

The Songs of Crisis: Words that draw identities in protest songs at Global South

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1. Introduction

This article is underpinned by a primordial heuristic principle: that of demonstrating how artistic manifestations – in this case, popular music – are both a means and an object of social intervention. For this reason, they define their own space in denunciation, in contestation, in protest and in revolt before the social reality (Chepp 2015; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Feixa and Guerra 2017; McKay 2007; Street, Hague and Savigy, 2007; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014). This principle was also taken up in recent work, for example, McDonald (2013) explores the formation of a Palestinian identity through a social, political, historical and musical analyses from 1917 to the present.

Underlining the inadequacy of the understanding of music as a mere superficial phenomenon of a socio-political expression, this article emphasizes the importance of the performativity of musical resistance. Following the research we conducted (Guerra and Januário 2016; Guerra and Silva 2014; Silva 2014; Silva and Guerra 2015; Silva, Guerra and Santos 2018). Van der Hoeven, Janssen, and Driessen (2016) consider popular music and language as essential issues for establishing a national, collective and local identity. We consider in this article that the lyrics are a form of narrating stories to ourselves and to others that take place in imaginary worlds; such narration is used to express emotions and beliefs. These stories are thus central to the formation and understanding of identities and societies; they are crucial because they constitute stories about ourselves, as Geertz (1973) states.

2. The starting point: The 2008 financial crisis

Subsequently to the international crisis originated in 2008, in the heart of the North-American financial system, and in the context of the European sovereign debts crisis, several countries belonging to the Euro Zone were forced to ask for external financial aid. This was the case, in 2010, of Greece and Ireland, and in 2011 of Portugal. In all these cases, the aid was provided by the joint effort of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), constituting a “troika” of European and international institutions. In order to obtain the aid, each country had to apply for an “assistance programme”, whose terms implied (a) a heavy and frontloaded pack of fiscal austerity, (b) a sequence of reforms aimed at reducing labour costs and public expenditures, shrinking the public economic sector and deregulating the labour market, and (c) a close external surveillance on the decisions undertaken by the national government that could have fiscal impact.

Independently of the opinions on the merits and outcomes of the assistance programme, there is a general awareness of the tremendous sacrifices it demanded both from the society and the economy. If one compares the main economic and social indicators of 2014 with those of 2010, the conclusion is quite obvious: there was some progress in fiscal consolidation and in the deficit, and a major set-back in terms of the growth rate and volume of GDP per capita, employment levels and average income, number of people in poverty and social-economic inequalities. Still, in order to fully apprehend and evaluate the effects of the “troika” policies, one has to look beyond these figures, and investigate further into the domain of social representations. It is not only the “material” standards of personal and social life that are at stake; symbolic and moral issues are also relevant.

The moral topic was, and still is, a crucial feature: the Portuguese and the Spanish people paying the inevitable price of lasting habits of low economic commitment, financial incautiousness and conspicuous expenditure

that, according to many news media from Central and Northern Europe, supposedly characterised the Southern countries? Was there a “sin” to pay, as the German language suggested, using the same word both for “debt” and “fault” – with austerity serving as the act of contrition?

On the other hand, the Arab Spring, was first about a response to the low standards of living and political corruption and violence that rapidly spiralled into an all-out revolution through several countries, such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, and massive street protests in Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, among other countries. The 2011–12 Moroccan protests, on the other hand, were short in scale comparing some other countries, especially in the sheer violence involved, but it brought significant changes: it didn’t overthrow the regime, yes, but it gained political concessions by the king, namely a referendum on constitutional reforms. For some it was a clear victory; for others it wasn’t enough, looking with envy their neighbours. Thus, the aim of this paper is, therefore, to observe how the Portuguese, Spanish and Moroccan arts have dealt, first, with the financial crisis and the subsequent bailout, and for the latter with the Arab Revolution and its aftermath.

3. Singing the crisis in Portugal (2011–2014)

Regarding our analysis of the *message* of the 16 songs (Guerra 2019), we looked for the kinds of feelings that we associated with *these songs*, for example, revolt, discouragement, frustration, pessimism and despair. We also sought to analyse the values they assumed (fatalism, opposition, deconstruction, or others), the *themes/substances* of the songs (social critique, proclamation of revolt against society) and the *contexts/causes* (the register of the context or the prevalent cause in each song’s message, which reports to more or less specific social practices and facts). The messages, values, themes and contexts are thus the major analytical categories that we analyse in the songs that sing the crisis.

3.1. Singing the social consequences of the crisis: discouragement and frustration

And they admire the rise/ of assaults and murders/ the worst is that we are the ones that suffer/ with the assaults and murders/ that these motherfuckers are protected/ hidden in their condos/ the real assailants/ with their hands in the pocket of the suit/ and the money diverted to an offshore/ it is no wonder they are building/ more prisons. (Chullage 2012).

The songs of the crisis are also songs of discouragement. Along with the revolt underlying an explicit appeal to action (or the need for it), the above song, ‘God, Fatherland, Family’, the title of which itself constitutes a subversive intention of the values consecrated by the new state – God, country and family – allows us to infer, in parallel with the feeling of revolt, the discouragement that can be seen as an enhancer of the revolt itself:

Portugal is about to end/ Let the bastard die/ Without a country to sing/ Remains a world to live ... I spend the afternoon at the piano/ Working the disillusion/ The stanza advances the refrain is to pray. (B Fachada 2011).

In a much more blunt and somewhat paradoxical way, in the song ‘With All Due Respect’ by Jorge Palma, there is a feeling of discouragement due to the realization that everyone is hurt and/or impaired and that in several dimensions of the society and people’s lives, reality turns in an insurmountable way: ‘world disorder’, a passive form that culturally characterizes the Portuguese society; the expenses of the state (whose bill is paid by the people); the fact that (eventually) we live beyond our possibilities; the crude reality of the destitution represented by homeless people and drug addicts; and impunity or increased taxes:

Between the chaos and the restlessness, /Axes of evil, /World disorder,/ There are so many damaged people./ With all due respect. (...) The republic knows well how to receive,/ Spends millions that, by chance, it doesn’t have./ As the homeless get cleaned up, between/ Memories and some blankets,/ Others take care of their appearance/ And the drugs circulate in front of us/ So much corruption in this country. (Palma 2011).

The song ‘Friday – Good Job Now’ (2012), on the other hand, shows us pessimism and frustration especially in relation to a particular theme related to the current situation of Portuguese youth. The frustration associated with failure to gain employment after investing in college or the transition to the work itself – a much longer process than previously, with considerable unemployment – results in increased and prolonged dependence of youth on their parents.

So many years of studying to end up unemployed/ Or in a low paid job/ Getting a tip they call salary/ I didn't take the Superior Course of Sucker/ ... It's not lack of commitment/ They want me to tighten the belt but I don't even have pants/ Still the month goes halfway and I'm already afflicted/ Oh mother had you made me rich instead of handsome. (Boss AC 2012).

3.2 Singing the loss of confidence in the system

Taking as reference fatalism, we highlight as examples the songs 'God, Fatherland, Family' (Fachada 2011) and 'What a Fool I Am' (Deolinda 2011). If in the first the loss of confidence in the system, abstention from citizenship and loss of confidence in the political class lead to a fatalist attitude (later contradicted by an attitude that impels action) that points to the 'death of Portugal,' and to the contradiction that it isn't worth fighting, in the second, fatalism stems from the situation of the youth condition, already referenced:

Cause this is bad and it's going to keep that way,/ I'm already lucky for training./ What a fool I am!/ And I wonder,/ What a fool world/ Where to be a slave one must study./ I'm from the generation 'parent's house',/ If I already have everything, why do I want more?/ What a fool I am!/ (...) And I wonder,/ What a fool world/ Where to be a slave one must study. (Deolinda 2011).

The majority of the songs analysed can be assumed – and to some extent expected – to be critiques of the social system, pointing out aspects that are either general or specific representations of the social reality and of dominant values. Let's take some examples, by sub-category. The song 'Specter' by Gaiteiros de Lisboa (2012) is a criticism of the system, and at the same time of society's values, conventions and ways of living. It is perceivable as a denunciation of how power is instituted and reproduced, of 'greed for power,' and how people are manipulated with the aim of maintaining a social totalitarianism, from strategic and planned control. The reference to the expression 'Big Brother' is an unequivocal indicator of this:

In the Empire of rare birds/ Who has no feathers is King/ Between handles and macaws/ The Brave Ducks are Law./ The land of the mallards/ It looks more like a hornet/ They all go pecking/ To get to the perch./ Over the land/ Over the sea/ The Big Brother watches over us/ His shadow/ Is protective/ It comes way back from the great grandparents. (Gaiteiros de Lisboa 2012).

Still at this level, we grasp with the theme of fatalism, especially the song 'What a Fool I Am' (Deolinda 2011). where fatalism stems from the situation of the youth condition, already referenced:

Cause this is bad and it's going to keep that way,/ I'm already lucky for training./ What a fool I am!/ And I wonder,/ What a fool world/ Where to be a slave one must study./ I'm from the generation 'parent's house',/ If I already have everything, why do I want more?/ What a fool I am!/ (...) And I wonder,/ What a fool world/ Where to be a slave one must study. (Deolinda, 2011)

3.3 Singing the risk society

Listen to the newscast, they talk about a new disease/ Go to the doctor before this disease draws your sentence/ Pour medicines, prepare your intoxication/ Sustain the pharmaceutical industry and your rot./ Eat well, do sports, you will be healthy/ You will be unbreakable, and your body unshakable, listen/ The television news, they talk about another attack/ Terrorist, Islamist see if you are terrified. (Valete, Jimmy, Azagia, and Tamin 2012).

Listen to what I tell you,/ I'll tell you a secret,/ It's very profitable that the world is afraid,/ Fear of the flu, /Here some more medicines, / Come another strain reinforce the dividends,/ Fear of the crisis and crime as we've seen in the movie,/ Fear of you and me / Fear of the times,/ Fear of the crowd,/ Fear of the floor and the ceiling,/ Fear of loneliness (...). With this I buy more creams and I buy an alarm,/ If I don't have a gorilla guarding your door,/ I buy a weapon (...) I'm so afraid .../ We have so much fear .../ (...) They are afraid that we won't be afraid. (Capicua 2012).

The last two references, at the same time constituting social criticisms, are related to a different theme, *fear*, understood simultaneously as a means to legitimize a more conformist and a less activist attitude on the part of the people, who prefer security/protection to the detriment of freedom in the face of the risks posed to it or placed

strategically upon it and as what may be understood, in the Marxist way, as an indelible component of the *super-structure*. This is an ideological instrument that legitimizes the established social, political and economic powers, a fundamental mechanism for maintaining the ‘state of affairs’ in the face of the penalty of not succumbing to an uncertain, insecure and ‘risky’ society.

Another example – this time denouncing the alienating character of the current way of living – is the song ‘Feel Afraid’. Fear legitimizes the commodification of life. For this reason it is criticized, through the denunciation of fear as a means of legitimacy of the system, the mercantile way of living, in which capitalism is understood as the essential and hegemonic structure of a prevailing social model imposed by the elites of power:

Give them legitimacy to invade another country/ Make more civilian casualties to go after the barrels, listen/ The newscast, they speak of the anarchists/ As if they were crazy, hallucinated, extremists. / Feel afraid of them, feel afraid of the change/ And continues to vote for those in whom you have no trust/ Vote in the political parties of always, vote without hope/ And maintain this regime of iniquity and insecurity. / As long as you feel fear, you need protection/ You need guidance, you don’t deny the leadership/ Follow them blindfolded like a herd/ Anesthetized, beastified, and rigid. (Valete, Jimmy, Azagia, and Tamin 2012).

We are thus faced with narratives of the crises – either more general or more incisively about a particular aspect of importance; these narratives sing the ‘sick’ and fearful present, reflect uncertainty about the future, and evoke the recent past as a foretaste of a contemporary social model that clearly is characterized by fragmentation and transverse risk and by a totalitarian approach to the various spheres and dimensions of life – political, social, economic, and personal. To sing the Portuguese crisis is to sing and acclaim with voice and soul the pain and hurt of a major crisis of our time.

4. Facing the censorship in post-crisis Spain

As we could see for the Portuguese case, there was a soundtrack for the crisis. It has several main themes, such as discouragement, fear and the loss of confidence in the system. In the post-crisis Spain, the same cannot be said. But, because of the heavy hand of the Spanish State, a sort of momentum has been boiling: three rappers, Pablo Hasel, Valtonyc and La Insurgencia, had been convicted, and given sentences, because of their lyrics.

4.1 Criticizing the Spanish Royal Family

The Bourbon King and his moves, I don’t know if it was hunting elephants or going whoring, they are/things that can’t be explained,/like how he used his brother as a target,/now his half-brothers are the Arabs and he asks them for money to buy weapons,/they make him make the bed and do the dishes and meanwhile Doña Sofía is on a yacht fucking and that hurts, of course it does. (Valtonyc 2012)

We want death for these pigs” (...)/ ”We’ll get to the back of your neck, you bastard, meeting in the palace of the Bourbon, kalashnikov” (...)/ ”I’ll tear out the artery and everything else it takes”; we want death for all these pigs. (Valtonyc 2012)

Juan Carlos, Juan Carlos, he isn’t a friend of the people/but of the banking system, justice is in mourning,/I often dream he is flying through the winds/That is not terrorism, he deserves to go to heaven!/I get nauseated constantly by the scurfy kingdom/where a fraud is great by the grace of God,/this whorish flag doesn’t represent me,/Put in a red star and take out the crown!/Letizia, the progressive one, went over to the far-right/There’s very little which could be worse than to turn a bitch into a princess (Hasél 2010)

If in the Portuguese case the ramblings went against the fatalism, the political elite, etc., in the Spanish case all the problems are encapsulated in the Monarchy. Not only in the figure of the King, but in all the family, taken as a symbol of what everything that is wrong in Spain. The King is criticized as out of touch, doing his hunting’s in Africa, the Queen yachting, and the shady business links with some Arab countries regarding weapons sales. What really differ from the Portuguese case is the answer to these problems: just kill them. Some talk about go to the Royal Palace with an AK-47 or just daydreaming of them dying. The Spanish State saw in these lyrics a glorifying of terrorism and insults to the Crown and state institutions and prosecuted and jailed the rappers.

The critics go beyond the Royal Family, sprawling to the state institutions, especially the police, accused of brutality. Also, one of the main critics are the links between the Spanish State and the Franco regime. That is, a reference of the peculiar Democratic Transition after Franco's death.

The state legitimises Franco's heir / On your roof and in the game the bank always wins / Proletarian support from Madrid's neighbourhoods / Guerrilla women's diets in the Civil War (Propaganda pel fet!,2018)

Once again I'm dismantling that children's tale about/ "The King put a stop to fascism"/The King did what was the most convenient thing for his bank account/And he did Franco's bidding for too many years/He is no a hero, but a fat fish that gets to the coast/to devour more little fish/His power has manipulated history (Hasél 2010)

5. Criticizing the repressive laws

In prisons the weak, the poorest, is it or not?/In Geneva the patriots hiding the pile/Va Sofia and Leonor, commoners on one side of the cordon/I see nothing that sticks more than monarchy and condom. / Tell who you are and what you do is a crime / Look at the case of Valtonyc, I refer to the facts / The poor talk and go to prison, the rich laugh / Freedom of expression, tell them loudly / If rapping is a crime, boy, don't press play / They sell you the eyes here even the King steals from you / In a very short time, and if the law continues like this / There will be more rappers in Spain prisoners than in US prisons. (Propaganda pel fet! 2018)

In the last years, Pablo Hasel, Valtonyc and La Insurgencia were convicted and jailed because of their lyrics. The Spanish State are increasingly using his power to enforce a strict view regarding what could and could not be said. That turned into a criminalization of several lyrics (and tweets) of various rappers. One of the consequences is this became a rallying point for a heterogenous scene. These repressive laws became, then, a catalysis for social and structural changes, a mobilizing element. In this way, we could talk of two main themes, two rallying points for the social critic: the Bourbons and the new enforcement of the repressive laws.

6. Morocco: singing the contradictions of the revolution

6.1 Background

In Morocco, hip-hop always has been used as a way to criticize the social and political milieu. Since its very inception, from the 80's. The so-called Arab Spring and the post-revolution period were not exceptions. If during the 80's and 90's, the hip-hop movement had an underground nature, mainly consisted of young people aware of the novel trends happening in the world. We cannot forget that the hip-hop in Morocco had been influenced by the cultural flows between the diasporas and those who stayed behind. That is, we're talking of a genre influenced by the processes of globalization and migration. The underground nature was replaced by a more open nature when King Mohammed VI came to power.

This monarch permitted a sort of an opening for the youth subcultures and popular music. But always holding the reins. That is, bands, concerts and festivals started to pop up, but all of his depended of the *right* relationship with the state and the *Makhzen*. The government allowed and supported the artists, and in the process-maintained control over this medium (Almeida 2016 187). As Boum states: "Many hip-hop artists who have not been given similar attention have argued that the government is in the process of domesticating hip-hop and appropriating its message of resistance" (Boum 2013 174).

The problem with this perspective is the following: it creates an artificial dichotomy between authenticity and selling out. Between those who follow the wishes of the government and those who remain true to themselves. The reality was more complex than that. As Almeida (2013) puts it, it is true that the festivals were co-opted by the dominant forces, but the hip-hop artists were not destitute of agency. They openly embraced and benefited of that political opening trying to widen their space of possibilities (Findlen-Golden 2017).

Then came the Arab Spring. If this process was marred by generalizations and idealizations by the Western media and political elites, the same could be said of the understanding regarding the popular culture of that process. Almeida (2013) talks about the *Hip Hop 'Cool*. An appropriate name, because the media, and several academics, only saw what they wanted to see: a coolness and fervours embrace of the liberal democracy in those

countries. It produced a homogeneous portrait that overlook the deep differences in the society and in the very hip-hop movement. It is possible to find contradictory political messages in several songs and artists.

6.2 Singing Morocco's "Arab" Spring

One of the most known Moroccan artists, El Haqed, was (and is) one of the most vocal critics of the regime and monarchy. It released a song called Baraka Men Skate [No More Silence]:

If the people want life,/then they'll stand up to defend their rights. No more silence!/ They exploit our wealth and leave the crumbs for us/while so many freedom fighters died on our behalf./(..)/Those who suffered in silence and were dragged/ through the streets are fed up with going around in circles/ while our brother [the king] convenes his team to amend the constitution./There's something to go crazy over! Do they want us to take up arms to seize our rights?/ It's for me to choose whom I want to sanctify./And if you understand us, come live with us./"God, the Homeland, and Freedom (L7a9ed and Jihane 2011)

So, as the Spanish case, the institution of monarchy encapsulates all the wrongs society is facing, especially the young people. It is also a way to demonstrate the hip-hop's independence from the state power. In this case, the several grievances stated could only be solved by the removal of the monarchy. Not just some minor new amendments in the Constitution, but a whole new way of politics, where the people choose their leaders. The other option, if their demands were not followed, was taking up arms and fight for "our rights". On the other hand, artists like Assad Edin, other Moroccan artist, had a more direct way to solve all the problems: take an AK-47. It is interesting the prevalence of this weapon in some of the lyrics, in the Moroccan and Spanish cases. This weapon, Russian-made, is thus seen as the weapon of choice of the revolutionaries, of those who want to change de regime.

They have filled their bellies and shown their grease./

How can a president try to become a king? Know what I'm sayin'?/ Fire the AK-47 Kalashnikov/with violence and force: this is wisdom! (Assad Edin and Mauro 2012)

Continuing with Assad Edin, we can see, first the intimal relationship with the other revolutions popping up in North Africa at that time, with the reference of Bouazizi, and that of the fact "the Arab world follows him today, so they started a revolution!". The reason for this is not just the King this time, but all the *Makhzen*, the elite and political establishment who rule Morocco. Here we can also see some of the main critiques, namely the usual corruption and social injustice, mas more important the critique of the Westernized idea of individualism, summarise in the "every-man-for-himself-ism" expression. We have to realize that the critiques, in most if not all songs, cut both ways: they critique the political clique, yes, but also what they bought with them, namely some Western ideas.

Bouazizi, may God have mercy on his soul, took his own life because he lived in humiliation/ and the Arab world follows him today, so they started a revolution!/The path of fear in which the people were living is broken and shattered. The sun has set upon it./ Social injustice and corruption and/nepotism and sectarianism and every-man-for-himself-ism and class-ism were inflicted upon us./We are the tyrannized people./We are the oppressed people. (Assad Edin and Mauro 2012)

6.3 Singing ambiguities

As stated, the generalization of the protest song reported by the Western media brings the problem of overlooking artists that supported the *status quo* or favoured Islamists points of view, such is the case of Hamada Ben Amor, aka *El Général*, considered the voice of the Tunisian Revolution. For example, Don Bigg, with the song "Mabghitch" [I Don't Want], criticizes both sides of the spectrum: those who he deemed westernized, crystalized in those who "won't fast during Ramadan" and the feared "bearded men", that is, the Islamists. If we see the videoclip, first we see a social critique of those westernized, driving good cars, with fancy clothes and beautiful women, in contrast with several *normal* people trying to board a crammed bus. More significant is the scene when we see a youth protest, clearly westernized, with one of them riding a donkey. The problem for the rapper, as stated in the song and videoclip, is the hypocrisy: they protest only about themselves and do not mind or even realized the social problems. That is stated when the mass of protesters passes by a homeless and do nothing. More than that, those who don't fast during Ramadan are represented by a clown eating a hamburger and being watched by

a “bearded men”, that is, an Islamic, who, in the next scene, is seen doing some behind-the-shadows dealing with a politician. Assad Edin, in the previous section, appealed against sectarianism. Don Bigg does the same. For him, the solution resided in unity under the guidance of the monarch.

7. Final Remarks

As we can see, there are several differences namely between the song that sing the European or the Moroccan crisis. Even among the Portuguese and Spanish songs it is possible to find significant differences. For example, in Spain there was an almost obsession with the royal family. If the Portuguese artists sang the social inequalities and focused their aim on the political and financial elites, or on the *Sebastianism nature*¹ of the Portuguese population, the Spanish ones sang against the monarchy, against the Spanish transition to democracy. As we have seen, there wasn't a soundtrack, as to speak. That changed with the introduction of repressive laws against supposed insults against the Royal Family or the State. That changed everything, because served as a rallying point, as something to grab and use as a *we and them* standpoint.

Because of that, in the last years, several artists, especially hip-hoppers, were convicted and jailed because of their lyrics. That is a particularity of the Spanish reality. In Portugal the State is criticized for his lack to bring social changes, to his inability to deliver some basic obligations: employment, housing, financial stability, etc. In Spain the regime is criticized for his heavy-handed response against some (until then) low-key rappers. It all ends in a critique of the regime, yes, but qualitative different, as we have seen.

The Moroccan reality is very different. Yes, there is also a critique of the monarchy, but it is not a homogenous stance. For some time, the Western media and academia saw these artists as all the same, all fighting for the Western-kind of democracy (Almeida 2018). But as we can see, the reality is different. There are some artists who sang expecting the downfall of the regime and the arrival of a new era of liberal democracy, but, at same time, one of the most important Moroccan artist Don Bigg, ridiculed that perspective on the *Mabghitch* videoclip, specially when we see the protestors passing by a homeless without even noticing. It is an example, among many, of the other side, one that see the monarch as a stalwart of peace and stability, a way of preventing of becoming a second Syria, with on one side those who “won't fast during Ramadan” and the feared “bearded men” fighting to grab the political power. Thus, if we have a different reality comparing with the European peers, it is important to deeply study the artistic lyrics to dispel the myth of the homogenous Arab: a Western-loving or a Islamist. An old lasting form of orientalism (Said 1978).

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1 Sebastianism was kind of a prophetic belief or movement that arose with the disappearance of King D. Sebastião in Portugal in the 16th century, which generated a crisis in the country. Since there was no body, it was believed that the king would return to save Portugal. Sebastianism nature then refers to the ever-present hope that inequalities might disappear in the country, that is, the hope that the country would improve.

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