

# Lady Gaga Meets Ritzer: Using Music to Teach Sociological Theory

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**Kenneth Culton**  
Department of Sociology  
Niagara University  
Niagara University, NY, USA  
[kculton@niagara.edu](mailto:kculton@niagara.edu)

**José A. Muñoz**  
Department of Sociology  
California State University, San Bernardino  
San Bernardino, CA, USA  
[munoz@csusb.edu](mailto:munoz@csusb.edu)

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**Abstract**  
This paper presents methods for instructors to deal with student anxiety over theory courses. The method is an interactive class exercise that provides instructors with direction as to using popular music. The paper accomplishes this through the use of several cases for including music in order to spark discussion and suggestions for helping students to interpret the theory presented. Additionally, linking music to incorporating writing assignments with the exercise are provided here. A table linking music to a theorist is also provided.

**Keywords:**  
Music, Sociology, Theory, Teaching, Student Anxiety, Subculture, Class Exercise, Undergraduate, Popular Culture

The challenges involved with teaching an undergraduate Social Theory course are oft reported. Lowney (1998) notes that students often enroll in Social Theory simply to fulfill a requirement for their major. Others cite the mental and emotional obstacles students face. Students are often "anxious and fearful" of Social Theory courses (Ahlkvist 471; Hickson and Stacks 262). Research into lowering student anxiety in theory and other core courses is a critical question explored by many scholars (Ahlkvist, 471; Ormrod, 191; Schacht and Stewart 329). From our anecdotal experiences and writings by Julie Pelton (107), we find students regularly report theory to be the most difficult Sociology course taken. Rumors tend to spread, thereby enhancing the fear and anxiety associated with courses in Social Theory. Cases were discovered where instructors work around their students' difficulty in understanding complex concepts by constructing a theory course that is both fun and enjoyable, resulting in students feeling more comfortable with theory (Fianagan and McCausland 311). As in many courses, the patience and willingness of the instructor to put extra work into a theory course goes a long way in regard to students conquering their fear of theory. One suggestion is looking to contemporary examples and current events as a method for simplifying concepts (Hickson and Stacks 263). This can involve strategies that incorporate intensive writing where film (Pelton 107) or other popular culture content serves to engage students.

Employing popular music in Sociology courses has been lauded by both instructors and students alike (Albers and Bach 237-238; Martinez 260). To date we know of no systematic exercise integrating popular music in a standard Social Theory class; however, in the field of Criminology and Economics scholars have used music to teach key theoretical concepts in their courses (Rothe and Collins 227; Hinds-Aldrich 7; Van Horn and Van Horn 65). This is surprising because courses in Social Theory are important universally required and central to the discipline (Orum 95). Jarl Ahlkvist made an effort to integrate music when teaching classical theory in his introductory Sociology courses (473-478). Ahlkvist used "Progressive Rock" bands Pink Floyd, Yes, and ELP (Emerson, Lake, and Palmer), to illustrate the theories of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber respectively (476). The music served as a "concrete organizing framework" to which students could "easily link abstract social theories." (Ahlkvist 476) In short, the use of music enhanced students' learning of social theories; however, there were some stated limitations. Notably, Ahlkvist found that his presentations of conceptually dense progressive rock actually decreased student participation relative to other introductory core topics (476). Moreover, he states, "most [students] initially dismiss this music from the 1970's as largely irrelevant for understanding our current social environment" (Ahlkvist 480). Ahlkvist writes that "A more ambitious extension of this technique might include the use of popular music that emerged in the aftermath of progressive rock."(481) This paper does so, not entirely eschewing music from the 70's, while still moving forward and presenting an interactive exercise that integrates various styles of popular music in the Social Theory classroom.

The musical tastes and stylistic preferences of youth have become more fluid and there is an "essential eclecticism of post-war youth culture" (Bennett 600). Musical tastes are less collective and more varied, reflecting what Bennett calls "neo-tribal sensibilities," mirroring aspects of "late modern consumer society" (Bennett 614). Like other patterns of consumption, youth are more accustomed to individualizing, and even personalizing, their choices. Albers and Bach find that using popular music in its classroom "bridges the gap between the professional and the personal" (Albers and Bach 238). The personal in this case, the world of popular culture and mass media, is a common immersion to most students. The professional is represented by the structured norms apparent to students and emblematic of the typical classroom environment. Material culture in the classroom allows for instructors to achieve their goals by sparking curiosity and limiting defensiveness and conformity (Groce 80; Hoefel 71).

Drawing from the above-referenced experience, using music in Ken Culton's introductory courses endeavored to bring music into the Social Theory classroom as well. As faculty members we are the bearers of institutional norms, and as faculty who may have chosen to teach Social Theory, we are often that much further culturally from the traditional college student. Using music and other forms of popular culture allows instructors to appear to be less intimidating and as such should be especially advantageous in the Social Theory classroom, where we commonly find students to be prone to intimidation (Pelton 107; Albers and Bach 239; Hickson and Stacks 262). Less fearful students are more apt to active engagement in the classroom. Martinez finds that "music has always been a springboard for discussion of issues, provoking students to use a certain amount of 'sociological imagination'" (Martinez 415). The use of music in the classroom allows for creating an active role for students "that involves the routinization of participation, thereby working to alleviate anxiety about a theory course (Macheski et al. 45). Finally, music in class can be used to create a "common language of discourse," given that the students take course material and apply it to the music played in the classroom (Macheski et al. 46).

Albers and Bach explain that playing music provides an "opening" or "back region" that allows students to make important breakthroughs in their understanding of the material (239). The authors go on to state that "If students perceive themselves in a backstage environment, they are more comfortable, and they are thus inclined to interact with one another and with us" (Albers and Bach 239). Additionally, Martinez points out that with students' connections to music culture, they discover that the concerns of social theorists are echoed by the artists they currently listen to—thereby altering their relationship to the entire enterprise (415). The ball is now on their side of the court, so to speak, since the invitation to participate has been delivered on their terms. It has been made appropriate for them to now speak, not as seasoned theorists, but as defenders and as translators of their own cultural artifacts. All of this, again, serves to bridge the gap between faculty members who are well versed in theory and comfortable talking about social theory and students who are not. We feel that bringing music into the classroom can help to alleviate this fear and anxiety.

Scholars who study various music genres and subcultures observed that music and lyrics often serve to reveal hidden truths about society (Assante 10; Wood 4; Gaines 177-192). The insight may add value and depth to the music, as such in the eyes of young students whose development can be seen as a search for truth in the face of myriad contradictions put forth by power holding adults (Hine 45).

## The Exercise

A great challenge in Social Theory courses, and many other courses for that matter, is getting students to read and think critically about the reading before class begins. Therefore, the teaching technique we describe in this paper involves beginning each class (or new theory) by displaying the song lyric and playing the song selection that corresponds to the listed theory in its entirety (See Appendix). In most cases the instructor would have come to class ready to play music either by using one of our suggestions or finding their own music. Additionally, the instructor could encourage students to bring in their own music. If the instructor plays a music video such as one may find on YouTube, then this video could add a visual dimension to a particular song beyond discussion. The lyrics can be posted on Blackboard for an ongoing discussion beyond the classroom. This approach, beginning each class with a song, was applied successfully by Albers and Bach (240). They noted greater student participation in sociological topics at the introductory level. The paper provides discussion heading to do with how to extend this approach to sociological theory courses.

The authors feel that it is important for this exercise to be open-ended. The addition of rules and procedures, for the sake of appearances, merely reproduces the institutional imperative and undermines our collective purpose. Students desire involvement and they are less likely to participate if they fear their answer may fall beyond the scope of what the instructor finds acceptable. Under the most unspecified conditions student anxiety may still exist, but in this paper the argument is that it is mitigated by a true commitment to a sort of structured informality. In short, students are challenged, or forced into thinking, while being given the leeway to think critically. The essence of what the paper proposes is simply process: play a song, present a lyric, and ask students to discuss how it relates to Social Theory. The four examples below outline this structured informality in practice; there is an introduction of a song and lyrics followed by comments about how an instructor could incorporate the music into class discussion.

The song "Meat is Murder" by The Smiths is a pointed example of an effort to redefine the commonly held definition of a symbol, in this case "meat." The vocalist, Morrissey, croons the following passage from the song, "Heifer whines could be human cries, closer comes the screaming knife. This beautiful creature must die. This beautiful creature must die. A death for no reason and death for no reason is MURDER."

After presenting the lyrics, the instructor can begin the discussion by asking students in an open-ended fashion, to consider how the song relates to symbolic interactionism.<sup>2</sup> The notion of symbol can arise from this discussion. The instructor might then ask, "What symbol is this song about?" After establishing that "meat" is the major theme, the instructor can then ask, "What is the author trying to say about meat being murder?" Once students engage with the symbol topic, the instructor can ask, "How the meaning of symbols is generally determined?" and "How do most people view this symbol (meat) most of the time?" There is plenty of room for tangential discussions here (ex. ecological cost of eating meat), and they should be welcomed. Vegetarians in the class may certainly weigh in, as well as those who find these ideas foreign. Students may conclude that many symbols in a complex society hold meanings that are subject to revision, often through the contention of various actors, just as observed in the classroom. The instructor may also choose to revisit this and other songs during the course to illustrate theoretical paradigms, such as critical theory.

The song "No" by Vivian Girls is a droll anthem of sorts with an entire lyric comprised of just one word: No. "No" is repeated in various melodies and harmonized in a pop whimsical fashion throughout. In this case, the song itself may function as a "breach," where the usual social order is disrupted. Similar situationally to Harold Garfinkel's "breaching experiments" (Garfinkel 44-49), the song elicits breach filling behavior on the part of subjects who, when faced with the true chaotic nature of the social world, are compelled to correct or to fill the breach. The puzzle is for students to figure out this very fact. Some students may at first be confused and even offended by the lack of more traditional lyrics. This confusion will only contribute to the breach and thus strengthen the example by bringing forth more frustration.

One conclusion to draw from the exercise is for students to think more critically about their preconceived expectations. What counts as an acceptable song lyric? Why is the use of one word troubling? Students should be challenged to consider what makes a song lyric acceptable. If Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists are "correct", then the world is much more chaotic than realizable. The ensuing discussion could be an attempt to find other examples where our expectations override our ability to see situations clearly. This discussion could begin with music, where the instructor might ask, "What are some other examples of music that challenge our sense of what is normal?" and "How did you react when you first heard (death metal, gangsta rap, etc.)?" The sounds used in a composition may allude to, or upend, our expectations.

Known to be an empowering, uncompromising, strong, and likely feminist figure in popular music, Lady Gaga espouses the virtues of acceptance in "Born This Way." In the bridge of "Born This Way," Lady Gaga sings "Don't be a drag, just be a queen. Whether you're broke or evergreen, You're black, white, beige, chola descent, You're lebanese, you're orient. Whether life's disabilities, Left you outcast, bullied, or teased, Rejoice and love yourself today. 'Cause baby you were born this way."

Though postmodernism is a regularly debated concept, George Ritzer describes it to be "more accepting of the stranger," where, unlike modernity and its attempts to eliminate ambivalence, the postmodern world is seen to be "more tolerant" (228). Ritzer states that "The postmodern world is destined to be a far more uncertain world than modernity, and those who live in it need to have strong nerves."

Before attempting to grasp postmodernity, students need a sense of modernity as a project of intensifying bureaucratization, social stratification, and order. The instructor might ask students, "What are some ways in which (modern) society is segregated or stratified?" Next, "How does Lady Gaga's song respond to this trend of question?" From here, the instructor may consider his or her own emphasis. One obvious direction is to stifle how "postmodern" a society is or is not. This could be effectively framed by asking students "Are we or are we not living in the world described by Lady Gaga?" Postmodernism has also been characterized as "a lack of concern, playfulness, and self-centeredness" (Ritzer 228). This is reflected in the exhortation to "be a queen" and the emphasis on "I" in the lyric above. Students might be asked to consider if these prescriptions are in fact the best way to better the world? Or, is there something more, namely collective action, missing from Gaga's utopic vision?

"Okie from Muskogee" by Merle Haggard is a classic country tune that many students will find humorous.<sup>3</sup> It is emblematic of an era, specifically a prideful affirmation of "small town" values and rejection of the amoral other. Ferdinand Toennies's *Gemeinschaft* or *community* is certainly on display here, described by Peter Kivisto as based on "habit, tradition, shared beliefs, and affective bonds" (91). Though some tend to dismiss *Gemeinschaft* as the increasingly passé social arrangement in favor of *Gesellschaft*, or *society*, "both types coexist at a particular point in time" (Kivisto 91). This may resonate with students of a conservative ilk, who may find a sociological ally in Toennies, a theorist whom, like Emile Durkheim, clearly favored tradition and the collective over instrumental rationality. Some students may be able to offer examples of modern country songs that include this trope; these types of lyrics will serve to strengthen the case while also making the classroom more inclusive.

Peter Kivisto brings forth a more nuanced interpretation of Toennies that recognizes both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as the outcomes of a social world that is "wilded" (91). "Natural will" or *wesennille* leads to actions that are "less consciously chosen, predicated instead on tradition, habit, or emotion" (Kivisto 91). Deconstructing the lyrical text below can uncover the mood or tap into the unsaid and reveal the implicit agreements made between Merle Haggard and his likeminded audience. Students might be asked to explain if residents of Muskogee in fact see their predilections as natural? Discussion could also be encouraged by asking students to identify the role of emotion in this *natural will* for Toennies to give birth to the *Gemeinschaft* social formulation. The following passage fits this argument. "We don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street, 'I'm here and I bein' free. I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee, A place where even squares can have a ball. We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse....We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy, Like the hippies out in San Francisco do" (Haggard).

The lyric loses explanatory power if applied to *Gesellschaft*. The hippies of San Francisco, though derived here, may also consider themselves both then and today a community of people with "shared beliefs" and "affective bonds" (Kivisto 91). Here again is an opportunity to further probe the theoretical terrain through probing questions. Perhaps ask students where they would *not* expect to see *Gemeinschaft*? The *Gemeinschaft* discussion can also be used to illustrate Durkheim's organic solidarity, though the concepts are not interchangeable. Is it the anomic city? On a rural campus such consensus may surface, but it is understood that cities are home to numerous tight-knit collectives. The instructor might end with the realization that *Gemeinschaft*, in one form or another, is almost universally desired, and *Gesellschaft* feared. The implications of this in a globalizing world is one of the many issues worth exploring.

The use of music lyrics as a class exercise allows for the students to think about the material in greater depth and connect through shared experience. Beyond the discussion based method proposed here, instructors may consider these alternative applications. One suggestion is small writing assignments where students answer a list of questions in light of the lyric and theory presented in class. For example, this could take the form of a brief memo, reflection paper, or as a unique way to begin a journal entry (Coker and Scarboro 219). For those instructors that wish to incorporate technology, adapting Paul Dean's visual analysis assignment could serve as another outlet for students(1). Students could be given a writing assignment where they would blog about a song of their choosing and make their own connections to a theory presented in the course. Such an assignment would fit Pelton's argument for using "low stakes" or practice writing assignments (111); these assignments have value for reducing anxiety and building confidence. Instructors could also incorporate findings from this exercise in exams as a short answer or essay question. Finally, and ideally for smaller classes, students may be asked to prepare individual or group presentations where, again, a sociological theory is illustrated through an analyzed lyric. This last alternative approach is more advanced, as it puts the student firmly in the instructor's role. This should only be attempted if the instructor has time to offer ample support for the student as s/he develops the presentation.

This paper presents a method for instructors to deal with student anxiety in theory courses. The method included is an interactive exercise that provides instructors with direction as to using popular music in the classroom. The paper accomplishes this by supplying four cases for including music in order to spark class discussion as well as suggestions for helping students interpret the material. The classroom exercise can be reinforced through student reflection by writing short papers, keeping a journal, or alternatively for smaller classes, students may create group presentations where song lyrics are part of the final demonstration. Apart from courses that assign theory, the exercise may be employed in courses such as Sociology 101, Sociology of Gender, Visual Sociology, and Social Movements. For example, one of the co-authors used music on a regular basis in his Sociology 101 course. He teaches at a small private Catholic university that offers BAs in Sociology, which is usually populated by 10-20 students who are predominately white.

The other instructor teaches at a medium sized state university and Hispanic Serving Institution that offers a BA in Sociology. The Sociological Theory course size at this university ranges from 45 to 55 students and are racially and ethnically diverse. The exercise occurred in the final weeks of the introductory Sociology course, where the students were asked to find a song of their choosing and discuss the song's lyrics in light of some topic discussed in Sociology 101. It was found that each year several genres of music are applied in these 40 students each. Finally, we want to address the paper the limited scope of some of the examples used in this paper. For example, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide examples for every aspect of postmodernism and modernity. It should be clear, the Lady Gaga example does not address every aspect of postmodernism.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The song samples chosen are not all new. Older songs can be integrated into the course, although it is recommended that at least some newer popular music be used. There is also value in using a variety of music that may appeal to diverse student interest. Students who are unfamiliar with a particular song will only expand their cultural awareness through this process. The use of one musical genre such as the progressive rock use by Ahlkvist is not recommended.

<sup>2</sup> Ideally students will have been introduced to the theory through prior reading. Introducing theory in this way may coax students to read more and more carefully.

<sup>3</sup> The instructor should be careful not to reinforce stereotypes that may unfairly denigrate a particular group, community, or state. The existence and persistence of these stereotypes however, can and should be discussed.

## Appendix

Theory/Theorist	Song	Artist
Functionalism	"Don't worry about the government"	Talking Heads
Conflict Theory	"Take the Power Back"	Rage Against the Machine
Symbolic Interaction	"Meat is Murder"	The Smiths
Postmodernism	"Born this Way"/"No Future"	Lady Gaga/The Sex Pistols
Baudrillard	"Fake Plastic Trees"	Radiohead
Globalization/Neo-Liberalism	"Globalization (scene of the crime)"	Dead Prez featuring Mumia
Foucault (Panopticon)	"I'm Being Watched by the CIA"	Anti Flag
Modernity	"Fitter Happier"	Radiohead
Toennies (Gemeinschaft)	"Okie from Muskogee"	Merle Haggard
Veblen (Conspicuous Consumption)	"Royals"	Lorde
Marcuse (One-Dimensional Man)	"She Watch Channel Zero"/"Bullet in the Head"	Public Enemy/Rage Against the Machine
Ethnomethodology	"No"	Vivian Girls
Feminist Theory	"FYR"	Le Tigre

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**Author Bios:**  
**Kenneth R. Culton** is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology at Niagara University. His interests include deviance, social movements, music, and youth culture. He teaches a course called Youth/Music/Subculture where students are encouraged to explore various music and non-music subcultures and consider the relationship between marginalized people and the perceived mainstream. He continues to look for ways to incorporate popular culture when teaching sociology.

**José A. Muñoz** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, San Bernardino. He received his PhD in Sociology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. José's research and teaching areas include social movements, immigration, globalization, qualitative research, and sociological theory. He has authored papers in the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *Social Movement Studies*, the *International Review of Modern Sociology*, *Sociology Compass*, *Migration and Development Studies*, and the *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. As part of José's current efforts in expanding into the area of evaluation research, he was selected for the first cohort of The Annie E. Casey Foundation Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity (LEEAD) program. <http://josemunoz.weebly.com>

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