Introduction: Songs that Sing the Crisis: Music, Words, Youth Narratives and Identities in Late Modernity

Paula Guerra 1
Carles Feixa 2
Shane Blackman 3
Jeanette Ostegaard 4

Abstract
In this special edition on popular music we seek to explore Simon Frith’s (1978: 39) argument that: “Music’s presence in youth culture is established but not its purpose.” ‘Songs that sing the crisis’ captures contemporary accounts which build upon popular music’s legacy, courage and sheer determination to offer social and cultural critique of oppressive structures or political injustice as they are being lived by young people today. Young people have consistently delivered songs that have focused on struggles for social rights, civil rights, women rights, ethnic and sexual minorities rights, through creative anger, emotion and resistance and we know that music matters because we consciously feel the song (DeNora, 2000). However, in the aftermath of the post 2008 global economic and cultural crises, young people in particular have faced austerity, social hardship and political changes, which have impacted on their future lives (France, 2016, Kelly and Pike, 2017).

This Special Issue assesses the key contestation where popular music is a mechanism to not only challenge but to think through ordinary people’s experience and appeals for social justice. The present introduction starts by presenting the historical and theoretical background of this research field. Then introduces the articles about the songs that sing the crisis in Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Denmark, Egypt and Tunisia through the rhythms of rap, hip-hop, fado, electronic pop, indie rock, reggaeton, metal and maghragan.

Keywords

1 University of Porto, Portugal. Guest Editor.
2 Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. Guest Editor.
3 Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. Editor of YOUNG.
4 The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark. Editor of YOUNG.
**Introduction**

Music seeks to change life;
life goes on; the music is behind;
That's what's left for us to talk about.

Greil Marcus (1989, p. 3)

Young people are often at the forefront of a major contemporary social and political change, we consider that music has been a central element in these events - either as a potentiator of political mobilization (Street et al., 2007) or as an important indicator of the profound changes and identity reconstructions of youngsters in late modernity (Feixa, 2012, 2017). Therefore, this Special Issue seeks to explore the questions raised by this dilemma, crossing notions of music, identity, political and artistic protest, though an inter and trans-disciplinary analysis in the fields of sociology, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, media and history, among others, and most importantly allow to situate music in the centre of youth studies (Feixa and Guerra, 2017; Guerra and Silva, 2015; Feixa and Nofre, 2013). This Special Issue has clear global scope, on the basis that we sought contributions from the diverse latitudes: first, to move away from a Eurocentric perspective that tends to dominates youth studies; second, because it is only through multiple different analyses, situated in different historical contexts, that it is possible to move forward with the state of the art of studying young adults.

Our point of departure for this special issue is that popular music has managed to imaginatively portray the feeling that ‘times are changing’ creating distinctive lifestyles, located in leisure time, or in interstitial areas of institutional life. Genres of popular ‘music sing the songs of crisis’ according to their social-historical context - folk, rock’n’roll, soul, rock, reggae, punk, rap, metal or grime - music goes on, prefigurating societal challenges - economic, political and cultural shifts (Marcus, 1989). These are particularly relevant in times of crisis as Randall (2018, p. ix) notes every dominant authority in a nation state has sought to “suppress the music.”

The birth of rock’n’roll is contested terrain (Gillett 1970)1,’ Gillett (1970: 23) argues that rock’n’roll rose out from cities and towns with poor Black and White populations, producing Northern band rock’n’roll, the New Orleans dance blues, Memphis country rock, Chicago rhythm and blues and the Doo-wop vocal groups. Each of the five styles forging rock’n’roll was based on cultural integration and through Alan Freed’s Moondog’s Rock and Roll Party (1951) the genre became the mechanism to test the
potential for racial integration in divided American society during the 1950s (Lipsitz, 1994). The development of rock’n’roll as a diverse cultural powerhouse of language, sexuality and subjectivity has been the model for global communication through the mass media – internet, television, cinema, radio - through selection and adaptation to each national and local context. As a ‘real virtuality’ capable of being experienced in many ways, music is a field of knowledge for young people to express, and also build their individual subjectivities and collective identities.

The immediate post-war years, for Bennett, (2001) reveal the social and cultural impact of rock'n'roll and how it became a vehicle for the young to exhibit their desires and concerns from a society marked by the Cold War. However, at the same time rock’n’roll had little impact on the concentration of power amongst the small number of corporate multi-national companies which were in effect the same pre-as-post rock’n’ roll (Columbia, RCAVictor, Decca and EMI). In the 1960s, popular music, became the soundtrack to sets of issues, amplified by young people’s struggles focused gender equality, the Civil Rights Movement, and in particular against the Vietnam War and the murder by the American National Guard of four unarmed innocent students at Kent State University, sung by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young’s (1970) ‘Ohio.’ In the United Kingdom of the 1970s, marked by the Post-imperial hangover and a deep economic recession, which greatly affected the young, we see them developing a set of aesthetic-cultural-musical practices of revolt and opposition to mainstream music, crystallized in the punk movement: No Future, No Fun and No Feelings (Savage, 1991). Dick Hebdige (1979) considered 1970s punk a perfect metaphor of the crisis (a manifestation of the open conflicts caused by the economic crisis and the rhetoric of the No Future), and also a catharsis (as an expressive performance of unresolved conflicts in the parental culture). This interpretation is also found within rap, hip-hop, fado, electronic pop, indie rock, rai, grime, reggaeton, metal and the songs of mahragan. All the struggles carried out by young people can be found in these soundtracks. The lyrics and sounds from critical and crucial periods you can find the feelings and reactions of the different social groups, especially by the losers of these moments of change – celebrated ironically by young people through Beck’s single (1993) ‘Loser’, as a ‘slacker’ anti-anthem. This is an unequivocal proof for the centrality of music in the restructuring of youth identities and cultures to disturb and challenge authority (Lynskey, 2010).
In the 1980s and 1990s, we see the beginning of what continued to be the importance of music in the political mobilization of the younger generation up until today. The examples can be seen in the German *Chaostage*; in the countercultural universe of the 90’s (McKay, 1998) or the Basque Radical Rock. Songs of resistance and protest continued pre and post the demise of the Eastern European Dictatorships as shown by Draganova and Blackman (2019, p. 230) where “DIY politics and subcultural values developed and maintained relevance in changing circumstances.” Dillane, Power, Devereux and Haynes (2018) detail that across the world, we find examples of protests led by young people within music scenes where a sense of attachment and commitment flourish. In Portugal, the song "What a Fool I Am" ["Que Parva Que Eu Sou", 2011], which was used as a manifestation of the conditions of austerity and precariousness experienced by qualified young people post-2008 crisis is one such example (Guerra, 2018). Young people in the use of social networks - Civil and digital platform Real Democracy Now [¡Democracia Real Ya!], led the Movement 15-M in Spain. The young Tunisian Rappers and Punks were and are a voice anger of the Arab Spring generation. Valassopoulos and Mostafa (2014) tell us about the role of intervention music and protest in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.

Songs can constitute manifestations that not only seek to denounce but also to intervene/act, and sometimes provoke an action. Thus, the songs and texts produce a discourse about social reality, which prefigures them as artistic creations producing socially relevant meanings and not mere reflections (mirrors) of the society’s dynamics in which they are produced (Reed, 2017). Protest songs and songs of crisis take on the role of producers of denunciation and protest, and creators of their own themes, by provoking and changing social life, because of their own perception of social reality. The history of youth people’s music and its narratives explores broader struggles against, sexual discrimination, racism, homophobia and critical injustice and oppression (Whiteley, 2000). Popular music presents ‘voices of anger’ sometimes distorted offering agency or deliberately misinterpreted by the media and governments reproducing negative labels and stigma (McKay, 2007; Connell and Gibson, 2002; Eyerman and Jamison, 1998; Turino, 2008). This special issue aims to listen to what young people have to say. To give them a voice. To hear their worldviews and observe revolts, this is why critical popular music is interdisciplinary and its purpose is to dismantle boundaries and
challenge Adorno’s (1941/1990, p. 309) critique of the degeneration of culture through disobeying ‘commands for listening.’

**Outline of this Special Issue**

This special issue of the journal YOUNG incorporates five articles focused on different geographical spaces and music styles. Three papers are centered in European countries that have been most affected by the recent economic crisis - the so-called contemptuously PIGS: Portugal, Ireland and Spain (Greece was the fourth); the other two articles are related to different music landscapes: Nordic welfare democracies - Denmark; southern Mediterranean countries affected by Arab Revolutions - Egypt and Tunis. From the point of view of music styles, rap, punk, folk metal, black metal, *fado*, reggaeton and mahraganat are represented - both mainstream and underground music scenes.

The article by Paula Guerra points out how the Portuguese identity in times of crisis is expressed through the songs of popular music, covering a diversity of music genres such as rap, hip-hop, *fado*, electronic pop, indie rock, among others. She sets out to analyse a set of sixteen songs by Portuguese artists, musicians and bands that were produced between 2011 and 2014 – presented as the post-2008 economic, financial and social crisis’ soundtrack by a leading Portuguese weekly newspaper, *Expresso*. The analysis of these songs focuses on a single analytical dimension: their message. This work underlies a heuristic principle: to demonstrate how artistic manifestations – in this case, the songs in several (sub-)genres of popular music – are themselves a means and an object of social intervention, demarcating a specific, defined space in the acknowledgement and revelation of social problems, and in the contestation, deconstruction and accusation of problems that deal with social reality. Guerra demonstrates that these songs seek to denounce and sometimes incite social change with the aim of creating transformation, and they are simultaneously significant elements of a collective identity.

The article by Núria Araúna, Iolanda Tortajada and Mònica Figueras-Maz focuses on one non-western music style – reggaeton - that has become globalized and commodified at the turn of the XXI Century, but in Spain, after the crisis, it was appropriated by grass root musicians and took a more politized stance. It was originated as an underground hybrid style belonging to subaltern classes from a peripheric region -the Caribbean-, and was considered male (and underclass) territory, but it rapidly spread from marginalized
sectors toward middle class and central ones (Dimou 2016). The study analyzes the expansion of reggaeton in Spain from the point of view of gender relationships and the *mainstreamisation* of popular feminism. It is centered in three different popular young artists - Brisa Fenoy, Ms Nina and Tremenda Jauria - that have appropriated the style as a subversive tool to deliver feminist messages, through the lyrics as well as the body performances. Both in the commercial trend of the first two and on the alternative trend of the last one, the lyrics and its diffusion in political contexts - like the #MeToo demonstrations of 8M 2018 - allow the authors to conclude that reggaeton could be seen as an exercise of resignification and empowerment, a tactic to subvert gender discriminatory representations: “these songs and performances are a manifestation of a complex underlying process (...) the so-called renaissance of feminist movements in Spain in the wake of the crisis that brought along more precariousness and poverty to the working classes (but especially to women and young people)”.

The article by Byrne explores how rap music workshops in Ireland can be an effective to understand young people’s experiences when researching neighborhood regeneration, in disadvantaged communities where rap music is already an embedded part of the local youth culture. The article draws on research with 78 young people in a large social housing estate which is undergoing regeneration in Cork City, Ireland, focusing on a subgroup of six teenagers who participated in a rap workshop. The use of rap music workshops can enable young people to express themselves in empathetic spaces and reflect on their everyday life experience and identity, to hear their voices on the regeneration process and its consequences for their community. This research reveals how young people have the imaginative capacity to make informed analysis of their own communities and have a strong desire to influence the decision-making process, thus showing how young people and researchers can work together to influence policy and challenge inequalities.

The article by Aila Mustamo analyses black metal and folk metal through lens of the crisis of the welfare state in Denmark. Mustamo defends that anti-modernism has always been a part of the ideology of black metal and folk metal subcultures and that both subgenres reflect ideas from the mainstream, despite sometimes being considered as countercultures. Mustamo examines how members of black metal and folk metal subcultures participate in the discussion about the welfare state, giving a voice to individuals rarely heard in music media, using interview material. Bringing forward
critical discourses about the apolitical tradition of heavy metal subcultures, the author interprets the admiration of metal cultures for the days gone as a part of the public debate on the ideology of the Nordic model of the welfare states. For some participants of these subcultures, the relationship between the ideology of the welfare state and the common statements about the modernity is clear; for others, the modernity in the Nordic countries is just a synonym of the gray everyday life and general soullessness culture. The article shows that the nostalgic statements, and their criticism, reflect ideological and political changes in the Nordic societies, and that, even in a counterculture, the debate about the welfare state is the context where reflections of the modernity and the past happen.

The article by José Sánchez-Garcia and Carles Feixa focuses on the politics of a global popular music – rap - and a glocal one – mahragan - in Tunis and Egypt, analysing lyrics and ethnographic data, after the so-called Arab Spring. These hybrid music styles could be seen as the soundtrack of the revolution but also as a motivating factor of the protests. Based on a comparative research project, the study combines the analysis of the lyrics with ethnographic data from the two countries. In Tunis, during Jasmine revolution, rap was the way to spread the discomfort with the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali, as the songs by El General expressed well, even if there was a gender and class divide - middle class institutionalized politics in front of marginalized young people. In Egypt, Cairene mahragan was a transformation of Sufi music and dance, mixed with commercial and electronic rhythms, popular in poor neighborhoods, but considered as ‘bad taste,’ vulgar and western influenced by the adult centric ruling classes. Their lyrics changed with the anti-Mubarak uprising erupted in 25th January 2011: mahragan songs were politized and attracted different social groups and generations. As a singer says: “We made music that make people dance but also talk about their worries”. In both cases, these music styles were re-signified from a generational, gendered and classed perspective, moving between resistance to resilience: Rap music in Tunisia and mahragan in Cairo enables young people, from the lower classes to imagine hope and critical focus on multiple marginalization.

Popular music can appear hyper-stylised and bland as it is pulled through Adorno’s culture industry of standardization. The corporate music industry seeks its hegemony, but even 3D holograms or computer animated heroes such as Gorillaz create songs of protest and resistance. Throughout these articles popular music represents a diverse cultural expression where hybrid rhythms have arisen in periods of economic, political or cultural
turbmoil, so that, music is both as a product and a producer of crisis. On a global basis we see young people enjoy the present and confront the (no) future through hedonistic techniques and underground DIY cultures (Bennet and Guerra, 2019). The current neo-liberal crisis cannot be understood in purely economic or technocratic terms but as “crises of public power, order and authority” that became a “crisis of narrative” or legitimacy, then crises “are viewed as both reflections and factors of societal change” (Kjaer and Olsen, 2016, xi-xiii). Popular music is an imaginative vehicle for young people to exhibit cultural expression and promote social change and thus for studying youth as a social barometer of the contemporary society.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes


References


Authors’ Bio-sketch

**Paula Guerra** is Professor of Sociology and a senior researcher in the Institute of Sociology (ISUP); she is also a researcher at the Centre for Geography Studies and Territory Planning (CEGOT) and at Transdisciplinary Research Centre ‘Culture, Space and Memory’ (CITCEM); she is the Adjunct Professor at Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research (GCSCR) in Australia. She has been an invited researcher in several international universities (Brazil, Vietnam, Canada and Morocco, among other countries). She is also coordinator and founder of the All Arts—Luso-Brazilian Network of Sociology of the Arts and Culture. Her recent publications include ‘Underground Music Scenes and DIY Cultures’ (2019, Routledge, with Andy Bennett). Guerra is the chief investigator of ‘Keep it simple, make it fast! Prolegomena and punk scenes, a way for Portuguese contemporaneity (1977–2012)’, an international and interdisciplinary project on the Portuguese punk scene funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (PTDC/CS-SOC/118830/2010), and co-convenor of the Keep It Simple, Make It Fast! (KISMIF) Conference. More details http://paulaguerra.pt/en/ and https://www.kismifconference.com/en/.

**Carles Feixa Pàmpols**, Professor of Social Anthropology at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona). He has a Ph.D. from the University of Barcelona and an Honoris Causa from the University of Manizales (Colombia). Former Professor at the University of Lleida, he has been visiting scholar in Rome, Mexico City, Paris, Berkeley, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Newcastle and Lima. He has specialized in the study of youth cultures, conducting fieldwork research in Catalonia and Mexico. He is author or coauthor of 50 books, including De jovenes, bandas y tribus (Barcelona, 1998, 5th ed. 2012), Jovens na America Latina (São Paulo, 2004), Global Youth? (London & New York, Routledge, 2006), De la Generación@ a la #Generación (Barcelona, Ned, 2014, 2nd ed. 2018) and Youth, Space and Time (Boston & Leiden, Brill, 2016). He has been a consultant on youth policies for the United Nations and VP for Europe of the research committee ‘Sociology of Youth’ of the International Sociological Association. In 2017, he obtained two of the highest recognitions to his research work: the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA) Academia Award of the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Advanced Grant of the European Research Council.

**Shane Blackman** is a Professor of Cultural Studies, Canterbury Christ Church University. His publications include Youth: Positions and Oppositions, Style, Sexuality and Schooling (1995); Drugs Education and the National Curriculum (1996) and Chilling Out: The Cultural Politics of Substance Consumption, Youth and Drug Policy (2004), ‘The Subcultural Imagination: Theory, Research and Reflexivity in Contemporary Youth Cultures’, (2016) with Kempson, M; Youth Marginality in Britain: contemporary studies
Jeanette Østergaard is a senior researcher at VIVE—The Danish Center for Social Science Research. Her research interests are quantitative and qualitative longitudinal studies of young people’s transition to adulthood. She has extensive experience of managing large research projects and has acquired excellent skills in conducting large-scale longitudinal research projects, both nationally and cross-nationally. She is working on three large-scale research projects at present: a longitudinal survey of young people’s drug and alcohol use in transition to adulthood; a crossnational qualitative longitudinal research project: ‘Against all odds—Exploring and explaining positive outcomes for young adults formerly in public care’ and a national qualitative longitudinal project: ‘Open-ended transition? A qualitative longitudinal study of continuity and change for young people in uncertain times’. She is the coeditor of the journal YOUNG and an editorial board member of the journal Children and Society.