CHAPTER 4

Respectful Resistance: Young Musicians and the Unfinished Revolution in Tunisia

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I am an unknown creature yelling high behind my microphone singing all alone, provoking silence in quiet places ‘Heartless places’

Wael Meskini 2011

The Tunisian Revolution in January 2011 initiated a wave of Arab-Mediterranean uprisings, all articulating their demands with democracy, social justice and dignity (Glasius and Pleyers 2013). In the post-revolutionary Arab world, multiple art forms have been used to fight for the recognition of the diversity of political expressions by young people, as Wael Meskini’s lyrics above indicate. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the meanings of music in relation to young people’s civic engagement in Tunisia by listening to the life stories of young Tunisian musicians.

In earlier studies it has been claimed that the overall discontent and lack of trust in public institutions on the part of the young in post-revolutionary Tunisia have been made visible through cultural channels, especially through diverse genres of music (Mannone 2012; Skalli 2012). We continue this discussion by exploring multiple meanings ascribed to the notion of resistance among young musicians in Tunisia. The conceptual pair of youth and resistance is often treated in connection with state-centred arenas, manifest political participation as well as overt dissent on the streets. This leads easily to somewhat spectacular accounts of young people’s resistance, leaving aside its diverse everyday modes, agencies and spaces (see Bayat 2013). By examining the informants’ reflections on the roles of music in their lives, and by listening to their music and lyrics, we aim to analyse the complexities of youthful civic action through music in Tunisia with the concept ‘respectful resistance’.

Resistance is often seen as a reaction to individual or collective oppression, whether overt or invisible. In its traditional usage, resistance is embedded in the

1 Translated from Arabic to English by Afifa Ltifi.
exercise of oppression by a ruling group (see Young 2000). This understanding of resistance also seems reasonable in the Tunisian post-revolutionary context. In this article we highlight the contested understandings and manifestations of resistance among young Tunisian musicians. We discuss how the notion is jointly embedded in respect for the country’s cultural heritage and its musical tradition, and the struggle for material, cultural and social change.

The concept of ‘respectful resistance’, attached here to post-revolutionary conditions in Tunisia, has been used in various fields and contexts and refers to the multiple tensions embedded in the acts of negotiating with and challenging different authorities (parents, teachers, politicians) while acting as musician (see also Quiñones 2015). These young musicians, after growing up during President Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime, are obliged to express their discontent in creative ways in spaces in which artistic expression may be limited, challenged or even dangerous. After our field work in Tunisia, the state of emergency law that was put in place in November 2015 after several terrorist attacks was extended several times. The law allows, for example, the banning of strikes and meetings, the temporary closure of theatres and bars and measures to control media. Street art and the use of public space for different types and forms of non-violent argumentation, providing a diversity of counter publics in the public sphere (Palma 2014), have an especially important function in embodying and representing freedom of expression and maintaining recently gained citizenship rights.

In the next section we provide a brief background to the role of music in Tunisia, to our research process and to our informants. Then we discuss the concept of respectful resistance in our informants’ artistic exercise at two intersecting levels: first, on the continuum of respect for tradition and the quest for change; second, in terms of generational dialogue and conflict. We conclude the chapter by underlining the importance of in-depth analysis of artistic modes of ‘respectful resistance’ by young people, especially in societal situations in which citizenship rights and freedoms are actively contested. This article is also written with respect at a delicate moment in Tunisia’s history, in order to understand better how these young ‘engaged artists’ strive on a daily basis for deeper democracy and a more open society through their lyrics and performed songs.

Music in Tunisia: Academic Discussion and Fieldwork

During and since 2011, hip hop scenes with their revolutionary dimension have gained much attention both in the academy and media. It marked a unique moment where rap lyrics were considered relevant and were heard attentively