

# **FRAGILE EMPOWERMENT: THE DYNAMIC CULTURAL ECONOMY OF BRITISH DRUM AND BASS MUSIC**

**Alistair Fraser & Nancy Ettliger**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper discusses the dynamic cultural economy of British drum and bass (D&B) music, which emerged out of Britain's rave culture in the early 1990s. We suggest that D&B offers insight into more general issues regarding the relation between alternative cultural economies and capitalism. We examine relations between D&B and the mainstream capitalist economy and argue that D&B calls attention to the possibility for alternatives to conventional capitalist relations to survive and possibly thrive without pursuing separation from capitalism. We also theorize D&B as a vehicle towards empowerment regarding the industry segment vis-à-vis the mainstream music industry and also regarding D&B's practitioners, many of whom can be understood as marginalized discursively and/or materially. However, D&B empowerment is fragile, due in part to technological changes that threaten practices which have helped cultivate innovativeness as well as communal relations. The empowerment of alternative practices is fragile not only for D&B as an industry segment, but also from the vantage point of internal power relations – notably with respect to differences along axes of gender and generation/age. Our conclusions indicate the broader significance of the paper for critical social theory and propose how new research might build on our dynamic view of D&B's cultural economy.

**Key words:** Cultural economy; empowerment, subjection; alternative economic spaces; music industries; drum and bass music; Britain

## **FRAGILE EMPOWERMENT: THE DYNAMIC CULTURAL ECONOMY OF BRITISH DRUM AND BASS MUSIC**

### **1. Introduction**

Interest in alternative economies has been noticeable in recent years in Geography (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Leyshon et al., 2003). Yet ideas about the meaning of “alternative” or “diverse” differ considerably. “Different” may not necessarily signify a *just* economy (Pollard and Samers, 2007), thus drawing attention to issues of internal power relations. Further, scholars of alternative economies have different views as to whether “alternative” signifies separation from capitalism (a *post-capitalist* economy) (Gibson-Graham, 2006), a dominance-dependence relation with capitalism (Lincoln, 2003), or a temporary retreat from mainstream life that nonetheless mimics or becomes assimilated into the mainstream economy (e.g. Crewe et al., 2003). In this paper, we develop a *relational* position, recognizing the relation (not separation) between alternative, counter-cultural lifeways but also problems of marginalization and uneven power relations both with alternative economic spaces and between these spaces and mainstream capitalism.

We offer a case study of a small segment of the music industry, drum and bass (D&B), which broadly construed represents a counter-cultural movement that reflects discursive

and material marginalization; but also one that has survived and in some ways thrived as part of the capitalist system. We conceptualize D&B as a “cultural economy” because we recognize the mutual constitution (hence, the false separation) of culture and the economy (Gibson, 2003; Gibson and Kong, 2005; Massey, 1997; Ray and Sayer, 1999). From our vantage point, economies are inherently cultural entities that entail symbols and identities of economic actors as well as materiality; looking for culture in the economy requires examining much more than the so-called “culture industries”, which bracket off certain economies as cultural and fail to recognize the cultural in all (see critiques by Ettliger, 2004 pp.26-29; also Ettliger, 2007).

In Section 2 of the paper, we show that the strength of D&B, a small counter-cultural segment of the music industry within the capitalist system, is very much linked to specific technological practices and their interrelated spatiality. We also shed light on the ways in which D&B has been a vehicle to fragile empowerment for many of its practitioners and, by adopting a relational approach,<sup>1</sup> we examine complex power relations between D&B practitioners and the mainstream capitalist economy. Our argument is that D&B speaks to debates in Geography regarding “alternative” economies because it calls attention to the imperfect and nuanced relations between alternative and mainstream economies.

Shifting focus to power relations within D&B, we then explain in Section 3.1 of the paper that the “alternativeness” of this cultural economy from its origins through the present

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<sup>1</sup> On the relational turn in economic geography, see the special issue of the *Journal of Economic Geography* (Boggs and Rantisi, 2003); see also Yeung (2005).

has always been gender biased – an indication that being radical does not necessarily ensure equality or social justice. Furthermore, in Section 3.2, we follow Andrew Leyshon’s (2003) illumination of technology change as the “scary monster” of the music industry by analyzing how generational differences among D&B practitioners complicate technological changes that have prompted significant restructuring of power relations and also have begun to threaten D&B’s survival.

In our conclusions in Section 4 we then consider how the case of D&B can shed light on the study of groups that experience subordination (Escobar, 1995; Mitchell, 2002; Said, 1978). Although subordination has been connected to a “politics of becoming” (Gibson, 2001), our overriding sense of the literature is that such groups typically are portrayed as “becoming” in discursive but not really in material terms – that is, as unable to undergo significant material change. We call attention to the interrelation of the material practices and discursive representations to highlight uneven and changing power relations amongst those who are subordinated. We advance a view of D&B as a *subaltern* economy evolving *within* capitalism, while also entailing uneven and changing power relations internally.

D&B music emerged in the early 1990s from Britain’s rave culture. Raves are late- or all-night events in which young people listen and dance to a wide range of electronic music (Redhead et al., 1997; Thornton, 1996). Late 1980s and early 1990s rave-style music drew upon, and then helped bring into being, a wide range of musical forms. Whereas the influences included ‘1970s disco, early 1980s synth-pop, Euro-pop, Hi-NRG and the

black electronic house/techno of Detroit and Chicago' (Brown, 1997, p.76), the offspring of Britain's rave scene includes genres such as trance, happy hardcore, UK garage, grime and D&B. The latter blends the above musical influences with Jamaican reggae and ragga. The result is a highly visceral, exhilarating style of music consisting of thunderous bass lines and frantic drums. D&B is performed by DJs and MCs (who add ragga-style lyrics) in raves or nightclubs all over Britain but especially in England and increasingly beyond British shores in the rest of Europe, Japan, North America, Brazil, or Australia. It has a dedicated following of "D&B headz" or "junglists" who buy records, attend events, and perhaps eventually proceed to make D&B themselves.<sup>2</sup> The development and growth of D&B has entailed the creation of a small industry, which has survived despite relying on relatively low record sales of between 1,000 and 5,000 units. It is a marginal player in the broader music industry but large enough to provide numerous opportunities for those involved to earn a modest living. On the production side of the industry, there are music producers making music for sale in vinyl, CD or MP3 format and many others who earn by DJ'ing. Then there are rave promoters, web site managers, and pirate radio station entrepreneurs as well as managers of D&B artists (handling bookings, arranging travel, payments and so on). But there are also people who are involved in multiple areas of D&B: producing music, DJ'ing, running record labels, promoting events, and operating web sites. Many D&B practitioners pursue a diversified portfolio of activities, often occupying overlapping positions in multiple sectors of the industry.

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike genres such as punk and hip-hop, it would be hard to associate D&B with particular styles of dress.

Our case study is almost exclusively confined to D&B in Britain. Although D&B is made, played, and consumed elsewhere in the world, the industry's largest, oldest, and most prestigious record companies are based in Britain.<sup>3</sup> Britain is also the industry's "mass market", especially with regards to frequency of D&B events. DJs have greater earning potential in Britain, which in turn means that non-British DJs or producers have a strong material incentive to establish their credentials in Britain and be booked to play there; the uneven geography of D&B reproduces unevenness. Another reason for focusing on Britain is that the industry's "elite" DJs – those who command the highest fees for DJ'ing and have the most cultural capital by virtue of their position in forging D&B's history – are British.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Britain remains the place within which new music tends to circulate, not least because having their music played in Britain provides unsigned producers with a stronger chance of signing to one of the British D&B record companies. Thus, a case study on D&B in Britain enables us to examine the dynamics of D&B in the place in which it emerged and endured and from which it has diffused to other places.

We use secondary data – such as the major book on D&B, Brian Belle-Fortune's (1999) *All Crew Muss Big Up*, and interviews of D&B actors published in the only two D&B

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<sup>3</sup> Recently formed record companies outside of Britain are outside the scope of our analysis, though we consider them important for future research especially regarding new geographies *and* power relations of D&B as related to technological changes; we broach this subject in the penultimate section.

<sup>4</sup> That Australian or Brazilian artists such as Pendulum or Marky have joined the more elite group of DJs is evidence of D&B's increasingly international marketplace, but they are the exception heretofore.

magazines (*Knowledge* and *Atmosphere*), as well as interviews in a variety of commonly used web sites, which are the main form of communication at this point in time – to illuminate what we believe are the pertinent elements of D&B’s cultural economy. Our strategy was to collect published interviews with D&B DJs and producers and analyze them for insights about the D&B cultural economy. Research on music need not be confined to primary data collected via ethnographic methods, although there are excellent examples of ethnographic studies (e.g. Cohen, 1991; Finnegan, 1989; Pini, 2001). We recognize the importance of acknowledging limitations of secondary data, notably that we have used answers to interview questions that we did not ask and on which we could not follow up; further, we are not in a position to examine the multiple texts apparent in an interview (e.g. body language and the like). Nevertheless, we believe we have sufficient secondary data to engage the issues that concern us here.

As we write, a crisis is developing in D&B. Specifically, the scope for the industry to continue providing opportunities may be severely curtailed by the “scary monster” (Leyshon, 2003) of technological change in the form of MP3 file formats and peer-to-peer file sharing networks such as Limewire or SoulSeek. Downloading has begun to affect record sales; some D&B record companies have had to cut back on staff, others have had to find new ways of making a living. New types of players have emerged on the scene; some older players have left the industry. In short, a process of economic restructuring is occurring, the outcome of which is far from certain.

We examine this critical moment in the development of D&B by positioning it relative to the rest of the music industry and capitalism more generally. We do this in part by calling attention to D&B's "dub plate culture" which, as we elaborate in the next section of the paper, is a specific approach to the production-consumption relation, and signifies a particular type of cultural economy. We argue that dub plate culture has been critical for the growth and survival of D&B, and moreover, that it offers its practitioners at least a partial vehicle of empowerment and resistance to the capitalist economy, which subjects them.

## **2. Dub plate culture and nuances of empowerment in D&B**

D&B's survival and growth is closely bound up with dub plate culture, the practice of music producers giving new, unsigned music in dub plate format to DJs to play in raves and events. Dub plate culture is the link connecting innovation in production to live performance and consumption. It is D&B's unique, defining feature. The following discussion examines the constitution and significance of dub plate culture.

### *2.1 Accessible technologies for innovation*

Dub plates are acetate, rather than vinyl, records that can be played on record players. They have a long history of use in the Jamaican music economy (see Bradley, 2000 pp.22-26; Power and Hallencreutz, 2002). Dub plates have a short shelf life; whereas vinyl records can be played thousands of times without wearing down, dub plates are malleable and can only be played ten or so times. Though lacking in durability, dub plates are cheaper to produce than vinyl. They therefore have been a significant feature in



the development of music made by budget-conscious musicians such as in the case of Jamaican reggae. Dub plates have been a technology of the marginalized, although as we will elaborate through reference to D&B, technological change in the music industry suggests that CDs may be the *new* technology of the marginalized. That some musicians in the early rave scene embraced dub plates reflects their use in other British music scenes and is evidence of the tight financial limitations on those making rave music. Dub plates were used to minimize the risks of operating in a small-scale market on the margins of the music economy.

As noted earlier, of all the genres emerging from the rave scene, D&B developed an especially close association with reggae and ragga. Part of this was about “sampling” reggae records or blending ragga lyrics with D&B beats. But the association with the world of Jamaican music also entailed adapting their technological practices to suit the requirements of D&B’s fledgling industry. Part of the “culture” in dub plate production is precisely that it has been “cool” for D&B to emphasize its Jamaican ancestry. But there is another way in which to see the culture in dub plate culture: dub plates have played an important role in the development of a culture of experimentation, collaboration and sharing in D&B. Most D&B producers start out as “bedroom producers” using relatively cheap music production equipment – of the sort that broke the major companies’ “monopoly” on studios (see Jones, 2002, p.217) – often at home. They experiment by constructing new sounds combined with “samples” from other musicians, which they manipulate and transform. The result is a proliferation of different styles and sounds, and a rapid pace of change as competing producers attempt to move the music into new

terrain. Dub plates became an enabling technology because they facilitated experimentation: producers would have their tracks “cut” onto dub plate and then played in events by DJs, who would then relay feedback to the producer and recommend ways to improve the track. DJs learned how audiences received tracks; producers learned whether their tracks had commercial potential. Use of dub plates therefore provided what DJ Kenny Ken has described as ‘a quality control safety net’ (Belle-Fortune, 1999, p.45). The relatively low cost of dub plates helped D&B practitioners develop a flexible socio-technical culture driven forward by experimentation, collaboration and sharing. The resulting cultural economy has been, and remains, focused on producing innovative and exhilarating music.

## *2.2 Spatiality of dub plate culture*

The spatiality of dub plate culture has been germane to the growth of D&B’s cultural economy. The world of D&B consists of multiple sites and assemblages, fixed points as well as fleeting, temporary locations in which innovation occurs and value is generated and then valorized. Innovation, for instance, occurs in recording studios in a producer’s home or in the office of a D&B record company. These are mostly fixed in space-time, but music production software also allows for music-making on-the-go, for example on a laptop computer whilst traveling. Some collaborators meet up and make music in a particular studio; others collaborate virtually by sending sounds, beats, or tracks to each other over the Internet. The world of D&B exemplifies Gernot Grabher’s (2002) notion that innovators learn new skills, become inspired, or establish contacts with others via “hanging out”, even virtually.

But learning also occurs on the dance floor in raves, which become a testing ground, a laboratory, even a marketplace in which new, often unsigned music is played and consumed. Innovation meets up with D&B's economy on the dance floor. D&B events, which are mostly run by industry insiders, are held all over Britain.<sup>5</sup> There are D&B-specific promoters such as Innovation or Jungle Fever and other promoters from within the industry such as record companies (e.g. Ram, True Playaz, Prototype, Hospital Records, Good Looking and V Recordings all run frequent events). Some nightclubs are regular venues for D&B events: Swerve is held every Wednesday night at The End nightclub; Movement is regularly held in Bar Rumba on Thursdays. Other venues are only used occasionally; the music is "performed" *fleetingly* in a wide variety of spaces. D&B events rarely occur in places designed for the music. Raves and events are spatially diffuse.

Rave promoters have benefited from dub plate culture because producers want their tracks tested, because DJs want to play the latest sounds, and because audiences in D&B events expect to hear *new* music, which they associate with dub plates. Dub plate culture produces D&B raves as pulsating occasions. Loud cheers and whistles from the audience greet the frantic beats and low frequency bass-lines of D&B tracks. DJs playing in one-hour "sets" are joined by MCs who build up the excitement and interact with audiences; D&B events should be "running" i.e. exciting. DJs play dub plates of new tracks from the producers with whom they are connected. They compete with one another to have the

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<sup>5</sup> We are unclear as to whether this holds true for D&B outside of Britain.

freshest tracks. According to Eastman – promoter of raves such as Jungle Fever and manager of pirate radio station, Kool FM – DJs such as Grooverider play what other, less connected DJs cannot play, which is ‘good [because] when [DJs are] on a rave together and they’re all doing they’re [sic] own individual thing [i.e. playing music given to them by their network of producers]. That’s what keeps the buzz going’ (Belle-Fortune, 1999, p.45).

Live performances by D&B DJs stretches the “locus of exchange” (Jones, 2002) far beyond the cash register in record shops; DJ’ing enables the industry to tap consumers’ pockets. Indeed, the industry would not survive without events because D&B’s heartbeat is on the dance floor. Thus, raves and events in nightclubs constitute an all-important and spatio-temporally expanded marketplace for D&B and help the industry manage low sales volumes.

In summary, British D&B has grown by virtue of actors – including music producers, DJs, promoters and consumers – traveling from various parts of Britain and coming together in multiple, fixed and fleeting innovation spaces. They have established and maintained social networks designed to facilitate innovation. D&B producers and DJs make, circulate and play music in an expanded marketplace, which they have been instrumental in constructing. Consumers’ pockets are tapped and revenue is generated across Britain and increasingly the world. Indeed, the growing importance of exporting D&B to the rest of the world and performing therein means that D&B is no longer confined to Britain; D&B is increasingly unbounded, even if Britain remains its largest

market. The industry's resilience – which, as we discuss in the next section, has meant that D&B producers and their record companies have been able to resist the temptation to sell to the majors – is strongly associated with the spatial constitution of its industry, its culture of innovation, and expanded marketplace.

### *2.3 A relational understanding of dub plate culture*

Our view of D&B is “relational” in the sense that we view its identity as well as material rewards and challenges in relation to, not separate from, the mainstream capitalist economy. As elaborated below, we view D&B as a marginalized industry whilst also being a source of at least partial empowerment.

The conventional view of power in the music industries literature portrays the majors as all-powerful because they can cherry-pick artists at will or buy companies if they so wish (Hesmondhalgh, 1996, 1998; Leyshon, 2001, 2003; Leyshon et al., 2005; Negus, 1998; Power and Hallencreutz, 2002). And D&B is indeed marginalized by the majors. For example, whilst the majors can rely on music videos to promote new releases, accessing music television channels, such as MTV, is beyond the reach of most D&B record labels. As Roni Size has noted, ‘as individual labels we’ve all got the same problem... the system! We don’t have the machine that allows us to say, ok we’re gonna go out and spend quarter of a million on this album and we’re gonna hit you with videos, art work and shows’ (RWD Magazine, 2006). D&B record labels also experience distribution problems, with small economies of scale leading some labels, such as Timeless, to try to establish their own networks (RBMA, 2007). Moreover, the size and financial muscle of

the majors means that they influence how technological change occurs because, for example, developers of new technologies such as Apple's *iPod* must take the majors' opinions into account. D&B, along with other marginal segments in the music industry, can only *adapt* to technological change; it does not have the ear of Sony, Samsung or Apple.

Beyond the material dimensions of marginalization, D&B also is *discursively* marginalized.<sup>6</sup> As a member of the music industry overall, it is ignored by the "cultural" or "arts" sections of major newspapers or magazines. Mainstream music festivals such as in Reading and Leeds receive extensive attention from print, radio and television media, but D&B's marketplace-cum-dancefloor is largely overlooked, even if the media (p)reviews some events in which D&B DJs and producers have some presence, such as the Notting Hill Carnival or Glastonbury Festival. Meanwhile, Britain's state-run radio station for young people, BBC Radio 1 – a major player in the music industry with important gatekeepers and power (Hendy, 2000) – categorizes D&B as "black" and "urban", not "dance", music, and only reserves late-night slots for D&B shows. The result is that D&B is rendered largely invisible in mainstream British culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Recognizing separate material and discursive dimensions of marginalization need not entail the construction of a binary of material/discursive; our intention is not to suggest that one is the negative of the other, nor that emphasizing one dimension necessitates the exclusion of the other (Massey, 1999 p.52; Ettliger, 2008). Thus, we note that mainstream culture celebrates some artists discursively even while they "struggle" materially (Neff et al., 2005); see also Wendy Shaw (2005) regarding alternative cultures in Berlin, Amsterdam, and Melbourne that are discursively celebrated by mainstream culture and the state but simultaneously squeezed out of particular neighborhoods by the property markets in their respective cities.

Ironically, however, while D&B overall is marginalized in the capitalist economy, its practitioners nonetheless *manipulate* capital by tapping it towards their own ends. D&B *necessarily* draws on capitalist enterprises, including Akai, Bose, JBL, or Roland, which make music production hard/software. Moreover, some D&B producers and DJs have established relations with the majors over, for example, remixing tracks by mainstream artists, compilation albums, or soundtracks for video games such as Grand Theft Auto. Finally, of course, consumers use credit or bank cards to buy D&B music or tickets for events.

D&B also suggests other possibilities for marginalized actors. For example, D&B insiders retain ownership of the industry's (albeit, small) record companies. Unlike many other small record companies in the music economy (Hesmondhalgh, 1996), D&B insiders have not pursued a strategy of building a reputation and then selling to the majors such as Sony or BMG. Rather, they have strived to retain control over their product and ownership of their businesses. Thus, DJ Grooverider owns the Prototype label, for example; Hype owns Ganja and True-Playaz; DJ SS owns Formation; Roni Size co-owns Full Cycle; Bryan G co-owns V Recordings; and Andy C co-owns Ram Records. As Grooverider has noted, then: 'We own everything. We own the whole business' (Belle-Fortune, 1999, p.32). They have been productive (see Table One: Output of selected leading D&B record companies). In this regard, D&B is not like jazz because jazz musicians rarely "owned their own product" (Basu and Werbner, 2001; Kofsky,

1998); nor is it like Jamaican reggae, in which firms external to the industry ‘have in many respects been the most important actors’ (Power and Hallencreutz, 2002, p.1844).

Dub plate culture is crucial here. It has helped insulate the industry because it gives D&B insiders a *relational advantage* over the majors with respect to signing new talent. The circulation of new music in dub plate culture means D&B insiders tend to be the first actors in the music economy to learn about skillful, up-and-coming artists. Thus, D&B insiders have been well positioned to sign talented newcomers such as Pendulum, TC, Artificial Intelligence, or Clipz. The industry comes close to Basu and Werbner’s (2001) view of hip-hop as constituted by insiders with specialized knowledge of what is commercially viable and who know ‘the streets’ and use their cultural capital in internal networks that the majors struggle to access.

D&B is indeed commercially oriented. Some “underground” or “alternative” music genres – as well as some of their critics and, indeed, champions (Hutnyk, 2000) – might decry commercial success as “selling out” (Hesmondhalgh, 1998), But ‘giving up the day job’ (Belle-Fortune, 1999, pp.28-30) and working full-time in D&B requires making money. Critically, for our purposes, there are numerous examples of working class people from mixed ethnic backgrounds “making it” in D&B. However, this is absolutely not to suggest that D&B is an *exclusively* working class industry: there are numerous actors, such as DJ Storm (who studied radiology at Oxford University), who would probably have had excellent labor market opportunities without becoming involved in D&B. British D&B is made by, and popular with, working as well as middle class



people. Here, though, and without over-romanticizing the impact of D&B on people's lives, we call attention to how D&B has been a vehicle especially for working class people who might otherwise fall into Britain's ever expanding reserve of redundant labor (McDowell, 2003). D&B has, for example, enabled people such as Mickey Finn to transform their material positions: '[D&B] took me away from a shitty life. I was a criminal before I done all this...I've been in prison four times' (Knowledge Magazine, 2004a). MC 5ive'O, has noted that, 'I'd done a prison term already. I said, "I don't want no more of that." I had three children, I had to change my tings [sic]. I'm still in the Hood. But I've got out of the ways of the Hood' (Belle-Fortune, 1999, pp.28-29). Making, playing, or distributing D&B has brought about material change that might not otherwise have been possible. DJ Hype, for instance, has commented thus:

When you're in this scene, most people who work in it, DJs, producers, MCs drive a nice car and every day, they've just come back from here, there or wherever. You think it's the norm. But it ain't the norm is it? Some people dream of going to somewhere like Japan and never get there. I've been there three or four times, toured the whole place. This music was my ticket from the shit, out of the shit. (DJ Hype quoted in Belle-Fortune, 1999, p.32).

D&B artists and insiders have constructed a cultural economy that enables some participants to survive without relying on wage labor in the increasingly contingent labor

market (Peck and Theodore, 2001). The case of DJ Bailey, who now hosts a show on the BBC's 1Xtra station, is emblematic of the shift in fortunes for some actors in D&B:

I used to work in a place in Purley called Water Palace, a water chute thing. I used to fry chips and burgers man. While I was at college at Christmas breaks I used to work at Argos picking in the stock rooms. That was me. I was doing a diploma in engineering but I got pissed off. They send you to school to do certain things and I followed the path, do y'know what I mean? Then you get to the end, with your qualifications and the employer is saying: 'sorry you got no experience' and you think 'what was the point?' Luckily for me the DJing took off. (Knowledge Magazine, 2004b)

Similarly, DJ Hype, co-owner of the True Playaz record company, has noted with pride his changed circumstances and the new world in which he plays as the co-owner of an “independent” D&B company:

99% of the people [in the D&B music industry] were destined for nothing. Nothing and nobody in life. At best they're gonna be in a nine-to-five job, Mr. Average. And that would have been termed good round this area (Hackney). But we're all businessmen now, man. I'm sitting there with Sony Japan in this big hotel up West [London] and I'm sitting there like this (jeans, sweatshirt and trainers) and it's bare suits in the place. And I

was thinking, “Fucking hell, five years ago I wouldn’t have got in the building, they would’ve called the police.” And now I’m here negotiating with Sony Japan. (DJ Hype, quoted in Belle-Fortune, 1999 p.32)

Participation in D&B has also empowered numerous black DJs and producers such as Grooverider, Fabio, Mampi Swift, SS, Bailey, LTJ Bukem, Bryan G, as well as MCs such as 5ive ‘O, Moose, Fats, Dynamite and Fearless. Indeed, black actors in D&B own some of the most influential record labels, including Formation Records, Prototype Recordings, Valve, V Recordings, Good Looking, Renegade Hardware, and Creative Source. Their success in D&B must be viewed in the context of the mainstream music industry. Specifically, and as Negus (1999) has noted, black actors in the music industry experience greater ‘occupational insecurity’ than whites when they work in ‘black music divisions’ of the corporate giants because black music tends to be among the first to experience job losses and cutbacks during times of financial crisis. Black actors in D&B have been able to secure their positions in the music industry by working for themselves, owning record labels, performing as DJs, and making D&B music.

Also similar to hip-hop, moreover, D&B has created ‘economic opportunities for those with cultural capital beyond the few highly publicized “success” stories’ (Basu and Werbner, 2001 p.247). D&B has generated employment for numerous people working behind the scenes, as has been noted in the case of Toronto’s rave scene (Marsh, 2006). D&B has required an infrastructure staffed by web site designers, promoters, booking agents, sound engineers and others.

In our view, then, D&B's potential to provide a fragile empowerment is worth highlighting in the context of a changed labor market in which many young working class men struggle to find stable, fulfilling employment; it is also an avenue toward self-esteem in a context of a contingent labor market that can be psychologically devastating and in the light of popular (often middle-class) discourses in Britain that constructs working class youth as useless jobs or, in more recent parlance in England, "chavs" (McDowell, 2006, p.837) and in Scotland, "neds".

From a (perverse, to our way of thinking) neoliberal perspective, D&B's emergence and survival might be interpreted as an exemplary case of working class people "getting on their bikes" and becoming entrepreneurs.<sup>7</sup> Some might celebrate it precisely for this reason; that is, as evidence of the value of Thatcher's project to liberate the "nation of shopkeepers". However, we do not seek to communicate such a message; rather, we suggest an alternative political message in D&B, namely its existence as a viable industry at the margins of the mainstream capitalist economy and run by insiders, many of whom come from working class backgrounds. Resistance – to subordination via the labor market or to discourses that construct British youth negatively – can occur *through* the economy. Yet resistance in D&B is not necessarily about stopping the state, protecting certain rights in the face of oppression, or calling for economic or political change (although some MCs add politically-charged lyrics to D&B tracks in raves); in this sense, we cannot suggest D&B is a revolutionary force (hence, it will not satisfy those who call

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Tebbit, a cabinet Minister in Margaret Thatcher's early governments, famously argued that, like his father, working class people should negotiate economic hardship by getting on their bikes and looking for work.

for the creation of “more robust” [North & Huber, 2004 p.982; see also Hutnyk, 2000] alternatives to capitalism). Rather, we interpret D&B as a form of resistance to the capitalist economy insofar as D&B has provided a way for a diverse range of people to reject contingent wage employment and the material and discursive constraints of the labor market. By virtue of the place of dub plate culture in D&B’s cultural economy, moreover, D&B has been very much oriented towards achieving business success through collaboration and innovation. The strategies of D&B insiders have encompassed sharing and reciprocity as well as an explicit ethos of helping newcomers survive by working full-time in the industry rather than in the labor market. Practicing the economy through D&B subverts mainstream discourses that value a ruthless entrepreneurialism, represented in the popular media in television shows such as *The Apprentice*. D&B offers alternative capitalist practices.

From these materials on D&B, we suggest its cultural economy offers insight to theoretical developments in economic geography regarding “alternative economic spaces” (Leyshon et al., 2003). Economic geographers have researched a wide variety of such alternative economic spaces, including alternative financial spaces (Fuller & Jonas, 2003), small retro retailers and traders in Britain (Crewe et al., 2003). At issue in this literature are *alternatives* to capitalist economic relations, that is, situations in which relations of reciprocity are more important than unequal exchange in a post or non-capitalist context. For some in this emerging literature (Gibson-Graham, 2006), challenging capitalist social relations entails achieving separation – that is, creating an alternative and *discrete* economic space. Our reading of D&B suggests otherwise. Thus,

whilst the level of reciprocity and ethos of helping one another in dub plate culture would seem to speak to the alternative economic spaces perspective, our interest lies in calling attention to relations between, rather than separation of, alternative and mainstream economic spaces. In our opinion, a crucial consideration is whether relations with the mainstream economy set limits or provide opportunities for alternative economies to survive or, indeed, thrive. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that D&B is not “independent” (read: separate), even if the record companies at its core are typically viewed as “independents”. As we have demonstrated, D&B is constrained by and marginalized within, but it is not isolated from, the mainstream capitalist economy. And D&B *has* retained its cultural capital and counter-cultural identity at the same time as its practitioners tap capitalist opportunities. In the process, then, D&B subverts capitalism, becoming an engine of capitalism *towards its own ends*, affording employment opportunities far more meaningful to its practitioners than might otherwise be available (if at all) in the mainstream contingent labor market. We therefore suggest that D&B illustrates the scope for alternative cultural economies to emerge, survive and remain controlled by insiders, even if they remain on the margins of the mainstream economy. D&B is thus marginal to, but firmly part, of the capitalist economy. It survives – alongside numerous other small segments of the music economy – as a marginal player in a competitive marketplace, which structurally privileges resource-rich actors. We use the case of D&B to argue that separation from capitalism is far from necessary and may even be impossible for ‘alternative economic spaces’ to flourish.

### **3. Power relations *within* D&B**

Towards avoiding an overly romanticized perspective, we want to clarify problems internal to D&B. D&B's development has been unevenly experienced. Gender and seniority are two crucial dimensions here. More recently, technological changes have posed problems for D&B's cultural economy. The following discussion elaborates on D&B's internal power relations by focusing first on gender and seniority and secondly on D&B's contested technologies.

### *3.1 'Rugged masculinities' and seniority in D&B*

D&B is male dominated regarding performers and their crews as well as audiences. Some in D&B argue that the music has become too visceral or, in D&B terminology, too "hard" or "dark" compared to other dance music styles. Terry Turbo, who until recently was a leading D&B promoter, has claimed that the masculinist slant of the music has driven women away:

Everyone I speak to, all the DJs, all the producers, all say the same thing, 'there's not enough girls [in raves]'. The reason there aren't any girls is because the music has driven them away... Now it's sort of like really 'waaah, waaah'... and really hard... [In the past] there was singing and people used to go out and love it. (Knowledge Magazine, 2004c).

Some elite DJs defend the production of gender-exclusive styles of D&B. Andy C, for example, has argued that the dance floor is 'where [the music] comes from and that's where its main focus should be. In the clubs and on the dance floor, not *pansying* about in

a quiet lounge or something' (Knowledge Magazine, 2004d; our emphasis). Other DJs, such as Hazard, argue that the harder styles are what audiences want: 'I like to play dark, technical tunes... Kids are paying £10 or £15 to get in to rave, so you want to give them something they can jump up and down to.' (Knowledge Magazine, 2004e). There are dissenting voices, such as DJ Friction, who laments that DJ'ing in raves boil down to 'a contest to see which DJ can smash it the most' (Knowledge Magazine, 2004f). D&B therefore constructs a highly masculinist niche in space-time, which is especially striking in the light of the mainstream labor market. As Linda McDowell (2003), in particular, has noted, "masculine" forms of employment in the manufacturing sector have been increasingly replaced by 'female-dominated sectors such as health, retail, catering, education, financial services and clerical work', in which 'many of the skills and qualities sought by employers in these sectors are those stereotypically associated with women' (McDowell, 2003 p.29). Whereas today's marketable traits are 'forms of embodiment that emphasize docility and deference' (p. 196) – which means that men practicing the "wrong" sort of emotional labor are increasingly disadvantaged in the labor market – the reverse is true in D&B. A "rugged" sort of masculinity is a highly marketable trait in the spatially diffuse D&B industry. Participation as DJs in events in places such as London, Sheffield, Birmingham, or Cambridge provide opportunities for men in D&B to be rewarded for performing visceral, masculinist music made by mostly male producers competing and collaborating with other men to "smash up" the dance floor.

Beyond its gender bias, D&B also has an elite class of DJs. DJs are rewarded with access to new music in return for providing feedback to producers. Accessing new music from



productive, skilled producers is crucial because ‘The quality and freshness of the dubs help make top name DJs’ (Belle-Fortune, 1999, p.44). This has led to a situation in which producers seek out and strive to have their tracks played by the elite DJs such as Grooverider, Andy C, Hype and Fabio. The ‘choice of [which] DJ [to whom they give new music] is crucial’ (Belle-Fortune, 1999, p.44). Those with highly developed networks of producers in turn constitute the elite class in the D&B world. This is not to deny elite DJs’ talent or dedication, nor that they travel far and wide and work late into the night; rather, *the issue is their relative advantage*. Their position within dub plate culture provides them with consistent access to new music, reinforces their reputations, increases their booking fee and compels promoters to book them. Dub plate culture has been the key mechanism reinforcing the position of leading DJs: the elite DJs enjoy access to new music as a result of their relative advantage, defined largely in terms of having been in the industry for many years. As we now discuss, however, technological change unsettles power relations in D&B.

### *3.2 Generational difference and contested technologies*

As discussed earlier, use of dub plates encouraged innovation and empowered the industry relative to the majors whilst helping to create and reinforce the position of privileged elites in D&B, particularly (male) DJs who receive dub plates and can afford to cut dub plates because they are regularly paid to perform. But the continued and prolonged use of dub plates is in question. The persistent existence of D&B’s elite class has made it difficult for up-and-coming DJs and producers to break into the industry. As we now discuss, it is ironic that the efforts of the marginalized in D&B now threaten the

continued use of dub plates, the key technology in D&B's development. There are two, interrelated issues about contested technologies to consider.

The first has to do with the shift towards using Compact Discs (CDs) in raves. Whereas the "classic" dance music DJ once mixed vinyl or dub plate records, many dance music DJs now play CDs and even MP3 in their sets. CD-scratching and mixing equipment, such as Final Scratch, has been an enabling technological development in this regard. It has taken slightly longer for D&B to notice the impact of CDs and MP3s in D&B, most especially because of the prevalence of dub plates. But other technological changes have begun to alter this picture and the change has led to heated debate about the future of D&B. Some DJs claim that playing CDs or using laptops to play MP3s in raves makes a mockery of their skills. Playing CDs devalues the "craft" of DJ'ing. Future Bound, for example, claims that, 'it's good to have extras like CD, Final Scratch & the laptop thing as part of your show, but a DJ turning up playing a whole set from a computer is cheating and meaningless. And the punters don't like it either... fact!' (Dogs on Acid, 2006a). Others use moral arguments about what DJ'ing *should* mean to justify holding onto dub plates and vinyl. Fabio, for example, claims that:

...if I pick up a pack of CDs I don't feel like I'm going to work. I feel like I'm just going out to have a piss about to be honest...I need to feel that I have got my record box to carry, that's got 60 dubs in there that weigh 23kg, almost breaking my back carrying it, because its work innit (Dogs on Acid, 2006b).

Nicky Blackmarket, meanwhile, makes a similar point, while unwittingly illustrating the gendered approach to D&B DJ'ing: 'if I get sent a CD I cut it onto acetate dub plate – which obviously is expensive, but that's *workman's tools* at the end of the day' (4Clubbers.net, 2007; italics our emphasis). CDs, then, are resisted by many among the elite DJs who would rather continue with what has worked in the past and pay the extra money to cut a malleable dub plate and proceed to “properly” *perform* the role of the DJ.

However, for up-and-coming DJs with infrequent bookings and limited access to producers, it makes little economic sense to try and cut dub plates, even if they have access to new music circulating among D&B's elite. Cutting one dub plate, which contains just one track, can cost as much as US\$75. “Burning” a CD with as many as ten or twelve tracks costs significantly less. It is worth noting here that, whereas there are only a few places in Britain in which dub plates can be “cut”, anyone with a basic personal computer can burn a CD. There is no need to travel to a dub plate cutting house in London, say, to transfer digital music into a format that DJs can play in a rave. *CDs and MP3s alter the spatiality of D&B's cultural economy by opening and extending the spaces of collaboration, circulation, and production.*

In support of CDs, then, many up-and-coming DJs and artists argue – often in online message boards<sup>8</sup> – that, whilst they would like to play dub plates, CDs enable them to

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<sup>8</sup> Sites such as Dogs on Acid ([www.dogsonacid.com](http://www.dogsonacid.com)) are a key resource for understanding D&B and its development.

remain in the industry. Thus, when D&B's internal power relations are considered, it becomes clear that the growing use of CDs is not just representative of their lower cost, nor is it simply that actors in D&B can burn CDs more easily than dub plates. Rather, the use and contested growth of CDs reflects the changing power relations of different classes of D&B practitioners – the former, senior elites and the newcomers in D&B have been able to make it into the upper echelons of the industry. Whereas dub plates became the technology of D&B's elite, CDs apparently have become the new technology of the marginalized.

The impact of shifting towards CDs is amplified by other technological developments in the entertainment industry. The “scary monster” (Leyshon, 2003) here is well known: software formats such as MP3s and peer-to-peer file-sharing networks enable consumers to distribute music to each other and bypass the music retailer. As a result, CD sales have fallen throughout the music industry. The impact of these changes has been somewhat delayed in D&B, partly because the industry has always relied upon an expanded marketplace and because becoming a D&B DJ entailed learning how to mix vinyl records. If D&B DJs can play CDs in their sets, then the incentive for up-and-coming DJs to buy records evaporates: why bother learning how to mix dub plates and vinyl records if neither technology will be around by the time they “make it” in D&B? There are, therefore, serious concerns that the shift to CDs will destroy the industry, while offering empowerment (albeit possibly ephemeral) to a new generation of D&B practitioners. As J-Majik, DJ and owner of Infrared Records, has warned:

This [playing CDs] is all very clever but no-one is thinking of the long term implications. If everyone starts mixing on CDs within 5 years then there will be no scene left at all! I think its cool for a producer to go and play the odd CD when he has just finished a track but hasn't had time to cut it and needs to test it out on a system. But if top DJs start basing their sets around CDs I think that within 5 years there will be no vinyl sales at all. (Atmosphere Magazine, 2004a).

D&B sales have indeed begun falling and this places the survival of some D&B record companies in question. In response, some companies have innovated, either by selling tracks via Internet-based record stores such as Apple's *iTunes* store, or via their own channels, for example on D&B web sites (such as [www.breakbeat.co.uk](http://www.breakbeat.co.uk)). Such moves, in turn, mean that D&B record shops face displacement by online retailers of D&B MP3s. The emergence of new technologies and the industry's inability to control how producers and consumers embrace the new formats means there will be new winners and plenty of losers. The scary monster is unleashing a process of restructuring in the D&B cultural economy.

A second – and distinguishing – dimension of D&B in this regard has to do with the *particular* ramifications of the scary monster for the way in which dub plate culture operates. D&B DJs and producers are connected together in virtual networks using instant messaging software such as AIM (America Online's Instant Messenger) and social networking web sites such as MySpace. Whereas producers might once have had

to meet up with DJs or owners of D&B record companies, or send unreleased tracks to them via regular mail, many now use AIM to distribute tracks over the Internet in MP3 format. The fast pace of the D&B industry, which includes a high turnover and short playing life of most D&B tracks, also encourages DJs to circulate tracks in MP3 format. AIM has been embraced as a way to circulate or collaborate over the production of new music. The case of Pendulum, three men from Western Australia, is illustrative. They were unable to physically meet up with D&B insiders. In the absence of traveling to Britain or sending the track to record labels in the hope that someone would sign it, Pendulum had few options open to them. But AIM enabled Pendulum to contact Doc Scott, owner of 31 Records and an influential actor within the industry. They “met” Doc Scott over the Internet, sent the track they had made, *Vault*, via AIM and within minutes it was signed to 31 Records. Thus, ‘the whole signing process for *Vault* was done through AIM’ (Atmosphere Magazine, 2004b). The result: *Vault* was a major commercial success in 2003.

This sort of virtual hanging out in AIM and social networking web sites alters D&B’s geography with various consequences. On the one hand, it expands D&B’s world, as the case of Pendulum demonstrates. Beyond Britain’s mass market, moreover, AIM enables DJs to access new music sooner than if s/he had to wait for a vinyl release. As US-based producer, Hive, has noted: ‘AIM has changed everything; if it wasn’t for that software then I think in the States anyway those of us that play out [i.e. DJ] would just be playing a lot of our own camps music, well that’s how it used to be anyway. Nowadays, you’re hearing home-grown [i.e. US-based] DJ’s playing the freshest tracks from the UK around

the same time that they're smashing up the dance floor in the UK' (Giana-Brotherz, 2007).

On the other hand, however, and crucially, the ubiquity of virtual social networking technologies means new music can be *clandestinely* distributed, either to consumers or, more controversially, to up-and-coming DJs, who are then able to play music that they are not supposed to have. File-sharing systems such as Limewire or SoulSeek increase the likelihood of this occurring. Hacking is another risk when music is stored in MP3 format. In turn, the emergence of new technologies in D&B, which makes it possible for the excluded to access music previously intended for elites, threatens the reciprocal practices of sharing between DJs and producers that characterizes dub plate culture. In contrast to the wishes of up-and-coming DJs, many of the industry's elites, such as DJ Friction, now circulate their music in *tighter* networks: 'I can only send MP3's of my material to a few select people...the big producers are tighter with who they give their music to because there is just so much piracy' (Dogs on Acid, 2007). These recent technological changes therefore threaten to alter enduring, well-rehearsed relations of trust between producers and DJs. This is important because producers must demand control over whom they provide with tracks. Moreover, the price DJs can demand for playing in events depends on playing "exclusives" in their sets (Belle-Fortune, 1999, p. 44-48). The extent to which they have exclusives to play is reduced if new tracks are available over the Internet. New technologies therefore require stricter internal governance than was the case in classic dub plate culture. The relations of trust that

lubricated dub plate culture and provided the industry with a relational advantage over the majors are in question.

But the picture is not entirely gloomy, at least not for all D&B practitioners. As we have discussed, technological change *has* posed a severe challenge for D&B, yet the industry survives. At issue for the future is how D&B's practitioners re-negotiate the new marketplace called forth by technological change. Like the music industry as a whole, the industry's golden age of generating income via record sales may be waning, but producers remain active, the buzz on the dance floor persists, clubs remain busy. Some in D&B may seek to compensate for falling record sales by pursuing development of new marketplaces abroad; indeed, British DJs, many of whom are hardly elites at home, are well positioned to exploit their elite status internationally and use their Britishness to generate bookings in the industry's "emerging markets". Financial instability in British D&B might be resolved via a "spatial fix" (Harvey, 1982) that entails colonization of foreign markets by those in the British industry; a prime issue for future research is whether the production-consumption relation in a post/'colonial' D&B will mimic or depart from the exploitative character of offshore production facilities in the global economy.

#### **4. Conclusion: interpreting the contradictions of D&B**

In conclusion, we suggest that the materials presented here have general significance for how marginalization and subordinated people – subalterns – are understood in critical social theory. We follow revisionist interpretations of subalternity that refuse



circumscribing subalterns by “third world” boundaries and historical periods and recognize similar processes of marginalization and subordination occurring across time and space (Mufti and Shohat, 1997). Subordination in any context occurs in countless ways and at a wide range of scales. In the case of British D&B, we have discussed how D&B is in part constituted by and in part draws from class-based subordination among many of its practitioners, and we have called attention to subordination along gender and generational lines *within* the industry as well as *between* D&B as an industry and mainstream capitalist segments.

More generally, our exploration of the D&B cultural economy calls attention to the possibility of marginalized actors making use of the capitalist economy as a vehicle towards change, even if such change is imperfect and uneven among D&B practitioners. Upscaling from individual actors to whole industry segments, British D&B’s cultural economy is akin to a “subaltern industry” – a phrase that might seem an oxymoron in the context of rather bleak portrayals of subalterns as outside of, or blocked from benefits from, mainstream capitalism (e.g. Escobar, 1995; Mitchell, 2002; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997). D&B occupies a subordinate position relative to the mainstream capitalist economy while nonetheless manipulating the system and drawing benefits from it.

We have examined D&B via a relational approach, that is, we have focused on relations between individuals, groups, and industry segments and how those relations have come together in D&B’s emergence and fragile survival. We have highlighted power relations

within D&B and between it and other capitalist segments. Our approach reveals processes of subordination as well as resistance at multiple scales.

Thinking about subjection in a relational sense, we argue, prompts questions that point towards a more general research agenda regarding how the economy might be used as a vehicle of resistance to subjection. For example, research might turn to cases of marginalized groups practicing economic power in diverse production contexts (in places and across space) and as a form of resistance against, or constructive action for, social change. The case of gang life in U.S. cities (Venkatesh, 1997) highlights the scope that exists for recognizing that marginalized groups can use the economy to meet political aims. The “place” of alternative culture, moreover, is of such great importance to the reputation of some cities that it would be worthwhile examining not just how city governments seek to protect the symbolic capital of their (sub)cultural economies (Shaw, 2005), but also how those involved in (re)producing (sub)cultures protect their economic niche in the city. Recent research on street vendors struggling to remain in gentrified Mexico City illustrates how marginalized groups use mobility to tease the police into exhaustion and hence retain their economic niche in space-time (Crossa, 2006). D&B suggests that relational spaces of resistance are not confined to colonialism in earlier times or colonized places (Busteed, 2005; Featherstone, 2004, 2005; Lambert, 2001, 2005), contemporary practices of resistance in the so-called “global south” (Escobar, 2001; North & Huber, 2004), or the urban “frontiers” of resistance to neoliberalism in Seattle or Genoa (Leitner et al., 2007). As with oppression (Young, 1990), resistance has numerous “faces”. Opposing the state or capital are well known forms of resistance; but

from a relational perspective, we suggest that using the economy can be another significant, although often overlooked, practice of resistance.

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