway." They chewed gum, they affected an odd walk that involved stretching their necks as they went down the street, and they loved to listen to American jazz.

These young men were to become known in Russian as *stilyagi*, a term that is usually translated as "style hunters"; their story has been told by a number of authors, including Artemy Troitsky, Timothy W. Ryback, and S. Frederick Starr. The *stilyagi* constitute one of the most remarkable movements in the rich history of oppositional subcultures. What they had turned themselves into were walking cultural protests against Stalinism in one of its most paranoid periods. All that Stalin had melted into air, the *stilyagi* made flesh.

In the years after World War II, Stalin attempted to extirpate every aspect of American culture from Soviet life. Jazz, which had been played publicly in the USSR as recently as the war years, was now officially regarded as decadent capitalist filth; to even speak of jazz during this period was a criminal act. The same was true of anything American: It was all capitalist decadence, and it was all dangerous and usually illegal. In reaction, the *stilyagi* did not merely embrace American culture in secret; they actually appropriated American characters ("Joe," "Bob"), as they understood them, and took them into public. Indeed, they borrowed American cultural geography ("Broadway") and laid it over Stalin's.

But what is most striking about the American personae assumed by the *stilyagi* was that these alternate personalities were built out of vulgarisms. Mind you, this was not vulgarity as only the insane Stalinist cultural apparatus would define it, but a strident, studied vulgarity that made even Western elites grimace when they saw it in their own streets. The *stilyagi* were zoot suiters, loud-tie-wearing, gum-smacking, slang-using, greasy jazz-heads in need of haircuts. Their protest was not a matter of distributing banned poetry texts; it was a public act, complete with role names, costumes, and even a peculiar behavior that was intended to call attention to itself.

It wasn't only the authorities with whom the *stilyagi* had to contend; it was everyone. Being a *stilyaga* was truly isolating, and the public reaction was brutal. Their fellow Muscovites taunted them on the sidewalks and on the streetcars, loudly criticizing their appearance, hurling insults at them, sometimes attacking them. Obviously, the Communist press took notice of them, terming them subversive and linking them to criminal elements. Inevitably, the police also went after them. When the cops didn't arrest them, they gave the *stilyagi* impromptu street haircuts or, interestingly, slashed their clothes.

### **Improvising an Image**

Where did the *stilyagi* get their look and behavior? They assembled their personae from the bits and pieces of low American culture to which they briefly had access. The men's hair, for example, came from Tarzan movies. Stalin had been quite taken by Tarzan and had previously allowed several Johnny Weismuller films into the country. Soviet critics, however, had afterward attacked the character as representing the savagery and base sexuality of the capitalist West. That was all the *stilyagi* had to hear. The gum chewing seems to have been borrowed from James Cagney movies that had been exhibited; as reputed celebrations of disorder and criminality, gangsterisms were naturally absorbed into the style. Other details were borrowed from disparate sources or simply made up.

But the truly impressive achievement of the *stilyagi* was in creating the material elements of their protest. Remember, this was the heart of Stalinist darkness: There were no marketers to exploit the *stilyagi*, no merchandising apparatus to lure them into the desire for false consumerist needs. Instead, the *stilyagi* had to manufacture almost everything themselves. Their artifacts were the expression of a pre-existing meaning, of an opposition to the stifling repression of Stalinism. The *stilyagi* created their hair, clothing, and slang styles as a means of achieving the identities they were struggling to assume.

To do so, they were often brilliantly resourceful. Where did they get their loud ties, for example? They weren't going to find what they wanted in the state-run GUM department store near Red Square; there were no chains of tie shops. Instead, they took whatever ties they had and literally painted over them, or they cut ties from whatever appealing swath of fabric they might locate, whether it was in the black market or hanging over their windows as a

curtain. (Prague's version of the stilyagi affixed pieces of American cigarette packaging to their self-made ties.)

Who did their hair? The style wasn't merely lengthy, recall; it was flipped. There were no stylists who would sell them a look; they had to do it themselves. Using heated rods, they styled one another's hair in their kitchens; old stilyagi would later remember walking around all the time with burns on their necks. Some stilyagi obtained the leather for their notorious shoes from the black market, too. They had to peg their own pants. They couldn't even locate genuine chewing gum, so they substituted paraffin wax.

But the crowning achievement lay in their music collections. Jazz survived in the Soviet Union in some astonishing circumstances. As jazz historian S. Frederick Starr has recounted, many of the country's best musicians were actually in Siberian prison camps, but these camps were in many cases ruled by commanders who liked jazz and who organized the musicians to play for their often-lavish parties. Prison camp commanders would even exchange these jazz groups, allowing them to "tour," as it were, camps where countless prisoners were being worked, starved, and frozen to death. Other bands were exiled to remote cities, such as Kazan in the Tartar region, where they were supposed to undergo "rehabilitation." Instead, these groups, many of which had learned jazz in pre-Mao Shanghai, took advantage of the local officials' musical ignorance, and played jazz anyway. In Kazan, the courageous bands even performed on Tartar State Radio. That's how the early stilyagi kept up with the music: by monitoring Tartar broadcasts to hear exiled musicians outsmarting their cultural keepers.

But the stilyagi managed not only to hear jazz, but to assemble collections of recordings too. How? They had turntables, but they certainly couldn't buy jazz records in record stores (there weren't any). They couldn't tape what they heard on the radio. Even assuming they could get access to a reel-to-reel recorder, where were they going to get enough blank tape? The solution was a piece of genius. A jazz-loving medical student realized that he could inscribe sound grooves on the surface of a medium that was actually plentiful in the Soviet Union: old X-ray plates. He rigged a contraption that allowed him to produce "recordings" that, while obviously of low quality, at least contained the precious music and allowed its admirers to listen to it at will. He and his imitators were to make a lot of well-earned money on the black market.

The stilyagi were eventually transformed by a series of changes in their world. Stalin died in 1953, and Nikita Khrushchev inaugurated the so-called cultural thaw in 1956. In the meantime, the Voice of America began transmitting jazz to the USSR via shortwave. The surviving prisoner-musicians of the USSR were still playing big band arrangements; they -- along with their "audience" -- had been completely isolated from the international music scene and had no idea what had been happening. Thanks to VOA jazz DJ Willis Conover, however, the Soviet Bloc started hearing bebop. Its expressive improvisation electrified the stilyagi and their scene started going cool.

In 1957 a stilyagi dream came true. Despite Khrushchev's complaint that jazz gave him gas, American jazz musicians came to Moscow to play at a festival. The stilyagi who showed up in their notorious costume finery, however, sensed the inconsistency between their self-presentation and the cool music they were embracing. It was a bittersweet moment. They went home, put away the loud ties, and started giving each other Gerry Mulligan crew cuts.

But the cultural problems for Soviet authorities were just beginning. Russian athletes had returned from the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia, with something new: rock music. Built on the foundation prepared by the stilyagi, the Soviet Bloc rock subculture (complete with music on X-ray plates called "rock on ribs") was soon to become far, far bigger than the stilyagi scene had ever been. It was filled with innovations of its own, eventually adopting Western clothes, especially jeans. Entrepreneurs leased pictures of Western acts to fans for limited periods (remember, there were no publicly available Xerox machines under communism); exploited new technology, especially the cassette tape; and formed illegal bands that staged illegal concerts. Eventually, the Soviet Bloc rock scene grew into an alternate world, complete with a string of safe houses that one could use to inhabit the counterculture no matter where one went.

Soviet authorities tried everything to combat the rock subculture. They banned it, belittled it, and co-opted it with state-approved rock bands. They even instructed the gymnastic bureaucracy to invent "official" rock dances consistent with socialist values, which they then pushed on Soviet TV. Obviously, nothing worked, and nothing could have worked.

The point of the various musical countercultures under the Soviets was not simply to hear music. What the authorities never understood, and what many cultural critics in the West similarly don't understand, is that the fans who inhabit such "vulgar" and disruptive subcultures are not being exploited. It is the fans who are using both the music scene and the paraphernalia that surrounds it for their own expressive purposes. If there is no one to sell them the paraphernalia -- the clothes, the imagery, the recordings -- then the members of these subcultures will not go without it. They will create it themselves.

There was simply no way for the Soviet system to come to terms with this and remain true to its authoritarianism. In the end, it wasn't the musical subcultures that were delegitimized but Soviet authority. The inability of such a system to allow its citizens to construct their own cultural identities -- that is, to meet their "consumer demands" -- was a major factor in robbing communism of credibility among its own populations.

## **Rai Spell**

Although the Soviets never understood how to use music to oppose Islamism, a segment of the Algerian populace did.

Indeed, throughout the period that the USSR was vainly beaming Western pop at Central Asia's Islamists, Algerians were using their own music and their own cultural tradition in a struggle against North Africa's fundamentalists.

That struggle illustrates how broad-based culture, popular and vulgar, is far from being a mere distraction or a source of self-absorption. As Islamists have learned, it can function as a bulwark against coercion. More than that, it can even be a means of democratic resort. Here's how it worked in Algeria.

In 1994 a young man named Cheb Hasni was shot and killed outside the home he shared with his parents in the Algerian port city of Oran. His crime? He was a singer of rai songs, an Algerian musical style that was as controversial as it was popular. Hasni was known as the "Prince of Rai" and had recorded more than 80 cassettes of the music. His murder is often perceived as the climax of the so-called war against rai being waged by Algeria's notoriously vicious Islamists. The religious zealots see rai music as the apotheosis of a secular culture they consider lewd and impious. But nobody really knows who killed Hasni. A conspiracist view of Hasni's death maintains that he was actually assassinated by the anti-Islamist military, who then blamed his death on religious militants so as to inflame further an already seething rai world.

This much is clear: By the time of Hasni's death, rai music was a major front in the confrontation between Algerian Islamism and the secular forces it sought to overcome. What is rai? The style is at least a century old and has deep folkloric roots, but it is the late, vulgarized form that is at issue. Rod Skilbeck, one of many academics who have studied it, asserts that in its modern form rai has developed into a kind of Algerian blues, "singing of alienation, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and forbidden sexual desires. Hedonism, existentialism, suffering, and total inaction became major structural elements." Despite the fact that it often serves as "background" music, its content has increasingly reflected the worldly, urban concerns of its listeners.

The "rai war" erupted in earnest in the wake of the 1990 elections, when Islamists came to power in many cities. Among their first acts was to close nightclubs, prohibit alcohol, and ban rai. Some Islamists would stone rai fans when they attempted to stage concerts. In 1991 fundamentalists tried to burn down a crowded hall during a performance. In 1994 a leading Berber singer was kidnapped by Islamists; he was reportedly "tried" on religious grounds and then released. After Hasni's murder that year, many rai singers emigrated to France.

For their part, rai singers would mix provocative, supposedly pornographic lyrics with openly anti-Islamist messages in their music, and some rai fans were drawn to the scene at least in part because of the secularist meaning they perceived in it. A famous rai anthem of 1988, "To Flee, But Where?," asks: "Where has youth gone?/Where are the brave ones?/The rich gorge themselves/The poor work themselves to death/The Islamic charlatans show their true face."

In the course of its confrontation with both governmental authority and the rising Islamist challenge, the rai world took on the characteristics of an oppositional subculture, reinforcing certain aspects of its participants' identities. At least some rai cultural statements were militantly anti-Islamist. For example, the 1997 film *100 Percent Arabica*, made in France by the Algerian writer and filmmaker Mahmoud Zemmouri, uses such leading rai stars as Khaled and Cheb Mami to portray the rai world as a culture of hope beset by mullahs who are revealed as criminal hypocrites.

The Islamist campaign to take over Algeria has not succeeded. The country's military eventually took control of the government with the apparent support of many secularists who feared that the alternative was an Islamic state on the model of Iran. Islamists have massacred tens of thousands of people in the ensuing civil war.

But if democratic values are stymied in the political sphere, they remain alive culturally. Algerian rai is a vulgar form by elite standards, one that addresses "low" subjects of sexual desire through a "base" model of popular celebrity. It is diffused by way of cheap and widely available consumer electronics and is a potential means for the gradual reordering of the society around the music.

Specifically, it is capable of giving voice to powerless outgroups, and of helping to redefine the position of women and changing the relationship of the sexes. Nor would such a gradualist revolution be peculiar to Algeria. British society began a similar reordering of social roles in the 18th century using similar means. In that case, the vulgar form at issue was popular, escapist fiction of the kind that critics feared would fill women's heads with all manner of bad desires. The United States experienced a similar process of change in the 19th century. Indeed, the revolutionary change in the values of both societies was to pave the way for a series of historic humanitarian reforms.

In other words, the confluence of markets and culture has repeatedly advanced democratic values, because it has allowed a series of outgroups -- women, blacks, Jews, gays, etc. -- successfully to address the larger society about injustice and inequality. Such appeals have been successful precisely because of their "vulgar" forms. It is because they have involved such emotionally compelling forms as music and melodrama that they have induced their audiences to experience a given injustice through the eyes of those suffering from it. Justice's medium is empathy, and empathy's medium is more often the melodrama than it is the manifesto. In short, it is the broad-based culture that emerges from markets that frequently serves as a means of democratic self-correction.

### **Spice Grrls**

Rai music has become a conduit for protest against the external world of authority and poverty. But it has also opened possibilities for other protests, including protest against its own world. For example, many rai songs address fantasies of illicit sex. In the tradition-bound, male-dominated world of North African societies, the women in such fantasies

would be completely objectified types: women of pleasure whom one might encounter in a cabaret; women who dance, smoke, and drink alcohol. These are not prostitutes, but rather women who enjoy pleasure as a value in itself. The type, writes Danish academic Marc Schade-Poulsen, is known as a *maryula*.

In the course of rai's contemporary development, women singers have intervened in this male fantasy narrative. First, they have emerged as performers in their own right, building on the success of such Arab women singers as Asmahan and Umm Kulthum, two major Egyptian stars of earlier generations. As public celebrities, such singers provide new, assertive role models for women, in contrast to the low social status of traditional women performers. Second, they legitimize the content of their music as appropriate expressions for women.

Women rai singers do not only address love and personal happiness: Some of them have chosen to embody the personae of the female libertines that appear in male lyrics. These women perform under such professional names as Chaba "Zahouania," a word that Schade-Poulsen defines as "having the sense of being merry, joyous, fond of good living." The implication of this role playing is that the choice made by the *maryula* is legitimate: Women have a right to pleasure. If they have such a right, then the independence to make such a choice is a requirement. In other words, some women rai performers have used the very objectification of their role in the music to assert their right to independence.

This parallels closely what British and American women authors of escapist literature did with the concept of "virtue" in the 18th and 19th centuries. The rise of popular fiction featured the emergence of various fantasy adventures, especially the theme of "virtue in distress," in which a good and decent woman was threatened by a more powerful male villain. A series of women authors, notably the gothic specialist Ann Radcliffe, used this notion of womanly "virtue" to challenge the very idea of manly strength. As the women's-studies academic G. J. Barker-Benfield has noted, their argument was that if men too sought virtue, then they must attune themselves to what they professed to admire in feminine sensibilities. One of the results of their efforts was the emergence of the "man of feeling."

These women too were intervening in men's fantasies, turning the apparent weakness of their roles into a challenge that helped lead to moral recognition and, eventually, legal rights. Radcliffe was to intensify her argument by inventing the mechanics of suspense; she involved her readers emotionally in the fate of her virtuous characters. Radcliffe and her cohorts were overlooked in the literary histories; their lachrymose characters and creaking plots were not judged to have stood the "test of time." Yet the fact remains that they changed their time far more than did many of their more celebrated literary contemporaries.

Rai music has hardly resulted in egalitarian North African societies, but it is precisely this kind of force that will eventually facilitate social change. The potentially liberating forces that are new, by the way, are products of the market: diffusion via cheap technology. The dangerous idea that is being diffused -- libertine eroticism -- is not. It's been present in Islamic culture all along and is not a Western import.

In some ways, the rai scene appears to percolate with Westernisms. Ray-Ban sunglasses and backward-worn baseball caps (imported from Morocco and sold on the black market) are part of its costume. Although the music's roots are entirely Algerian, some of its modern instrumentation is obviously borrowed from Western influences. Rai owes its status as a pop form to the cassette tape recorder, and its current youth-oriented celebrity structure appears to follow a familiar model pioneered in the West.

There is a suggestion among defenders of Islamism and critics of Western culture that surviving moral traditions are being undercut by commercial baseness. Both groups are making unhistorical arguments that severely distort the cultural reality. After all, libertinism has a long tradition in North Africa.

Rod Skilbeck cites an example of the kind of lyric that angers Islamists: "Oh my love, to gaze upon you is sin/It's you who makes me break my fast.../It's you who makes me 'eat' during Ramadan." The same artist, Rimitti (a woman more than 70 years old), adds, "People adore God, I adore beer." Not only are the lyrics impious, they subversively use sacred references to underscore their sexuality and advance their impiety.

Here's another text, one that actually addresses Satan, demanding that the devil restore a missing lover. If he doesn't, the singer makes the following threat: "I'll read the Koran! I'll start/a Koranic Night School for Adults!/I'll make the pilgrimage to Mecca every year/and accumulate so much virtue that I'll...I'll..." At that point, the lover is restored. "It was twice as good as before!" the singer exclaims, adding, "I've been on the best of terms/with the Father of Lies." The missing lover is identified by the male poet as "my boy."

The first text is recent; the second one, addressed to Satan and threatening Koranic virtue, is from the poet Abu Nuwas, who wrote erotic poetry to both men and women in the eighth century. Arabic poetry is extraordinarily rich, and one of its most striking strains involves the erotic in a context of religious skepticism. Even caliphs wrote erotic poetry. Indeed, there is a centuries-old tradition of Islamic poetry celebrating the pleasures of wine, sex, singing girls, and beardless young male cupbearers.

While there have certainly been periods of ascendant religious piety, there is a good case that it is modern, censorious Islamist pietism that is the newer development in the Muslim world, and that the celebration of "vulgar" pleasures predates it.

### **If the Hush Puppies Fit**

Speaking of those reversed baseball caps worn by rai's fans, why did so many people in the West start wearing them

that way in the first place? Was there an ad campaign of some kind that set the model? Was it part of a vast corporate strategy to instill a pointless "need" in stupid Western consumers and subsequently sell a lot of hats? What about those notorious, logo-heavy athletic shoes? People don't really "need" those, do they? Where did "grunge" come from? Did the flannel industry invent it because the lumberjack market was shrinking along with virgin-growth forests? What about Goth? Did some mascara factory accidentally make a batch too much and invent Goth to sell the overstock? How are such phenomena born, anyway?

Capitalism's critics in the West blame what they call "the culture industry," which makes itself rich by aggressively manipulating consumerist idiots. The latter part with their money because they have been persuaded that some truly useless but expensive object will make them hip, youthful, or desirable, or raise their status. This manipulative scheme is now a global enterprise, filling the world with what Benjamin Barber and his ilk castigate as "junk." Worse, say the Daniel Bells and Hillary Clintons, it's a threat to Western prosperity, because it instills self-absorption at the expense of the work ethic.

This critique completely misses the point of cultural commerce. The citizens of the post-subsistence world have a historically remarkable luxury: They can experiment with who they are. They can fashion and refashion their identities, and through much of their lives that is just what they do. They can go about this in a lot of ways, but one of the most important methods is what is known and reviled as "consumerism." They experiment with different modes of self-presentation, assert or mask aspects of their individuality, join or leave a series of subcultures, or oppose and adhere to centers of power. It is from this complex mix that the things of the material world become the furnishings of both a social and a personal identity. That's what meaning is.

Consumerism of this sort has been born and reborn many times. The extended and apparently open-ended chapter in which the Western world has been wallowing began in 17th-century Britain, Holland, and other European trade centers. It is still being reborn all over the world, as people grab the first opportunity to escape the traditionalist boundaries of selfhood. Yet this is the very spectacle that depresses the West's anti-consumerist critics and makes them sputter.

Far from being a drain on prosperity, the drive to create and recreate identity has proven irresistible, even in circumstances where no cultural industry exists. Where such industries do exist, self-fashioning immediately becomes an engine of the economy. As British scholars John Golby and William Purdue observed in their 1984 study of the origins of industrialist popular culture, the key factor in the increasingly positive attitude toward work in the 18th century was neither religion nor legislation but "the growth of new patterns of leisure and consumption," primed by wage increases. Generally speaking, workers didn't start punching the clock because they were forced to but because they wanted to. Regular hours -- and regular wages -- gave them more time and money to buy and enjoy the crass, vulgar, and base artifacts from which they fashioned their senses of self. In other words, the evidence from the beginning has been that culture, capitalism, and democracy actually reinforce one another.

The opportunity to create and revise one's identity is by its nature an anti-authoritarian enterprise, and that is nowhere more obviously demonstrated than in the reviled Western cult of "cool." Successful culture industries don't try to manipulate their customers; they long ago learned that they cannot imbue their products with meaning. Rather, they attempt to engage in "meaning" intelligence, spending vast amounts to identify rapidly changing meanings; meanings they know will change yet again the moment that the same public catches the first whiff of marketing. In other words, the most successful among the cultural industrialists are not leading their customers at all; that isn't possible. The best they can do is try to follow them.

The best description of this process is a 1997 *New Yorker* essay by Malcolm Gladwell called "The Coolhunt." Gladwell describes a telling cultural moment involving the makers of Hush Puppies shoes. A few years ago, nobody wanted the suede shoes except a dwindling number of older customers. They'd become passé. Even the manufacturers wanted to drop the old line of "Dukes" and "Columbias" and get into so-called "aspirational shoes." The company wanted to introduce something called the "Mall Walker."

"But then something strange started happening," writes Gladwell. "Two Hush Puppies executives...were doing a fashion shoot for their Mall Walkers and ran into a creative consultant from Manhattan named Jeffrey Miller, who informed them that the Dukes and the Columbias weren't dead, they were dead chic." People in Manhattan were scouring thrift stores for them; Hush Puppies were turning up in hip fashion shoots. Hush Puppies executives were as mystified as they were pleased. They were the beneficiaries of a process over which the market has no control: They'd become cool.

The best that the West's cultural industrialists can hope for, as Gladwell argues, is a well-timed intervention in cool. They can try to associate a product with a (temporarily) cool celebrity; they can pay to "place" their product in a film that they hope will be cool, they can try to subordinate their product to a currently cool subculture, as Sprite has done with rap music. Sometimes they succeed, but even when they do, their process begins again the next day.

More frequently, these efforts do not succeed at all, and for the same reason that Soviet teenagers rejected "official" socialist dances, and that Central Asian listeners rejected the Western music beamed at them from Moscow: Culture is built around meaning, and meaning proceeds from one's self.

## Cultural Exchange

From mid-century to communism's end, the Soviet Bloc and the United States engaged in an official exchange of contemplative art forms. The U.S. actually sent its "best" abroad, exactly as Benjamin Barber wishes it would do today.

The process was largely a charade. Not that the material being exchanged wasn't good -- it was often very good -- but it was unrepresentative of what was going on in either country. Still, the arrangement was a good deal for the Soviets. They had under their control many extremely talented poets, filmmakers, dancers, and musicians and -- in contrast to the vulgar, commercialized West -- they were thus able to position themselves as enlightened patrons of the fine arts, in the best European aristocratic tradition.

The US, for its part, counted it as a victory when a member of the Bolshoi would hop an airport turnstile and defect. When some American would actually beat the Russians in an elitist competition -- concert pianist Van Cliburn, chess master Bobby Fischer -- Americans would celebrate them as national heroes. It never occurred to the West that the Soviet system was, in the meantime, being undone by the likes of Paul Anka (much more popular among Soviet fans than was Elvis, whom they simply never understood). Anyone who would have tried to make such a case would have been dismissed as simply not serious.

The West has never been comfortable with its own cultural vulgarity. Such anxiety is arguably strongest in the United States, which has long nursed a cultural inferiority complex vis-à-vis more-established British and European practitioners of high art. Popular, commercial forms are not thoughtful. Rather, they are temporary, noisy, intense, ecstatic. They are sensual and disruptive. Because they are frequently set in motion by powerless and even despised outgroups, they appear subversive. They not only threaten social morals, but challenge established power relationships.

The result is that such ecstatic forms are attacked not only by the West's left-liberal critics for their commercial origin, but by the West's conservatives for their disruptive power. Cultural ecstasy may have billions of participants, but it hardly has a single friend.

For the last 200 years, vulgar forms and subcultures have often set off a series of "moral panics" among those who perceive a threat to their own cultural power and status. The popular novel, when it first appeared, set one off. So did penny dreadfuls and pulps. So did melodramatic theater. So did the music hall. So did the tabloid press, and the waltz, and ragtime, and jazz, and radio, movies, comic books, rock music, television, rap, and computer games.

All of these -- and more -- led contemporary critics to declare the end of civility, to worry over some newly identified form of supposed "addiction" (to novels, to TV, to video games, to pornography, to the Internet, to Pokémon, etc.), to announce that the coming generation was "desensitized," and to rail about childishness and triviality. It's the cultural sputter that never ends.

In democratic societies, most such panics simply run their course until the media tire of them. (Drug prohibition remains a singular exception.) Thus, the generation that in the 1950s was dismissed as Elvis-loving, hot-rod-building, gum-chewing, hog-riding, leather-wearing, juvenile-delinquent barbarians eventually achieved a mature respectability in which the artifacts of their vulgarity became sought-after nostalgia, and even a beloved part of the common cultural heritage. In less than two decades, the menacing hoods of *Blackboard Jungle* became the lovable leads in *Grease*. By then, however, that same generation had become, in its turn, concerned about the disruptive social effects of rap music and violent electronic gaming.

In places where the moral order is the legal order, however, ecstatic forms and assertive ways of being remain matters for the police. In December, Cambodia's prime minister ordered tanks to raze the country's karaoke parlors. Last fall, Iran announced a new campaign against Western pop music and other "signs and symbols of depravity." And only last summer, the Central Asian Republic of Kazakhstan -- just a few hundred miles north of Afghanistan -- began a crackdown on dangerous "bohemian" lifestyles. The authorities went after a number of familiar outsiders -- gays, religious dissidents -- but even Westerners were surprised to learn that one targeted group was "Tolkienists." It turns out that there are Kazakh Hobbit wannabes who like to dress up in character costume and re-enact scenes from J.R.R. Tolkien's novels. For their trouble, they were being subjected to sustained water torture.

Hobbit re-enactors in Kazakhstan? Where do they get their paraphernalia? Are there Kazakh Tolkienist fanzines? Have fans started changing Tolkien's narratives to suit themselves, the way Western *Star Trek* subcultures turned their own obsession into soft-core pornography? Do re-enactors change roles from time to time, or are any of them trapped inside a Frodo persona? Is there no end to the identities waiting to be assumed? No end to what invention makes flesh, before it tosses it aside and starts again?

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