

# **SLEEP NOW IN THE FIRE: AN ANALYSIS OF A SONG BY RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE USING MARXISM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Rage against the Machine is known for their politics as well as their music, which the later helped creating an aggressive-heavy rock-rap genre. Article presents a song by Rage against the Machine band related to ideological movement in America, titled Sleep Now in the Fire. This effort brings an understanding of ideology that is embraced by the band. The method is through literature study. Presentation begins with a short biography of the band, theoretical concepts, and analysis of the song as well its music video. It is concluded that the song represents ideological criticism toward capitalism using Marxism. Both of these lyric and music video represents Marxism as it shares the same movement to fight capitalism—which in this case, Rage against the Machine is using their music, lyric, and video to fight the crime against humanity and cultural imperialism.*

**Keywords:** *Rage against the Machine, lyric, music video, ideology, capitalism, Marxism*

## **ABSTRAK**

*Band Rage Against the Machine dikenal dengan politik dalam musik mereka, yang akhirnya berkontribusi dalam menciptakan genre musik aggressive-heavy rock-rap. Artikel memuat lagu band Rage Against the Machine yang berhubungan dengan perubahan ideologi di Amerika: yang berjudul Sleep Now in the Fire. Lagu tersebut memberikan pemahaman tentang ideologi yang dibawa oleh band ini. Metode dalam artikel ini adalah melalui studi pustaka. Artikel dimulai dengan biografi pendek dari band, konsep teori, dan analisis lagu dan video klipnya. Dari artikel ini, dapat disimpulkan bahwa lagu tersebut merupakan representasi kritik ideologi terhadap kapitalisme Marxisme. Dalam lirik dan video klip merepresentasikan Marxisme yang merupakan pergerakan yang sama untuk melawan kapitalisme - dalam hal ini, Rage Against the Machine menggunakan musik, lirik, dan video mereka melawan kejahatan terhadap umat manusia dan imperialisme budaya.*

**Kata kunci:** *Rage against the Machine, lirik, video, ideologi, kapitalisme, Marxisme*

## INTRODUCTION

*Rage against the Machine* is known for their politics as well as their music, which the latter helped creating an aggressive-heavy rock-rap genre (Serpick, n.d.). The band's first album, *Rage Against the Machine*, reached triple platinum status. Its album cover featured Malcolm Browne's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of Thích Quảng Đức, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, burning himself to death in Saigon in 1963 as a protest of the murder of Buddhists by the US-backed Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm's regime. The band are advocates for the release of former Black Panther and Death Row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, a convicted cop killer who they considered to be given a mistrial by the government, De la Rocha even once spoke before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in support of Abu-Jamal. The band also raised funds and support for political activist and convicted double-murderer Leonard Peltier, a figure of American Indian Movement and documented his case in the video for *Freedom*.

Critics have noted *Rage Against the Machine* for its criticisms toward corporate America, cultural imperialism, and government oppression with their punk, hip-hop, and thrash musical genre. Singer Zack de la Rocha brought the rap with his aggressive, politically charged lyrics/rhymes. Tom Morello added punk, metal, and funk sounds with his guitar creating a groovy-metal sound to match De la Rocha's rhymes.

Both of these two front men de la Rocha and Morello were born into activist families. De la Rocha (born January 12, 1970) grew up in suburban Irvine, California, and East L.A., as the son of a painter, Beto, who devoted his work to Mexican/Chicano causes. De la Rocha's grandfather was a Sinaloan revolutionary who fought in the Mexican Revolution and an agricultural labourer in the US. Later, de la Rocha (Cuevas, 1998) would see the hardships his grandfather endured reflected in the struggles of the Zapatistas (also known as EZLN). His German-Irish mother, Olivia de la Rocha, has a Ph.D in Anthropology from the University of California at Irvine. Zack described Irvine, the city which he once lived as "one of the most racist cities imaginable. If you were a Mexican in Irvine, you were there because you had a broom or a hammer in your hand" (Tannenbaum, n.d.).

Harlem-born Tom Morello was the son of a Kenyan rebel-turned-diplomat father and a white civil-rights activist mother. Morello (born May 30, 1964) graduated from Harvard with a social studies degree and moved to California, where he shared the same ideology in de la Rocha. Along with drummer Brad Wilk and bassist Tim Commerford, they formed Rage Against the Machine in 1991 and released a self-produced 12-song cassette the following year, which then got them a deal with major recording company, Epic Records. The band did not sign until it was assured full creative control (Serpick, n.d.).

Morello is the co-founder of the non-profit political activist organization, Axis of Justice, which airs monthly on KPFK 90.7FM in Los Angeles. Their goal is "to bring together musicians, fans of music, and grassroots political organizations to fight for social justice together". They also "aim to build a bridge between fans of music around the world and local political organizations to effectively organize around issues of peace, human rights, and economic justice" ("Our Mission, (Axis of Justice)," n.d.). The group has worked for issues such as immigrant rights and death-penalty abolition. They also recommended book list includes authors such as Noam Chomsky, Karl Marx, Che Guevara, George Orwell, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Grant Morrison.

### Theoretical Background

Capitalism is a concept related with economy where economic matters are separated from theology. Whereas economic matters were still bound to religion and churches in Middle Age era, then

thinkers like Quesnay and Adam Smith suggested that economic matters were become world matters. For Quesnay and Smith, Capitalism is a concept that allows humans to be involved in free economy and be able to earn profit as much as they can without any restraint/limitation regulated by religion and even the state/government. The main principle of capitalism at that time was *Laissez Faire*, a concept that prohibits external authority to interfere in economic matters. Smith argued that if mankind were free to gain profit than there would be competition (as if there is an invisible hand creating order within the society without the economic practitioner's awareness). Another principle is that capitalism emphasizes production's profit to increase the capital itself (assets). With this new concept, capitalists compete with each other increase production as effective as they can, so that the capital can be accumulated and strengthening the company's finance (Ahdian, 2006).

Capitalism is also a socio-economic system where social relations are based on *commodities for exchange*, in particular private ownership of the means of production and on the exploitation of wage labour; The owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) *buy* the labour power of those who do not own the means of production (the proletariat), and use it to boost the value of their property (capital). Value is increased through the appropriation of surplus value from wage labour. In capitalism, the ruling class earns surplus value by extending the working day beyond necessary labour time. That extra labour then is used by the capitalist for profit; used in whatever ways they choose ("Encyclopedia of Marxism: Capitalism," n.d.).

At a certain point (the beginning of the 20th-century), the entire globe had been divided up between a few great powers. Thus begins the final stage in the development of capitalism, imperialism, characterised by the domination of the banks, the formation of large multi-national corporations, by war and revolution. While the growth of militarization remains a necessity to expend excess production. For example, one country might invade another by using its military power, the destroyed country then is infiltrated by capitalists to be offered business contracts for the process of 'rebuilding' the fallen country ("Encyclopedia of Marxism: Capitalism," n.d.).

Marxism is a revolutionary movement against capitalism which then developed as current of social theory which engages a wide spectrum of people ("Encyclopedia of Marxism: Marxist," n.d.). Marxism itself derives from the philosophy of Karl Marx (along with Frederick Engels), who was born in 1818 in Trier, Rhineland, Germany (Woodfin & Zarate, 2008). One of his famous remark was "The history of all existing mankind and society is the history of class struggles". He thought that exploitation began when society was based on slavery—slaves were the real wealth for the dominant classes, and this system collapsed because of the contradiction within itself and then was replaced by feudalism. In the feudalism era, societies were subjected to aristocrat's-controlled land, making them unable to move freely. Feudalism was broke and then was replaced by a modern dominant production system, which is capitalism. Capitalism is a bourgeoisie revolution, which began when merchants and big cities industrialists took over the power and authority from aristocrats and forced them to comply (Woodfin & Zarate, 2008).

Imperialism, which is an advanced stage of capitalism, happens when the expansion of colonialism has surrounded the globe and no new colonies can be obtained by the superpower countries except by taking them from each other, and the concentration of capital has grown to a point where finance capital becomes dominant over industrial capital. Lenin pointed out the following five features characteristic of the era of imperialism:

- (1) the concentration of production and capital has reached to such a high level that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economy;
- (2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the forming on the basis of this "finance capital", of a financial oligarchy;
- (3) the export of capital as eminent from the export of commodities acquires particular importance;
- (4) the formation of international monopoly capitalist associations which share the world between themselves, and
- (5) the territorial division

of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is well-established (“Encyclopedia of Marxism: Imperialism,” n.d.).

## DISCUSSION

The writer focuses the analysis on one of Rage Against the Machine’s songs, *Sleep Now in the Fire*. The writer analyzes the lyrics as well as the music video of the song using Marxism. The music video for the song which was directed by Michael Moore which features the band playing in front of the New York Stock Exchange, it also consists a satire of the popular television game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* which is named “*Who Wants to Be Filthy F#&%ing Rich*”. The shoot for the music video on January 26, 2000, caused the doors of the New York Stock Exchange to be closed. First analysis focuses on the lyric of the song.

On the first two lines, we hear ‘*The world is my expense, the cost of my desire*’. Means I will rape the world if it is necessary to enrich myself. Next, we hear ‘*Jesus blessed me with its future*’. This line is about a book by Max Weber, *Capitalism and the Protestant ethics*, how religion is connected in supporting and spreading capitalism. Then, we hear ‘*And I protect it with fire*’ which means I will protect my assets even with force if necessary and with fire I will burn books or information about my greed.

Next line says ‘*So raise your fists and march around, don’t dare take what you need*’, which probably mean that that people are allowed to gather and protest but should not take crosses the government’s line, because ‘*I’ll jail and bury those committed, And smother the rest in greed*’ that means with money and power the government will imprison those who stand in its way to protect the elite’s wealth for it is greedy.

On the next lines, we hear ‘*Crawl with me into tomorrow, or I’ll drag you to your grave*’ which means I won’t even hesitate to kill you to protect our assets/wealth. This verse is ended with ‘*I’m deep inside your children, they’ll betray you in my name*’, that can be interpreted as: any possible changes—on not to become greedy—will be too late because their children will already be following the capitalist. Even amongst families, greed will make them to betray others as if it is natural.

The reff of this song says ‘*Hey! Hey! Sleep now in the fire!*’ Sleep now in the fire means that you are dead but you don’t realize it because you’re sleeping, while I’m taking everything from you and after I have taken everything from you. It can also means political apathy, when people are being repressed by the government (fire) but at the same time they are not doing anything about it.

The next verse is opened with ‘*The lie is my expense, the scope with my desire*’ that means I can lie to you to get what I want; because it is my desire to get what anything I want. Next line says ‘*The party blessed me with its future, and I protect it with fire*’ which means any company or organization that I join in has blessed me and I will protect it with force to maintain its stability/wealth.

Next, we hear ‘*I am the nina, the pinta, the santa maria*’ which are the name of the ships that Columbus found America with, and claims that it was his. It is continued with ‘*The noose and the rapist, the fields overseer*’. The noose here means a rope used for hanging or in public execution, usually it is to hang the black people during the Ku Klux Klan era (lynching era). The rapist here is not in the same context as raping someone sexually, instead, it is about a rape against humanity/culture. It can be said if one country is invading others and taking its resources is considered to be raping them.

The fields overseer here means a foreman, someone who make sure that all works are to be done by the subordinates/slaves. He forces everyone to do the work.

Next we hear '*The agents of orange, The priests of Hiroshima, The cost of my desire, Sleep now in the Fire*'. The agents of orange refer to a code name for one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the U.S military as part of its herbicidal warfare program, Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War from 1961-1971. Vietnam estimates 400.000 people were killed or maimed because of this chemical weapon, and 500.000 children born with birth defects (York & Mick, 2008).

The priest of Hiroshima here refers to the eight German missionaries who prayed in a house everyday during the World War II. During the A Bomb that went off in Hiroshima about 1 km from the location of the house, these German missionaries were found alive and only conceded minor injuries; no radiation sickness, no loss of hearing, or any other visible long term defects (Rinehart & Hubbell, 2000). This is a symbol of a Hiroshima bombing during the World War II.

These are the consequences of my desire, so you die and sleep in the fire because of them. Basically these are the symbols of the crime against humanity; The Nina, Pinta, Santa Maria are the ships of Columbus, in which during his voyage many Indians were killed for many reasons. The noose, the rapist, and the fields overseer symbolizes the Americans during the slavery period, in which black people were hanged and raped and also forced to do labor/slavery work by the white people.

On the third first, it is opened with '*For it's the end of history*'. The end of history here is probably taken from Francis Fukuyama's essay called 'End of History' in 1989, in which he argued that a notable consensus about the legitimacy of liberal democracy as governmental system had emerged and developed throughout the world. Next, we hear 'It's caged and frozen still' that means the system of liberal democracy cannot be changed as it binds and represses people. Finally, it is ended with '*There is no other pill to take, so swallow the one that makes you ill*'.

These lines still refer to Fukuyama's thesis of the End of History, which then the 'pill' here refers to liberal democracy as the most ideal governmental system that conquered rival ideologies hereditary monarchy, fascism, and communism (other pills). Fukuyama added that this system may be the 'end of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government'; hence, 'the end of history'. That makes you ill means you can't avoid this system even though it makes [some of] you ill (Blunded, 2005).

The writer then analyzes the song's music video found on the internet through Veoh.com. The video opens with the scene of Wall Street Stock Exchange and a statement that Rage is not going to play their music on Wall Street. Then the scene shifts to Wednesday, Rage slowly enters a small stage in front of Wall Street to play their music. Fans gathered to watch Rage plays, for a while the police and Wall Street security allows them to play because they thought that they had permission for it. The scene then changes to a new narrative style, a spoof on Who Wants to be Millionaire quiz/TV show appears. Rage appears playing their music using businessmen-like wardrobe. The show starts its first question and its first contestant. A middle-class looking man is given the first question: what letter follows A? The question is followed by two possible responses, choice A is B and choice B is Q. The man then easily answers the question, which is shown only as a satire on how easy or ridiculous sometimes the question given by this show. A lady then shows up to answer the second question: numbers of Americans with no health care? Again, there two possible answers; choice A is 45 million and choice B is a few old people. The lady then chooses the wrong answer, which is B. a few old people—the correct answer should be A. 45 million. The lady then seems to be surprised knowing that her answer is wrong. This satiric scene shows how people are uncaring or apathetic about the low-class people. For the third question, a black American lady shows up. This time the question is: The richest 10% in America own...? The two possible answers are A. 80% of all wealth and B. Connecticut. The middle class looking lady then chooses the wrong answer, B. Connecticut. Again,

this shows how people are unaware that the majority of the whole economy in America is owned by the richest people there, therefore the gap between the richest and the poor is wide, contributing the imbalance of power in America.

Next, a working class guy is given a question, this one asks that what do women make...? Possible answers are A. 30% less than men and B. babies. The man then chooses the right answer, 30% less than men, which shows how women are treated unequally among men in the case of receiving wages. The fourth question is: How many people in the world live on less than 1 dollar a day? Possible answers are: A. 1 billion and B. not possible! Again, the next contestant gives the wrong answer, B. not possible! Again, the satirical purpose of this scene is to show how most people are unaware of poverty that exists in the world. The final episode presents a homeless guy who is given the last question to win a jackpot. The question is how many Americans live in poverty? Possible answers are: A. 35 million and B. what poverty? The homeless guy, who has been living poverty,—unlike other contestants who are working class or middle class people—then gives the right answer, which is A. 35 million. The host then presents the homeless guy a million dollar in cash in which he carries with his own arm for him.

Reacting to this, the homeless guy is not showing any interest at all, instead, he gives the money back to the host. The audiences in the show then give applause to the homeless guy and go crazy inside the studio, they destroyed everything and throw out the million dollar cash around the studio. At the end of the scene, director Michael Moore was arrested by the police. After awhile, Rage was then also forced to stop playing and was escorted to leave the place.

## CONCLUSION

Both the lyric and the music video of Sleep Now in the Fire by *Rage Against the Machine* reflects a criticism toward capitalism. The lyric takes a perspective of a greedy person/a capitalist, as it is shown on the lyric that it is using a first person point of view. The keywords expense, cost, and greed are among the key concepts shown on the lyric that represents capitalism. Rage is trying to say that the Europeans (which eventually American as well) are guilty for the crime against humanity by invading other countries, forcing them to accept the colonizer's business contracts, enslaving its citizens, killing, and raping them as well. The music video of this song shows a satire toward capitalism by creating a spoof of a popular TV gameshow *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. The video aims to criticize how sometimes the media is playing an important role in widening the gap between social classes. The video ridicules TV game show by showing how apathetic or unaware people are about poverty and how absurd it is that rich people own most of the economy in America. Therefore, both of these lyric and music video represents Marxism as it shares the same movement to fight capitalism—which in this case, Rage is using their music, lyric, and video to fight the crime against humanity and cultural imperialism.

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