



***“Every day I’m hustlin’”*: Rap music as street capitalism**

by David Diallo

In a 2004 article, rap scholar Mickey Hess remarked, “Making money is a legitimate goal for rappers, and one that is stated outright in lyrics” (635). Rap musicians, it is true, very often display a capitalistic frame of mind in their performance. They consistently refer to money—more specifically, to making money through entrepreneurial activities—and generally draw on a semantic field of capitalism. For example, EPMD—a rap group whose moniker stands for Eric and Parish Making Dollars and who released the albums *Strictly Business* (1988), *Unfinished Business* (1989), *Business as Usual* (1990), *Business Never Personal* (1992), *Back in Business* (1997), *Out of Business* (1999), and *We Mean Business* (2008)—clearly favored a business-oriented and capitalist discourse. Record labels like Cash Money in New Orleans and Jay-Z’s Roc-A-Fella, whose name explicitly references the capitalist heights rappers seek to climb, similarly point to this inclination. Whether they do it through their aliases or in their lyrics, rap musicians brazenly display a capitalist frame of mind and repeatedly brag about their enterprises, whether legitimate (like outstanding record sales) or criminal (particularly, accomplishments in the underground economy of the “hustle”).

Although the capitalist logic of bragging about sales is quite obvious, since selling records is a legitimate business, rapping about pushing drugs or pimping has not commonly been associated with capitalism as it is generally acknowledged. Yet a growing body of work has addressed the interdependencies of legal and illegal economies and has convincingly shown how some informal economies are very much a part of capitalism (Nordstrom 2007). For example, and as sociologist and urban ethnographer Sudhir Venkatesh demonstrates, drug trafficking and prostitution belong to what he calls “outlaw capitalism,” an underground capitalist economy that has been reconstructed hyperbolically, in rhymes and in rhythm, in the lyrics of rap emcees (2008: 37–38).

This underground economy of black ghettos, also called “shadow” or “informal,” has been documented in several works of the past thirty years. In the 1990s, sociologist William Julius Wilson published authoritative books and articles on the theory of the urban poor as an “underclass.” He argued, along with sociologists like Loïc Wacquant, Elijah Anderson, and Lawrence M. Mead, that the ghetto underclass was a separate social stratum that had developed into a group isolated from the rest of society (Wilson 1993). In the wake of their findings, several sociologists conducted detailed ethnographic research on the economic activities that characterized this group. Wacquant (1993), Philippe Bourgois (1993), Mitchell Duneier (1999), Anderson (1999) and, more recently, Venkatesh (2006; 2008) each published highly documented studies on this field of illegal activities that commonly requires a particular type of symbolic capital in order to generate immediate financial gain.

Wacquant uses the term “hustle” to refer to these mutually dependent activities. This term, in African-American ghetto vernacular, refers to various extralegal ways of obtaining money, generally through deception or violence. It gained prominence in scholarly works of the late sixties in the wake of pioneering books like Elliot Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967) and Bettylou Valentine’s *Hustling and Other Hard Work: Life Styles in the Ghetto* (1978). It can also be found in the more recent ethnographic work of sociologists (Bourgois 1989; Venkatesh 2006) and, also, extensively, in rap lyrics. For example, there is an Atlanta rap label called Grand Hustle Records, and of course there is Rick Ross’s well-known song “Hustlin’” (2006), whose famous chorus I borrowed in my title (see video below). Countless other examples illustrate this point. For L.A. Dennis, the hustle’s economic activities range from illegal gambling to drug trafficking, from selling stolen goods to pimping (1972: 19). Although it tends to call to mind images of devious back-alley business deals, the hustle, or to hustle (as a verb), for urban ethnographers and rap emcees refers in fact to the entire uncensused, untaxed underground economy of inner-city street culture. During his ten-year research in the Chicago high-rises, Venkatesh documented the constellation of ghetto dwellers who work off the books to make money, as well as the vastly structured underground economic web that surrounds the neighborhood and weaves its social fabric (2006).



Building on this research, I hold that it is important to insist on the *structured* aspect of the informal/criminal economy, since it has often been portrayed as entropic and lacking organization. However, as the latest research has brought to light, this economy is, in fact, far from disorganized. There is a vast structure in place, with a set of rules that define who trades with whom, what prices can be set, and what revenue can be earned, just like in the documented or reported capitalist economy. Also, just as in the documented capitalist economy, there are codes in place for settling disputes and adjudicating conflicts. In *Off the Books* (2006), Venkatesh unveils an economic web of underground dealings and shady enterprises that weave together residents, families, businesses, and even politicians and police. Other scholarly works on the hustle have similarly demonstrated how this economy provides ample opportunities to make money and to maintain the community, through an element of necessity and pragmatic logic.

The informal economic activity in the United States is commonly acknowledged as a criminal world peopled with devious street workers (drug dealers, pimps, stickup men—characters with considerable symbolic capital in expressive forms of the ghetto as oppositional folk heroes). It is also sometimes acknowledged as a

world peopled with welfare parents not capable, or not willing, of working as a “good American” would. Urban ethnography, however, has exposed an entrepreneurial drive from ghetto residents who run operations or are involved in a beneath-the-radar capitalist economy. As Bourgois’s research reveals, these workers and entrepreneurs have garnered street forms of cultural capital needed to operate in the underground economy that can be transplanted under different forms to the documented, censused economy.

What Bourgois shows in his ethnography of the Puerto Rican East Harlem conducted in the 1980s is that the mastery of street culture and economy can enable ghetto residents to administer their businesses successfully in the underground economy but also help some of them, with some support and expertise, to operate as legal entrepreneurs. The main problem of people involved in the hustle (in his study, drug dealers) is not lack of skills—they manage a complex system involving marketing, distribution of resources, and human relations—but rather their lack of cultural capital (literacy, know-how) in handling city agencies, or the ability to switch between the street and white-collar worlds.

The world of the street, and its economic web, being at the center of the life of ghetto residents, is predominant in rap discourse, rap being a highly ghetto-centric expressive form. Rap music’s stylized and rhythmic productions are profoundly marked by street culture. Several books and scholarly articles have brought to light how rap musicians frequently glorify street life and criminal activities in their lyrics (Diallo 2012; Evil 2005; Quinn 2004; Riley 2005). Rappers’ repeated allusions to drug trafficking and the underground economy result from the symbolic reconstruction of the social space of the street hustle and of gang culture. Rap music’s constant references to the black ghetto and to its informal practices confer rap artists’ credibility in a field where to evoke illegal activities enables the demonstration of sociocultural authenticity. If rap lyrics are replete with representations of the hustle, it is predominantly because in order to have some legitimacy or street credibility (“cred”) in the rap scene, emcees must refer symbolically to this social space. This an established convention of the genre, “a staple of rap music,” as Charis Kubrin points out (2005: 369).

Mentioning their capitalist accomplishments confers credibility to rappers in a field where rapping about getting rich through music or illegal activities, or both, enables performers to demonstrate sociocultural authenticity. It has been established numerous times that rap music is an extremely competitive expressive form (Costello and Wallace 1990: 24; George 1992: 86). Without dwelling on this here, it is important to note that emcees must exhibit lyrical dexterity through sophisticated rhymes and demonstrate how each of their characteristics surpasses those of any potential or identified rival. Through this agonistic inclination, they must celebrate their rhetorical virtuosity and invent status markers determinedly superior to those of any potential opponent to sway the audience or the listeners.

Such bragging (or boasting) is one of the conventions of rap music (Edwards 2009: 25). It mainly derives from DJ battles and other forms of expression where exaggeration is commonplace, like break dancing and battle rhyming. This unwritten rule has led rap emcees to recurrently brag about how much more of everything (especially money) they have than the next emcee—hence the emphasis they frequently lay on their capitalist enterprises, glorifying the hustle as a lifestyle or simply addressing it to get cultural recognition. In rap lyrics, “hustlin’” is indeed either glorified or at least mentioned in a discourse that constantly shifts between need and greed. Rappers are either celebrating street capitalism or “grindin’” (working hard) for the dollar. This “shadow” capitalistic imagery that prevails in rap does so not simply in what is commonly and rigidly labeled “gangsta rap,” but also in the discourse of rappers conveying a political message. In other words, rappers rap about making money and easy women when choosing a gangsta persona, but they also rap about “hustlin’” as an inexorable way to “get by” in America’s disadvantaged neighborhoods (e.g., “The Corner” by Common, video below). Addressing this theme is critical in the rap performance and the reception of rap lyrics.



Common - The Corner ft. The Last Poets

Countless examples point to this capitalist frame of mind and at the celebration of an outlaw capitalism whose structure, as Levitt and Dubner have revealed, is very similar to corporate structure (2005: 86–113). Emcees continually rap about making (and spending) money under its various metonymic forms: paper, cheese, cheddar, green, payola, C.R.E.A.M (an acronym coined by the Wu-Tang Clan for “Cash Rules Everything Around Me”), cash, dough, collard greens. They also rap about the advantages of money, evident in the noms de plume chosen by rappers and groups like American Cream Team, Lloyd Banks, Bo\$\$, B. Rich, Cash Money and Marvelous, Ca\$h Money Click, E-Money Bags, and Too \$hort; in songs like “Get That Dough,” “Put Your Money,” and “Got My Money Right,” and albums like *Straight Outta Cashville* by Young Buck, *Paid in Full* by Eric B. and Rakim, and *Power of the Dollar* by 50 Cent. In rap discourse, talking about money and earnings is predominantly posturing and complying with a formal convention in a greatly standardized production.

To conclude

This article’s intentions are twofold. First, I have shown that a great deal more can, and should, be written about rap music and capitalism. In doing so it is important to highlight that the structuring role of the rap genre’s ghetto-centric discourse and competitive spirit has obliquely shaped the content of its emcees’ rhymes. Second, the rappers’ permanent use of representations of street capitalism, I have argued, results from the symbolic reconstruction of the social space of the “street hustle.” Also, rappers’ constant references to the ghetto and its illegal practices confer them credibility in a field where to evoke criminal activities demonstrates sociocultural authenticity. These observations are simple, but they are particularly insightful and enlightening for understanding the aesthetic choices of rap musicians. Looking at rap lyrics in the light of recent ethnographic work substantiates that rap lyrics and the verbal discourse of rap emcees are plainly part of capitalism. Although the activities they bring to light remain illegal insofar as they are beneath the radar and unreported, their inner workings and the entrepreneurial spirit that drives them are highly capitalist in nature.

David Diallo is an Associate Professor at the University of Bordeaux (France). His research interests focus on rap music, African-American expressive forms, urban ethnography, sociology of art, and contemporary social theory. He has been a Visiting Research Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and New York University and has contributed to the *Journal of American Folklore* and *Ethnologies*.

References

- Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Bourgois, Philippe. 1989. Crack in Spanish Harlem: Culture and economy in the inner city. *Anthropology Today* 5(4): 6–11.
- Bourgois, Philippe. 1993. Homeless in El Barrio. In Pierre Bourdieu, ed., *La Misère du monde*, pp. 317–336. Paris: Seuil.
- Costello, Mark, and David Foster Wallace. 1990. *Signifying rappers: Rap and race in urban present*. New York: The Ecco Press.
- Dennis, L.A. 1972. The hustler. *Black America* 2(6): 16–18.
- Diallo, David. 2012. The theme of deviance in rap music. In Pascale Antolin and Arnaud Schmitt, eds., *Pratiques et esthétiques de la déviance en Amérique du Nord*, pp. 240–256. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Edwards, Paul. 2009. *How to rap: The art and science of the hip-hop MC*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Evil, Pierre. 2005. *Gangsta-rap*. Paris: Flammarion.
- George, Nelson. 1992. *Buppies, b-boys, baps and bohos: Notes on post-soul black culture*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Hess, Mickey. 2004. The rap career. In Murray Forman and Marc Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the joint!: The hip-hop studies reader*, pp.634–654. New York: Routledge.
- Kubrin, Charis E. 2005. Gangstas, thugs, and hustlas: Identity and the code of the street in rap music. *Social Problems* 52(3): 360–378.
- Liebow, Elliot. 1967. *Tally's corner: A study of negro streetcorner men*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. 2005. *Freakonomics: A rogue economist explores the hidden side of everything*. New York: Penguin.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn. 2007. *Global outlaws: Crime, money, and power in the contemporary world*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Quinn, Eithne. 2004. *Nuthin' but a "G" thang: The culture and commerce of gangsta rap*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Riley, Alexander. 2005. The rebirth of tragedy out of the spirit of hip hop: A cultural sociology of gangsta rap music. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(3): 297–311.
- Valentine, Bettylou. 1978. *Hustling and other hard work: Life styles in the ghetto*. New York: The Free Press.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir. 2006. *Off the books: The underground economy of the urban poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir. 2008. *Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist takes to the streets*. New York: Penguin.

Wacquant, Loïc. 1993. The zone. In Pierre Bourdieu, ed., *La Misère du monde*, pp. 279–316. Paris: Seuil.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2002. Scrutinizing the street: Poverty, morality, and the pitfalls of urban ethnography. *American Journal of Sociology* 107(6): 1,468–1,532.

Wilson, William Julius. 1993. *The ghetto underclass: Social science perspectives*. New York: Sage Publications.

- See more at: <http://www.focaalblog.com/2015/04/03/david-diallo-every-day-im-hustlin-rap-music-as-street-capitalism/#sthash.UuuSIKRP.dpuf>