

# Jacques Attali's *Noise*

When Jacques Attali's spectacular book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* was first published in translation by the University of Minnesota in 1985 (as volume 16 in its "Theory and History of Literature" series) -- and every time the book was reprinted, which happened five times between 1985 and 1996 -- it came carefully wrapped. In front of it was Frederic Jameson's seven-page-long "Foreword," and after it was Susan McClary's nine-page-long "Afterword." Such thick wrapping for a book so thin (only 148 pages and four chapters long)! And such *heavy* people to put the wrapping on it, too: Jameson, identified simply by the book jacket as William A. Lane Jr., Professor of Comparative Literature at Duke University, was at the time America's best-known Marxist academic; and McClary, identified as professor of musicology at the University of California at Los Angeles, was a rising star in academic feminist music theory (today she is a star).

Why was such protective (explanatory) wrapping deemed to be necessary? Was it thought that Attali's book would not be understood, accepted or even read seriously by English-speaking academics if it did not come wrapped in long explanations by well-known experts? Was the text, originally published in French in 1977, really that difficult to comprehend? Or did it have to do with the book's ostensible subject matter (the history of Western classical music), widely known to be one of the most boring topics in all the world?

In his "Foreword," Jameson locates the significance and originality of Attali's book in its contribution to "a general revival of history, and of a renewed appetite for historiography," and in its specific insistence on "the possibility of a superstructure to *anticipate* historical developments, to foreshadow new social formations in a prophetic and annunciatory way." In her "Afterword," Susan McClary -- throwing caution to the wind and allowing herself to "take Attali at his most daring and permit ourselves to assume that music truly heralds changes that are only later apparent in other aspects of culture" -- wants only to have Attali help her "find explanations for several problems in seventeenth-century music scholarship."

OK: so we know that *Noise* was not wrapped carefully because of its *content*. Then why? Because of who wrote it, and why it was written.

On the book jacket, Jacques Attali is identified simply as "the author of numerous books, including *Millenium: Winners and Losers in the Coming World Order*." But ol' Fred Jameson knows better: he is, Jameson notes in passing, "a practicing economist and a close adviser to President Mitterand," and "a central figure in France's current socialist experiment," as well as a "distinguished scholar, the author of a dozen books whose subjects range from political economy to euthanasia." In other words, Jacques Attali is a prominent financial capitalist, a "socialist," a technocrat, and a close personal friend of the President of one of the G-7 nations. He seems, shall we say, a little out of place in the company of other authors published in the "Theory and History of Literature" series, who include Georges Bataille and Mikhail Bakhtin.

In the two decades since he wrote *Noise*, Jacques Attali has authored books about Francois Mitterand; was the first person to head the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (created in 1990 to assist the former Soviet Union); was the president of A & A, an international consulting firm based in Paris; and has been one of *Foreign Policy* magazine's contributing editors. As his recent writings indicate, he is a leading advocate of neo-liberal capitalism. In "The Crash of Western Civilization: The Limits of the Market and Democracy," published in *Foreign Policy*, Number 107, Summer 1997, pp. 54-64, Attali writes that, in order to avert the destruction of western democratic societies by the unfettered rule of the capitalist market,

the West should improve and strengthen democracy in order to achieve a balance with the power of the market. To accomplish that, we must foster a new government role in enforcing the rule of law, supporting the principles of education, ensuring social justice and the participation of workers in corporate decision making, and leading the fight against corruption and the drug economy.

This perspective has *nothing* to do with Marxist "political economy," and Jameson was able to spot it way back in 1985: "The positioning of Marxism as an older world paradigm clearly marks Attali's affinities with certain poststructuralisms and post-Marxisms, at the same time that it expresses the French Socialist party's complicated relationship to its Marxian tradition." *Complicated* ain't the word, Freddy: "severed" or "inverted" would be much more like it.

Though it appears to be a work on music by a committed revolutionary -- indeed, by a situationist-inspired revolutionary -- *Noise* is one long justification for the formation and continued existence of France's "socialist" government. "Without

music, no State could survive," Attali quotes a character in Moliere as saying; Attali, of course, believes that his own French state is no exception to this rule. But Attali is not a musician, nor does he use *Noise* to advise the members of his government to don sunglasses and play Elvis Presley songs on their saxophones. In his discussion of the music of the 18th century, Attali brings up the rhetorical question, "How could an order that brought such wonderful music into the world not be the one desired by God and required by science?" It is clear that Attali would like the voters of contemporary France to say, "How could an order that brought such a wonderful *book* about music into the world not be the one desired by the majority of the people and required by the global economy?" (It is also clear that Wlad Godzich, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, and the other "socialists" at the University of Minnesota Press -- not to mention academic Marxists such as Frederic Jameson and Susan McClary -- have a vested interest in seeing to it that the American perception of the results of the socialist "experiment" in France is favorable.)

To make *Noise* a convincing and effective work of political propaganda, it must silence or, rather, expose as "mere noise" certain discourses that insist on the immediate destruction of both the capitalist economy and the technocratic State. Of these discourses, the situationist critique of the society of the spectacle appears to be the most dangerous to the socialist "experiment," and so must be silenced first. Why is this? For the same reason that Mitterand presented himself as the leader of the Party that would "Change life" once it was voted into office: "Situationism" -- the enemy of situationist theory -- was the French government's unofficial ideology in the 1980s.

It is staggering that the only situationist author Attali quotes in *Noise* is "Gian Franco Sanguinetti Censor" [sic], the author of Veridique rapport sur les dernieres chances du capitalisme en Italie, which was translated from Italian into French by Guy Debord (whom Attali does not mention) and published in Paris by Champ Libre in 1976, just one year before Attali published his "political economy of music." Censor's pamphlet, unlike every other situationist text, was addressed directly to the ruling class, of which -- as we have pointed out -- Attali is a member. Though the pamphlet was part of a deliberately constructed scandal, which was designed to embarrass, if not topple, the ruling class -- for Censor was not, as he claimed, a member of the ruling class to which he addressed himself, but the situationist revolutionary Gianfranco Sanguinetti writing under a pseudonym -- incredibly, Jacques Attali uses it as a relatively straight-forward source of good practical advice on the running of a modern State such as France!

Both of the direct references Attali makes to Sanguinetti's pamphlet lay bare Attali's foul ulterior motives for writing *Noise*. Seeking to avoid social "errors" -- or, rather, lamenting the fact that "many errors would have been avoided in social science over the past two centuries," that is, had his insights been available back then -- Attali writes the following:

The [classical] concert is then seen to be the place used by the elite to convince itself that it is not as cold, inhuman, and conservative as it is accused of being. For the rest, the [popular] concert is mediocrity camouflaged in an artificial festival, for 'whatever is distributed to the poor can never be anything more than poverty.'

In a footnote, Attali correctly attributes this quote to Censor. But when he evokes this "law," Censor is not advocating its overturning: he is advocating that certain illusions must be given up by the elite, for capitalism is impoverishing and poisoning the entire world, even or *especially* for the elite that control it.

For a long time [Censor writes] one pretended to believe that the abundance of industrial production slowly elevated everyone to the conditions of an elite. This argument has so completely lost its very slight appearance of seriousness that it has been degraded to being nothing more than the ephemeral incitations of publicity [...] The mechanically egalitarian tendency of modern industry to want to make everything for everyone, and to break and maim everything just to distribute its most recent merchandise is what has poisoned almost all space, and most of our time, with its piles of cheap goods: cars and "second homes" are everywhere. If words remain rich, the same is not true of things, and the countryside is deteriorating everywhere. The law that dominates all this is, of course, that the only thing one distributes to the poor is poverty: cars that do not circulate because there are too many of them, wages paid in inflated currency, meat from animals fattened up in a few weeks by chemicals means, etc.

For Censor -- and for Jacques Attali, as well -- the trick is (once again) *extricating the elite from the ranks of the poor*, but without incriminating the "justice" that is meted out to the poor under this fundamental law, which must remain unchallenged.

As for the nature of the elite, the simple truth is that it is indeed "cold, inhuman, and conservative," and Attali doesn't deny it: in fact, he is trying to protect modern capitalism by getting the elite to do a lot more than attend musical concerts, that is, if its members want not to be perceived accurately and, as a result, fought more effectively.

"Capitalism," Attali writes a couple pages later, "has become 'a terrorism tempered by well-being, the well-being of each in his place' (Censor)." But when Censor uses these words, he is *not* referring to modern day capitalism, *but to the Republic of Venice*, which Censors cites as "the model of a qualitative society, a model that was sufficient in its time, even perfect." The *contrast* with modern day capitalism couldn't be more stark.

This [Censor writes, referring to the Republic of Venice] was the most beautiful dominant class in history: no one resisted it, or even pretended to reckon with it. For centuries, no demagogic lies, hardly any troubles and very little bloodshed. It was *terrorism tempered by happiness*, the happiness of each in his place.

By conflating modern day capitalism with what the ruthless capitalist Censor defines as the most desirable society in history for *his* social strata (the ruling class), Attali has taken Sanguinetti's bait -- and this is, of course, what Censor's pamphlet was all about: getting the ruling class to take the bait. In the conflation, Attali has indicated clearly what is for him and his "socialists" buddies the *desirability of the current state of affairs*, terrorism and all.

Looking back on the 19th century, Attali correctly points out that:

The commodity quickly became an object of spectacle. Already in the eighteenth century, music-turned-commodity was announcing the future role of all commodities under representation: a spectacle in front of silent people. In representation, commodities speak on behalf of those who purchase the spectacle of their order, their glory. Usage, as soon as it is represented, is destroyed by exchange. The spectacle emerged in the eighteenth century. . . .

But as soon as he has said this, Attali wants it to be known that he has grave doubts -- no more than that, but grave doubts are enough for him -- about the continued relevance of the theory of the spectacle to modern society.

The spectacle emerged in the eighteenth century, and, as music will show us later on, it is now perhaps an obsolete form of capitalism: the economy of representation has been replaced by that of repetition [...] *Music announces that we are verging on no longer being a society of the spectacle*. The political spectacle is merely the last vestige of representation, preserved and put forward by repetition in order to avoid disturbing or dispiriting us unduly. In reality, power is no longer incarnated in men. It is. Period. [...] Even the spectacle is now only one form of repetition among others, and perhaps an obsolete one [...] The spectacle [has been replaced by] recordings of it [...] In the end, the political spectacle itself, already now limited to the highest eschelons, may disappear -- without, however, a dissolution of power -- just as it disappeared in the large corporation, in which legitimacy is now founded upon efficiency and the competence of anonymous, interchangeable cadres, and hardly at all in the personality of the president.

The source of this hardly disinterested speculation, though not made explicit by Attali, is obvious: the "post-situationist" writings of Jean Baudrillard, former teaching assistant to Henri Lefebvre and member of the pro-situ group Utopie in the 1960s. Drawing upon Baudrillard's *Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production*, Attali puts forth the following "succession of *orders* (in other words, differences) done violence by *noises* (in other words, the calling into question of differences) that are *prophetic* because they create new orders, unstable and changing."

The simultaneity of multiple codes, the variable overlappings between periods, styles and forms [Attali writes], prohibits any attempt at a genealogy of music, a hierarchical archeology, or a precise ideological underpinning of particular musicians. But it is possible to discern who among them are innovators and heralds of worlds in the making [...] Briefly, we will see that it is possible to distinguish on our map three zones, three stages, three strategic usages of music by power. In one of these zones, it seems that music is used and produced in the ritual in an attempt to make people *forget* the general violence; in another, it is employed to make people *believe* in the harmony of the world, that there is order in exchange and legitimacy in commercial power; and finally, there is one in which it serves to *silence*, by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human voices.

This last usage of music -- repetition that silences -- is the zone of the spectacle, or rather, it corresponds to the "bureaucratic power" of the society of the spectacle.

Attali's anecdotal descriptions of the third "zone" are accurate and compelling. In this stage, "*people buy more records than they can listen to. They stockpile what they want to find the time to hear.*" While the second stage "stockpiled exchange-time in the form of money," the third stage "stockpiles use-time." In effect, Attali writes, "transforming use-time into a stockpileable object makes it possible to sell and stockpile rights to usage without actually using anything, to exchange ad infinitum without extracting pleasure from the object, without experiencing its function." In the

final analysis, "*the stockpiling of use-time in the commodity objects is fundamentally a herald of death.*"

One couldn't agree more: the death heralded by the appearance and on-going development of repetitive or spectacular society (and its forms of music, especially Muzak) is the death of music as a separate sphere of human cultural activity, the death of human pre-history, and the death of the entire capitalist socio-economic system in and through which this three-stage process unfolds. This death is quite literal, unfortunately: it is the death of the human species due to lethal accumulations (stockpiles) of toxins, pollutants, and radioactive wastes. The only alternative to this death is revolution, the global destruction of capitalism and its replacement with a higher form of social organization.

But Attali does not want to see people all over the world rise up in open revolution against both private and bureaucratic capitalism: as a member of the "socialist" government of a leading Western nation -- especially one that as recently as 1968 was nearly toppled by a popular revolution -- his *job* depends on the infinite delaying and deferring of this necessary revolution; indeed, his job *is* the infinite delaying and deferring of it.

And so, out of nowhere -- illogically, arbitrarily, but "poetically" -- Attali posits the "embryonic" existence of a fourth zone or stage, which he calls "composition," that "heralds the arrival of new social relations" in which "freedom" is an essential and irreducible feature. Signs of its eventual birth are everywhere, in both "avant-garde" and "pop" music. Attali writes:

Both [John] Cage and the Rolling Stones, *Silence* and "Satisfaction," announce a rupture in the process of musical creation, the end of music as an autonomous activity, due to an intensification of lack in the spectacle. They are not the new mode of musical production, but the liquidation of the old.

As we have seen, Attali claimed that "a precise ideological underpinning of particular musicians" is not possible (yet this is precisely what he has just done with John Cage and the Stones); furthermore, Attali claimed that "it is possible to discern who among them are innovators and heralds of worlds in the making." But, when "push comes to shove," he locates the beginnings of the fourth stage in technological innovations, not in the efforts of particular musicians such as Cage or the Stones (better references would have been La Monte Young and the Velvet Underground). Notice the total absence of *human agents* in Attali's description of "radical" anti-capitalist subversion:

Already, from within repetition, certain deviations announce a radical challenge to it: the proliferating circulation of pirated recordings, the multiplication of illegal radio stations, the diverted usage of monetary signs as a mode of communication forbidden political messages -- all of these things herald the invention of a radical subversion, a new mode of structuring, communication that is not restricted to the elite of discourse.

Without the presence of self-conscious human agents, this description clearly suggests that the passage from the deadly third stage to the "free" fourth stage is an inevitable and technological one, not a determined choice, made for dire social reasons, by organized but anti-hierarchical groups of people. For Attali and other "socialist" technocrats, no human intervention is needed: technological "progress" itself, if allowed to develop unimpeded, is what will overthrow the society of the spectacle and save us from death.

With the arbitrary addition of this fourth stage, Attali's three-part cycle suddenly becomes a linear progression, an evolutionary and inevitable course of development, a happy story ("Fear, Clarity, Power, and [then] Freedom") rather than a terrifying paradox. And yet Attali is canny enough to want to make clear that this fourth stage will directly answer and satisfy the human needs -- totally ignored by capitalism -- that situationist theory and practice so successfully exposed.

Hear me well [Attali writes]: composition is not the same as material abundance, that petit-bourgeois vision of atrophied communism having no other goal than the extension of the bourgeois spectacle to all of the proletariat. It is the individuals's conquest of his [sic] own body and potentials. It is impossible without material abundance and a certain technological level, but is not reducible to that.

This is double-talk: technological "progress," if allowed to *continue* to develop unimpeded, will poison us all, even the members of the elites. For the society of the spectacle to be overthrown, both capitalism and the bureaucratic state must be overthrown as well. No happy "free zone" is possible within the society created and managed by these institutions, except perhaps for members of their elites. Hear *me* well, Mr. Eurobank who likes Eric Clapton: these are established facts for every person part of the international current of radical subversion channeled in certain ways by the situationists. We won't be satisfied with simple "conquest" of our own "bodies" and "potentials": we want the liberation of all of human society from the shackles of private property, work and the state, and the permanent, unending

realization of *society's* potentials. Only then can we realize our own potentials as individuals.

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