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Learning for Democracy: The Transformative Power of Music

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Introduction

The sustainability of any democratic polity relies on the active participation of its citizens in civic and political affairs. Therefore, if we value democracy, it is important to be clear about how people become active participants so it can be sustained and developed. There are a range of conceptual ideas that social scientists use to explain how people develop an interest in politics and become political actors. In this article I will draw on my doctoral thesis to explore one of these ideas, the concept of political socialisation, and to highlight the key role that music played in helping some young people become politically active and critically conscious citizens. I will conclude by arguing that educators should recognise and harness the transformative power of music to help people learn about democracy and their role in it.

Political Socialisation and Music

The concept of political socialisation is used to explain how people become politically active (Almond & Verba, 1963, Neundorf & Smets, 2017). It is the mainly informal social learning process, usually situated in young peoples' formative life experiences, which results from their interactions with a range of socialising agents such as: family background, schooling, peer relationships or the mass media (Norris, 2011). Yet music is often overlooked and, so, largely absent from most of the literature on political socialisation (Jackson, 2009). Other scholars (see for example, Street, 2012, Esteve-Faubel *et al.*, 2019 or Woodford, 2005), who study the interaction between music and democratic politics, psychology and sociology, recognise the important transformative role music can play in people's lives. For example, Nuxoll (2015: 5) argues that music can aid in the political socialisation of people through raising awareness of issues and offering new perspectives to help them make sense of their experiences. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) highlight music's influence on people's political learning and identity formation. Moreover, DeNora (2010) claims music can help build critical consciousness.

In addition to the concepts introduced above, it should be noted that learning focused on promoting citizenship and democratic participation features significantly in education policy

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at a national and international level. For example, in the Scottish context, promoting peoples' active participation in democracy and working towards social change and social justice is a stated central purpose of the field of Community Learning and Development (CLD), a purpose that has a long history and tradition (see for example, CLD Standards Council for Scotland, 2023; Tett, 2010; Crowther et al, 2017). Furthermore, in relation to our young people's education in an interconnected and changing world, promoting active and responsible citizenship is one of the key purposes of Scotland's Curriculum For Excellence (Education Scotland, 2023a), so education can '…*enable children and young people to be democratic citizens and active shape*rs *world'* (Education Scotland, 2023b).

Young people and their engagement with music

The experiences of the young people discussed in this article are drawn from my doctoral study (Moir, 2020). Applying a critical research method, I sought to identify the factors that led some young people to become politically active. Between 2017 and 2019, I conducted qualitative interviews with young people between 19 and 27 years old, who were already critically conscious citizens committed to social justice and who are active in the Communist, Labour or Trade Union movement in Scotland. The names presented below are pseudonyms and to maintain authenticity, I've presented their words in the Scots dialect they spoke.

For four of the activists in my sample of 17, music was a vital socialising agent. Either on its own, or through interaction with other socialising agents, music stimulated their intellectual curiosity, helped to develop their critical consciousness and fuelled their capacities and motivation to become active. This analysis can be demonstrated in their reflections:

Rosa, a member of the Young Communist League (YCL) and Communist Party of Britain (CPB) describes how some anti-fascist-influenced Punk music developed her political socialisation:

> …I think it was something to sort of hear a different view…. it's like a lecture … it's like a polemic, it's something that you can sing along to, and yell, and, like, sort of stick your fists in the air and things like that. Well…there's an energy behind it …it's something you can sing along to and shout at protests and things… Yeah, gives you more energy as well. It's sort of something to rally behind, it sort of gets you pumped up.

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Hugo, a member of the LP and full time Trade Union official also sees music as a crucial factor in raising his awareness of politics. Hugo's family are politically engaged. His parents are active members of their trade union, his father a shop steward, who had also been an elected local Councillor for the Labour Party. He describes his family as *'... socialist, and heavy socialist'*. However, despite what is clearly a politically stimulating and active household, he does not see his family background as the important feature in his political development and activism. As he puts it: *'...I wouldn't say it was definitive.*' It is difficult to accurately evaluate, in the third person, the consequence of his upbringing on his political socialisation and the relative influence of other agents. Yet, when asked what influenced his activism, he identifies his experience with music as a crucial factor. As he comments here:

> …there was a music group turned me on tae kinda movements. There is one band that I can honestly say I think changed my whole aspect of what politics was about, which was a band called the MC5. Motor City 5 they're called…I can remember just being gobsmacked that the type of music they were doing was the type of music that I was in tae, but they actually had a social conscience, they spoke about revolution openly.

He goes on to comment on one particular song, called 'Kick out the Jams'. Here his comment reflects a more active intellectual engagement with the music; *'...that's a good song, and then when you actually read Kick out the Jams, what they were talking about was everything that gets in the way of social progress.*'

Hugo does not explicitly connect his family background to his awareness through an interest in music. Yet for Mick, there is a clear relationship between his family background and music. Mick is a member of the YCL and CPB. He does not see his family background as being central to the development of his political interest and activity, but does cite music as an important socialising agent. For Mick, his family *'werenae particularly political'*, with no history of political activity: their interest was limited to being Labour party voters and supporters. However, whilst it appears Mick's household was not particularly political, he does feel his

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family background helped him develop some key values which became important in his political development, as this exchange demonstrates:

> **Stuart:** But would you be interested in things like fairness and equality and injustice?
> **Mick:** Oh aye, I'd say that's probably…too sophisticated for my understanding of politics at the time. Like, very vague notions o' equality, I wanted everybody tae be okay and do well and the access to opportunity... I think that's obviously, in terms o' how they've rubbed off on me, that's impacted my values, the idea that you treat people wi' fairness. ... I'd definitely say that was instilled by my family, tae treat people how you'd like tae be treated, that whole thing.

The result of this enculturation process on Mick's political identity was that he became *'...vaguely left, vaguely idealist, wanted the best for everybody, wanted everybody tae dae well, everybody tae get by, have access tae things.'* Yet a link can be made between his developing sense of values and political identity, and the music he was attracted to. Mick became interested in what is known as Irish Republican or rebel songs associated with the football team he supports, Glasgow Celtic. However, this genre of musical expression is controversial, particularly in the context of Scottish football, as it has been associated with sectarianism in the wider Scottish society between Catholic and Protestant communities. In fact, in an attempt to challenge this sectarianism, the Scottish Government passed legislation in 2012 that made the singing of songs deemed to be sectarian punishable by a fine or imprisonment (See Miler, 2015).

Mick does recognise the controversial and sectarian nature of some of these songs. As he acknowledges; *'...I make a distinction between Irish rebel tunes and the sorta, the bigoted ones, cause I know there's a few out there that, to be honest, when I was younger I probably did sing as well...no very proud o' that now.'* Yet many of the songs Mick listened to and that developed his political awareness depict the history of the Irish people and their relationship and struggles with the United Kingdom. For some, these songs draw on and deal with themes such as injustice, inequality, anti-oppression, anti-colonialism, sedition and the struggle for

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freedom (See Miller, 2016). The following two quotations both hint at a developing intellectual curiosity and highlight the impact that this music had on his political socialisation:

> But, you know, an interesting thing, I wondered this as well. We, all my family were big Celtic fans…my brother as well. As he was growing up he was listening tae a lot o' Irish rebel tunes. Now, that's not necessarily synonymous wi' being left wing but looking in tae the sorta Irish Republican history sorta painted a picture o', and even it's a stereotype, and not a very accurate one, but at the time Celtic were on the left and I don't know if that's maybe played a part.

> …a lot of the tunes I like just had a lot o' history behind them and I liked to read about history, and I read about the history of the IRA, and I read the history about the Troubles. The impact that the British Empire had had across the world. And that, towards the later stages crystallised my view o' imperialism and crystallised my view o' how we're perceived in the world and, again, ... class differences and…that really, really sorta opened things up tae me. And as I say, when I was younger that's probably maybe where I got a lot of the sorta vaguely idealist left, like, struggle for freedom…

Although Rosa, Hugo and Mick's formative experiences in their households are different, their encounters with music help to illustrate how different socialising agents can interact to enhance their political socialisation. For example, as well as music being seen as an agent of socialisation for Rosa, she also identifies her family background as important. Whereas, though Hugo and Mick do not rank their family background as crucial, they did have politics in their household. Nevertheless, the family background of all will have made them more likely to be open to the awareness-raising possibilities of some politically-informed music. Yet one young activist's experience shows that, if a politically nurturing family environment is not present in their lives, music can be an important and primary source of political socialisation.

Freddy feels he was not politicised by his family background, but cites music as a crucial factor for him. His introduction to this influential music was because of the peer relationships he

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developed at school, further demonstrating the interaction of a number of socialising agents. Speaking about this introduction to influential music though his peer group he explains:

> …you know I grew up with them [his peers] so to speak and so what's quite relevant here is not so much their personal political leanings but actually strangely enough the music they were listening to. So, they were the only ones in our school that were listening to a type of music called Grime Rap, which obviously I got into as well…

One of the rappers he and his peers listened to and discussed most, and who was important in Fred's politicisation, was Akala, the stage name of a male British rapper, poet and political activist, Kingslee James Daley. In these two quotations, Freddy explains how this political socialisation process worked sequentially on him:

> …Akala raps quite a lot about Malcolm X and his influence on him. So eventually I started to read Malcolm X and I think that was the first ever politically active writings that I started to read, so I think that was really the start of my political awakening so to speak.

> …the person who radicalised him [Akala] actually is Malcolm X … he continually rapped about it and so I went to go on, about twelve, thirteen I think, to start looking more at the Black Panther party and then Marxism, Leninism and stuff like that, and you know that's eventually how I got into reading Marx. I got into my book-reading phase 'cause I think I was trying to learn just as much as possible at this time…So I was looking at that and obviously from reading Malcolm X, Marxist books were right up on my list, so I got into those and then the rest is history so to speak. I'm a Communist now.

For all four of these young people, the themes and ideas portrayed in the lyrics of the songs they listened to stimulated their intellectual curiosity and, for some, inspired an autodidactic process. So, the music acted like a gateway leading on to the development of their political awareness. Unlike some of their peers, they moved from just listening to the music, to being interested in studying the lyrics of the songs and the broad political themes and ideas that the music was introducing them to. The following quotations demonstrate this autodidactic and

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interpretive process well. Firstly Freddy; *'…You know I used to sit and just read the lyrics, not even listening to the song, just read them and you know have a look at what he was saying, I could analyse it like it was an actual text.'* Mick also offers a good example of this process at work when he reflects:

> …the Irish rebel songs I'm thinking of, the ones that tell you a story, and you want tae go and read it. And obviously now we have access to the internet, to being able to Google or Wiki things, reading a whole history, a lot of the tunes are about emancipation and about revolution…I was able tae go and check these things out. And used tae get lost for ages ... and quite often it was just Wikipedia…I'm just talking about a brief history o' events, of organisations, of what they believed in, and quite often it was just a click … onto the next subject. ... And it was just dead interesting.

For these young people, not only was their political awareness developed by listening to music, but it helped them, in the Freirean sense (Freire, 1985), to not just 'read the word' but to begin to 'read the world'. It introduced them to social and political issues that were of relevance, and helped them to explore and better understand these issues, leading to a process of 'conscientization' and identify formation. DeNora (2010: 17) recognises the transformative power that music has as she draws on the work of Adorno to argue that music can also be a *'…resource for the instigation of critical consciousness'*. Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 161) also explore the political influence music has on people's political learning and their identity and argue that *'The construction of meaning through music and song is ... a central aspect of collective identity formation…'*. They make the point that music can help the listener more easily connect to feelings and thoughts that are also shared by wider political and social movements, leading to the identification with, and perhaps membership of, these movements.

Yet, as Jackson (2009) argues, it should not be surprising that music has this formative and at times transformative political power, as it evokes feelings and emotions as well as fostering cognition. It is a combination of all of these factors that help some people develop political beliefs and to move to political activity. Jackson (2009: 6) offers an appropriate example of how this process works to illustrates this point:

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> … whereas the work of Karl Marx makes for a far more intellectually compelling argument for Socialism than the music of the Clash, a British Punk band with Socialist leanings, the written words of Marx do not muster the sensual and emotional wallop that results from hearing the angry words of the Clash or…other passionate Socialist singers.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown how music introduced some young people to social and political issues that were of relevance to them, enabling them to make connections between their own lived experiences and material conditions, and the analysis and ideals of wider political and social movements. In the process, they became critically conscious, engaged citizens willing to become active in the struggle to make our society more socially just. For these young people, this process was exclusively peer and self-directed, without the involvement of educators.

Nevertheless, the current education policy context can be interpreted as emphasising learning for democracy to promote activism for social change and social justice. Yet, as educators we should remember we are not neutral even if we try to be. In our work, despite the range and complexity of our approaches to our learning encounters with students, as a final outcome we continually face what Freire (1985) would assert, is ultimately a binary choice: between working with students to help them adapt to the way things are, or encouraging them to question and look for alternatives that strengthen democracy and advance social justice.
Therefore, as the chorus of Florence Reece's song made famous by Pete Seeger asks, 'Which side are you on?' (Reece 1933).

I would suggest that, for the benefit of democracy and social justice, educators should recognise and draw on the transformative role music offers in not only helping people to become politically aware and active, but also in promoting awareness of alternative ways of seeing and acting in the world.. In doing so, educators can help their students critically examine the world around them and support their capacity to act to change it thus contributing to challenging the injustice and inequalities that currently characterise our contemporary market-based Capitalist societies.

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