



Fragile empowerment: The dynamic cultural economy of British drum and bass music

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the dynamic cultural economy of British drum and bass (D&B) music, which emerged out of Britain's rave culture in the early 1990s. We suggest that D&B offers insight into more general issues regarding the relation between alternative cultural economies and capitalism. We examine relations between D&B and the mainstream capitalist economy and argue that D&B calls attention to the possibility for alternatives to conventional capitalist relations to survive and possibly thrive without pursuing separation from capitalism. We also theorize D&B as a vehicle towards empowerment regarding the industry segment vis-à-vis the mainstream music industry and also regarding D&B's practitioners, many of whom can be understood as marginalized discursively and/or materially. However, D&B empowerment is fragile, due in part to technological changes that threaten practices that have helped cultivate innovativeness as well as communal relations. The empowerment of alternative practices is fragile not only for D&B as an industry segment, but also from the vantage point of internal power relations – notably with respect to differences along axes of gender and generation/age. Our conclusions indicate the broader significance of the paper for critical social theory and propose how new research might build on our dynamic view of D&B's cultural economy.

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1. Introduction

Interest in alternative economies has been noticeable in recent years in Geography (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Leyshon et al., 2003). Yet ideas about the meaning of “alternative” or “diverse” differ considerably. “Different” may not necessarily signify a *just* economy (Pollard and Samers, 2007), thus drawing attention to issues of internal power relations. Further, scholars of alternative economies have different views as to whether “alternative” signifies separation from capitalism (a *post*-capitalist economy) (Gibson-Graham, 2006), a dominance-dependence relation with capitalism (Lincoln, 2003), or a temporary retreat from mainstream life that nonetheless mimics or becomes assimilated into the mainstream economy (e.g. Crewe et al., 2003). In this paper, we develop a *relational* position, recognizing the relation (not separation) between alternative, counter-cultural lifeways but also problems of marginalization and uneven power relations both within alternative economic spaces and between these spaces and mainstream capitalism.

We offer a case study of a small segment of the music industry, drum and bass (D&B), which broadly construed represents a coun-

ter-cultural movement that reflects discursive and material marginalization; crucially, has survived and in some ways thrived as part of the capitalist system. We conceptualize D&B as a “cultural economy” because we recognize the mutual constitution (hence, the false separation) of culture and the economy (Gibson, 2003; Gibson and Kong, 2005; Massey, 1997; Ray and Sayer, 1999). From our vantage point, economies are inherently cultural entities that entail symbols and identities of economic actors as well as materiality; looking for culture in the economy requires examining much more than the so-called “culture industries”, which bracket off certain economies as cultural and implicate others as not cultural (see critiques by Ettlenger, 2004 pp. 26–29; also Ettlenger, 2007).

In Section 2 of the paper, we show that the strength of D&B, a small counter-cultural segment of the music industry within the capitalist system, is very much linked to specific technological practices and their interrelated spatiality. We also shed light on the ways in which D&B has been a vehicle to fragile empowerment for many of its practitioners and, by adopting a relational approach,¹ we examine complex power relations between D&B practitioners and the mainstream capitalist economy. Our argument is that D&B speaks to debates in Geography regarding “alternative”

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¹ On the relational turn in economic geography, see the special issue of the *Journal of Economic Geography* (Boggs and Rantisi, 2003); see also Yeung (2005).

economies because it calls attention to the imperfect and nuanced relations between alternative and mainstream economies.

Shifting focus to power relations within D&B, we then explain in Section 3.1 of the paper that the “alternativeness” of this cultural economy from its origins through the present has always been gender biased – an indication that being radical does not necessarily ensure equality or social justice. Furthermore, in Section 3.2, we follow *Leyshon's (2003)* illumination of technological change as the “scary monster” of the music industry by analyzing how generational differences among D&B practitioners complicate technological changes that have prompted significant restructuring of power relations and also have begun to threaten D&B's survival.

In our conclusions in Section 4 we consider how the case of D&B can shed light on the study of groups that experience subordination (*Escobar, 1995; Mitchell, 2002; Said, 1978*). Although subordination has been connected to a “politics of becoming” (*Gibson, 2001*), our overriding sense of the literature is that such groups typically are portrayed as “becoming” in discursive but not really in material terms – that is, as unable to undergo significant material change. We call attention to the interrelation of the material practices and discursive representations to highlight uneven and changing power relations among those who are subordinated. We advance a view of D&B as a *subaltern* economy evolving *within* capitalism, whilst also entailing uneven and changing power relations internally.

D&B music emerged in the early 1990s from Britain's rave culture. Raves are late- or all-night events in which young people listen and dance to a wide range of electronic music (*Redhead et al., 1997; Thornton, 1996*). Late 1980s and early 1990s rave-style music drew upon, and then helped bring into being, a wide range of musical forms. Whereas the influences included ‘1970s disco, early 1980s synth-pop, Euro-pop, Hi-NRG and the black electronic house/techno of Detroit and Chicago’ (*Brown, 1997, p. 76*), the offspring of Britain's rave scene includes genres such as trance, happy hardcore, UK garage, grime and D&B. The latter blends the above musical influences with Jamaican reggae and ragga. The result is a highly visceral, exhilarating style of music consisting of thunderous bass-lines and frantic drums. D&B is performed by DJs and MCs (who add ragga-style lyrics) in raves or nightclubs all over Britain but especially in England and increasingly beyond British shores in the rest of Europe, Japan, North America, Brazil, or Australia. It has a dedicated following of “D&B headz” or “junglists” who buy records, attend events, and perhaps eventually proceed to make D&B themselves.² The development and growth of D&B has entailed the creation of a small industry, which has survived despite relying on relatively low record sales of between 1000 and 5000 units. It is a marginal player in the broader music industry but large enough to provide numerous opportunities for those involved to earn a modest living. On the production side of the industry, there are music producers making music for sale in vinyl, CD or MP3 format and many others who earn by DJ'ing. Then there are rave promoters, web site managers, and pirate radio station entrepreneurs as well as managers of D&B artists (handling bookings, arranging travel, payments and so on). There are also people who are involved in multiple areas of D&B: producing music, DJ'ing, running record labels, promoting events, and operating web sites. Many D&B practitioners pursue a diversified portfolio of activities, often occupying overlapping positions in multiple sectors of the industry.

Our case study is almost exclusively confined to D&B in Britain. Although D&B is made, played, and consumed elsewhere in the world, the industry's largest, oldest, and most prestigious record

companies are based in Britain.³ Britain is also the industry's “mass market”, especially with regards to frequency of D&B events. DJs have greater earning potential in Britain, which in turn means that non-British DJs or producers have a strong material incentive to establish their credentials in Britain and be booked to play there; the uneven geography of D&B reproduces unevenness. Further, the industry's “elite” DJs – those who command the highest fees for DJ'ing and have the most cultural capital by virtue of their position in forging D&B's history – are British.⁴ Finally, Britain remains the place within which new music tends to circulate, not least because having their music played in Britain provides unsigned producers with a stronger chance of signing to one of the British D&B record companies. A case study on D&B in Britain enables us to examine the dynamics of D&B in the place in which it emerged and endured and from which it has diffused to other places.

We use secondary data – such as the major book on D&B, *Brian Belle-Fortune's (1999) All Crew Muss Big Up*, and interviews of D&B actors published in the only two D&B magazines (*Knowledge* and *Atmosphere*), as well as interviews in a variety of commonly used web sites, which are the main form of communication at this point in time – to illuminate what we believe are the pertinent elements of D&B's cultural economy. Our strategy was to collect published interviews with D&B DJs and producers and analyze them for insights about the D&B cultural economy. Research on music need not be confined to primary data collected via ethnographic methods, although there are excellent examples of ethnographic studies (e.g. *Cohen, 1991; Finnegan, 1989; Pini, 2001*). We recognize the importance of acknowledging limitations of secondary data, notably that we have used answers to interview questions that we did not ask and on which we could not follow up; further, we are not in a position to examine the multiple texts apparent in an interview (e.g. body language and the like). Nevertheless, we believe we have sufficient secondary data to engage the issues that concern us here.

As we write, a crisis is developing in D&B. Specifically, the scope for the industry to continue providing opportunities may be severely curtailed by the “scary monster” (*Leyshon, 2003*) of technological change in the form of MP3 file formats and peer-to-peer file sharing networks such as Limewire or SoulSeek. Downloading has begun to affect record sales; some D&B record companies have had to cut back on staff, others have had to find new ways of making a living. New types of players have emerged on the scene; some older players have left the industry. In short, a process of economic restructuring is occurring, the outcome of which is far from certain.

We examine this critical moment in the development of D&B by positioning it relative to the rest of the music industry and capitalism more generally. We do this in part by calling attention to D&B's “dub plate culture” which, as we elaborate in the next section of the paper, is a specific approach to the production–consumption relation, and signifies a particular type of cultural economy. We argue that dub plate culture has been critical for the growth and survival of D&B, and moreover, it offers its practitioners at least a partial vehicle of empowerment and resistance to the capitalist economy, which subjects them.

2. Dub plate culture and nuances of empowerment in D&B

D&B's survival and growth is closely bound up with dub plate culture, the practice of music producers giving new, unsigned

² Unlike genres such as punk and hip-hop, it would be hard to associate D&B with particular styles of dress.

³ Recently formed record companies outside of Britain are outside the scope of our analysis, though we consider them important for future research especially regarding new geographies and power relations of D&B as related to technological changes; we broach this subject in the penultimate section.

⁴ That Australian or Brazilian artists such as Pendulum or Marky have joined the more elite group of DJs is evidence of D&B's increasingly international marketplace, but they are the exception heretofore.

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