

THE SOUNDS OF HATRED

What is patriotism as opposed to nationalism? And which of these is what sometimes surfaces in contemporary rock music?

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Patriotism is generally defined as a love for one's homeland, and how it is perceived varies depending on the particular nation or period in history. Initially, the term mainly meant attachment to one's place of birth – be it to the district, region, or land as a whole. It wasn't until the twentieth century that its meaning extended to include loyalty to the territorial state.

The German historian Reinhart Koselleck observed that patriotism is the first concept that recognizes the independence of citizens and their demand to participate in exercising state power. Today, a “patriot” is not just someone who lives in a particular country. As Wojciech Burszta writes: “In our understanding of patriotism, one's ‘father’ is one's ‘fatherland’ (not always identified with the state), which is populated by all those who are defined as one's countrymen.”

What then is “nationalism”? Anthony D. Smith suggests the following as a working definition: “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation.” Such a perception might form the basis for an ideology proclaiming that one's own nation is supreme, and the rights of individuals and other nations must abide by its rules. Michael Billig, on the other hand, notes that nationalism is mainly observed in the attitudes of people associated with extremist movements. It is something we will sooner attribute to the leader of a radical right-wing organization, than to an average European politician. This approach, in turn, situates such attitudes in both the political and territorial spheres, which Billig strongly criticizes in his book. According to Billig, nationalism may affect a person directly, and in a much stronger way than he or she realizes. Ignoring and overlooking certain events inevitably leads to conflict. Many people think of nation states and borders as eternal and immutable

concepts, especially if they attentively listen to stories of their country's remote history. These are often exaggerated, but they are understandable to the public and help citizens bond together, which is the desired effect.

In an attempt to define these concepts, one must agree with Koselleck that “patriotism, like nationalism, cannot be determined in ontological terms.” It is a fact that requires special attention, since both nationalism and patriotism refer to the same object (phenomenon): one's homeland and one's love for it. Organizations and movements that can be accused of nationalism often themselves define their beliefs as patriotic, because this way they are better received by the public. This mechanism is evident in the world of rock music, as we will now examine.

Not just rock and roll

In his book *Rewolucja rocka: Semiotyczne wymiary elektrycznej ekstazy* [Rock Revolution: Semiotic dimensions of electric ecstasy], Marcin Rychlewski notes that the important elements of the rock ethos are authenticity and social commitment to “the oppressed.” In rock music, which explores themes of patriotism, nationalism, as well as race and tolerance of the oppressed, this takes the place of the nation, the state and ideological issues.

This type of rock music has been present on the world stage since the late 1970s, starting with the English band Skrewdriver. Its leader Ian Stuart Donaldson was the founder of the organization “Blood & Honour” and the initiator of a series of concerts entitled Rock Against Communism (RAC). The term RAC has become synonymous with various bands and artists whose work deals with similar ideological themes, but they are not homogeneous musically.

The new trend did not make itself felt on the Polish music scene until the 1990s, when some Polish musicians began exploring themes of the RAC genre. At the moment we can identify about 30 bands (some of which are no longer active on stage) whose music touches on national themes. One of the most recognizable representatives of this trend is the band Honor, whose popularity stretches beyond Poland's borders.

For Honor, every other race is a foe that needs to be fought. Their mission: to defend the Aryan race. In the song “Nation for Nation”, we hear: “Betrayed cities defend themselves against aggression/Against emigration no one wanted here.” Also, in the song “Soldier of the North”, we hear about the colored savages invading the country, and the need to defend against foreigners. Intriguingly, this rhetoric has only gained in currency today, twenty years later.

Honor is also openly anti-Semitic, as is audible in the songs “Gold Kills the Race” and “Fighting for the Lost.” The band’s members consider a Jew to be a foreigner on their land. They accuse the Jewish race of scheming to control the government, and destroying not only “the nation,” but “the race” as well.

In recent years, parallel to the birth of the RAC genre, we have also seen the emergence of Identity Rock. The shifting reality and the constant drive to reach out to more listeners have here prompted an attempt to step back a bit from radical slogans, instead developing new ways of sending the message so that it cannot be labeled as hate speech. Musicians belonging to this trend focus on history and selected important events from the past. They talk about how important it is to fight for one’s homeland, and what should be most important to us as citizens of the same country. The band Horytnica is a representative example of this trend.

One of the songs by this band, “We Do Not Need to Die” was the unofficial anthem of the 2011 March of Independence (a right-wing event held on Poland’s Independence Day in November). The lyrics refer to patriotism being forgotten by the Polish society: “Instead of seeing your country, you mock the word Homeland.” This perception of reality dovetails with part of the current right-wing rhetoric. It divides society into those who perceive the world as they do, vs. those who don’t consider the nation to be most important. In the song “Memory and Pride” we hear: “Just as you in the past, so we are here/We have to fight again, to our last breath/Though the enemy hides behind a veil of lies today/His days are numbered.” The enemy is ever-present, though not necessarily clearly specified. The listener has to get the impression that the fight against foes is inevitable. And that they need to take sides.

When writers say “we”, they mean a specific group with which they identify. This expression gives it certain exclusivity. German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels writes: “By using the terms ‘we’ and ‘you,’ we start to play the game between our own culture and a foreign culture, through dividing the roles into primary and secondary, until forced inclusion and exclusion are reached.”

The opposition of “us” vs. “them” is precisely what Horytnica and Honor have in common. Focusing on the enemy and warning of the impending threat posed by foreigners should more aptly be considered nationalistic views, rather than patriotic ones, as the band wants to portray them.

Fluid boundaries

As Wojciech Burszta puts it, “The ideology that is making a grand-scale comeback nowadays has an antagonistic character, as it is not shared by everyone but, on the contrary, it divides society into those who want to adhere to a particular vision of a world filled with symbols and signs (...), vs. those who are denied this right, or at least their right is questioned.” This is how both Honor and Horytnica perceive reality. But also, the last solo works of singer-cum-politician Kukiz fit in with this trend. In them, the artist feels an obligation to the nation and the state. He ceases to be an ordinary musician and becomes a messiah,

who, through his work tries to convert those who have strayed. For Kukiz, it is the establishment that is the enemy, and alien force within its own country. It is solely responsible for the state the country is in today. On one side of the dispute is society, betrayed by politicians and the government, on the other are thieves, who have a hold on power and are not giving it back. For the author of the lyrics, they are strangers in their own country, and they should be opposed.

Setting forth any exact boundaries between patriotism and nationalism on an ontological level is difficult. On the cultural front, the notion of a struggle between “us” and “them,” invoking an enemy that must be fought, point to nationalism rather than patriotism. We should therefore conclude that the differences between patriotic rock, identity rock, and national or nationalistic rock are quite fluid and difficult to pin down. ■



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Further reading:

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Burszta W.J. (2013). *Globalna ekumena popnacjonalizmu*. [Global Ecumene of Pop Nationalism]. in: *Sprawy narodowościowe/Nationalities Affairs*, folio 45, Poznań–Warsaw, pp 51–65.

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