

From Italian Dancehalls to South London

An epiphanic Journey through Sounds and Systems

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As it often happens, experiences are made of connections and revelations. It also happens that we transform ourselves during the process of connecting and revealing.

This is the way in which I would recall my experience with the Sound System Outernational conference. In fact, I would call it an epiphany that revealed what I had been waiting so long to see. During the four-day event, I had the chance to expand my knowledge about the Sound System culture and empirically access practices that I had only read about in books or heard about through other people's stories. Academically speaking, these alone would be great achievements. However, for those who seek to understand, and get their hands dirty in what is called practice, it is not enough. The conference, in a way, has bridged my theoretical background and placed it, geographically and politically, on a path that I am keen to continue. A continuing epiphany that is encapsulated in a commitment that I give to myself and that I aim to achieve collectively. The experience of SSO4 animated the theory and took it to the edge by questioning what we can do today with theoretical frames developed yesterday. Here is the deep sense of what I mean by "epiphany". The major point is grounded on the fact that Goldsmiths has welcomed forms of cultural expression that have been hidden for a long time such as the Sound System Culture. Furthermore, by doing so it has also opened a space in which we can question the political and social issues of our times. In this sense, I will consider as a case study the knife crime wave that concerns part of London youth and the implication this has in relation to the legacy of British colonialism and institutionalized racism. In analysing this, I will recall my Italian political background among the project of Cultural Studies and finally my everyday life as a Londoner.

This is when I link the moment of the epiphany to a political commitment for the future. I will try, then, to explain in these few pages what I felt, what I learned and – most importantly – describe the route that has been opened in front of me. It is a journey and it begins in a specific space. It has a positionality, but it

moves. It starts far away and it aims to go further.

Let's begin.

Sound System Outernational was an absolutely astonishing experience. My colleagues and I helped out throughout the four-day-event in different ways. We carried the actual Sound System and we learned how it is built, how it works and the practical skills that are required to make it sound 'right'. This enabled me to see, live and listen to the stories of all the people who are part of the Sound System community. However, as I have already mentioned, the journey began years ago, in a small town in Italy. There, I discovered Cultural Studies and the brilliant mind of Stuart Hall.

What I enjoyed most when I discovered the project of Cultural Studies was its intersections with popular culture, critical theory, and its consideration for different forms of knowledge. Cultural Studies has taught me the relevance of cultural practices, of their claims and of what they fulfil, while pushing me to ask questions and explore issues and problems that characterise the world we live in. A world that should be acted on. Now.

Keeping this in mind is helpful for the following steps of this journey.

I moved to London years ago, not for the tourist attractions but for the culture of 'cut and mix' that I had found in books and in the academic literature (such as Dick Hebdige, Tony Jefferson, Paul Gilroy and of course Stuart Hall) and for the desire to expand my knowledge with practical experiences. Unfortunately, I soon realised how arduous it was to find authentic Sound System Culture in a city where gentrification and homologation are everyday concerns. Goldsmiths has opened a space where these cultural practices can not only be supported, but can also be shared with the entire community. The university's geographic position, and its history, have made it possible for academics and practitioners to meet. The institution's geographic position is a key feature and I will return to this later. The rooms of the

University became the space in which alternative ways of knowledge were exchanged. And more. The space revealed dialogues, experiences and lives. Encounters and exchanges were at the heart of the conference. I really enjoyed the session dedicated to women in Sound System Culture. It was amazing to listen to their stories: how the first encounter with the Sound System mostly happened in the family environment; how the influences of different traditions mingled in original outcomes and different ways of expression. However, the most interesting part was absolutely the one about the struggle of being a woman in the Sound System Culture. Sista Culcha explained to the audience how she chose her first stage name, which was 'Contrary', describing how the choice was designed to "counteract" the negative images of women in music and Sound System. It was, for her, a way to challenge the objectified image of women. This is because being a woman is a challenge in itself.

Flashback and connections.

This takes me back in time to when I was a student in Italy. Back to one of the most important books in my academic career, *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. I was impressed by the role of women in subcultures particularly as they were, and often are marginalised in male-dominated environments. Sista Culcha and the other amazing panels of this session found their way to resist the assumption of Sound System being a practice centred around men. Likewise, the following session was dedicated to women in Sound System around Europe and their struggles. This reminded me of my own cultural background. It is at that specific moment that my past came across the present. Lives, connections and stories converged. I never thought I would be able to see different practices as part of a continuum. The whole experience brought me back to my roots, to what I had already lived and seen 'back in the day': to processes and practices that I had never seen with critical eyes. To use Paul Gilroy's (1993) expression, I would call it a journey from routes to roots and routes again. At that time, I had a blurry idea of what a Sound System was. Most of the parties I was involved in were part of political festivals or squats. Occupied spaces in the name of the re-appropriation that were aimed at creating a network of social and political activities. I was already surrounded by a politicised environment or, more accurately, involved in activist groups. However, the Sound System was mostly associated with leisure. A shared experience. I probably didn't realize this until I got the chance to listen to the amazing stories from people I met at the SSO Conference. Back in

my sunny days in Italy, a Sound System night was just a dance night. It took me time to conceptualize what I had seen in those days. It certainly helped me to understand the experiences I have lived and the stories of the people I have listened to since I started my new life as a Londoner. Which is precisely when I re-thought about those sounds and voices. For instance, I reconsidered the heterogeneous world of Italian culture and the value of its diversity. The cultural differences and influences that my home country has and incorporates became more visible. The disparate dialects and languages. Also, the different claims that its communities articulate, depending on their particular stories and the relation to their territories. Everything was already laid out. It was "there", in front of me. I just needed to capture it. I just needed to understand the universality of the experience. In a sense, the conference enabled me to analyse today with a critical approach what I have lived in the past. This has also led me to create connections between lives and experiences that I would have otherwise rarely intersected. Furthermore, this new vision opened space, causing me to ask myself what the next step will be. That is why I would like to interpret this like a journey, which does not aim to ever end. As already mentioned, this is a path that continually grows and expands.

It is now that the epiphany unfolds and gives meaning to the purpose of the conferences that Goldsmiths has hosted over the last four years. In the exact moment in which the theory has taken shape, as an epiphany, is when it becomes a commitment for the future. This realisation creates an intersection between the activist experience from back in the day and the intellectual adventure that I enjoyed after coming into contact with Cultural Studies. This intersection poses a question. More than one to be honest. What is the outcome of this event? How can we apply these voices and take them into our everyday life? I should have probably mentioned before that I am not a musician. I am not even a technician of sound. I am interested in the political claims that music and the culture connected to it expresses. In particular, I seek to understand the ways in which music can act on society and how the academic world can support these claims. I think music and politics make a pretty good team. After all, it was the English subcultures that led me to "meet" the intellectual project of Cultural Studies. And how mysterious is it that in order to pursue that project, Stuart Hall had first encountered the magnificent thoughts of the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci? It might sound odd, but, as an Italian, finding out about this amazing encounter between Gramsci and Hall, made me feel less lonely.

“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will,” as Gramsci said.

The optimism, in this case, is linked to the fact that the university can become a platform. A space – a political one – in which different realities cannot only express what a culture was, but also what a culture can and will be. For this, we probably need different voices and different sounds. We need to address the claims in accordance with the conjuncture of the time we live in now.

Being conjunctural. Antonio Gramsci taught me in the first place the urgency to be conjunctural, to observe popular culture and to analyse how it unfolds as a playground for the interaction between different agents, with different degrees of power. Stuart Hall continued asking questions about conjunctures. I come from a political background which is influenced by Gramsci’s thought, yet sometimes it seems like all the people who talk about him, forget his habit

of problematizing social phenomena, of taking nothing for granted. Gramsci gives us the means to formulate questions, to interrogate the conjuncture. This act of continuously questioning was something that I had forgotten for a long time. The notion that

nothing is guaranteed and that our duty is to keep problematizing. For this, I claim, we need different voices.

In a country where social exclusion is a common phenomenon, to open up cultural spaces of co-habitation is an ethical imperative. These places must allow different communities - researchers and practitioners, community members and foreigners - to share their interest or affection, as the Sound System Outernational conference made possible for the sound system community.

The central point of my claim rests on the belief that the University, alongside the academics who are part of it, cannot be separated from what is happening in society. This applies mostly to the fact that Goldsmiths hosts different courses based on Cultural Studies. As mentioned before, all the axes lead us to re-imagine the active role of academics.

Over the last few months, the media have focused their attention on youth crime in the English capital. More than sixty people have died in 2018. We are overwhelmed every day with numbers and statistics. A high percentage of the dead are black teenagers: young men excluded and marginalised by the system who seek achievement and find themselves experiencing violence. This phenomenon points to the ongoing public disinvestment in youth and social services. It seems as though the tools to address this scenario are lacking. Furthermore, music is too often blamed, rather than seen (and listened to) as a vehicle of expression. It is imperative to promote a platform that listens to the voices (and music) of the disenfranchised. As Blacker Dread explained in an interview at BBC Breakfast: “it starts from education. [...] if you are constantly told you are not good, you are not good, you start to believe so. So, if you are told you can, you can, you start to believe it” (BBC Breakfast, 2018). While we ask ourselves what brings those young teens to waste their lives, we should



Image credit: Giovanni Nardini

also understand how deep-rooted this issue is. I do believe that we cannot deal with the problem of social exclusion and crime without engaging with the problems connected to the legacy of colonialism. The institutionalised racism that these teenagers meet every day should also be denounced. By

facing these big issues, we can try to work together, as a universal community, to solve the problem. It requires effort. And it is here that the University can become a useful tool.

It is here that I would like to transform my statement into a collective one. Because this is how we all felt: a community, which created a collective voice and claim. That is why I would like to talk on behalf of this community made of students, professors and practitioners. We believe that it is necessary to open the University to all those who are currently excluded from it. As part of the academic world and, mostly, as a Student in Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy, I sought to connect the legacy of colonialism, the politics of race and class to these issues. We need to break with a specific system of thought and with narratives that aim to keep a part of the population marginalised or, even worse, depict it as unavoidable. It is necessary to fight against this narrative. Like the

Sound System culture did, in a way, at the time of its emergence and throughout its history of diasporic ramifications. We want to make a collective claim. We want to use education and create out of it a chance and a call for a better society. This is how I sought to connect my Italian political background, my interest in Cultural Studies and the reality that I face in my everyday life as a Londoner.

However, conventional education is not what we should look at. As exemplified by the knowledge practices of the sound system culture, what we are interested in is education that emerges from below. This involves the contribution of everyone. That builds speakers and plugs cables in order to increase the volume of the sound – but also that of the claim. Everyone deserves the opportunity to achieve happiness and live and work for the good of the community. Opening the University in a country where quality education is inaccessible or denied to a large amount of the population, is an imperative that the academic world cannot ignore. In this sense, the academic world needs what Gramsci calls *Intellettuali organici*, the Organic Intellectuals. Or, in this case, the Diasporic Intellectuals, if we consider, following in the footsteps of Stuart Hall (2017), the idea that Diaspora functions as a space of enquiry. And more.

If we imagine the University as a platform, we can then believe in the encounter of different realities and experiences. Is the repressive action of police the right way to resolve the crisis of hope that much of working-class London youth is torn by? Could it, instead, be solved with a new, open, decolonised narrative? The university can emerge as the space of this struggle. Or better, as one of the spaces of this struggle. This is the exact moment by which the journey embraces the claim and fights for its resolution. It is the essence of the journey itself. It is what has been always there and what it will always be. It can concern different realities according with their specific necessities. However, the claim remains the same. If music is a vehicle, it is necessary to make its voice resonate. To speak with the youth community, listen to their voices (and music) and fight the construct that categorises them as hopeless.

The geographic position of Goldsmiths, in South East London, is strategic for this. Furthermore, the connection with the population of the neighbourhood is essential. Communication with different realities is a tool that the university should use if we want to change even a small piece of the world we live in. We do not have in mind a

redemptive idea of the University. Neither do we understand it as a way to save marginalised souls. We want to see the university as an open stage where people can exchange experiences and think together a different way of living side by side. We understand it as an accessible place (a physical building, an idea, a community) where everyone can bring their own knowledge and share it with the community. In the community.

The Sound System Outernational Conference has unveiled and welcomed a space that for so long has been hidden. It has also created a community that commits to continue in this direction. To produce connections, engage with people and create alternative solutions to this society. During the 70's, the Sound System culture empowered an entire generation in the UK. It fought against racism and exposed historical injustices, while supporting an open and hybrid community. Enhancing these types of interventions can help us to work together and face the challenges of our times.

I am grateful to have had the chance to be part of the Sound System Outernational Conference. I never thought I would assist Sound System practitioners and learn how to connect cables, or have the patience to create the perfect sound. I never thought I would have the opportunity to bridge theory and practice, and, using the knowledge gathered, to pose questions relating to the everyday issues that society faces. It has been an astonishing experience, which has made me feel closer to my colleagues, but mostly, it has enabled me to continue this adventure marked by the intersection between political practice, cultural theory and social and political urgencies. A path has been paved and it is our duty to keep going in this direction. While writing these pages I ask myself if the confused description of this journey makes sense to the readers. I am wondering if it is possible to unravel in the right way, if there is one, the feeling and the hope that this event has brought to me. I continually question my positionality and the right to speak, from my Italian-immigrant-point of view. However, in this journey I have met special souls from the most distant parts of the world and all with completely different backgrounds. We walked and worked together to give our humble contribution for a better society.

This, for me, is the real aim of my academic career: the intersection of theory and practice, and the willingness to use it in my everyday life.

“Optimism of the will.”

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