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On Music and Politics: Henry Cow, Avant-Gardism and its Discontents

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In what follows I intend to think about the articulation of music and politics through the lens of Henry Cow, drawing on my work as bass guitarist and cellist with the group from 1976 to 1978, and with some of the afterlives of Henry Cow – groups that followed or emerged from it, including the Feminist Improvising Group, the Art Bears and various free improvisation ensembles.[1] What I have to say will complement the dialogue between Chris Cutler and Benjamin Piekut. There are four parts to my primarily theoretical presentation, after some brief preliminaries. The first part concerns wider theoretical issues to do with thinking about the avant-garde today, beyond the hegemony of a restricted conception of modernism. The second part concerns what Henry Cow did: the nature of our practices, and how they were inflected by our politics. The third concerns some contradictions and tensions in our practice, illustrated by some particular historical moments. And the fourth part reflects on some key lessons offered by this material for understanding the mutual mediation of music and politics.

Preliminarily, I want to pick up three points from the previous exchange between Chris and Ben. First, I want to pursue the question of whether there was an 'independent women's group' within Henry Cow. This has been attributed to a period in which I was in the group, but I never experienced it. Indeed I would question that it ever existed: we may have debated such a thing, but it never developed. Perhaps this is a memory issue, but I don't think it is. The

[1] This is an edited version of the spoken presentation given as a response to the discussion between Chris Cutler and Benjamin Piekut at the Red Strains conference. I am grateful to David Marquiss for his original transcription of this presentation, to Ben Piekut for undertaking the initial editing, and to Robert Adlington for further editorial suggestions.

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reasons why such a development never occurred are significant and interesting. They are to do, in part, with the existence, as so often, of real differences between the three main women in the group: having or not having had children; different sexualities; different formations and ages; different degrees and kinds of political consciousness and affiliation; different relations to the men in the group; and so on. But then it becomes interesting why such a thing has been imagined into being: perhaps it speaks to an aching retrospective desire that Henry Cow should have supported a politics of gender appropriate to the group's political ambitions, which are then projected onto the women in the group – perhaps in itself a sign of a certain capacity to overwrite their (our, my) actual experiences. The nature of the social relations in the group were complex and cross-cutting. I came late, joining the group in 1976; I was somewhat younger and a bit outside the core of the group. There was, perhaps inevitably, a gendered hierarchy. The group culture also had a quality of . . . I don't think so much 'British public school', perhaps more British inhibition, along with British warmth and British humour: key people were a bit 'buttoned-up', you might say.

Secondly, I want to affirm Chris's point about the need to acknowledge a hinterland of popular cultural and popular musical identifications and cultures in the UK by the start of the 1970s, when Henry Cow began, and to agree with him that it's only against this background – this genealogy – that we can understand what the group was trying to do, in particular the accelerating and expanding experimentalism that Henry Cow represented, an experimentalism in and of rock or popular music. In this sense, we have to bear in mind commodification's positive and productive effects in popular music, in the Benjaminian sense (I refer to Benjamin's important counter-analysis to Adorno).[2] This is a point to which I will return.

Lastly, on the question of race: large swathes of white British popular music and rock culture until the late 1970s or early 1980s had little to do with the politics of race – 'little', that is to say, apart from the gigantic and often unacknowledged black Atlantic musical and cultural debts that underpinned the entirety of that unmarked category of 'whiteness' to which Ben has alluded. When this situation finally shifted in the UK, my sense is that it was mainly as

[2] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973), 217–51; 'The Author as Producer', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Elke Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 254–69; Georgina Born, 'Afterword: Recording: From Reproduction to Representation to Remediation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, Eric Clarke and John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 288–89.

a result of demographic changes and new generations coming through, with young British West Indians and British Asians coming to an influential maturity. And Henry Cow's emergence and decline were prior to that moment in Britain. But I have to say that, personally, I felt certain aesthetic absences in what we did. I did so as one who loves and listens to many black popular musics and black-derived popular musics; it's at that level that I have a resonance to this question of race, perceiving the *absence* of a certain space of aesthetic feeling in the music of Henry Cow. But then it would have been musically very different! I think we can link this issue to George Lewis's compelling observations in his writing about the whiteness of Eurological improvised music, such as the European free improvised scene. His point is that the unmarked whiteness of that scene is in part a kind of unacknowledged, implicit denial of its black origins, influences and counterparts.[3]

Now to the four main parts of my presentation. My first point is that it's high time now, if nobody else has said it explicitly at this conference, that we recognize a more plural, multiple conception both of any notion of an avant-garde and of modernism. Here I am alluding to the rich and burgeoning literature on alternative and multiple modernisms and modernities, a literature as rich in anthropology as it is in cultural studies or music studies. We have a generation of writers on music – not least a number of people presenting papers at this conference: Robert Adlington, Eric Drott, Beate Kutschke, as well as Amy Beal, George Lewis, Sumanth Gopinath, Ben Piekut and myself – who are now fast expanding our understanding of the variety of modernisms in music and their links to diverse art scenes and cultural and political ideologies in the sixty years since the Second World War. This is a picture that introduces greater complexity and points also, inter alia, towards what George Lewis in the introduction to a recent issue of the *Journal of the Society for American Music* speaks of as 'afrofuturisms': various types of modernism from the black Atlantic.[4]

We could also think of the classic statement by Peter Bürger on the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, which he defines in terms of the return of

[3] George E. Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal*, 16/1 (1996), 91–122. Lewis's argument here has affinities with (and draws in part on) a core theoretical strand in my book *Rationalizing Culture.* See Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), ch. 2, 40–65, esp. 56–65 and note 29 (351). For a fuller development of the methodological and theoretical issues at stake, in the guise of proposals for a relational musicology, see Born, 'For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 135/2 (2010), 205–43.

[4] George E. Lewis, 'Foreword: After Afrofuturism', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 2/2 (2008), 139–53.

art to the everyday, and the critique of the institutionalization of art.[5] This takes us directly to Henry Cow because, arguably, the group saw itself as very much in this avant-garde vein; and indeed, Chris mentioned Henry Cow's Dadaist roots. I wasn't there at the time. But, of course, for Bürger, Dada is a signal moment of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. Henry Cow did, I think, quite self-consciously adopt a certain avant-gardism without abjuring a certain formalism, which I'll come back to later. Yet, at the same time, it also operated commercially for a few years on the Virgin label, and after that effectively as a small independent business, while in later years it existed increasingly at the centre of a network of similar small-scale enterprises.

I would therefore want to put on the table an anti-Adornian position with regard to Adorno's reductive equation – in his dualistic worldview, his Manichean sociology of music – of all market-supported popular musics merely with commodification, and therefore also depart radically from his analysis of the culture industry. In light of the above, and of developments throughout the history of late twentieth-century popular musics, this is all glaringly reductive; it is one of the areas in which we need much more work, and indeed the critique of Adornian reductionism has been a constant theme of my own writings.[6] It is the retreat from all engagement with the potential transformation of music's social, organizational and institutional forms that underpins Adorno's formalist conception of the politics of music; and it is precisely the link between these two dimensions of his work that is often overlooked. Instead, post-Adorno, I want to suggest that we need a constellatory conception of musical practice and of the politics in and of music – and that's what I want to develop today.

My second theme concerns the politics of what Henry Cow actually did in its practice, a politics that was not pre-given but that it invented – that was itself experimental, if you like, in its range and form. Henry Cow was particularly inventive in exploiting and highlighting five dimensions of the mutual mediation of music and politics. These dimensions have been discussed in other conference sessions in the last few days, *but not, I think, thought together as an ensemble*, as they should be; and here is my main conceptual intervention.

The first dimension is about the group's articulation or alliances with larger

[5] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[6] Papers that develop critical perspectives on Adorno along these lines include Born, 'Afterword: Music Policy, Aesthetic and Social Difference', in *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, ed. Simon Frith *et al*. (London: Routledge, 1993), 265–92; Born, 'Against Negation, For a Politics of Cultural Production: Adorno, Aesthetics, the Social', *Screen*, 34/3 (1993), 223–42; Born, 'Music and the Social', in *The Cultural Study of Music*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2012), 261–74.

political and social movements (aligned and non-aligned). We heard about Henry Cow's work with the left – with the PCI and the far left in Italy. We also worked with the left in France and in various other European countries. We helped to found an organization called Music For Socialism in Britain in 1976–77. We were also the first rock group to enter Spain after the death of Franco: an astonishing moment. I remember our concert in a church in Zaragoza: it was packed, people were literally hanging from the roof. So we were there at some very interesting and important moments, and that's a first mediation or articulation.

The second dimension is about Henry Cow's re-imagining of the institutional and organizational forms supporting the production and distribution of music – a theme of Bürger's that is relatively little discussed. I refer to the group's creation of an independent label, of independent networks of performance, touring and distribution, of the Rock in Opposition network, and so on. However temporary these developments now look (although they lasted for some years), historically this was about a new, and a politicized, institutional imagination informed by a political analysis of the existing institutions of musical production and distribution. It was extraordinarily significant and has remained central to Chris's work and thought, and also my own.[7]

The third dimension of the mutual mediation of music and politics in Henry Cow concerned the social relations of musical practice and performance. And this wasn't just about how we worked in rehearsal and in performance as a group, although it did inform those aspects of our lives. Because we were one of those Brechtian 1970s collectives, everybody who took part in what we did had an equal (and rather low) salary; scrupulously, our economic life was tied to a sense of how long and how much one had committed to the group; we debated every major (and some minor) decisions collectively. And that was informed by various politics: not only by a quasi-socialist egalitarianism, but an awareness of the politics of gender. This gender politics of Henry Cow was very salient in our working practices; it was a constant, nagging presence, somewhat dutiful, and very imperfectly realized, as Chris has conceded and as I experienced painfully throughout my time with the group. But it was there, and it crossed both our musical and our day-to-day practices, our touring, and so on.

The fourth dimension of our musical politics was precisely the music – the musical sounds. In the extract played earlier from the inelegantly named piece

[7] Critique of the prevailing nature of the institutionalization of music and art and its effects not only underpinned aspects of Henry Cow, but led to core themes of my intellectual work from the outset: see, for example, Born, 'On Modern Music Culture: On Shock, Pop and Synthesis', *New Formations*, 2 (1987), 51–78, as well as *Rationalizing Culture*.

Erk Gah, you heard the unmistakable flavours of an aesthetic (rock) modernism – the repeated tritone figure, for example, that I had to play on the bass, the complex and irregular polyrhythms. Had we listened to one of Henry Cow's sets from this period, you'd have heard woven through this modernism various folk-rockisms, and then some lengthy, electronic and extended-instrumental free-improvised sequences. What I mean to point out is how utterly distinct this particular mixed language of experimental rock modernism is from the more well-known 'alternative' modernisms at this time, that is, the post-Cagean avant-garde, a purer *musique concrète*, and the various postmodern developments – minimalism and so on. We were attempting something very distinctive and different.

And the fifth dimension of the politics of Henry Cow – in a sense the most orthodox – concerns our song lyrics, which brings us to one of Chris's most important contributions to the work of the group.

In light of my portrayal of these five dimensions of the mutual mediation of music and politics in Henry Cow's work, in this third section I want to bring out some tensions and contradictions in what the group did. I'll illustrate with four brief moments in our history; and as I do so, a bit of blue sea may open up between Chris's position and my own. My aim is to notice and to dwell on some of the troubling things we encountered in terms of responses to our music and performances, as well as how we were appropriated, politically and aesthetically. The first event occurred on one of those many occasions when we played for one or other section of the Italian left. One day we arrived in Torino at the main civic theatre to play for a far-left group called the Autonomia Operaia.[8] This group had been engaged in running street battles in previous days with another small far-left group called (from memory) the Avanguardia. In fact the day before there had been some kind of a riot, and the Autonomia had hospitalized a number of people from the other side. When we fetched up, the organizers told us this story and said, 'Look, we're very sorry, but there might be some trouble tonight': they expected our concert to be the occasion for retaliation from the other group for the previous day's battle. And I remember that we had to look at our insurance contract because, had there been a riot and had our equipment been damaged, the insurance policy might have had an exclusion for riots – and sure enough it did! So we thought very hard about performing at all; and in fact we only agreed to go on when the organizers from the Autonomia offered to announce on their radio station – every far-left group in Italy worth its salt had a free radio station in this period – that Henry Cow and this concert were not aligned with their party and took no stance on

[8] Autonomia Operaia (Workers' Autonomy) was an extra-parliamentary group that existed between 1976 and 1978. It counted Antonio Negri amongst its most prominent members.

the political disagreements. They also printed posters – shades of Hans-Magnus Enzensberger! – that were handed out to everybody coming into the theatre saying that Henry Cow dissociated itself from the ongoing fights.[9] In the end everything went well, although we had rehearsed an evacuation of the stage, and our engineer and roadie, who were stuck in the middle of the hall at the mixing desk, had no escape route and were pretty scared. With this story – quite hilarious in retrospect – I want to point to a certain political promiscuity in our relations with aspects of the left. Of course, it was a principled promiscuity. But we struggled to make our European tours economically viable, and this inevitably fuelled our availability.

A second moment highlights a different, if related, aspect of our political practice, again in Italy, which became a setting for these interesting occasions precisely because of the heightened degree and range of political energies manifest there in the late 1970s. We were performing in the south of Italy near a poor town called Benevento, north of Napoli. We played out of doors for a *Festa de l'Unita* hosted by the local PCI in a small, ruined amphitheatre. The audience was mainly southern Italian farmers and their families out for a warm evening of conviviality and solidarity. As usual, we began to play late in the evening as the sun dropped, opening with one of our 'uncompromising' atonal compositions. We recorded that concert from the mixing desk, as we did most gigs, and the recording is testament to an astonishing event. A couple of minutes after we start to play, somebody calls out, and then someone else claps, and quite rapidly an escalation of calls and cries and slow hand-clapping can be heard issuing from the audience. These responses of displeasure, of criticism and rejection, continued throughout the ninety-odd minutes of our set as the audience of farmers and peasants from the region grew in boldness and contempt. This concert became notorious for us because the peasant audience made

[9] Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, ed. Michael Roloff (New York: Saebury, 1974), 95–128. Enzensberger's classic tract aimed to lay the basis for socialist engagements with the new media, drawing heavily on Benjamin. It charged those from the Marxist left with a nostalgia for older art forms, arguing that they 'have not understood the consciousness industry and have been aware only of its bourgeois-capitalist dark side and not of its socialist possibilities'. Instead, he argued – and this is the stance Henry Cow witnessed among diverse factions of the Italian left in the late 1970s, and that the group itself also took to some extent – 'the proper use of the media demands organization and makes it possible. Every production that deals with the interests of the producers postulates a collective method of production. It is itself already a form of self-organization of social needs. Tape recorders, ordinary cameras and cine cameras, are already extensively owned by wage-earners. The question is why these means of production do not turn up at workplaces, in schools, in the offices of the bureaucracy, in short, everywhere where there is social conflict.'

vocal their dislike of what we were doing, the sounds we were producing. Their jeering and clapping amounted to a kind of sounding antipathy, and the tape offers a sonic proof of this negative popular response to our music. So: let's say we took real risks, and on this occasion – and some others – the audience didn't like it. The implication is stunning and brutal: any putative aesthetic politics attached to bringing modernist rock to the people was, certainly, put in question or even annulled.

My third moment is really a general observation. Coming as I did rather late to the group, I want to point to a rather uncritical adulation of Henry Cow on the part of some audiences through a sort of inheritance effect: from its links to the Virgin label, to Soft Machine, and to a certain stable of post-hippie art-rock in Europe and the UK. And this inheritance was something I myself found slightly troubling, because, as I've suggested, we were doing something rather different; yet it's unclear the extent to which this was (or is) actually realized by some of the core Henry Cow audience.

My last story concerns a significant moment when, in a group called Music for Films that followed on from Henry Cow, we went to play in East Berlin in 1985 as guests of the state at the annual, two-week Festival of Political Song. This was Lindsay Cooper's group, and we were there to play her wonderful film music, including some songs. It was an all-woman ensemble, with the film-maker Sally Potter as presiding diva, and Chris as drummer – the token man. The whole trip was ridden with contradictions, and gave an entirely different sense of what the GDR was about prior to its collapse. I want to pose it for you as metonymic of larger processes and realities quite at odds with the impression given by that film, *The Lives of Others*.[10] It's a marvellous film, but I do think the account it gives of late East German life is one-dimensional. We found that people were coming up and handing us cassette tapes of music all the time – 'Can you get this to John Peel?' – and a great deal of 'subversive' cultural and musical activity was going on and material was circulating, directly around this official festival. The particular moment that I want to relate, however, was about gender. One day we fetched up in the Berliner Ensemble, where we were booked to play that evening. The morning of the performance we women were on stage setting up the borrowed amplifiers and other gear; I was trying to get my bass guitar sounding good. We were ringed by male East German technicians, circling us at the edge of the stage, who refused to help but stood there continually commenting and laughing at us through their moustaches: a classic instance of the gendering of music performance and music technologies. Later

[10] *The Lives of Others* (2006) (German: *Das Leben der Anderen*), directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck.

that day, an hour before the concert, the organizers from the Festival came to see us in the dressing room, and they said: 'You know those lyrics of yours that talk about feminist matters? Well, perhaps you'd just leave those verses out, because we don't have a problem here. Feminism is not needed in the GDR.' That was telling; and through relating these four historical moments I've pointed to contradictions of various kinds in our political and musical practice, which are worth bringing out and reflecting on. They were there.

Now to two final meta-points: lessons or implications for how we can understand the articulation of music and politics. The first point is that – as the material I've discussed shows – we are in urgent need of an expanded and a multiple account of the mutual mediation of music and politics. Such an expanded notion would take account of several different orders – I've pointed to five – of the mediation of musical practice, of music-making, each of which can become the basis of a politics. With reference to Henry Cow, I've suggested that the first takes the form of the potential for animating or building direct alliances with wider political and social movements – and in light of the crisis of left politics, perhaps especially today with burgeoning non-formalized, decentralized and incipient movements. The second concerns the politics of music's diverse institutional forms, as evident in the group's practices of self-organization and self-management, the creation of new labels, new networks, and so on. The third order – and one that has been astonishingly neglected in much of the discussion of music and politics – has to do with the politics of the social relations of musical practice: questions about the social relations of the performance ensemble or of the group, of the rehearsal situation, and of the performance event itself. These can be highlighted by counterposing what we've been discussing about Henry Cow – its attempts at collectivism and egalitarian relations – with, for example, the social relations of an orchestra like the Berlin Philharmonic, with its powerfully gendered, hierarchical, and authoritarian social relations.[11] Fourth, as I've suggested, we certainly need still to take account of the politics of the aesthetic, those old questions of the politics of musical and sonic materials and of musical evolution. And fifth, the political potential of lyric writing, a responsibility that Henry Cow put largely in Chris's hands. So what we see in a group like Henry Cow, however imperfectly it was realized, is a concerted attempt over the years to develop multiple dimensions and forms of political invention and experimentation in relation to its practice. And it's interesting finally here to consider how many of these orders of political mediation that I've

[11] For a fuller theoretical account of the second and third orders identified here – as but two of four distinctive orders or planes of the social in music, all of which have the potential to be reinvented and thereby politicized – see Born, 'Music and the Social'.

touched on come to be evident in the musical sounds themselves. For me, personally, when I listen now to Henry Cow's music, I hear the sonic potential or outcome of these valences of the political more in the group's improvisations than in the scored songs and pieces. I hear greater freshness, openness, and experimentation informed by these multiple political sensibilities – and interestingly, I think our improvisation stands up well in comparison with some of the output from other free improvised groups of the same era.

My last point returns to the politics of music's institutional or organizational forms. It centres on a much-derided category in Marxist analysis: petty capitalism. This category is actually quite central to the first academic paper that I ever wrote,[12] and my interest in it is very much informed by the experience of Henry Cow. My contention is that petty capitalism – a term I take to encompass myriad small-scale forms of entrepreneurial, commercial activity in culture – has been one of the key means by which progressive leftist, anti-racist, and resistant forms of culture, music, and art have been made possible: have been produced, circulated, and lived. It's a despised category of economic activity and analysis, generally seen as collusive with capital, as politically irredeemable, as insignificant and ineffective in any meta-historical analysis. But with regard specifically to cultural activity it sits somewhere crucial between full-blown corporate capitalism and the quite different but just as marked forms of cultural, ideological, and aesthetic closure and policing that tend to characterize statist and other kinds of subsidized cultural institutions, whether in music, broadcasting or academia.[13] I've researched statist cultural institutions rather deeply, as those who know my writings on IRCAM and the BBC will be aware.[14] So my argument today is that while there is no necessary connection between progressive or politicized culture and these small-scale, entrepreneurial petty capitalist interventions – and in that sense there is no deterministic relation – there are, nonetheless, opportunities; they might be conceived as affordances or, better, in William Connolly's fruitful phrase, indebted to complexity theory, as *pluri-potentialities*.[15] In terms of the possibility of new, experimental, and alternative forms of production and circulation, informed by a politics of cultural production, we should be more aware of this category of activity and what it can achieve.

[12] Born, 'On Modern Music Culture'.
[13] Born, 'Music and the Social', 271–73.
[14] Born, *Rationalizing Culture*; Born, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (London: Vintage. 2005).
[15] William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 38, and see ch. 1.