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# **Listening to an other England:** *A geographical approach of punk music*

## **Introduction**

In our spirit, music just can be an artful arrangement of sounds across time. In fact, "music is part of virtually every culture on Earth, but it varies widely among cultures in style and structure" (Bulter David). More complex than it should be, music link art, society, space and culture, and by its all forms it is a system.

Between our two research projects of "sciences of territory" master, the study of punk music can make the surprise. One of us works on the paper of music in geography, the other on sensible territories. Both are thinking that music can be relevant in the next years, and not only in geography. It is everywhere and every time, it is source of economical, political and social stakes, everybody in the world can have an access to it. Yet, its style, its signification or the values its leaves exist in many different forms. Its use and the message its produces are not always simples to descript, but more and more works show that it is most of the time an image of the society. To go to some question, we want introduce this topic in a geographic approach by the example of a specific place and time. How can we aboard music in geography? What is the interest we have? By which process music take place in the society? And overall, how it can be a producer of identity, a vehicle of a social discourse? All this questions are link to our theory which puts music in the situation of a territory marker and a place maker.

Thus, we will introduce our argument in a scientific and critical way, taking care of the necessity we have to look serious and credible. In a first part, we going to try establish and affirm the role of music in geography and the trace the latter leave in its. A second part will deals with punk music in the crisis of the 70's in England by a territorial and social aspect.

## **I- Music in geography and geography in music**

In this first part, we want to show how geography's research can take in account music. To show that, we think it is necessary having help by some authors and examples. Moreover, we have to precise that the paper interest is not to legitimate place of music in geography, so we will turn on the demonstration towards our topic. The latter effectively need a get into shape more important than a simple introduction.

There is in geography sciences a perpetual movement of innovation. For many reasons geographer find news approaches, news topics, news debates. Social demand, political or

economical conditions and personal interest are the more considerable elements those should intervene in the geographic way of thinking. If first studies of music are not precisely localized, their origins of expansion and diversification are very recent, especially after the 1980's. In effect, this date marks a turning point in all modern societies, may be the gate to the post-modernity.

We know that the study of music does not make the unanimity into geographic corpus. Approaches are very different according to schools and most of the explicit works come from Anglo-Saxon countries (U.S.A., England, Canada, etc.). Yet, they are in multiplication in many countries, in acceptance in more and more geographic department. Apparently, the globalization has played a role in this event; "Music has been neglected in geography, yet the rise of 'world music' exemplifies the multiple ways in which places are constructed" (Connell J. and Gibson C., 2003a). Having said that, make interrogations about the link exist between music and geography it is always legitimate. What is its nature? How geographer can aboard it? Are not we too near than other human sciences? Where reside the interest for geographic community to develop its comprehension? Answers are numerous and not go necessary in the same way. However, there is not movement against its in spite of the perplexity of many geographers.

One of the geographic topics more assimilate to music is the identity. We are talking of a psychological aspect of territorial approach. Geography is, among other definition, the science of places, but not only in their material aspect. Through the territorial identity, we can find ideals relations between humanity and the place she takes up, like collective memory or attachment for example; "...the role of music in establishing and expressing place attachment..."(Sancar F.H., 2003). Using what is relevant like a social link, music takes a place of choice in the description of territorial aspects of societies, with the same manner of sociologist aboard arts; "[...] music has as secure a place as the visual arts in the study of social life." (Smith S.J., 2000). The first studies were nearest than anthropology, studying traditional music for example, but geographer bring back the topic to geography using the importance of the place. Then, cities are very used in the works on popular music. Colapietro V. (2003), show that music (Bebop) makes urban compartments, so that its can change the city, materially like ideally. In certain conditions, music makes the city. Music is localized, its practices situated in real and imagined space, so is producing place and territorialize its. "Various melodies [...] materialize their basic information and generate novel spaces." (Levy A.J., 2003).

Other way to link geography with music can pass to politic. In the case of we propose to study, the part playing by the popular movement and the imaginary of place is very relevant. Connell J. and Gibson C. (2003b) help we to legitimate the choice of this topic thank to their recent work on it: "A crucial element of tourist consumption is popular music, produced specifically for youth markets, informed and influenced by the attitudes and style of backpacker cultures." (Connell J. and Gibson C., 2003b). Many people are committed with fact that music is, like other arts, a source of society production, an object made by a group for a group. For all that reasons, we can emit the theory that if society makes music it is to affirm its existence; existence which pass for a manner and a place to live. Reality is that society needs playing and/or singing its sentiments to exteriorize them, to show them to the others. Music is everywhere, in walls of our cities and house of our countries, every time on radio's airs and television. Who is not concern by its extent? Who do not take part in it by whatever thing he does? Geography, in his paper of social science, has to take in account all factors of society and place production. Like we think and we want to express by this work, there is an interest to geographer to take it seriously. Things are not always what theme appears.

## **2- The social and spatial identification of an other England through punk music**

### **2-1- Space and punk music: from margins to public spaces**

For a dabbler punk music, and popular music in general, will only appear as an avatar of a globalized, universal music which will be the same in London as it was made up in New York, Los Angeles or Belfast. But geographers have to listen further to popular music in order to understand that punk music made in New York (The Ramones, Television, Patti Smith) is very different aesthetically, musically from The Clash and The Sex Pistols. The global diffusion of some songs and bands do not mean that they are placelessness. All artistic productions are a mirror of the place where they have been produced. Do we say that books of Proust are embedded nowhere because they are read in Tokyo, Shanghai as in New York or Paris? There is a kind of despise to say that popular music comes from nowhere, just as a commercial, industrial product. We really think that popular music, even music which sells records and is diffused all around the world, is stamped by the place of its production. There is a *genius loci* for cultural innovation.

English punk music was born in London at the end of the year 1976. Two main bands emerge: the Clash from Notting Hill and the Sex Pistols. This musical revolution appears in a paradoxal spatial context: in a certain way since its birth punk movement is at the center in the capital, but in an other way this musical revolution begins in the margins of the capital. The city provides an access to musical diversity in performance and on records. The proximity of radios, televisions and record companies provides this music a way to be diffused and heard by the rest of England. Moreover London is the place of musical innovation since the Rolling Stones, the precursor David Bowie, the Beatles and their studios at Abbey Road, which is the place where popular innovative music is made up and recorded since the end of the 1960's. Music, and in this case punk music, can be seen as a medium, a symbol through which places and society speak to the world. And punk music has been a link between marginalized spaces of London and the rest of England, and of the world. The capital provides punk music the cultural, cognitive and economic resources to develop and be diffused.

But if punk music is influenced by a spatial context, it also produces spaces and creates new social relationships in public spaces. A new aesthetic in sight and sound has been created. Punks terrorize the academic England by their new ways of dressing and new behaviours in public spaces. From the margins and thankful to punk music a new "tribe" who appropriates in his own way public spaces is born and have found his own identity. Music provides youth and marginalized people a way of social identification.

### **2-2- Reading marginalization through music**

Punk music is embedded in a spatial and in a very specific social context. At the end of the 1970's England is affected by economical crisis, desindustrialisation, fear of immigrants and the growth of immigration and unemployment. These phenomenon marginalize some parts of England. Punk music and especially the songs of the Clash reflects these social issues. In "Career Opportunities" Joe Strummer sings the impossibility for the children of workers to find great jobs and have a better life than their parents. In "Something about England" we discover the story of a man who has fought for his country during the Second World War and who is now forgotten by England. He stands as a symbol of people who are only numbers, arms or soldiers for the power and rich who do not care about their lives and happiness. The two songs "London calling" and "London burning" tell the feelings of the workers who are leaving the city little by little or are marginalized and do not have access to

the center. They are also a call for a reappropriation of the city by the workers, the ones who built it.

The proximity between marginalized people and in particular immigrants is reflected by the music which has influenced punk rockers. Black music (Jamaican music, reggae and rap) is very present in Clash' songs. "Police and thieves" is a cover of a reggae song, transposed in the social context of England, "Revolution rock" is, in spite of its title, a reggae song and all the record Sandinista has got the print of music from black ghettos.

### **2-3- From music to politic**

As we have already foreseen that punk music songs have a strong political content. We can just think to the lyrics of the Clash: "they say the immigrants steal the hubcaps/ of the respected gentlemen/ they say it would be wine and roses/ if England were for Englishmen again". This music stands against the central power and the establishment. 1977 is the year of the punk but also the jubilee of the Queen. In this context the Sex Pistols' song "God save the queen" stands for an anti-anthem where Queen Elisabeth II stands for a non-human person and the government for a "fascist regime". Punk music is here the "medium through which those whose condition society tries its best not to see can begin to make themselves heard"<sup>1</sup>. These songs provide us to listen to an other England with other realities and other values such as peace about Ulster. Punks do not want of the society of consumption who marginalize and exploit the other, like tourists in the country they visit: "I don't want holidays in the sun/ I don't wanna go to their new belt sun".

The political dimension of punk music can be seen in the repression and censorship who affected punk rockers. It was forbidden to play on radios Sex Pistols' songs. This music expresses the conflict between marginalized people and central power who tries not to see them. But all these facts are more a symbol of an English society which try to forget some parts of itself. Music is here the last chance to have a voice when there is apparently no other way to be heard. This is a similar situation as rap music and black people in America, as rock and youth in the sixties. Punk music has been a way for marginalized people to survive in a society who wants to forget them.

### **Conclusion: music, margins and geography**

In this article we have tried to prove that space and places are not only embedded in sight but also sound and in particular music. And we have shown the very close link that exists between music and politic through the example of punk in England. Music reveals identity of a place, social issues, inequalities and marginalization which are themes traditionally explores by geography. Geographers have to study artistic expressions and in particular music to show the influence of the spatial context and that art products space and place. In a scientific context where geographers pay more and more attention to emotions and marginalizations, by studying popular music which is not only a commercial product and not at all a placeless art we can understand how some social groups can make them heard and how the invention and innovations in popular music very often reflect marginalization. Through the example of English punk music we have proved the link between social marginalization and musical innovation, a link that has to be explored further. We can also try to understand how these innovations are appropriated by record industry and what are the spatial and musical consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> **Smith S.J., 1997**, "Beyond geography's visible worlds : a cultural politics of music", *Progress in human geography*, Arnold Publishers, vol. 21, n°4, pp. 502-529

In this article we have shown that music can be a very interesting field of research for geographers. Until now this field has only been explored very lightly. We are also hoping that geographers will now pay more attention to the links between music (and all other arts) and space or place.

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