

The promotion of Black capitalism in Pharrell Williams & Jay-Z's "Entrepreneur"

Elliott Murtagh
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On August 21, multimillionaire music star Pharrell Williams released a song featuring billionaire rapper and businessman Jay-Z, entitled, "Entrepreneur," as part of a special issue of *TIME* magazine named "The New American Revolution," which Pharrell—who runs a clothing brand called Billionaire Boys Club and is best known for his hit song, "Happy"—also curated.

Following in the footsteps of the *New York Times*' "1619 Project," the *TIME* issue "examines America's oppressive past" and features "a series of conversations and essays about creating a more equitable future for Black Americans." Pharrell's lead essay is a confused mess, both critiquing and praising the private profit system, America's past, and patriotism, and ultimately advancing the politics of black nationalism.

Overall, the pieces contained in "The New American Revolution" are feeble and unserious. They range from academic and Stalinist hack Angela Davis arguing that there is no need for "a perfect candidate in order for us to participate in the electoral process" (i.e., a cynical, "left" means of backing Joe Biden) to rapper 21 Savage discussing the importance of financial literacy "for black Americans to undo centuries of racist policies," along with black radicalism, microaggressions, and afrofuturism. All put forth the conception that race is the fundamental dividing line in society, rather than class.

The most popular component of *TIME*'s project, however, is Pharrell and Jay-Z's single, "Entrepreneur," streamed over five million times on YouTube. *Billboard* describes the song as focusing on "how Black ownership can help erode systemic racism."

Presented as empowering and inspirational, the hip-hop song features a stripped-down beat, Pharrell's trademark soul-influenced falsetto hooks and

embellishments, and a building melodramatic horn and string section. Though the musical content strives for grandiosity, it falls very short, and comes off as lackluster and formulaic. Repeated throughout is a sample of the late US Senator and big business politician Arlen Specter saying, "If you want to be led out of here, you're welcome to go."

Pharrell whispers his verses, speaking of "this position with no choice, the system imprison young black boys, distract with white noise, the brainwashed become hype boys." A sung refrain presents his entrepreneurial solution:

You gotta risk it all
Or there'll be lots of things you'll never see
You gotta let go
'Cause you never know
What's in store Mr. Entrepreneur

In the Jay-Z verse that follows, he raps, "For every one Gucci, support two FUBU's"—referencing the American hip-hop clothing company whose name stands for "For Us, By Us"—and, in a flaunting of wealth common in hip-hop, says, "I sip Ace till I throw up," referring to a luxury champagne that costs \$300 a bottle.

He continues:

Stop sittin' around waiting for folks to throw you a bone
If you can't buy the building, at least stock the shelf
Then keep on stacking till you stocking for yourself

Jay-Z finally gets to the heart of the matter: "Black nation, black builder, black entrepreneur, You in the presence of black excellence and I'm on the board [of trustees], Lord!"

The refrains of the second half of the song consist of reciting the words "Black man" over 150 times.

The accompanying music video for the song features

portraits of financially successful black entrepreneurs and CEOs, whose achievements are highlighted through on-screen text. Included in the video is the owner of a Los Angeles soul food restaurant, pictured with and endorsed by Obama, the CEOs of Black and Mobile, a food delivery service that “exclusively delivers for Black-Owned restaurants,” as well as a Broadway actor dancing in front of a mansion that “was once a plantation where his ancestors were enslaved,” which he recently purchased—“cash only”—as his home.

Such is the stuff of the “New American Revolution.” In reality, it is not revolution to which these politics and music point, but the propping up of a system that produces ever greater levels of social inequality across all racial groups.

Advocates of Black capitalism, first celebrated by Richard Nixon in the late 1960s, seek to advance the interests of an aspiring black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, not the interests of the broad working class. As the WSWs stated in the report, “Perspectives for the coming revolution in America: Race, class and the fight for socialism”:

That is, not social equality, but the equal distribution of positions of power and “affluence” among races and minority groups. Not programs to uplift all poor people, or to improve the conditions of the entire working class, but the selective elevation of a small minority to preside over deindustrialization and the destruction of the living conditions of the vast majority.

The ideology of black capitalism, along with all forms of identity politics, is employed by the ruling class and its representatives to divide the working class and impede a unified struggle for socialism. Conforming to these aims, and designed to inspire listeners with the possibility of a new American dream in which they, too, might take their place in a neighborhood of mansions paid for with cash, the latest from Pharrell Williams and Jay-Z has little to offer but pandering unreality and the ugliness of racial division.



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