

# Young people putting music to the crisis: The role of music as a political expression

January 31 2020

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In Tunisia, during the Jasmine Revolution (June 2011), rap was the way to spread unrest with Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. Credit: Photo taken in Tunisia by the authors.

Songs that Sing the Crisis: Music, Words, Youth Narratives and Identities in Late Modernity is the title of a special issue of the journal *Young* (Nordic Journal of Youth Research) to be published on 1 February, now available online, that reflects on the role of music as an expression of the crisis. It contains case studies of musical genres rap, punk, folk metal, black metal, fado, reggaeton and mahraganat in countries like Spain, Portugal, Finland, Ireland and Egypt.

The special issue includes studies by researchers from the Youth, Society and Communication Research Group (JOVIS.com) at Department of Communication UPF: one by Mònica Figueras (together with lecturers at the URV Núria Araüna and Iolanda Tortajada) on feminist reggaeton in Spain, and another by the researchers José García Sánchez and Carles Feixa about rap and mahraganat in Egypt after the revolution.

As well as being an author, Carles Feixa Pàmpols (UPF) is also the editor of the special issue, together with Paula Guerra (University of Porto, Portugal), Shane Blackman (Canterbury Christ Church University, UK) and Jeanette Østergaard (The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark).

## **The expansion of reggaeton in Spain**

The article by Núria Araüna, Iolanda Tortajada and Mònica Figueras-Maz focuses on a non-Western musical style, reggaeton, which became commercialized and globalized at the turn of the century, but in Spain, after the crisis, adopted a more politicized stance. It originated as an underground hybrid style belonging to the lower classes of a peripheral region—the Caribbean—and was considered a male domain (and subclass), but quickly spread from the marginalized sectors to the middle and central classes. Reggaeton can be seen as an exercise of resignation and empowerment, a tactic to subvert discriminatory gender representations.

The study examines the expansion of reggaeton in Spain from the point of view of gender relations and the mainstreaming of popular feminism. It focuses on three young popular artists: Brisa Fenoy, Ms. Nina and Tremenda Jauría, who have appropriated the style as a subversive tool to convey feminist messages, through the lyrics and body movements.

Both in the commercial slant of the former two and the alternative stance of the latter, the lyrics and their dissemination in political contexts, such as the #MeToo demonstrations on international women's day (8 March) 2018, allow the authors to conclude that reggaeton can be seen as exercise of resignation and empowerment, a tactic to subvert discriminatory gender representations: "these songs and performances are a manifestation of a complex underlying process (...) the so-called revival of feminist movements in Spain as a result of the crisis which caused greater insecurity, poverty in the working classes (but especially among women and [young people](#))," the authors of the work explain.

## **Analysis of the music of the Arab Spring**

The article by José Sánchez-García and Carles Feixa focuses on the politics of a popular world [music](#)—rap—and a glocal music—mahragan— in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively. The research is part of the European project TRANSGANG. Based on a comparative research project, the study combines the analysis of song lyrics with ethnographic data from the two countries, after the so-called Arab Spring. These hybrid musical styles could be seen as the soundtrack to the revolution, but also as a factor motivating the protests.

In Tunis, during the Jasmine Revolution (June 2011), rap was the means of spreading discontent with Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, as the songs of El General clearly depict, there was even a division of gender and class: institutionalized politics for middle class young people against marginalized young people. In Egypt, Cairo mahragan was a

transformation of Sufi music and dance, mixed with commercial and electronic rhythms, popular in the poorer neighbourhoods, but regarded as "tasteless," crude and influenced by the Western ruling classes.

The lyrics changed with the anti-Mubarak uprising that erupted on 25 January 2011: mahragan songs were politicized and attracted different social groups and generations. As one singer says: "We made music to make people dance, but we also talk about their concerns." In both cases, these musical styles were re-signified from a generational and gender perspective going from resistance to compulsory resilience: rap music in Tunisia and mahragan in Cairo allow lower class young people to imagine the hope and the critical focus of multiple marginalizations.

## **A special issue that links music, identity, political and artistic protest**

The presentation of the special issue states that "young people are often at the forefront of an important contemporary social and political change, and they believe that music has been a central element in these events, whether as a promoter of political mobilization or as an important indicator of the profound changes and reconstructions of youth identity in late modernity." Therefore, this special issue of *Young* has sought to explore the issues raised by this dilemma, crossing notions of music, identity, political and artistic protest, through interdisciplinary analysis in the fields of sociology, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, the media and history, among others, and, most importantly, it allows putting music at the centre of studies on youth.

**More information:** Paula Guerra et al, Introduction: Songs that Sing the Crisis: Music, Words, Youth Narratives and Identities in Late Modernity, *YOUNG* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1103308819879825](https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308819879825)

Provided by Universitat Pompeu Fabra - Barcelona

Citation: Young people putting music to the crisis: The role of music as a political expression (2020, January 31) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-young-people-music-crisis-role.html>

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