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'Artivism' in the Arab World: a Major Driving Force towards Democracy

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Long before the Arab Spring, it had already been repeatedly pointed out that youth constitute the largest part of the population in the Arab world, and that this established fact should be seriously taken into account as a key political feature of the region. However, if the economic consequences of this factor have been broadly analysed, it is surprisingly much less the case when it comes to its cultural impacts, which are of equally great importance.

Young people have specific interests and behaviours, making up what is commonly called 'youth culture,' which is in turn directly related to a number of crucial economic and political issues in the region. To have a grasp of what contemporary youth culture means in the Arab world, we must consequently take a closer look at what today's youth generally like and like doing – namely the music, films, literature, and art they prefer, places they like to go to, events they celebrate, topics they discuss most often, etc.[1]

As such, with young people representing the greatest share of the population in this part of the world, youth culture is at the same time also about popular culture. In other words, knowing the tastes and preferences of the youth provides an understanding of the majority, thus allowing decision-makers to better choose and implement the most appropriate economic and political measures.

Youth Culture Equals Popular Culture

Above all, this 'popular youth culture' illustrates everyday life and contemporary cultural trends in the region, which are actually and luckily mostly far away from those pictured by the international mainstream media, which inevitably focus on the 'bad' news. Popular youth culture sheds light on how ordinary people think and act, and, in this way, on the major cultural transformations the region is undertaking. Ultimately, it explains how these led to the profoundly democratic phenomenon of the Arab Spring, although uncertain times have followed in its wake.

Like everywhere else in the world, most people in the Arab world are ordinary 'everyday life-heroes.' In addition, a significant number engage in creative artistic paths, which are particularly representative of the cultural trends and changing mentalities occurring there. In a region where democracy is still an exception, any kind of artistic expression enables not only a certain personal self-fulfilment, but also, as soon as it is shared with others, a form of collective action. The strength of artistic expressions in more or less authoritarian contexts lies precisely within the inherent 'ambiguity of art.' It is not by chance that the Arab world is increasingly becoming 'the place to be' when it comes to artistic creativity. Of course, in this respect the media primarily focuses on big museums or costly artistic projects, and, in doing so, fosters the idea of an emerging Arab arts market.

Yet, far from this successful mercantile approach to arts in the region, a number of artists engage more or less consciously in art as a form of cultural resist-

[1] Bonnefoy, Laurent and Catusse, Myriam (eds.). *Jeunesses arabes: du Maroc au Yémen: loisirs, cultures et politiques*. Paris: La Découverte, 2013.

ance; in short, in socially and politically committed art, in 'artivism.' The question therefore is: cultural resistance against what? Or: why artivism? There are plenty of socially and politically engaged artists carrying a message of hope and change throughout the region, be it before, during or since the Arab Spring. Many of them produce artistic work against arbitrariness and opposition to change, placing their creativity at the service of freedom and democracy. Some artists go even further, actively supporting activists and demonstrators, thus becoming renowned 'artivists.'

In this respect, the contemporary Arab music scene provides a striking and remarkable example. Not only was its development one of the very first indicators of the coming Arab Spring, but it has also actively escorted if not boosted the democratic uprisings. However, prior to the Arab Spring, few researchers had drawn attention to the new urban music emerging across the region since the mid-90s, though in different proportions depending on each country. Mark LeVine's *Heavy Metal Islam* can be considered an 'avant-garde' work on this topic, exploring the developing rock and hip-hop scenes across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), spanning countries from Morocco to Pakistan.[2] The book opens with a chapter on Morocco, which had the most lively music scene in the region during the first decade of the 21st century.

The Moroccan Nayda, a Precursor to the Arab Spring

Morocco, at the turn of the new millennium, experienced the development of an extraordinary cultural phenomenon: the Nayda. In Moroccan Arabic, in Darija, 'nayda' means 'something is going on,' 'something is arising,' and at the same time 'cool,' 'everything is fine,' 'we are having fun.' It must also be noted that the word has the same etymology as the 'Nahda,' the well-known 19th century Arab Renaissance movement. Similar to the creativity that distinguished the Nahda, the Moroccan Nayda refers to an unusual productivity in all artistic sectors between 2000-2010.

At the origin of the profoundly modern and secular Nayda was an underground music scene called 'la nouvelle scène' (the new scene). This music scene adopted new music forms, namely rock (including metal), rap and a genre named 'fusion,' merging traditional Moroccan music elements with rock, rap and reggae elements. Highly subversive during its first underground period, the music scene progressively developed to become a more 'overground' and mainstream phenomenon, especially thanks to a number of successful and innovative music festivals, such as the pioneer urban music festival 'L'Boulevard' in Casablanca and the 'Gnaoua Festival' in Essaouira.[3] This is how rock and rap have been acclaimed by the Moroccan youth, thus becoming part of Moroccan popular culture.[4] This creativity in the music field subsequently reached every form of artistic expression, be it in theatre, cinema, literature, fashion or art, so that by 2005 this whole dynamic was identified and recognised as the Nayda.

Benefiting from a certain 'liberalisation' of the media, which allowed the rapid development of private radio channels, and from the support of influential economic and political actors, among whom King Mohammed VI himself figures, the Nayda expanded very quickly. However, its drawback was its simultaneous co-optation by a variety of stakeholders. By the end of 2010, when the Arab Spring started in Tunisia, the Nayda was already in decline.

In the meantime, Tunisia's civil society suffered from excessive censorship under the Ben Ali regime, and musicians were hard-pushed to pursue committed creative work. In fact, as Mark LeVine points out, "governments in the MENA are naturally wary of such hybrid 'cultural' spaces and projects. They understand as well as the region's metal-heads and hip-hoppers how the presence of heavy metal, other supposedly Western forms of hard music and alternative cultures more broadly threaten the established order, and through it their political power."[5]

[2] Levine, Mark. *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam.* New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008.

[3] Boubia, Amina. *Les nouvelles formes de production du politique dans le monde arabe à l'exemple des festivals de musique au Maroc.* PhD thesis in Political Science and History, Sciences Po Paris and Kassel University, 2014.

[4] Boubia, Amina. "Les festivals de musique au Maroc: fusions artistiques, cultures globales et pratiques locales." In: Nicolas Bénard, ed., *Festivals, rave parties, free parties: histoire des rencontres musicales actuelles, en France et à l'étranger.* Rosières-en-Haye: Camion Blanc, 2012.

[5] Levine, Mark. *Heavy Metal Islam*, op. cit., p. 5.

That said, both the Moroccan and Tunisian situation before the Arab Spring show how authoritarian governments react differently to such artistic scenes, adopting various approaches to control them, either by tolerating them to a certain extent and co-opting them, or by censoring and repressing them more or less violently. In Morocco, the monarchy reacted in quite a permissive manner, progressively regulating and neutralising the Nayda. This is probably one of the reasons why the impact of the Arab Spring in Morocco was relatively low in comparison to what happened elsewhere. In contrast, in Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime's almost complete lack of toleration of any kind of contentious expression contributed to the revolution that led to its collapse, and finally to a democratic transition. Overall, what is important to bear in mind is the fact that the secular spirit of the Nayda is exactly the same post-Islamist trend that has driven the Arab Spring, first in Tunisia, then across the whole region.

Artivists and Raptivists of the Arab Spring

With the outbreak of the Arab Spring, artists from the contemporary music scene have often supported the contentious and revolutionary movements that emerged in several countries. Rappers in particular became important symbolic 'freedom fighters,' using the emotional power generated by their music and lyrics to galvanise protesters.[6]

In Tunisia, the rapper El General encouraged protests with his famous contentious song 'Rayyes lebled' ('President of the country'), in which he addressed Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, before being arrested by the police. Released shortly before the President's escape to Saudi Arabia, he was immediately considered as a revolutionary hero, and *Time* magazine included him among the 100 most influential people in the world in 2011. Since then, other 'raptivists'[7] have followed, and, as part of civil society, watched over the democratic constitutional transition process until its successful completion in 2014. For example, the rapper Volcanis le roi produced the song 'Chay ma tbedel' ('Nothing has changed') in 2012, despite the increased tensions between followers of the collapsed regime, Islamists and secularists. In 2013, the rapper Weld El 15 produced the song 'Boulicia kleb' ('Policemen are dogs') in which he sharply criticises the police. He was sentenced to prison and arrested before later being discharged. Such cases show that, since the Arab Spring, Tunisia's civil society is progressively discovering the joys and challenges of the freedom of speech for which they have fought so relentlessly. Egypt and Libya, two countries which have witnessed an impressive secular revolutionary movement in the wake of the Tunisian one, are also home to many raptivists who have supported the people's aspirations for democratic change. In Egypt, El Deeb participated in the demonstrations in Tahrir square, while MC Amin and the Arabian Knightz also produced engaged songs. In Libya, the anonymous Ibn Thabit continuously produced songs in support of the revolutionary movement while actually fighting in its ranks until the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, after which he revealed his real identity and stopped rapping.

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In Syria, the situation is quite different due to the cycle of violence that has developed from the initially democratic and peaceful revolutionary movement against the Assad regime. The violence of the repression made it much more difficult from the start for artivists to express themselves. Nevertheless, the rapper Omar Crow managed to produce some politically engaged songs, before street-art battles took over between opponents and supporters of the Assad regime.

[6] Filiu, Jean-Pierre. "Comment le rap a annoncé le printemps arabe". *Libération*, 1 August 2011, http://next.liberation.fr/musique/2011/08/01/comment-le-rap-a-annonce-le-printemps-arabe_752482

[7] On 'raptivism' see the hip-hop project of Aisha Fukushima, http://raptivism.org/

Splits, Radicalisation and Revival

In Morocco, however, the contentious 20 February Movement that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring neither became a revolutionary movement nor produced a cycle of violence. Nonetheless, it had a major impact on the music scene that had led to the Nayda during the previous decade. A split appeared between the main Nayda artists, some of whom were opposing change and others supporting the 20 February Movement. Even a so-called "battle" took place between the famous rapper Don Bigg defending the established order in his song 'Mabghitch' ('I don't want'), and the rapper Koman responding to him in his song 'Achaâb yourid al hayat foug Figuig' ('People want to live beyond Figuig[8]'), thus supporting the movement alongside other artists, just as the popular rock and fusion band Hoba Hoba Spirit did with its song 'Iradat al hayat' ('The will to live').

In addition, a second generation of artists, which is more explicit in criticising the established order, has emerged in this context. The rappers of the group L'Bassline (The insolents) perfectly illustrate this radicalisation of the Moroccan music scene: their successful song 'Chayllah système' ('Long live the system') contains a highly ironic message regarding the omnipresence of the 'makhzen,' the Moroccan governing institution centred on the King. The most stunning 'artivist' example, however, is that of rapper Lhaqed ('The Resentful') who engaged actively in the 20 February Movement, elaborating slogans prior to demonstrations, and whose lyrics sharply denounce the 'makhzen' and the monarchy. Owing to the video clip to his song 'Klab dawla' ('Dogs of the State'), which reports on the arbitrariness of the police, he was charged and arrested. Meanwhile Lhaqed is known as "the voice of the people" and has become the main symbolic figure of the 20 February Movement. Having maintained his position and his commitment to democratic change in Morocco, he has been arrested several times since his release.

Ultimately, when his Tunisian 'comrade' Weld El 15 was sentenced to prison because of a song in which he criticised the police as he had done, Lhaqed showed solidarity by producing the song 'Free Weld El 15.' Both then had the opportunity to meet and participate in a televised debate on "Rap as a form of political expression,"[9] perhaps constituting the first step towards a network of artivists and raptivists for democracy in the Arab world.

In summary, the case of the contemporary Arab music scene clearly shows how analysing artistic trends and popular youth culture provides a better understanding of the political issues on the agenda. Not only was the development of a new music scene across the region, and more specifically the Nayda in Morocco, a first sign of the Arab Spring, but artivists and raptivists were also at the forefront of the secular democratic dynamics once the changes had begun.

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"Rap as a form of political expression" (in Arabic), televised debate on France 24, 4 March 2014.

Raptvisim, a hip-hop project of Aisha Fukushima, http://raptivism.org/

[8] Figuig is a small town in the East of Morocco.

[9] "Rap as a form of political expression" (in Arabic), televised debate on France 24, 4 March 2014.