6.4. "We're from Switzerland, that's a chocolate island in Sweden": understanding the situation of Swiss bands with regard to the *indie rock rhizome*

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Abstract

Globalization through individualization together with an increase of translocal relations has opened up new ways of identification. Music as a set of symbolic elements enables this identification process. Indie rock as a globalized musical genre is a fruitful field that gives insight into understanding how individuals adopt and adapt a musical style. The aim of this research is to describe how indie rock bands are situated in Switzerland within the indie rock genre, and how they get in contact and identify with it. This research is based on 15 individual interviews conducted with members of six different Swiss indie bands. The results show that these bands uphold translocal identification with the international musical genre through, among others, the generalized use of English as the language of indie rock. However, since only few of them have connections abroad, this translocal identification is mainly mediated through the consumption of both live and recorded music from international artists. Due to this peripheral position, these bands are unable to play a significant role within the indie rock scene. Their music is, so to say, internationally inspired but locally produced. In this context, they are still very dependent on their geographical environment considered as a space of experience and resource. Yet, local identity does not seem to be claimed neither is the feeling of belonging to a local scene. This research shows that indie rock has to be understood through the lense of a rhizomic phenomenon, which is being constantly adapted by individuals through a variety of mediators. Moreover it challenges the idea of a local scene by showing how it is socially constructed.

Keywords: indie rock, identification, circulation, Switzerland, globalisation

Introduction

Individuals are engaged into processes of individuation and try to establish their own singularity (Simmel 1979; Martuccelli 2006). With globalization and the increase of dependences and relations throughout the different parts of the world (Khan 1998; Ritzer 2009), individuals are confronted to a larger diversity and have new possibilities to construct their own singularity (Scholte 1996; Kong 1997). These new circumstances challenge the relationship between places and identity and allow the emergence of *translocal* identification processes (Scholte 1996). Paradoxically if individuals seek to establish their singularity, they also need to create a sense of belonging with others, at least imaginarily (Cattacin and Leontsini 2014). When it comes to music known as a complex entity characterized by sounds, lyrics, visual cues, social relations and physical acts there seems to be an important resource for individuals to construct their singularity and to connect with each other (Bryson 1996; Kong 1997). Moreover the industrialization and *global* diffusion of musical genres gives support to the formation of such *translocal* movement (Harris 2000). I try to understand and describe these dynamics by looking at how six bands are situated in *indie rock* allowing me to tackle the question of the circulation of music and social practices that are associated with it. The aim of this paper is to describe how bands are situated within a *global musical genre* – in this case *indie rock* – and how they get into contact and identify with it. In order to achieve this I avoid considering *local* contexts as something that is given and in which globalized objects such as musical genres are adapted. Instead, following Müller (2011), I try to put forward the opposition between the *global* and the *local* by considering that they are two mutually constructed notions. In other words the purpose here is not to take them for granted. Rather I emphasize the way the actors construct and mobilize the latter items namely *local* or *global*.

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After presenting my method and contextualizing my research I shall present what I mean when I refer to *indie rock* and further present how the six interviewed bands are situated within this musical genre. Three different levels will be considered: objective, relational and subjective.

Method

This paper is based on a research I undertook for my Master's thesis in Sociology at the University of Geneva (Riom 2015). For this research I conducted fifteen individual interviews with members of six bands. I completed the interviews with both Internet research and direct observations at shows. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to pursue with a thematic analysis using TAMSAnalyser. All the data has been anonymized. The interviews with the bands had been chosen based on my personal subjectivity. Nevertheless, I made sure to select bands that present themselves – on their website, Bancamp, Facebook, etc. – as an *indie* band. In order to guarantee the diversity in my data, I tried to vary the profiles considering criteria such as the members' ages, the band's location, its renown or the diffusion of its music outside Switzerland.

Indie rock: a short introduction

I refer to *indie rock* throughout the research because it is the term I used with the people I interviewed. However other words or expressions can be used to describe the latter term, namely *alternative rock*, *indie*[2], *college rock* or *rock indé*[3] in French. In fact, *indie rock* is hard to define. In the end it seems everyone has his/her own vision of what it is, or what it should be. Defining it would imply limiting its multiplicity of meanings. In my view instead of coming up with a definition, it seems more interesting and relevant to keep this multiplicity and to compare the different stances on *indie rock* and to then put them into perspective. I have therefore managed to identify three main sets of *ambitions* into which I may now organize the definitions given to *indie rock* by the musicians themselves. I use the term *ambition* to emphasize that it is an ideal, which confronted to reality, is not completely applicable. In other words it would be an idea one aims to constantly while producing and composing music.

First, through its standard musical format (e.g. chorus and verses or melody based songs) and its privileged means of diffusion (albums, shows, radios, etc.), *indie rock* has the *ambition* to aim to what pop is in the sense of "popular music", namely music oriented to the mass. Secondly, I observed in the interviewees' answers an *artistic ambition*, which pushes musicians to seek for and to claim the uniqueness of their music. For instance, the constant wish of singularity is illustrated in the long and precise description of their music (Hodgkinson 2004). Third, *indie rock* has a *countercultural ambition* characterized by a will to produce music outside of the musical industry (Gilmore et al. 2012). Thus, bands claim to use the *do it yourself* ethic[4]. Moreover, they perceive their music as being the carrier of a "bigger cause" which should have the objective to change the world. These *ambitions* defined in the *indie rock* culture are in many ways in opposition of music considered as "commercial" (Kruse 1993; Bannister 2006; Brown 2012).

These three *ambitions* take different forms in the interviews. Each musician gives more or less importance to each of them and mobilizes them differently to justify what s/he considers to be *indie rock or not*. This positioning can be different depending on the contexts. Furthermore, these *ambitions* are not entirely compatible and individuals must negotiate the tensions between all three. For instance, it is difficult to claim the inaccessibly of the music because of its complexity from an artistic point of view and at same time expect and want the music to be accessible to the greatest number and on top of that be largely diffused. This negotiation process undoubtedly has an impact on an individual's engagement in her/his musical career with respect to other aspects of life (e.g. professional or personal). Consequently, the definition that someone gives to *indie rock* must be understood in relation to his/her own experiences and sets of beliefs and priorities. This short introduction is twofold. First the fragmentation of *indie rock* needs to be understood as such. Boundaries are not given. They need to be created to

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[2] Abbreviation of the word independent.
[3] Abbreviation of French word indépandant, meaning independent.
[4] Here I use DIY in the sense of an ethic with allows band to produce their music outside the musical industry. Of course as underlined by Hein (2012), the DIY is at the same time a principle and a necessity for those who do have only means to produce music by themselves.

justify the limit of categories (Bauman 2001). Regarding this, it is possible to be an *indie rock* band and have a record deal with a *major*. Boundaries are negotiated and moved. As Müller (2011) underlined it for the *hardcore* musical genre, *indie rock* definition is constantly in tension. The second fold has to do with my approach. Indeed I tried to construct my analysis based on the interviewee's discourses rather than to reason with a pre-existing concept.

At the periphery

On a objective level, I tried to draw the networks the bands use to produce their own music by trying to describe their art world (Becker 1982). When we look at the ways the six bands produce and diffuse their music, most of the work is done mainly by people based in Switzerland. We notice that often times these people are even based in the same city where the members of the band live. Most of the bands produce music by themselves in their own studio. When some of the work is outsourced abroad, it is generally very professionalized (e.g. mastering of an album). Only one band showed a Swiss label (the Zeta band). It works closely with Swiss labels and sometimes even created its own. The same can be said about the diffusion of its music. In general the bands rarely play shows abroad and insist on the difficulties they face when diffusing their music outside of Switzerland (e.g. find people to help them, a label, distribution, shows, etc.). Indeed, more generally, social ties and relationships are rare with foreign actors and in particularly with foreign touring bands. While the interviewees build relationships with other Swiss bands by playing shows together, this is unlikely to happen when they support bands from aboard during their tour in Switzerland:

> I mean those that you saw that were just support concerts and it's difficult sometimes with the bands to – I mean they are on tour. They play every night with others support bands. Sometimes they just want to have their freedom and not hang out with you. But it's mostly like friendly "hi" and that kind of thing. And yeah doesn't get above that level. (Stefan, guitarist band Gamma)

If they have the opportunity to meet foreign bands, as Stefan explains, it is rare that a strong relationship starts and further expands. Interviewees explain this situation being a result of the format of these tours: the bands play each day with a different bands and since their tour is organized by a European booker they do not need to build relationships in order to be able to come back to Switzerland. In the same way, interviewed bands lack relations to be able to organize tours outside Switzerland. Thus, they need the help of professionals (bookers, agents, etc.), which costs money they do not have. Consequently, they rarely play shows abroad and as Damien notices for his band, their reputation stays mainly *local*: "It's difficult for us to play somewhere else than in Switzerland I think. Sometimes I believe that if we left the fifty kilometres radius nobody would be interested in us. Nobody would come to our shows" (Damien, bassist band Gamma). The band Zeta is an exception in this context. After having met two members of a band from abroad during a show and then becoming friends, the band managed to play in their respective countries and meet different people abroad. This way, they could sign with a label outside Switzerland and tour on their own in those countries. Thus, first we can say that from an objective point of view there are strong rigidities in the production system. Second, we notice that the bands I interviewed seem to be at the periphery of this system to the extent that on a geographical level, we can state that their music is largely *locally* produced.

Yet very connected

However, it is very different when we look at the relational level. If they only have few direct connections with musicians outside Switzerland, they are totally connected to the rest of the world mainly through music. They use internationalized conventions in their music such as singing in English. Five of the six bands sing in English. The main reason that justifies this choice is that English is considered as the most appropriate language for *indie rock* as explained by Bastien (singer and guitarist band Epsilon): "Singing in French on rock music in most cases sounds

a bit like an adaptation, like when you watch a dubbed movie"[5]. The band Beta chose to sing in Swiss German[6] after having started with English lyrics just like the others bands. What is interesting is that Peter (singer of the Beta band) did not justify his choice according to the way they wanted to appear namely a Swiss band nor was it to include *local* traditions in their music. Indeed, he explained that he wants to be certain his audience understands the lyrics, because he believes that music needs to have an impact on people – an argument that we can relate to the *countercultural ambition*. Thus, we can say that this choice is motivated by the appropriation a globalized convention.

Furthermore, interviewees mainly listen to, get inspired and take as example bands coming from Anglo-Saxon countries, which is not a surprise for people who are familiar with *indie rock* since all of the most well-known and recognized *indie rock* bands come from these countries. Like Karen, some of them explain this by the lack of "good" Swiss *indie rock* bands:

> This guitar oriented pop-rock indie noise sound we do is not based in Switzerland and we are totally influenced by American guitar music. Something Swiss? Perhaps the ways we function as people. This band is Swiss, but not in its music, I don't know. Perhaps if we worked with guitars and keyboards then perhaps Young Gods[7] would be an influence but I wouldn't know who in Switzerland would influence us or have music like we do. I mean I very much respect a lot of Swiss music, like I love Swiss bands very much but it's not how we play or it's not what I wanna achieve. (Karen, guitarist band Zeta)

Karen emphasizes that her inspiration essentially comes from the American music. Indeed, Switzerland is an importer of music (Rutten 1996; Moon, Barnett, and Lim 2010). Moreover, the consumption of domestic music is weak (Feusi and Küttel 2011). When I asked the interviewees about the bands that were important to them, they mostly cited bands from the US and the UK. Of course, the Internet and international media have a central role in this strong orientation towards international bands. Many interviewees stay informed of new music through blogs, webzine, radios, etc. and many of them are based abroad and focus on bands from Anglo-Saxons countries as well as on some Nordic countries such as Sweden or Iceland[8]. Nevertheless, in local records stores, blogs, venues or festivals international bands take the top line too. For that reason we can say that if the music of the interviewed bands is *locally* produced, it is largely *internationally* inspired.

A re-territorialisation?

Now comes the question as to how bands position themselves in this paradoxical situation? They do not affirm a *local* identification. For instance, none of the bands said that they were part of something they call a "scene". If there sometimes is a feeling of togetherness, it is never extended to an esthetical level. In fact, there is more of an idea of recognition that Anthias (2013) calls a sameness with other bands than a question of a common identity clearly defined and collectively claimed. Indeed, the feeling of belonging changes over time, as Peter emphasized:

> I'm not sure how strong the community feeling is. It also depends on the time and what is happening. If there is a series of shows or record release parties and the people meet often then it's a strong feeling of community but then there is a time where no one is really releasing anything nor playing. Then everybody does its own thing somewhere. Yeah. But it's also always changing like sometimes you have more contact with other people I mean that's just how it is in life in general. (Peter, singer band Beta)

Peter underlined that those events such as shows allow people to feel they belong to a "community". Taking part in these events establishes a shared experience (Brubaker 2001). However, places that focus only on *indie rock* shows are rare and can be precarious. These places, which are often non-profitable and based on voluntary work, encounter different problems such as gentrification, real estate pressure or repressive policy when they are squatted or illegal. For example, the band Gamma used to regularly play and organize shows in a specific bar. Recently it has

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[5] "Chanter en français sur du rock dans la plupart des cas ça sonne un petit peu comme une adaptation, comme quand tu regardes un film doublé quoi." Translation mine.
[6] Swiss German is a Swiss dialect. Someone who simply speaks German cannot understand it. Each region of the Swiss German part has its own version of this dialect.
[7] The Young Gods is sample and synthesisers based Swiss band, which achieved a certain success in the late eighties early nineties.
[8] These countries have developed in the recent years a strong musical industry due to a strong-willed government policy (Burnett and Wikström 2006; Baym 2011; Prior 2014).

had to stop because of noise complaints of neighbours. *Indie rock* shows may take place in more commercial or established venues too, but these places can have a completely different show the next day. Thus, part of interviewee reported that they go to a lot of different places. This can be seen as negative to build a community around a place. Moreover, as Müller (2010) noticed it for *hardcore*, venues tend to move to the periphery of cities. As a result the interviewees develop no strong feeling of togetherness.

Furthermore, interviewees do not recognize the link between their music and the place where they live and as Stefan emphasizes they feel out of sink with respect to others bands:

> I think it's not. Our music, it's a bit alien here this kind of music. There aren't a lot of bands doing that or it's not, I don't know. There're few bands doing more of that garage blues, I don't know, whatever I would call that sort of thing, or in a more like hipster kind of thing, but that kind of music it's like all in between. I don't know it's just not from here. I don't feel like it's music from here really. (Stefan, guitarist band Gamma)

Stefan believes his band is like an "alien" in his city's *musical landscape*. Moreover, some of the interviewees preferably seek to distance themselves from what they consider to be "Swiss music", which is for them negatively connoted. Raffaele (guitarist band Zeta) claimed: "If there is a Swiss sound, then it's a bad sound". The same happened with the term *indie*, which is for some of them connected to bands they do not want to be identified with. For instance, they use expressions such as: "this is not my indie" or "indie-pop" to underline that these bands are "too pop" according to the *countercultural* or the *artistic ambitions*. The analysis of the way in which categories are used in different contexts allows us to emphasize how individuals define it, the competition between different acceptations of the term and the distinction game (Barna 2014).

The categorization efforts do not come from external actors such as the media either. The absence of media related to the bands, which could create a discussion space defining what *Swiss indie rock* is, contributes to this lack of recognition. Swiss media seems to give a greater attention to international bands. Several authors (e.g. Hodgkinson 2004; Ball 2010) have noticed the importance of media actors, in particularly those sharing a certain proximity with the bands, in order to establish a space of discussion, which allows individuals to establish a common and shared definition. The emergence of a *mediascape* provides a basis for the creation of an imagined world, which reunites different actors and amateurs of a *musical genre* (Bennett 2002). Finally, the medias can also be seen as tastemakers that increase the visibility of those bands and keep the musical industry informed (Van Rees and Vermunt 1996; McLeod 2001). Interviewees have only rarely spoken about such kind of media in Switzerland. This lack of media attention has been already underlined by Hänecke (1991).

If Swiss media does not consider *Swiss indie rock* as such, international media does not have specific expectations of bands coming from Switzerland either. For instance, in the case of world music, certain actors and in particularly media build representations of music of certain countries (Connell and Gibson 2004; Guilbault 2006). Bands that have been in contact with international media do not report such expectations. Often people mix them up with Swedish[9] bands as suggests the title of my presentation. Karen (guitarist band Zeta) explained that they started to joke about this during a tour in the US and they used this mix-up to present themselves. This can be explained by the relative few bands, which have reached success abroad[10] and more generally that Switzerland exports only little music (Moon, Barnett, and Lim 2010). Consequently, people are not used to listen to Swiss band. We can say that *indie rock* stays un-territorialized in Switzerland. Thus, these six bands are in a paradoxical situation where their music production is very *local*, while at the same time being totally part of something they consider as *global*, also very well explained by Damien:

> I think we're very local, but we have international standards considering the music we make. I think we're all very realistic about it. We don't think that any of us is going to make money with this, because that's also not the goal. We just like to play music. (Damien, bassist band Gamma)

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[9] Sweden is a impetrative country concerning music and some bands such José Gonzales, The Knife or The Tallest Man on Earth are well-established.

[10] However we can cite some bands: Yello, The Young Gods, DJ Bobo, Stephan Eicher, Sophie Hunger or metal bands such Celtic Frost or Eluveitie.

Concluding thoughts

To conclude, I would like to emphasize two ideas that emerged from my results, which can help us better understand *indie rock* and more generally, such a highly decentralized diffusion phenomena.

The first idea concerns the flows. As we saw, circulation processes do not only include direct relations between individuals, but *indie rock* is also transmitted through non-human interactions and in particular through the music itself. The flows seem to be ever shifting and multiple. This perspective allows us to understand music and practices not as something declined in different *local* contexts, but as *translocal* networks composed of different flows (Müller 2011). These flows allow individuals to tie links with the music (Ma 2002). Indeed, music itself is the mediator of its diffusion (Hennion 1994). Each song and more generally each piece of art embodies the conventions that have been used in its production (Becker 1982). Consequently, individuals learn these artistic conventions while being in contact with the music. As Fabien Hein (2012) said: music constantly evolves through individuals who adapt it by adopting it. Moreover, listening plays a central role in the way individuals create an attachment to music (Hennion 2004). Thus we can understand the multiplicity of meaning that individuals can give to a musical etiquette. We face diffusion phenomena that can be identified as decentralized, namely that none of the involved actors has the capacity to control the processes nor to impose a definition (Mayer and Timberlake 2014). Consequently, these phenomena are highly heterogeneous. In order to be able to picture these phenomena and their a-logical, hybrid, a-central, multiple setting in which each node can connect and instantly disconnect with any other node, I think the metaphor of the rhizome can be very useful (Deleuze et Guattari 1980; Müller 2011; Daskalaki and Mould 2013).

The second idea refers to the *re-territorialisation* process of a musical genre. We need to understand the definition of a *local* identification as the result of an action. The literature on *indie rock* – and for instance authors such Kruse (1993) or Straw (1991) – insisted on the importance of the "local scenes" in the diffusion of this musical genre. However, these *local* identifications do not and cannot exist outside of a social activity. They need to be defined, claimed and performed to exist (Müller 2011; Lussier 2009). Such processes required infrastructures (zines, venues, record stores, etc.) (O'Connor 2002). In my fieldwork these efforts seem too weak or too ephemeral to establish a strong feeling of togetherness. Consequently, it would be a mistake to presuppose the form these social groups take as well as defining them in the way they function. This is what I can reproach to concepts such as *musical genre*, *subculture* or *scene* (Bennett 2012; Tarassi 2012; Hesmondhalgh 2007). In my opinion, we can learn from Howard Becker's book *Art World* (1982). Indeed, according to Becker *art worlds* are defined by the network of cooperation between the actors and do not exist outside these relationships: "The world exists in the cooperative activity of those people, not as a structure or organization, and we use words like those only as shorthand for the notion of networks of people cooperating" (Becker 1982, p. 35). If we apply this idea to the understanding of the *territorialisation* of music, we can understand it as existing only by the actors' effort to establish it. This would allow us to avoid the definition problems I underlined by using terms and categories produced by the actors themselves. In fact instead of taking homogeneity of identities for granted, we should consider heterogeneity as an ontological state and focus our investigations on what constitutes a social group - we observed holds together- considering that any social group needs a social activity to exist and persist.

Finally, the link between place and music also needs to be understood as a social construction (Stokes 2004). Consequently, the *local* and the *global* cannot be understood one without the other, since these two notions are mutually constructed (Martuccelli 2007; Khondker 2004; Pieterse 1996). The real question would rather be to understand how these two notions are used by the actors and in our case how bands differently mobilize such categories in their effort of individualization (good examples are provided by researchers such Harris 2000; Luvaas 2009; Müller 2011; Brain 2011). Nevertheless, we need not to loose sight that such construction depends on the individual's available resources (Andreotti et al. 2013). Actors need to appear legitimate to be able to claim to be part as much of a *global* musical genre as of a *local scene*. However, actors have their own agency and work to create these resources. Applying these two ideas will help us better understand the circulation of music and practices associated with it. I believe this would allow us to understand the multiple, ever shifting even *rhizomic* form taken by highly decentralized and fragmented circulations of these phenomena.

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