United we fall, divided we sing.
An empirical study of the political role of music in Flanders (Belgium) and Southern Italy

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Thèse en vue de l’obtention du grade de Docteur en sciences politiques et sociales
Année académique 2016-2017

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La musique exprime ce qui ne peut être dit et sur quoi il est impossible de rester silencieux.

Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.

-Victor Hugo
Table of Contents

Aknowledgements

Introduction

I THEORIES AND METHODS

1. WHAT IS MUSIC POLITICALLY?
   1.1. A scientific contention on theories and methods
       1.1.1. Beyond text and context: the performance
       1.1.2. Phenomenology of music
       1.1.3. Music as a collective action
   1.2. Music in the humanities
       1.2.1. Classical theorists on the topic
       1.2.2. Music and change
   1.3. Music and classifications
       1.3.1. Subcultures
       1.3.2. Discourses
       1.3.3. Symbols
   1.4. Music and collectivities
       1.4.1. A matter for cultural theorists?
       1.4.2. Inventing communities through music
       1.4.3. Nationalism and the folk
       1.4.4. Imagining communities
       1.4.5. On ethnicity and sense of place

2. WHAT IS POLITICAL MUSICALLY?
   2.1. Where is the (political) meaning?
       2.1.1. Texts, lyrics and other words
       2.1.2. Good and bad sounds
       2.1.3. Text and sound in interaction
       2.1.4. The performance and its mechanisms
       2.1.5. Metatext and discourse beyond the performance
   2.2. Meaning from the top and meaning from the bottom
       2.2.1. Propaganda and political communication
       2.2.2. Creating networks and providing direction
       2.2.3. When music inspires the action
       2.2.4. Minorities, protest and mobilization
       2.2.5. Some more inclusive categories of action

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN
   3.1. An exploratory approach to a case study research
   3.2. Flexibility and problems in field access
   3.3. From exploration to case study selection
       3.3.1. Talking with artists, singers and songwriters
       3.3.2. Reading songs, albums and other works
       3.3.3. Going to meetings, concerts and festivals
   3.4. Potential biases between reflexivity and covert observation
II ITALY AND BELGIUM. ELEMENTS AND DISCOURSES OF THE CONFLICTS

4. QUESTIONE MERIDIONALE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE NORTH/SOUTH DIVIDE

4.1. Soft narratives and hard prejudices
4.2. Ideas on the political management of the South
4.3. Lega Nord. Anti-south in national politics
4.4. The south is the ball-and-chain
4.5. The counter-ideology of meridionalisti

5. THE VLAAMSE KWESTIE AND THE COMMUNITY CLEAVAGE IN BELGIUM

5.1. The Flemish Movement: from cultural to political demands
5.2. Radicalism and territoriality at the core of Flemish separatism
5.3. Ethnic and economic nationalism beyond the language issue
  5.3.1. The Vlaams Blok/BeLang
  5.3.2. The economic implications of a politico-ideological fracture
  5.3.3. The Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie

III THE SENSE OF DOING MUSIC IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

6. IN MUSIC WE READ (AND WRITE) WHATEVER WE NEED

6.1. The politics and the people, an introduction to kleinkunst icons
  6.1.1. Negotiating political identity within the Flemish musical tradition
  6.1.2. Vermandere as the new folk traitor
  6.1.3. Music and politics at the Vlaams National Zangfeest
  6.1.4. On the manipulation of affirmed political meanings
6.2. A (new) history and identity in the music of Southern Italy
  6.2.1. Traditional symbols and contemporary claims at La Notte della Taranta
  6.2.2. When the artist is a terrone
  6.2.3. Meridionalistic interpretations of the class struggle
  6.2.4. Fixing the images of music in history

7. MANIPULATION AND USES OF MUSIC IN THE ENCOUNTER WITH POLITICAL GROUPS

7.1. Brigante se more. The shades of meridionalism in one song
  7.1.1. Music between populism and demagogy
  7.1.2. Institutional and non-institutional utilitarian views on culture
  7.1.3. A musical reading of politics in the south
7.2. Vlaanderen boven. Ideological misinterpretations and symbolic shift
  7.2.1. The officialization of popular music as the symbol of political and cultural identity
  7.2.2. Vlaanderen Feest and the popularization of the Flemish identity
  7.2.3. Progressives, conservatives, and nationalists exposed through music

8. MUSIC MOBILIZATION: CONTESTING THE CLAIM AND TELLING THE TRUTH

8.1. The artists who said «Not in our name»
  8.1.1. Fighting Bart the flamingant
  8.1.2. Representing diversity: a voice from the street
  8.1.3. Conclusion
8.2. Meridionalism and artists: an ambiguous relationship
  8.2.1. Global and local antagonisms
  8.2.2. Let’s face it from the ghetto
  8.2.3. Conclusion
Conclusions
Appendix 1
Appendix 2
Appendix 3
Appendix 4
Figures
References
Press Articles
Web Sources
Other Sources
Summary:

The research seeks to gain in-depth understanding of the role played by music in the ethnocultural regionalist conflict characterizing Belgium and Italy. More specifically, the aim is to observe and analyze how artists, songs, performances and other musical experiences can convey political identity and ideology, can be used by political groups to represent and popularize their claims, can inspire collective debate and mobilization.

The theoretical framework within which the research is framed identifies music as a system of sociocultural relations, as well as a site where political discourses, ideas and problems are shaped, debated and shared. On a general level, the political value of music is connected to its power to convey discourses and symbols producing sociocultural classifications, categories of inclusion and exclusion. Music is seen as having the power to create, represent and reinforce collective ideologies, shaping the contents and the limits of cultural and political identity, ethnicity and sense of place. Concerning the analytical approach, music is not only studied in its textual and aesthetico-formal qualities. More importantly, it is subjected to contextual observation of its performance and of the experiences it creates.

Belgium and Italy are divided countries. Cultural, political and economic factors shape the fracture between north and south in the history and contemporaneity of both national projects. On one hand, the Vlaamse Kwestie (Flemish Question) has developed around the claims for language emancipation of Dutch-speaking Belgians, was part of the issues bringing to the country’s federalization, and evolved into the never-soothed separatist demand of Flemish nationalists. On the other hand, the Questione Meridionale (Southern Question) emerged in the aftermath of Italian Unification, was integral to the way political elites managed the country, and led to the rise of a northern separatist party. It is reflected today into so-called neo-meridionalism, a new wave of anti-national ideals, revanchist feelings and centrifugal projects in the south.

Through the study of music the author proposes an alternative reading of the forms and contents, the ideology and the action of contemporary Flemish nationalism and Southern Italian neo-meridionalism. Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, and the regions of Southern Italy provide the case studies.

The research is based on qualitative framework conducted from 2013 and 2015. It draws upon the empirical data collected through observation of and participation to political and non-political musical events. It also includes interviews with different categories of participants among which artists and listeners, but also organizers, managers, producers as well as members of cultural associations and political groups.