

TOBY KEITH AND THE DECAY OF THE AMERICAN OLIGARCHY

The technology of war advances the disenchantment of the world to an extent that necessitates the production of new myths as a way of bearing the increasing dehumanization wrought by this technology. On the home front and in the combat zones, a culture industry co-opted by the military supplies the need for tradition and rootedness with an artificial mythology created from unmediated, nostalgic concepts of freedom and patriotism.

In this context, the function of the music industry is no longer mere entertainment. Country music in particular, has been incorporated into the industry of war to the point of merging with it. It is employed partially as a weapon, partially as a psychological tool to boost fighting morale. Contemporary country music is no test-tube baby; its operation is more like refined sugar. Entertainment artists like Toby Keith are contributing to the tight knot that binds Country music to the pursuit of war. Country music has a song to offer for pretty much every war the USA has ever fought. In the shadow of victory and defeat, the Okie Trail of white, socially disadvantaged America plays out on the moving carpet of Country music: the exodus from poverty of a deeply religious, poor and predominantly white section of American society leads directly to the recruiting agencies of Uncle Sam. The soundtrack of this America is a hymn of glorification: the magic of the tornados experienced by the first settlers, storms that plough the bible belt like the angry finger of God, is now packaged as a cultural product dedicated to pursuing God's wrath and holy justice at the point of a gun.

A populist America ruled by the culture industry, that must imaginatively invent new so-called sciences to assist God's work, and where capitalism has been transformed into a force of nature, leaves no place for the project of social justice. Countrysongs like Ferlin Huskey's 'Let's Keep the Communists Out', or Merle Haggard's 'Okie from Muskogee', became part of a cultural mass production in which the motif of social justice, formerly integral to Country music, was subjected to an extermination campaign directed by the federal government. Freedom, as the only acceptable concept, was now called upon to continue the social function of this music, which gains in identificatory potential for certain sectors in society the more the 'classic western multi-party democracy is no longer capable of expressing a high degree of social discontent'. These are the reasons why Toby Keith must stage himself as a renegade, a paradoxical outlaw for a traditionally anti-authoritarian, white America, while simultaneously integrating with the military complex and state apparatus.

However this technê, which transforms science into passion, no longer merely enchants a supposedly unenlightened underclass. Irrationality staged on an astounding scale in the mass media, and disguised as common sense, increasingly affects the supposedly enlightened urban middle class. This inherent dissolution of traditional antagonisms, in the shadow of a decaying American oligarchy, enables an understanding of Toby Keith's political biography without perceiving it as schizophrenic, and it explains why the Dixie Chicks lag far behind, defending an old, incomplete enlightenment project, wearing an FYTK shirt. As actual outlaws in the tradition of Willie Nelson, they stand in the shadow of the Synthesist: Toby Keith, ex-Democrat, post-enlightenment missionary of a new American patriotism, post-religious, transcending race and

class at will, geotropically liberal and always ready for the fight.

While the attitude of the educated classes is propped up by an old-fashioned and fatal optimism of progress, which enables the equation of the 'absolute good' with the 'absolute evil', the less educated sector of American society is satisfied with an irrational magic of freedom. Here the de-politicization of the economy is countered on the one hand by a tolerant rationality that drives humanity to its tipping point into inhumanity and war. On the other hand, there rules a mythological freedom, traditionally defended with weapon or guitar in hand, which does not require a complex discussion about how to define the concept of freedom. This abstract freedom is barely more than a resonance in the void. It is a placeholder, resistant to all argument, proudly and stupidly waving its flag in the face of Socialism and Islamism. There is no need for grassroots: astroturfing gives rise to an emotional defence of tax exemption, the right to carry arms and to violently destroy any threat to this sense of freedom, which is serious and ceremonial, hand to heart. It is freedom that sits by the campfire with a guitar, negating its own racism so effectively that even African Americans and Latinos join in.

What is novel here is the gradual detachment from Neoconservatism and the rejection of modern standards of personal autonomy. These are ultimately seen to conflict with an official liberalism endorsed by the mass media, which speaks to the educated and non-educated American public alike, and which protects the racists in their ranks from the accusation of racism. These strategies are articulated differently at opposing ends of the political and social spectrum, but in the end they want the same thing: to recruit the masses, profoundly disturbed by the reality of 9/11, to the defence of a loosely defined, popular concept of freedom. This is the case even with a rational approach that might conceive of a less half-educated (in Adorno's sense) relation to this concept of freedom, but which ignores that this construct is hopelessly corrupted by geopolitical and economic interests.

The present collection of images by Thomas Galler consists of two volumes: one shows the management of troops by the USO (United Services Organisation) as a staging of the All-American nightmare (stars and stripes, celebrities, cheerleaders, wrestling, mosh pits, and lots of adrenaline). In the same context, the other volume shows Toby Keith entertaining the troops, taking souvenir pictures with bikini-clad girls, giving autographs. During serial US involvement in international conflicts, USO troop management has developed into more than a fixed feature of the conservatively oriented American culture industry. The culture industry is not merely an extension of the military complex; it has become a tool of psychological warfare. It is used in troop management to strengthen morale, in torture procedures, as permanent acoustic irradiation of besieged positions, and on the home front –the importance of positive backing at home for the trajectory of a war has been recognised at least since the debacle of the War in Vietnam. The soundtrack of the jungle war in the 1960s was based on music that was then considered to endanger the morals of young people: psychedelic rock. In the belief that superstitious Vietcong might be demoralised by means of psychedelia (LSD had already been unsuccessfully tested as a biological weapon), the jungle was bombarded with psychedelic sound developed by the military. Today of course it isn't supposedly dangerous Gangsta-Rap that is used to morally support

the troops, but predominantly white music: rock and country. The same music is deployed to demoralize enemy troops using acoustic canon in besieged sectors, or to torture non-western enemies. For example, Guantanamo prisoner Mohamedou Ould Slahi was maltreated through continuous exposure to the song 'Let the bodies hit the floor' by Texan Nu-Metal band 'Drowning Pool'. The same song is played in tanks to boost troop morale during combat missions. Even as 'Drowning Pool' present themselves as an alternative band, and Toby Keith stages himself as an Outlaw in combat gear, the staged difference becomes a symptom of the normalizing practices of a world power in the process of loosing its status, and whose attempts to stop the corrosion of its own symbols are largely in vain in a state ruled by an African American President, a state whose geopolitical position is shifting. The old America is dying.

Text by Diego Castro