In My Name and the Name of All People Who Live in Misery: Rap in the Wake of Revolution in Tunisia and Egypt

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Abstract
Rap and mahragan were the sound of youths that demanded freedom and social justice in Tahrir Square and in Tunisia Parliament Square sit-ins during 2011. It may have been, not merely the soundtrack of the revolution, but a motivating factor in bringing people into the streets and reshaping their basic political subjectivity: a core process of any revolutionary change in a country’s social and political structures. On the one hand, rap and mahragan are used by young people as a way of calling into question the processes of marginalization. On the other hand, young people use it as a way of participating in public life. Despite its differences, from a mixed analysis using the data collected in the SAHWA project, both qualitative and quantitative, this article proves how rap and mahragan music scenes (re)produce informal spaces as an alternative to their social marginalization and positioned them into Tunisian and Egyptian political arenas in different places according to environmental political dialectics.

Keywords
Arab Youth, rap, mahragan, popular music, political engagement, Tunisia, Egypt

Mr. President, here, today, I speak with you
In my name and the name of all people who live in misery.
It is 2011 and there is still a man who is dying of hunger.
He wants to work to survive, but his voice is not heard!
Go out into the street and see how people have become animals.
Look at the police with batons. Thwack-thwack-thwack! They don’t care!

(‘Rayes Le Bled’ by El Général)1

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The people and the government, the machine guns
And clubs Egypt rose up, and even those who didn’t steal dove into it
I will talk about those standing, the survivors and the dead
I will talk about the church, the mosque and the Brotherhood.
The people want the fall of the regime.
The people want five pounds cellphone credit.²

(‘The People and the Government’ by Saddat Abdel Aziz)³

Introduction⁴

As the number of shares and likes on digital networks showed during and after 2011 revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt, these two songs—a Tunisian rap and a Cairene mahragan—were a success in North Africa. The lyrics spread the revolutionary hopes of young people. Rap and mahragan were the musical styles of youths who demanded freedom and social justice in the Tahrir Square and Tunisia Parliament Square sit-ins. It may have been not merely the soundtrack of the revolution, but a motivating factor in bringing people into the streets and reshaping their basic political subjectivity: a core process necessary for revolutionary change in any country’s social and political structures (Frith, 1996). It was also, however, something integrally tied to and embedded within the social movement. Musicians on the squares performed a repertoire that the crowds could sing along with, a corpus of songs that connected the artists and their audience to a history of struggle (LeVie, 2015). The purpose of musical performance in Tunisia and Cairo was to move the crowds into a sentimental or affective state, such as rage or serenity, sadness or perseverance fusing the people in a ‘collective effervescence’, in Durkheim words.

After the Jasmine and 25th January Revolutions, rap in Tunisia and mahragan in Egypt became two of the most significant revolutionary music styles (LeVie, 2015), but in the current political environment, rap and mahragan have taken different social and political positions. Rap in Tunisia is the genre of lower class popular neighbourhoods. In Egypt however, it is a middle-class leisure practice. Mahragan in Cairene ashwaiyyat⁵ (informal neighbourhoods) is analogous to funk in Brazilian slums or kuduro in Mozambicans shanty towns: the music of young male lower classes (Swedenburg, 2012). One side recognizes the Tunisian youth and rap as the lever of change since the social uprisings and facilitate rappers the creation of a ‘national’ scene—not without critics of ‘true rappers’—while the Egyptian government consider mahragan to be a ‘vulgar’ musical genre coming from dangerous ‘young male lower classes’.

As François Dubet (2008, p. 48) notes, ‘anomic conditions, frustrated behaviour and the mechanisms of stigmatisation explain, in very large part, the forms of action found’. These activities often take the form of an action based on a deliberate choice and a political position. In this sense, young people show their refusal of the passive posture, instead in an activity that is at once engaged and emotional, and empowers their self-realization as rap and mahragan. On the one hand, rap and mahragan are used by young people as a way of calling into question the processes of marginalization. On the other hand, young people use it as a way of participating in public life.
This article examines how rap and mahragan scenes (re)produce symbolic alternative spaces to face the social conditions of young people and a political claim against the structural crisis that emplaces youngsters in the social margins.

**Youth Cultures and Music in Tunisia and Egypt**

In the field of Middle Eastern Studies, the topic of youth cultures does not feature prominently among youth studies. Despite analysing young people’s living conditions, social scientists have tended to view youths as producers and consumers of specific cultures only during certain periods. This is especially true in the cases for young people’s forms of artistic expression since the aftermath of the Arab Uprising (since late 2010 onwards). The study of youth cultures seems to suffer from the lack of theoretically strong analytical instruments applicable to the reality on the ground (such as the concept of ‘subculture’, which is not widely used in the literature because it is regarded as not fit to capture the reality on the field). Our aim here is to refine conceptual tools to be applied to the youth cultures research in North Africa by reflecting on, for instance, the historical and social peculiarities that construct ‘what youth is’ as social category in the contexts under examination.6

Youth cultures research focuses particularly on the use of information and communication technology and other forms of commodification of culture, on the religious expression of youth culture, and on ambiguous forms of cultural productions and expressions (Sánchez García, 2018, 2010; Schielke, 2003, 2006). Nevertheless, given the persistence of authoritarianism in Tunisia and Egypt, scholars have been very reactive to the notion of ‘looking for politics’ in traditionally, non-political environments or realms of activity. The lack of independent and autonomous political parties and trade unions, for instance, pushed scholars to turn their attention to Islamism and to the so-called ‘social non-movements’. The latter is probably the most interesting and most novel field of inquiry, and represents an aspect the studies have focussed on. The concept of social non-movements suggests that mobilization and dissent may originate from apparently ‘non-political’ contexts and groups as rap and mahragan scene embodies (Bayat, 2013). This article is focussed on actors such as music-oriented groups from middle and lower classes as potential political actors. Our analyses are based on previous studies about rap music, local hybrid music and the underground music scene (Bostic, 2011; Sánchez García, 2010), football fans’ clubs (Dorsey, 2012; El Ghandour, 2012; Tuastad, 2014), street art (Demerdash, 2012), informal politics (Anceschi, Gervasio, & Teti, 2013; Sánchez García, 2018) and religious non-mainstream groups (Bekkaoui, Khalid, & Larémont, 2011).

Major theoretical innovations revolve around the idea of the politicization of what has previously been wrongly perceived as a-political or non-political. When it comes to this specific issue, studies are still weak and are outnumbered by those focussing on issues such as the activism of non-governmental organizations and political party membership. It is indeed of great relevance that scholars focus on ostensibly non-political activities in order to grasp very political and important dynamics related to urban spaces and self-management (Sánchez García, 2018). The findings of this paper are orientated to this task. We show that current themes in popular music are
claims for dignity, respect for rights (liberal rights but also material rights, such as the right to a respectable life), and a condemnation of the previous regime’s submission to Europe and or to the US. But we also raise a cautionary note. Whilst rap is a highly politicized music genre, embedded in the politics of class emancipation and resistance, it also reproduces and spreads misogynistic and materialistic tropes.

Concerning politics, the data collected shows that as well as not identifying with their institutions, which, they say, only represent the elite, young people demonstrate a lack of interest in formal politics and trust in their institutions. According to recent data, over 40 per cent of young people in Egypt and Tunisia of voting age did not vote in the last elections, with the main reason being lack of interest (44.58%). Still, young people’s political disinterest is accompanied by their determination to join a dynamic of action. For them, cultural and artistic practices are alternative modes of engagement that they use to question dominant social norms and give sense to their experiences. Young people tend to be drawn to an array of cultural and artistic activities: theatre, popular music, dance, photography and graffiti (Sánchez-García & Feixa, 2016). Consequently, while young people tend to reject formal politics and forms of political engagement, they show interest in other means, such as music, direct action in the community and social media, through which they can express their concerns and participate in public life. In this sense, the young seek to avoid the established rules and the controls imposed by some of the system and seek to develop innovative strategies and have influence on society.

Young people’s cultural production such as rap and mahragan acquire a fundamental role in establishing their own discourses on reality through which they can position themselves politically. What is more, these youth cultural productions allow the individuals involved in them to make themselves visible as political subjects and to root themselves in identity terms among their peers. In this way, young people’s actions are recognized as a creative process based on meaningful symbolic and material practices (Willis, 1990) that may be classified in various ways, but which in all cases may be understood as demarginalization strategies. It is in these social constraints that rap and mahragan constitutes special ways to escape marginalization—and political marginalization expressly (Sánchez García & Sánchez-Montijano, 2018). Nevertheless, whilst rap and mahragan were important manifestations of political action and participation—mechanism to deliver messages to the public and of addressing issues to a broader population—before and during the revolutionary events (Pfaff, 2009), after this period, rap and mahragan has returned to peripheral urban spaces and transformed into an expression of middle and lower classes, conforming a subcultural space in contrast with other youth subcultural scenes in Tunisia and Egypt.

Some Methodological Notes: Youth as Social Category in Tunisia and Egypt

This article uses the data collected in the framework of SAHWA project focussed in Tunisia and Egypt. The results presented come from two main sources: the SAHWA Youth Survey 2016 (2017) and the SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork (2016). The first is a representative survey of the five countries analysed carried out between October 2015 and March 2016 on a representative sample of 2,000 citizens per
country (Sánchez-Montijano et al., 2017). The SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork was carried out from April to November 2015. In Egypt, it included 4 focus groups involving 42 youngsters (21 women and 21 men), 3 life stories and 2 focussed ethnographies. In Tunisia, it included 4 focus groups involving 39 participants (19 women and 20 men), 6 life stories and 3 focussed ethnographies. In the framework of SAHWA project, the focussed ethnographies were designed to research-specific youth groups improving observation, participant observation, informal chats and conversations, and field notes during the fieldwork. Following Blackman, a focussed ethnography tries ‘to reveal what is usually hidden [this] is to cross emotional borders in fieldwork accounts… as “an encounter with newness”’ (Blackman, 2007, p. 701). For our purposes, we are using the ethnographic research devoted to rappers in Tunisia while in Egypt the main qualitative findings coming from an individual fieldwork carry out by one of the authors realized between 2012 and 2015 mainly in Dar as Salaam quarter in Cairo. In the case of the lyrics, the extracts coming from YouTube maharagan videos and selected by their popularity measured with the ‘likes’ in the channel webpages common among the participants in the research.

The age cohort for both data collections was established as 15–29 years old. The reason for selecting this specific cohort relates to the concept of youth as a social category. Marriage is considered in the region to be the transitional point at which children become adults (Sánchez García & Feixa Pàmpols, 2016; Singerman, 2007). World Marriage Data 2015 (UN, 2015) confirms that the average age of marriage in Arab Mediterranean countries is 29.1 for both sexes. In the case of women, the figure is 26.9 and for men 31.3. Consequently, this study determine that a youth is a person who is no older than 29 and/or is not married.

Marriage as social marker alters the social categorization of individuals and their relationships from youth to adult-youth according to the adult-centrist understanding of life cycle. The mediation of this cultural model in the construction of social reality has traditionally defined the position of youth in Arab Mediterranean countries. An age hierarchy in political, economic, parental and spare time relationships could be established. In consequence, maturity is regarded as the stage when the individual has completed their cycle of socialization. This should be the main goal of youth: the desirable destination prescribed by the different hegemonic discourses in dispute. This ideal should place unmarried individuals in a liminal position within the social order: a transitory state aimed at reaching the adult stage of the life cycle through marriage and the birth of the first child. The single state is considered temporary, and must be exchanged for married status. This is ‘the desirable normal status’, while ‘not yet married’ refers to ‘a state of preparation and anticipation of a status still not realised’. The cultural model, independently of their age, emphasizes the lack of reason—*aql*’—of young people, which paradoxically allows for the expression of certain attitudes that are strongly discouraged in other age groups and are classified as gross errors of judgment, including disobedience to the political system. For young women, in accordance with the patriarchal perspective, this stage is established as crossing a border, which is able to fulfil the traditional primary role of women in Arab societies, that is, to form a family and have children. Accordingly, the traditional marker—marriage—between youth and adulthood in terms of a job and an independent household are postponed or remote for large numbers of young people, although ‘young’ is a relative concept and makes sense only in contrast to other age groups.
Rap in North Africa

The significance of popular music as the product of local knowledge and sensibilities and a form of independent cultural territory has been demonstrated widely. It is the local knowledge that act as a basis for social action. In the case of rap, several authors note its power as a form of political expression and a reflection of the tensions and contradictions in the urban local landscapes.7 Rap originated in the South Bronx as a consequence of the failure of urban renewal programs and economic recession with the aim to maintain youth gang members away of fighting and illegal activities such as Afrika Bambaataa (Lipsitz, 1994). Rap as cultural resistance has become increasingly prominent in literature on the genre over the past 20 years (Tanner, Asbridge, & Wortley, 2009). Focussed in the emancipatory view of rap’s history and development, hip-hop as a form of protest music, offering its listeners a message of resistance not restricted to black youth. Thus, the global diffusion of rap rests on the music’s capacity for resonating with the experiences of the downtrodden and marginalized in a variety of cultural contexts. Thus, rap’s appeal is as much about class as it is about race and trespass national boundaries in the same manner than current capitalism export policies across the world.

Today, from the South Bronx, hip-hop and rap has become a global product. As we are going to describe for the North African cities, rap and hip-hop outside of the USA and African American culture is constantly ‘re-made’ by different groups of young people in ways that extend it beyond its meaning as a ‘black cultural form’. Arriving in the mid-1990s to the Arab world, rap music quickly established itself as a major force for aesthetic expression and innovation among Arab youth from Morocco to Iran (Davies & Bentahila, 2008; Shahabi & Golpoush-Nezhad, 2016). Like in other contexts, rap mahragan in Tunisia and Egypt are constructed and acted out in response to the marginalized positions of young people. In this sense, rap and mahragan articulates differentiated discourses that uses the same basic knowledge but acquire different forms. Rap and mahragan are part of a musical territory, a locally contested cultural space with different discourses that creates particular narratives out of locality. Both genres are channels to communicate the situation of youth in Tunisia and Egypt. They are cultural identities, expressions of urban culture as form of resilience that nevertheless reflect different contradictory discourses.

Rap in Tunisia is an appropriated device of global culture, which maintains stylistic similarities to its African American roots. Rap in Tunisia is part of social revolutionary discourse against the state, family, and hegemonic gender discourses. Mahragan, on the other hand, means the continuation of the traditional social norms and values of the shabi8 people in a public sphere dominate by ‘Westernized’ discourses on politics and social values including gender models. The genre in Tunisia attracts young people from very diverse socio-cultural background. In Egypt, however, rap is seen as a ‘foreign’ discourse adopted for the middle classes with access to global culture, whereas mahragan is seen as a genuine local genre rooted in Shabi music and inshad. For this reason, in Egypt, mahragan means ‘authenticity’ for lower classes members as a part of Egyptian popular—shabi—cultures while rap signifies a ‘Westernized’ style (Sánchez García, 2018, 2010; Sánchez-Montijano, 2018). This is the same distinction that some Tunisian rappers make between ‘gangster rap’, which is seen as authentic, and ‘commercial’ rap. In this sense, this distinction is, like in Afro-American rap a question of class. Despite their differences, rap and mahragan
resemble each other in that they represent ‘the youth habitus, by which I mean series of dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself (e.g., a greater tendency for experimentation, adventurism, idealism, autonomy, mobility and change) that are associated with the sociological fact of ‘being young’’ (Bayat, 2013, p. 118).

**Tunisian Rap**

In Tunisia, fieldwork among rappers was conducted in Cité Ibn Khaldoun, an urban peripheral area that is representative of Greater Tunis, not least because a number of young people from this neighbourhood have attempted clandestine emigration and jihadist adventures. Wajdi (24 years old), a young subsaharian man from the area, is committed to underground rap, which he considers a release for what is stifled within him. He speaks of his anger about those who govern, and about drugs and the situation of his generation of young people. In his songs, he raps lyrics such as ‘Why this youth injects himself, why this other takes zatla (hashish)... I don’t want to give lessons’, and explain, ‘I address myself to power, tell them that they should get a move on and change things, so that these young people don’t have to turn to that.’

What does rap represent for these young people from disadvantaged classes? Rap is a vehicle to denounce their socio-economic situation. The miseries described in the rap songs focus on the difficult life of the neighbourhood and their economic dependence on their families. In short, rap is a protest against the lack of a true state of social welfare. It is the music of the revolution of the black people of the United States—marginalized like them—and it represents the culture of the black ghetto and all the associated racist problems. For Wajdi remarks, ‘this style of music expresses very well the reality in which we live’. And he explains, rap ‘is used to address the system and address other people, to tell others what displeases us’. Finally, ‘represents for me an intellectual revolution. The real thought! A thought that does not destroy but helps to move forward!’

With this cultural resistance background, during Jasmine revolution, rap was the way to spread the discomfort with the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali. A well-known example of the role of rap in the Tunisian uprising is the song ‘RaisLeBled’ performed by El General (see the lyrics in the first page). With a dense tempo, hip-hop beat and piano melody, El General sends a message to President BenAli, informing him of the situation of the people.

In the subsequent verses, the rap describes the indignities and violence, corruption and oppression suffered by ordinary Tunisians, in spite of the ostensibly progressive aspects of the legal system introduced by the 1959’s constitution. The chorus continues to denounce the impoverished situation of the people in the country with lyrics such as ‘miseries are everywhere and people have not found anywhere to sleep’. *El Général* then explains that he will be in trouble for his message to Ben Ali, but it does not matter. The final verse describes the broken promises of the regime and the nepotism and corruption that infect the country. A situation that benefit the thieves and impoverish the Tunisian people:

> But how long [must] the Tunisian live in illusions?  
> Where is freedom of expression? I saw that it was [only] words […]  
> They steal in broad daylight, confiscate property, and own the land.  
> [Even] without me naming them, you know who they are!
So much money was pledged for projects and infrastructure:
Schools, hospitals, buildings, and improvements.
But the sons of bitches stuffed [their] pot-bellies with the people’s money.
They stole, robbed, dismembered, kidnapped and would not give up the seats [of power].

The discourse of the rapper reflects one of the key results of the Jasmine Revolution:
the loss of fear of a generation that would rather ‘die on our feet than live on our knees’ as Ernesto Guevara, converted in a symbol of the uprisings, claimed decades before. Nevertheless, the claiming contents of the rap songs, as in the case of El Général, have politicized the rap allowing the political manipulation of the style. In post-revolutionary times, an invasion of the musical scene of rappers was produced and used them in the election campaigns by political groups of different factions. Wajdi, almost like all the street rappers, gets involved in the political protest changing their lyrics to carry a more explicitly political message. With the coup of the revolution, song as Tounès 7orra (‘Tunisia is Free’) by Lak3y, get a success in the hit parade in 2013. The rap is an elegy to the activist of the revolution:10

One heart, one voice, one people, one Tunisia.
All the people are together. Our hands our united.
This is our dignity, our freedom, our honour, our future.
We must be one word and one strength.
We’re a people who irrigated the Green [Tunisian] soil with blood.
We’re born men, we live as men, and we will die as men (Oh!) […]

However, after revolutionary events, the participants in the focus groups discussion criticised the relationship between rap and institutionalized politics: ‘rap has become friends with politics … people use rap for political propaganda’, explains Brahim.11 For our informants, before the revolution, the rap was more spontaneous, unconscious of its identity and even less of its capacity as a revolutionary phenomenon. ‘Real rap’ illustrated the conditions of life in marginal neighbourhoods, it was ‘authentic’. Walid (26 years old), a Tunisian rapper, said, ‘I talk about the street, about people tortured in police stations, about contempt; I mean things you see every day’. For Walid, commercial rap was a concession to the mainstream sphere; but when marginalization is strong; rap is expelled from concert circuits and is preserved in the neighbourhood counterculture as a form of resistance. Participants maligned rappers like Balti and Kafon, who pleaded with the government to guarantee their media and economic success. These artists, marginalized by the commercial circuits, recognize in rap its ability to create a public opinion, make revolutions and mobilize crowds. For Walid,

[rap] it was invented to fight racism and state violence; it is not an art form that you experience, applaud and then move on to something else. It contains messages, it is an art form capable of making revolutions and creating a critical population; or a generation that would follow you where you decide; but you must approach this generation, belong to it! … A rap singer is not an ordinary person, he is called to lead people, districts, guide them to make decision… rap is almost a fifth power, in Tunisia, as well-known rap singers can manipulate public opinion as they wish.

As we have seen, rap has become a politicized space after its success during the revolutionary days. In their verses, young people expose their views on ‘policies’
and ‘politics’. Rap, therefore, is part of the Tunisian political field and it reproduces the political differences of young people. Young middle-class people integrated into institutionalized politics using rap to spread messages from ‘political professionals’ (Bourdieu, 2009) in rivalry with marginalized young people from popular neighborhoods who express their discontent over their educational, economic and social deficiencies. Moreover, if rap means resistance through formal politics and economic constraints, the masculine rappers follow the hegemonic discourses on genre, so rap could be rebel and conservative at same time depending on the topics tackled in the lyrics.

... and Cairene Mahragan

Mahragan music is the genre resulting from the transformation of Sufi music, into dance music of varying beats using the traditional shabi tunes and rhythms. It was in 2011 when mahragan spread from the alleys of poor Cairo neighbourhoods to city centre malls, high-class weddings and even TV programs. Young lower-class men and followers of mahragan music disseminated their (ambivalently politicized) ideas through social media channels, especially YouTube. In sampling and remixing both traditional Sufi popular inshad songs (though not its ‘cultured version’ promoted by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture) and shabi music (but not the youth Arab mainstream music), mahragan followers, singers and musicians produce what Willis describes as a ‘common culture’ (1990). The creation of what one could call mahragan-grounded aesthetics, following Willis, allows for an understanding of this cultural form as linked to local semantics, constituting a response to other youth mainstream styles such as shababiya—the mainstream pop music—and rap. The aesthetic framework becomes visible in ways that also transform body image, dance forms and everyday behaviour in comparable terms to rap and hip-hop. Long hair, baseball caps and T-shirts of football teams may seem exotic to neighbours, and drug and alcohol use in their meetings can facilitate the belief that this is a deviant social order.

The lyrics of mahragan music changed when the anti-Mubarak uprising erupted in 25 January 2011. In that time, Abdel-Aziz, a mahragan player, sang a song called ‘The People and the Government’ (see lyrics in the first page). As a result of the 25th Revolution, as in Tunisian rap, mahragan lyrics were politicized and attracted different social groups and generations even if ‘you don’t understand three fourths of the lyrics, but then you hear a something good and realize the whole song relates to you’ as a 47 years old coffee waiter explained. This describes the capacity of mahragan to extend a discourse of political resilience like rap in Tunisia, which is produced by deviant male youth in neighbourhoods in the popular quarters of Cairo. Mahragan is simultaneously perceived as something intrinsically Egyptian by shabi groups and potentially dangerous by the more Westernized middle and upper classes. ‘We made music that make people dance but also talk about their worries,’ commented Alaa al-Din Abdel-Rahman, aka Alaa 50 Cent, a 23-aged mahraganian player: ‘[In] that way everyone can listen and hear what is on their minds’. During these days, following the attack to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces government leaded by Major Tantawi in the interregnum between Mubarak and Morsi, mahragan performers such as DJ Islam Chipsy would play
in Al Azhar Park (a leisure complex between Muqattam and El Hourreya quarter in central Cairo), performing songs like this

The oppressor and the oppressed. The ruler and the condemned.
To whom will I complain? And whom will I blame?
Should I blame the people who get hit by the dirtiest boot and remain silent?
Or a government that controls everything with hearts that’ve died?

So down with the government! So down with the regime!
So down with the [Emergency] Law! So down with the rulers!
So down with the coward! So down with the traitor!
So down with the nice man if his kindness will let him be humiliated!15

Today, *mahragan* music, has returned to the alleys of the informal settlements on the outskirts of Cairo. Both secular and Islamic authorities continue to criticize *mahragan* music with the same arguments that were employed before the 25th January Revolution: *Mahragan* considered bad taste, vulgar and Western influenced. The Egyptian State is producing and reproducing the new image of ‘the Muslim’: internationally successful, cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial, competitive, urban, educated, civilized and wearing the latest in Western fashion. However, the new image of ‘the Muslim’ is far away from the semiotic world of *mahragan* players, producers and followers. For the latter, the capability of breaking the secularist/religious dichotomy using *shabi* and *inshad* tunes means the capability of contesting the social and political order in post-Mubarak Egypt (Sánchez García, 2018).

The melodies acquire the atmosphere of Sufi spirituality, are full of emotional overtones, and are enhanced with repeating known religious convictions and pious, deeply ambiguous formulas deployed by the DJs. *Mahragan* is also connected with notions of authenticity and heritage for Egypt’s young lower classes with both *shabi* and *inshad* music mentioned above. Because such a cultural authenticity takes advantage of some local heritage (like using some elements of traditional *inshad* songs), *mahragan* is tolerated by adults of *shabi* classes, despite the profanity and vulgarity that can be heard in some songs. With electronics, sampling and remixing, *mahragan* creates genuine material with various vocal styles and themes such as sexual frustration, informal employment and the search for narcotics. A good example could be Nope Nope by DokDok and Funky:16

She passes by, nope nope
Doesn’t say hi, nope
I look into her eyes, nope nope
And she looks into mine, nope
No, she wears tight clothes, nope nope
And my knees are shaking, nope […]
And my friends are making fun of me, nope[…]
No, she comes back late, nope nope
I get jealous, nope
She stays up late and parties, nope nope
Among bad people, nope […]
And she is fussy
No, if you have money, nope nope
She runs to you, nope
Songs like Nope Nope reflect the gender model of the lower-class youth males and the importance of having financial means if one is to be able to marry. According to contemporary ways that marriage is understood by young women, young men should be able to support a family financially, including all the devices of modern life and let their wife more freedom to plan their life. In this example, mahragan is transformed from a music of protest into a conservative dialogue that follows closely the hegemonic discourse on gender of shabi classes. This kind of verse is what had placed mahragan as a marginalized style for well-off classes who ascribe to Western discourses on gender. While for lower classes this discourse, precisely, emplaced mahragan as a genuine Egyptian genre. At same time, mahragan can be understood as an informal creative practice that is produced and consumed in opposition to mainstream cultural circuits existing in Egypt today, such as, for example, shababiya which is the state-led politically correct music for young people. Shababiya’s songs performed by mainstream artists like Amr Diab or Cairokee (among others) sound very similar to global dance music, and may be seen as an elite, state-led method for reviving inshad songs. In contrast, mahragan are re-arranged and re-signified from a generational, gendered and classed perspective Tunisia is ‘authentic’ rap.

Mahragan music means much more than simply making its followers and artists political subjects. It permits the creation of new informal spaces of (self)identification as well as new opportunities for (self)empowerment. It provides a way to escape process of class marginalization imposed by the social order in Egypt. The dominant classes see mahragan music as a genre without the required level of erudition to become part of the current morally and politically sanitized national-cultural project of El Sisi in Egypt. Moreover, and simultaneously as result of this ‘civilizing process’, the resulting marginalization occurring in informal neighbourhoods in Cairo has undeniable consequences on youth subjectivation and lifestyles. In particular, Egyptian male lower-class youth seem to have internalized the negative representations about their lifestyles, ideologies and tastes conveyed by the mainstream media, but this does not prevent them from being attached to young virtual social networks and using it for their own purposes. Marginality seems to favour also the feelings of distrust they feel towards specific institutions, which is expressed by the distancing of youth by the government’s cultural initiatives. It should be noted that, in regards to the case of mahragan music, it does not question the dominant pillars of the Egyptian society. While labour, school and family remain privileged spaces in which young people anchor their (self-)identity and their (self-)recognition, mahragan represent a challenge to Cairo mainstream, marketized, upper-class nights. As in the case of Tunisian underground rap, if mahragan challenge the political hegemonic discourses does not reject the dominant social rules of Shabi classes.

**Rap and Mahragan: Rebel Popular Music?**

We have argued that rap music in Tunisia and mahragan in Cairo provides opportunities that allow young males, especially those from the lower classes, to imagine a life horizon with a degree of hope and escape from the peripheries of the social
sphere and from multiple forms of marginalization (Sánchez García, 2018). Young people escape cultural marginalization by becoming music consumers and producers, creating social spaces for establishing and self-managing their musical compositions. Information and communication technologies, as well traditional face-to-face social networks that exist in the daily life of the neighbourhoods, allow the followers of rap and mahragan to spread their discourses against the hegemonic classes (adults) and, therefore, to develop new routes for political action. Rap and mahragan promise an escape from economic marginalization. The most successful artists in the genres distribute millions of copies of their records, especially through Tunis and Cairo’s informal markets. The capacity of these musical creations to spread youth discourses must not be ignored: they deal with the issues that concern them and form a political ideology and agenda that differs from that of the state. Yet, the production of rap and Mahragan means grappling with tastes (musical, technical, production and commercial) that are difficult to acquire in formal education. Rap and mahragan proposes the putting into practice of ‘subjugated’ knowledge, as Foucault define it, knowledge that lacks the necessary levels of erudition or scientific legitimacy to accord with to the canons established by the adult-centric society. At any rate, rap and mahragan can be understood as a cultural product that allows, if not escape, then a way to overcome or wade through the different dimensions of young men’s marginalization, especially for those from the lower social classes.

If rap and mahragan challenge the political hegemonic discourses, economic deprivation and the failure of formal education to acquire musical, production and technologic skills, it does not challenge the gender and social norms of popular classes. Neither rap nor Mahragan challenge the shabi family values and gender models. As we have observed in the case of Tunisian rappers, women rappers are suffering the discrimination of their male counterparts. For this reason, in the case of Tunisia, we are witnessing of the emergence of a ‘feminist’ rap to denounce the gender inequalities of shabi Arab classes. As Bouteina explains the rap is ‘very macho’ and reflect the male hegemonic discourses on women that maintains the female perceptions, aspirations and perspectives subjugated. This is the case of the analysed lyrics of mahragan song ‘Nop-nop’, it reveals the imaginary of the young male lower classes of Cairene popular quarters: young women are desirable objects that could be ‘bought’. Consequently, women are being kept in the traditional role imposed on them by gender models—a discourses in the rap and mahragan reproduce this. Moreover, these gender inequalities—both in production and discourses—in the rap and mahragan politics shows that local ‘politicized’ spaces are far from being homogeneous.

These young politic spaces contain disputes and conflicts that reflects the diverse discourses on and of youth: gangster rap and commercial rap do not have the same significance Tunis, and neither does rap and mahragan in Cairo. Following Vommaro (2018), rap and mahragan configure a ‘ politicization’ of these youth practices with a specific local meaning. In this sense, we understand that some youth cultural practices, such as those that we analysed here, can be understood as modes of political expression including contradictory and different discourses. Thus, practices that are not considered political from classic approaches can be politicized—that is, converted into policies in the sense of Râciere—to express dissidence collectively. In this way, the concept of politicization makes it possible to address the relations between Arab Mediterranean youth and politics, broadening the boundaries of what we understand as the political sphere (Vommaro, 2018).
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Notes

1. Hamada Ben Amor performs under the name El Général. Ben Amor’s arrest in early January 2011 sparked further protests in the already turbulent country, and when the revolution ended, ‘RaisLeBled’ became popular across the country. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbMEYNnXCC4
2. Five Egyptian pounds is about €0.70 and is the minimum amount for a mobile money charge. See the video on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuaQkJUbog
3. Saddat Abdel Aziz, 26, grew up in the Cairo neighborhood of Dar al-Salam, a poor, drug-ridden district of rundown apartment buildings. This song was popular from 2011 until 2013, when Al Sisi lead the military coup that removed Morsi from office on 3 July, in response to June 2013 Egyptian protests, called a revolution by its proponents. https://soundcloud.com/sadatfifty
4. We would like to express our appreciation to the reviewers of the article for their suggestions and comments on how to improve the text. Moreover, our acknowledgement to Adam Brisley for their in depth reading and suggestions.
5. We use the term informal with a meaning determined by local specificity. In Cairo, self-build homes without an official license includes a wide range of housing. The prototypical favelais almost unknown in Egypt, whereas well-built houses and apartment blocks of up to 7 floors built with baked bricks are most common in Cairo. These building are undistinguished from real estate developments with a building license. The buildings make up huge neighbourhoods that are labelled ‘unplanned neighbourhoods’ by urban authorities. Such neighbourhoods provide housing for migrants from rural areas—especially from Beni Fayum, BeniSuef and the Upper Nile—and of the newly married couples who have five the districts of the city with high population densities as Gammaliyya and Al Hourriya.
6. The social emplacement of a person as youth as social category is directly related to marital status. As a stakeholder explains in a focus group: ‘however many countries have different definitions: for Morocco, it’s 18 to 30 years old; in Egypt, it’s 18 to 35, Bahrain, it’s 18 to 40. The definition depends on when the person leaves home and becomes the head of household. Thus, the householder becomes the person that has status in society and therefore defining youth is very complicated’. Consequently, marriage is a turning point that emplaces men and women as adults in the social field.
7. We do not use the term ‘local’ to describe finished spaces but rather to describe a series of discourses that involve ways of represent the local. Consequently, local is a contested space with different discourses that creates particular narratives of locality.
8. Shabi derives from the noun shab (‘people’) and is always used with a collective meaning that implies great political bearing. Its manipulation by the Egyptian ruling class and Islamist political groups has been consistent since the beginning of the independence process in the twentieth century. On the other hand, shabbi also designates a social group and refers to a wide range of native practices, tastes and patterns of behaviour in everyday life that has given rise to a musical style of the same name.
9. This ‘city’ was built in the 1970s as part of a ‘dégourification’ clean-up policy put in place by the state that consisted of the transfer of a population from the Jbell Lahmar slum to higher quality environment (Ben Slimane, 1995, p. 266). Cité Ibn Khaldoun I and VI are part of the upper El Omrane delegation that is dependent on the Tunis governorate. In 2014, upper El Omrane had 55,513 inhabitants, 27,767 of whom were men and 27,746 women. This takes in a certain number of neighbourhoods: Cité El Intilaka; El Nassim; upper El Omrane and Rommana. It is delimited by the municipality of Ariana to the north, the delegation of El Omrane to the south, the delegation of El Menzah to the east and the delegation of Ettahrir to the west. 13,490 young people, aged 15 to 29 make up 24.30 per cent of the population: 6,791 of these were male (12.23%) and 6,699 female (12.07%).

10. See the video-clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTEJVY7rttU

11. Even the Islamist party of Rachid Gannushi, EnNahda, was using rap singers in the campaign of the parliamentary elections of 2014. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgHn4xxUTy4

12. The fieldwork in Cairo was conducted in Dar as Salam by José Sáncez-García before and after 25th January Revolution. Dar as Salaam is a popular neighbourhood of approximately 100,000 people located in front of the island of Dahab in Cairo with similar characteristics of Ibn Khaldun quarter in Tunis. Every year, informal neighbourhood networks organize the Sidi Al Agamimulid, which is celebrated in the second week of the month of Yumada al Thani. For the mulid, informal youth networks in the quarter rent portable DJ equipment and hire disc jockeys such as those commonly found at local weddings.

13. In general terms, the inshad is related to Arab urban music of the first third of the last century (Al Faruqi 1993). The instrumentalists maintain their personality by expressing it in rich arabesques, including improvisations, facilitated by the flexibility in the musical form. They incorporate all kinds of modulations floating from one mode (maqam) to another, supported by the melodic rhythms of percussion (qafila). The player, through his chanting, seeks to abandon corporeality, in conjunction with those assembled, dissolving each other of their daily limits and reason (aql) that governs human affairs. The inshad is considered by listeners to be the archetypal Egyptian art whose emotional force dominates them and compels them to participate in the dhikr dance. With its distinctive genre and religious context, inshad may seem more traditional than other forms of musical heritage or be easier to identify by borrowing rhythms and modes from the entire Egyptian musical spectrum. On the other hand, shabi music is an urban genre (despite its rural roots) with a strong rhythmic pulse made by singers often (but not exclusively) male. It has been usually compared to Greek rembetika and Portuguese fado. Its main themes are bad luck, informal squatting, illicit sexuality and crimes of passion. Until recently, these songs, many of which are officially prohibited, avoided an explicit allusion to politics. However, its very nature usually means there is a strong sensitivity to the shabi, denouncing social and economic discontent (Ambrust, 1994). It is a music style oriented towards workers living in the outskirts of Great Cairo and is characterized by making use of the dialect of the streets. Some interpreters see shabi music as the only one unadulterated by the outside world, compared to music modernized by instrumental changes, joining drum machines, drums, organs, synthesizers or electric guitars that characterizes contemporary Egyptian music. However, it creates the opportunity to allow individuals to ‘contest’ the state since shabi has been censored by the Egyptian state in order to make much more visible than before the ‘inculturate nature’ of the Egyptian (young, but not only) lower classes.

14. Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) is a group of 20 Egyptian military officials. They took over power of presidency in Egypt following the fall of Mubarak. SCAF is always mistaken for Stretched Cunt Ass Fuck, which is a similar meaning.

15. See the video on: http://revolutionaryarabraptheindex.blogspot.com/2012/03/revolution ary-records-kazeboon-liars.html

16. Video-clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=xf9s_h8S2XM
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References


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