

## Review

Jonathan Pieslak. 2015. *Radicalism and Music: An Introduction to the Music Cultures of al-Qa'ida, Racist Skinheads, Christian-Affiliated Radicals, and Eco-Animal Rights Militants*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. ISBN 978-0-8195-7584-5 (pbk). 344 pp.

**Reviewed by:** Sarah J. Dietsche, Belmont University, Nashville, TN, USA  
[sarah.dietsche@adjuncts.belmont.edu](mailto:sarah.dietsche@adjuncts.belmont.edu)

**Keywords:** music and culture; propaganda; radicalism; violence

What leads a person to harass, assault, or commit murder in the name of radical ideologies? We find it hard to relate to violent extremists as fellow humans. Perhaps they are mentally ill or led astray by some charismatic leader. Whatever the case, *they* are not like *us*. In *Radicalism and Music*, Jonathan Pieslak addresses the role of music in the formation of violent extremists. In doing so, he removes some of those layers of difference, reminding us that we may not be as far removed as we think.

Pieslak, an accomplished composer, is an Associate Professor at The City College of New York and Graduate Center, CUNY. His research primarily focuses on the interactions of music and violence and, significantly, his book *Sound Targets* explored soldiers' interactions with music during the Iraq war (Pieslak 2009). Pieslak's main argument in *Radicalism and Music* is that music can have a significant effect on the radicalization process, no matter what type of extremism the music represents. The musical cultures of several disparate extremist organizations are compared and contrasted, ultimately parsing out the common threads that run between them.

*Radicalism and Music* is firmly planted in the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology. Techniques such as interviews, concert attendance, and internet discussions provided the primary methodological framework for the study as Pieslak attempts to 'infiltrate' these groups. In doing so, Pieslak references several prior studies exploring music's relationship to violence (Pegley and Fast 2012). These previous studies have addressed the musical cultures of each of these radical groups (Lemieux 2012) and studies outside of musicology address the culture of terrorism and extremist groups (Sternberg and Sternberg 2008). Pieslak's book contributes to this research by comparing these diverse cultures and groups in a

comprehensive way. He provides an in-depth study of the history, progression, and musical cultures of four extremist groups from different ethnicities, countries, religions, and political leanings.

The first four chapters address the music cultures of al-Qa'ida, racist skin-heads, Christian-affiliated radicals, and eco-animal rights militants consecutively. Each chapter begins with an account of a specific event illuminating how music has been used by individuals within these affiliations to create a sense of in- and out-groupness, block out unwanted reality, and actively promote or act out violence. He provides a history of each movement and a background of their musical culture. Pieslak then discusses how music is currently used in the service of the stated goals of the group and its effectiveness. An interlude addresses the overlap between the white supremacist movement and Christian fundamentalism. The final chapter compares the propagandistic commonalities between these diverse extremist groups. Pieslak notes that music is an effective carrier of propaganda because it triggers our emotions and can therefore circumvent rational reflection. In the closing, Pieslak offers a final reflection on how these propaganda techniques are used in more common situations such as sporting events or street protests. By drawing this connection, he encourages reflection on our own propensity for labelling and dividing and the inherent danger in doing so.

There are a number of things which Pieslak does well in *Radicalism and Music*, but perhaps his most significant accomplishment is in finding important commonalities between groups that seemingly have none. By choosing organizations that are so diverse, he is able to shed light on the overarching methods of radical propaganda used in music. Writing a book addressing such extreme and emotional topics is a difficult undertaking. For the most part, Pieslak does an excellent job restricting his bias, providing us with an unemotional and convincing picture of these extremist groups. Some bias does appear, however, during his discussion of Christian-affiliated extremists. These arguments seem more emotionally charged and the effectiveness of his conclusions is therefore lessened.

On the whole, *Radicalism and Music* is an effective and engaging book which encourages honest reflection, particularly in light of the recent increase in mass shootings and extremism in America. I have found myself referencing its contents introspectively and publicly several times. While it is certainly a scholarly project, it also seems to be motivated by a desire for human connection and the humanization of the other. This book would be of interest to those working on music and conflict/violence, music and psychology, the study of radicalism, violence, or terrorism, and anyone who has an interest in learning more about radicalism and extremism.

## References

- Lemieux, Anthony. 2012. 'The Sikh Temple Shootings and Hate Rock: Violent White Supremacist Music Comes into the Public Dialog'. *Psychology Today*. Online at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dangerous-minds/201208/the-sikh-temple-shootings-and-hate-rock> (accessed 23 July 2017).
- Pegley, Kip, and Susan Fast. 2012. *Music, Politics, and Violence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Pieslak, Jonathan R. 2009. *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Sternberg, Robert J., and Karin Sternberg. 2008. *The Nature of Hate*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818707>