

Matt Yglesias

Today at 3:14 pm

Popular Music and Social Democracy



Cato's Ilya Shapiro says Michael Jackson [makes the case for capitalism](#):

The King of Pop's creativity allowed him and his family to make hundreds of millions of dollars, yes, but it also created thousands of jobs in the music and marketing industries and brought joy to fans around the world. Whatever his personal eccentricities — perhaps, in part, as a result of them — Jackson represents a capitalist success story.

No central planner could have invented him, and no government bureaucracy could have transformed pop music in the way he did.

It's unquestionably true that central planning's record in pop music is extremely poor, though they did okay in film, but this seems to have limited relevance to our current policy debates. Suppose that Jackson had paid somewhat higher taxes over the course of his career, and that the funds had gone to provide nutritious meals to poor children? I think the world of pop music would have been just about as strong under that scenario, but America as a whole would also be a stronger and more just society. After all, among non-Anglophone countries I think you'd have to say that it's *Sweden* which has had the most pop music success. High tax rates don't seem to discourage their music entrepreneurs.

What's more, if you consider musicians operating outside of the "child star with horribly abusive father" paradigm, I think it's clear that a more social democratic system is going to be advantageous. Consider that in the United States quitting your day job to focus on your promising band can have dire implications for your ability to obtain health insurance. This is particularly the case if you have the misfortune of a pre-existing medical condition. An up-and-coming Canadian or British guitarist is taking a financial risk by choosing to focus on the band, but an American can be really putting his life on the line.

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Filed under: [Health Care](#), [Music](#), [Social Democracy](#)

28 Responses to “Popular Music and Social Democracy”

1. *DTM* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:25 pm](#)

So if Jackson had taken home a bit less, while the lower-paid members of the thousands of supporting people in the music industry had taken home a bit more, would Jackson’s music have never happened?

Indeed, if ever there was a personal demonstration of the diminishing marginal utility of money, isn’t it Jackson?

2. *T Porter* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:25 pm](#)

Shapiro forgot other only-in-America geniuses the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin.

3. *Aaron* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:25 pm](#)

“Limited relevance to our current policy debates.” Hmm. I don’t see Obama openly advocating Swedish-style top marginal tax rates. I do see him “not running” car companies, and “not running” banks. I also see exceptional confidence on the Left that central planning is desirable in the field of health care.

I also see a post just below this one in which you talk about how well central planning worked in building the nuclear bomb and the lunar landing, with the implicit suggestion that this is relevant to our current policy debates.

4. *cd* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:27 pm](#)

That cato post is the most retarded thing i’ve read since that dumbass anti-soccer essay yesterday.

5. *James Gary* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:31 pm](#)

After all, among non-Anglophone countries I think you’d have to say that it’s Sweden which has had the most pop music success. High tax rates don’t seem to discourage their music entrepreneurs...An up-and-coming Canadian or British guitarist is taking a financial risk by choosing to focus on the band, but an American can be really putting his life on the line.

Eeeeyeah. I’m not going to dispute your basic point, but in my experience, *being able to easily earn a living wage* is the *overwhelming* determining factor— much larger than tax rates or health insurance— for artistic entrepreneurship.

In 1973, Patti Smith could earn enough working part-time in a bookstore to rent a loft (at 18th and Park, apparently) large enough for her band to practice in. This is obviously no longer the case.

6. *Moral Panicker* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:31 pm](#)

Consider that in the United States quitting your day job to focus on your promising band can have dire implications for your ability to obtain health insurance. This is particularly the case if you have the misfortune of a pre-existing medical condition. An up-and-coming Canadian or British guitarist is taking a financial risk by choosing to focus on the band, but an American can be really putting his life on the line.

I am not sure about the American musician, but a Canadian or British guitarist is less accountable to an audience as opposed to whatever muse he or she chooses to follow. This may end up being a triumph of the individual soul, but it may just end up with a lot of preening nonsense (verging on anti-social violence) when a promising musician would otherwise be persuaded by financial realities to work to an audience with good taste. The Archbishop of Salzburg for example as in the case of Mozart or the clubs of the 1920s and 1930s for Duke Ellington. I am pretty sure that the pain that can come with poverty is worse than any alleged benefits of “making you want to earn it,” and the benefits of progressive taxation are better than the alleged downsides of discouraging productivity, but MAYBE there is an important lesson about responsibility to society somewhere in there (which is different based on the circumstances of different societies). But how to balance these issues?

Oh right, a less big deal than poverty itself. And oh right, the answer may just be quality education.

7. *MORal Panicker* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:34 pm](#)

blahlblahblahignoreme

8. *alkali* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:34 pm](#)

Consider that in the United States quitting your day job to focus on your promising band can have dire implications for your ability to obtain health insurance. This is particularly the case if you have the misfortune of a pre-existing medical condition. An up-and-coming Canadian or British guitarist is taking a financial risk by choosing to focus on the band, but an American can be really putting his life on the line.

Ex-Wilco guitarist Jay Bennett, who was tormented by hip pain and was trying to get together money for a hip replacement, died a month ago from an accidental painkiller overdose. He did not have health insurance; his hip pain was a preexisting condition. Yay, free market.

9. *Poptars* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:36 pm](#)

Shapiro forgot other only-in-America geniuses the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin.

Don't forget the Jonas Brothers and Hannah Montana. And Yanni.

10. *DTM* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:36 pm](#)

I also see exceptional confidence on the Left that central planning is desirable in the field of health care.

Health care **insurance**, actually. The constituency for government running health care **in general** seem pretty low in the U.S., even among “the Left” (unless you are defining “the Left” in very narrow terms).

In other words, think Medicare, not VA.

11. -g Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:37 pm](#)

In a related story, Felix Salmon [wrote a nice little piece](#) about the benefits of state-supported art in last months’ Atlantic. He noted that the government helped to fund Jackson Pollack...so I guess some Jackson’s can succeed in an evil apparatus after all.

12. *pseudonymous in nc* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:37 pm](#)

among non-Anglophone countries I think you’d have to say that it’s Sweden which has had the most pop music success. High tax rates don’t seem to discourage their music entrepreneurs.

Which calls for [Wyatt Cenak’s visit to Robyn’s crib](#).

Whatever his personal eccentricities — perhaps, in part, as a result of them — Jackson represents a capitalist success story.

Indeed. Only capitalism allows an individual to have \$500m in debts. Cato is funny.

13. *LaFollette Progressive* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:38 pm](#)

Honestly, that Cato link is some of the most hilarious self-parody I’ve ever witnessed.

I mean, here we have an extremely talented megastar who makes massively huge amounts of money, which he uses to surround himself with enabling yes-men and insulate himself from reality, alter his own appearance in bizarre ways, obtain large amounts of pharmaceuticals from quack doctors, acquire a pet chimp, purchase his own private amusement park which he used to surround himself with children whom he allegedly molested, pay a multi-million dollar out-of-court settlement to one of these children and spread millions more around to trial lawyers... and so on, and so forth. Yay, capitalism!

Michael Jackson, as a young man, was immensely talented. And I’m quite sure that he did more valuable and original work under his own creative control than he would have in a Soviet-style arts bureaucracy, *but his personal life is a giant, flashing billboard for social democracy.*

Can anyone say with a straight face that it served either the public good or Michael Jackson’s own best interest to insulate his vast personal fortune from confiscatory taxation? Or to let him make his own medical decisions without interference from nanny state bureaucrats? Please. That man needed a 90% pay cut and a whole hell of a lot less personal freedom.

14. *Tyro* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:40 pm](#)

That cato postis the most retarded thing i’ve read since that dumbass anti-soccer essay yesterday.

Everything you read at Cato is the dumbest thing you’ve ever read since the last time you read

something at Cato.

a Canadian or British guitarist is less accountable to an audience as opposed to whatever muse he or she chooses to follow.

That's your argument? That the audience suffers because such hypothetical musicians can manage a subsistence-level lifestyle holding down a day job without having to worry about health insurance? That's *even dumber* than the hypothetical Cato post I will read tomorrow after today's Cato post.

15. *Moral Panicker* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:42 pm](#)

As an additional politically correct caveat to my first comment on this thread I should say that just because people have power or money does not mean they are more likely to have good taste. There are a lot of things relating obedience to those with more power than you and social (or aesthetic) responsibility, but they are definitely not the same thing.

16. *Moral Panicker* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:46 pm](#)

That's your argument? That the audience suffers because such hypothetical musicians can manage a subsistence-level lifestyle holding down a day job without having to worry about health insurance? That's even dumber than the hypothetical Cato post I will read tomorrow after today's Cato post.

Tyro, if you read my comment in more detail you will notice I do not say government-supported health-insurance or the welfare state in general is bad. Additionally, your mention of people "holding down a day job" is curious; the general context of this post is based on people quitting day jobsto become full-time musicians.

17. *Poptarts* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:50 pm](#)

I agree with those saying Michael Jackson was a poor example for CATO to pick. I always think of that scene in Three Kings where the Iraqi blames Mark Walberg's America for messing up Michael's head.

People will have to agree that no central planner could create "street" magicians/illusionists like David Blaine and Criss Angel? No?

18. *Moral Panicker* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:51 pm](#)

From a clearer perspective, people are more likely to make better music when they are not living in deep poverty caused by having to pay for high health costs out of pocket. So, yes, I understand the many benefits of universal health-care in this specific context in addition to the clear humanitarian benefits for individual people.

19. *MaximusNYC* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:51 pm](#)

Superstars like MJ may keep more of their millions here in America, but up-and-coming musicians do much better in Europe.

Not only is there a dole that they can subsist on for years, and universal health coverage, there is also

generous arts funding. American musicians I know are amazed when they go to Europe on tour and find that not only will they get paid to perform, but their room and board are also paid for, and their hosts are likely take them out to a nice dinner on the government's dime as well.

20. *Point* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 3:58 pm](#)

Interesting that conservatives don't seem to be arguing the whole "tax on charity thing" here — probably because most kids are better off without his "charity".

"After all, among non-Anglophone countries I think you'd have to say that it's Sweden which has had the most pop music success."

Not saying much for non-Anglophone music, is it? I mean ABBA, for f***'s sake?

21. *Jacob Christensen* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:04 pm](#)

@point: Britney Spears may for better or worse be US American but the musical brains of her early career were Swedes. Local musical schools and a dose of non-Conformist churches seem to be part of the explanation.

22. *Gmorbgmibgnikgnok* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:15 pm](#)

No central planner could have invented him

What is Motown? Given a talented, but otherwise normal 5-year-old, it produced...well, whatever the hell he was.

Artistic decentralization is a relatively new (and very, very old) phenomenon. It takes a machine like Hollywood or the recording industry to make someone not only a star, but the *only* game in town. And a machine like that can only survive when technology permits (and only permits) widespread, uni-directional communication.

23. *Point* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:16 pm](#)

"Britney Spears may for better or worse be US American but the musical brains of her early career were Swedes."

Don't make my points for me Jacob...

24. *Max424* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:16 pm](#)

Fred Astaire called Michael the greatest dancer ever. He might be right. It is hard to tell, because there really isn't that much footage of Michael dancing. Some videos and some concert footage and not much else.

Thanks to central planning, we can watch Fred Astaire dance to our hearts delight. In fact, we can watch so much of Fred dancing we literally want to puke.

25. *Moral Panicker* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:17 pm](#)

If people do not need to be accountable to an employer for a subsistence livelihood (however that may be defined), then they do not need to be accountable to an employer (which in the case of an aspiring musician would include his or her audience, which would also include grant-makers from government-support endowments) for a subsistence livelihood. Now it is not at all clear why I would assume that this *will* (as opposed to nuanced speculation using the word “may” - which also included early modern patronage arrangements, which are different from a laissez faire situation) lead to better music. One needs a very high understanding of audiences with money or power and a very low understanding of musicians (their musical taste and their response to economic incentives of appealing to an audience) to reach that conclusion (even in the case of TOTAL ECONOMIC EQUALITY, which is not at all being discussed, whereby there are no economic incentives to appealing to an audience). Good thing I did not actually support that position.

26. *John Voorheis* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:18 pm](#)

@Point - In terms of Swedish pop music, you have to think indie rock - The Knife, Jose Gonzalez, I'm From Barcelona, Dungen, Robyn, Jens Lekman, Peter Bjorn & John, The Shout Out Louds...

27. *blah* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:19 pm](#)

The problem with central planners is not that they fail to create good art. The problem is that they tend to squelch good art that percolates up from the bottom or is cultivated by the wealthy patron class. The role of government, to the extent there is one, is to create the conditions that will expose young people to art, music and literature and to extend a generous enough social safety net so that budding geniuses do not decide to ditch their artistic pursuits for an office job.

28. *BP* Says:

[June 26th, 2009 at 4:20 pm](#)

Why do they have to make EVERYTHING about politics?? Not just politics but the left-right divide and why their side is correct. And these people wonder over their close proximity to the adjective soulless? Sheesh.

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