Alternative Music

Geographies: A Commentary

Forum: Alternative Musical Geographies: Popular Music and Space in Post-War German History

DETLEF SIEGFRIED

Spaces have always had a central role in the formation and impact of youth cultures, beginning with the near spaces of everyday life – school, workplace, village, neighbourhood – where peers come together and cobble together their own styles out of the traditions of their elders and media information about the new. National space was an important element as well, as a container for traditions, but also as a communication space for negotiating the boundaries of the new. Finally, in the years after 1945, global space has gained enormous importance with national debates affected by events and trends from other world regions. That they did not displace national specificities, but that these rather perhaps came forward even more prominently than before, is particularly clear in those youth cultures in which transnational influences have been connected with national cultural preferences and formed into unique mixtures. In Germany there is also the fact that the country was divided, so that the already battered construct of a single national culture was dismantled even further while its heterogeneous components stood out, just like the disparate notions of an appropriate economic and political order. In this respect a focus on youth cultures in divided Germany after 1945 reveals unusually diverse manifestations of broader debates concerning the legitimacy of new styles among youth.

The excellent articles collected in this forum take three dimensions of the spatial into consideration. Julia Sneeringer focuses on the local scene of one of the most important cradles of rock, the Reeperbahn and the Star Club in Hamburg. Timothy Scott Brown investigates the attempts of West German musicians from the underground scene to find a musical language independent from the Anglo–American mainstream. And Jeff Hayton examines the relations of West and East German punks and discovers in this subculture, inspired from the West, a driving force for the collapse of the East German system.

Department of English, German and Romance Studies, Njalsgade 128, 24.2, 2300 København S, KUA1, Building: 24.3.36; detlef@hum.ku.dk

The contributions not only focus on different areas, they also take different groups of actors into view. Sneeringer shows interest in the actions of the state's youth protection initiatives on the one hand and young people and club owners on the other, Brown puts artists at the centre, while Hayton focuses on the interplay between government and youth. In addition, the three articles can be read as a history of formative youth cultures in divided Germany between the early 1960s and the late 1980s. Thus, this informative and enlightening collection on the musical preferences of young people illuminates several central and much-debated aspects of German history.

Democratisation

Looking at German history after 1945 as a whole, individual expectations to participate in and shape society have emerged prominently at specific moments. The political taglines are well-known – from Willy Brandt's 'Dare more democracy' to the 'democracy movement' of the late German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the 'civil society' of the 1990s. Often, the right to participation and self-determination had to be enforced against traditional efforts, as Sneeringer shows in her exploration of St. Pauli. In that case, Beat music was regarded as 'a challenge to the maintenance of order'.

'Democratisation' often meant far more than an expansion of representative democracy by participatory elements. Many citizens wanted 'everyday democracy', i.e. increased social participation in all fields. It seems to me that the distinctive characteristic of the pop culture of the 1960s – namely to provide new spaces of expression for young people, where creativity and self-will could unfold – was an important element of social democratisation because it resulted in increased participation in society as a whole. The same goes for punk in the GDR, which strove for the legitimacy of cultural preference in the public sphere.

Whether the concept of democratisation fits with popular culture at all times is another question. Certainly it has not hesitated to pick up cultural elements 'from below'. Still, it is a way to gain attention with unconventional styles and articulate '*Eigensinn*' (stubbornness, self-will, self-interest). But it also developed a distinction, and pop culture knowledge produces cultural capital. This became particularly apparent among left-wing journalists of magazines like *Sounds* and *Spex* in the 1980s and even more in the conservative and elitist pop writings of the 1990s. It should not be forgotten that the emergence of pop culture as a legitimate part of high culture was the result of a process of social emancipation, whereby aspirants made use of the chance to distinguish themselves as experts – not entirely coincidental beyond high culture, where socialisation disadvantages, for instance in the field of classical music, were almost impossible to overcome. This field of 'distinction' is also gendered, with male writers gaining status through expertise and laying out a canon of 'cool'. Pop music was a new field, a *tabula rasa* upon which newcomers had every chance to make up for supposed cultural deficiencies. That upper- and middle-class

youth nevertheless benefitted from their enhanced cultural capital and were at an advantage in the intellectualisation of mass culture is part of the dialectic of this phenomenon.

'The West'

When Hayton stresses that acceptance of the GDR's demarcation policy towards the West eroded as a result of cross-bloc popular music exchanges, I agree. To what extent this was due to an 'ability of Western popular music culture to breach socialist spaces' is worthy of additional consideration. It is certainly true that for the entire existence of the GDR, the Berlin Wall was unable to stop Western radio and television waves. However, to say this does not mean that cultural elements originating from Western countries were incompatible with socialism per se. Initially they were mostly perceived as such by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) and therefore opposed. But subsequently they were often tolerated within limits, or indeed partially encouraged, as was the case with some East German rock bands, even eventually, as Hayton points out, with some punk bands. Apart from the regime's intention of gaining legitimacy, the question nevertheless remains: to what extent does the concept of 'Western popular music culture' make sense when analysing national manifestations of popular culture? Because pop is always a question of adaptation: regardless of origin, adolescents combine and use it in their daily lives. This appropriation does not even necessarily reflect national patterns but is often influenced locally, as in the case of West German punk scenes, which developed very distinctive local profiles.

As for punk in the GDR, it was, as Hayton argues, also heavily influenced by fellow scenes in other Eastern Bloc countries. Moreover, if we take Brown's example of Krautrock, then an insistence on the primacy of Western influences becomes even more questionable. Many Krautrock bands were oriented towards decidedly non-Western models – with the intention not to perpetuate, as Brown details, but rather to breach the dominance of American and British popular music. However, whether this was a movement of escape, as Brown suggests, is worthy of discussion. The term 'escape' was commonly used by contemporaries to stigmatise actors as apolitical. Conversely, one could also regard their supposed 'escape' as an example of agency within the framework of a self-critical 'second modernity' (Ulrich Beck) – that is, a move away from capitalism and towards more human spaces. How deliberate and 'political' such a movement was, is another question. In any case, 'the West' appears here decidedly as an antithesis, from which protagonists distanced themselves – needless to say, this was not necessarily 'true', but rather their own construct. An attempt to classify this phenomenon historiographically, moreover, would have to consider that the actors were rooted in traditions practiced by American hippies, but also by German life reformers around 1900. As these brief considerations suggest, definite ascriptions to a constructed space of 'the West' are problematic, not least because they can easily lend credence to traditionalist

manipulation theses – 'Americanisation' for example – as they were used by West German cultural critics left and right, as well as by the SED leadership.

Politicisation

First of all, it should be noted that the signs sent by pop culture – sounds, images, practices, even texts – are not political as such. They are not carriers of meaning in themselves but rather only within certain contexts. Further, they cannot so readily be identified as political or often only by those who have mastered a particular code within a more or less extensive group. This suggests that we are talking about ascriptions, about the charging of meaning within a specific context – ascriptions made by agents themselves or by segments of the public. Through such attributions, the use of lipstick, a guitar riff or a hairstyle can attain a certain social or political relevance in a specific historical situation. Sometimes these attributions are explicit, as when lyrics refer explicitly to political issues. But more interesting and often more effective are meanings that come to the fore less overtly, more indirectly. Important statements on pop culture have repeatedly insisted on its non-political character, often programmatically, such as Susan Sontag's concept of 'camp', which distanced itself from the classical criteria of high culture such as content, depth and meaning.

Of course pop features can also be politically intended, or at any rate be perceived as political signals. Again and again there have been attempts to politicise pop – 'from above', i.e. by the state or the church for instance, or 'from below', i.e. by young people who were and are the main actors of new modes. But often these actors also insisted upon the non-political character of their ideas. Teenagers in St. Pauli wanted their struggle for a separate space in which to carry out their musical tastes to be understood as 'non-political', whereas from above it was interpreted as a threat to the social order. Whether the aspirations of Krautrock were really so 'highly political' or if the bands generally saw themselves as 'actors in the political struggle', as Brown suggests, is up for debate. While some of them had a political message or were involved in political activities, others were primarily interested in musical creativity. It seems to me that pop historians have a tendency to force manifestations of popular culture into a political interpretation corset – perhaps to enhance the legitimacy of their subject-matter within a discipline, which for a long time has been primarily concerned with political phenomena. Instead, it would be of great benefit to draw sharper lines and evaluate non- or pre-political intentions and events as such – for example, as opposition to politicisation from above. In other words: to like rock'n'roll was not just the same as being a supporter (or an opponent) of the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

To sum up: yes, in a sense, pop music was 'political' not only when containing political lyrics or saturated with political attributions. It was also a process of 'mass democratisation' (Max Weber) in the sense of the participation of broad layers of

society, to be found in the practices of the actors that made pop music a political issue. Here social transformations in terms of milieu affiliations, gender, ethnic demarcations, etc., played a central role. However, particularly in Germany, pop culture has often been narrowly defined by its political aspects, by being described on the one hand as artificial and manipulative and on the other hand as liberating. In fact, pop music covers a diverse range of topics and stimulants which are not limited to the political. On the contrary such a reduction obscures a crucial fact: namely that the community-building and the mobilising power of pop music arises where the emotions govern, generated primarily in this case by sound. It is here that decisive emancipation processes take place – overcoming traditional gender roles, leaving one's home, coming together with peers – beyond what is described as 'big politics'. These emancipatory processes were caused not by political opposition and protest but by taking advantage of opportunities offered by changing environmental conditions, which in turn had political implications. Simultaneously, the emotional quality of pop music has been an ideal vehicle for political messages – precisely because of its community-forming and mobilising potentials. In the examples presented here, all these processes of course took place within national contexts – under the disparate conditions of a divided Germany. But they were concretely shaped and exercised in practice by young people in their local everyday spaces – a club in St. Pauli, a rehearsal room in Düsseldorf or a stage in Leipzig.