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A case study of Zebda: republicanism, *métissage* and authenticity in contemporary France

Le groupe Zebda : républicanisme, métissage et authenticité en France

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a case study of Zebda: republicanism, *métissage* and authenticity in contemporary France

par

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Résumé. This paper looks at the production and distribution of Zebda's cultural identity, perceived as 'alternative' or 'oppositional' in French popular music. Using the pluridisciplinary method of Cultural Studies, we examine how artists, producers and media create discourses that attempt to unify a certain difference from the 'mainstream', while national and cultural conventions relativize this identity. Zebda's commitment to republicanism is both promoted as 'radical' and in line with national traditions. The band's hybrid music parallels the evolution of French identity towards multiculturalism, but remains bound by the concept of integration. Zebda's commercial success since 1999 is also representative of the diversity of perception of cultural identities, at once mapped over the 'mainstream' and the 'alternative'.

Mots-clefs. *Alternative — authenticity — republicanism — French identity — métissage.*

After the attempts of *rock alternatif* to manage artists autonomously in ‘independent’ labels in the 1980s, the French music industry got increasingly blurred as foreign majors bought or distributed small French labels. The ‘alternative’ identity of many French rock bands, initially aimed at challenging the concentration of the industry, then developed in parallel to an unwilling reliance on majors, which led to the paradox that expressing ‘resistance’ depended on a form of ‘co-option’ by mainstream production. The now famous band Zebda, from Toulouse, is an interesting example of how, since the 1990s, French rock artists have struggled to articulate their ideological ‘difference’ (challenging ‘mainstream’ music and neo-liberalism among other themes), while being signed to one of the most powerful record companies (Barclay/Universal). This paper looks at the expression of Zebda’s ‘alternativity’ in terms of political commitment, musical *métissage* and its reflection on immigration, and in terms of production and media reception.

‘Seriousness’ and Republicanism

French *chanson* has a tradition of using a politicized discourse to set itself against the apparently more trivial storylines of *variétés*. From Bruant in the late XIXth century, to the singer-songwriters of *chanson rive gauche* in the 1950s-60s, French popular music has articulated its expression of ‘authenticity’ by pondering the inequalities of society, often criticizing the distress and poverty brought by capitalism. The more ‘serious’ trend of French popular music has, in this sense, often espoused the evolution of the political left. In the wake of this tradition, Zebda has claimed that « des socialistes à l’extrême-gauche, il y a un vaste terrain sur lequel on peut s’impliquer » (Charlie-Hebdo 397), charting their musical identity as inseparable from a form of political commitment. Indeed, Zebda’s first nationwide success was a song entitled ‘Le bruit et l’odeur’ (1995, on the eponymous album) which criticized the more conservative views of French society. On a ragga-muffin beat, sustained by electric guitars and drums (a rock music basis), it ended with the sample of a racist discourse by Jacques Chirac on the smell of immigrants. Although composed before the 1995 presidential elections, the song proved a timely provocation, and one personally opposed to the new President. This so-called ‘radical’ criticism attracted support from the left-wing press, in which Zebda made the headline as an ‘oppositional’, or ‘alternative’, music band: « Zebda, les chanteurs de la contestation festive » (Télérama 2566); « [leur] engagement politique sans faille » (L’Événement du Jeudi 15/04/99); « résistance musicale » and « militantisme démocratique » (Le Monde 08/11/98).

Since the development of capitalism, the left has considered that the latter contradicted the full development of social justice and democracy, and has, in some instances, considered rebellion as a means to potentially achieve a more just society. This position also reflects the appropriateness, or otherwise, of French republicanism as an alternative society model to economic liberalism. In the 1990s, Zebda has firmly re-assessed the French republican ideal, and its goal of an abstract and equitable citizenship, as valid and worth struggling for. The lead singer and composer of the band, Magyd Cherfi, has stressed the necessity of assessing, again and again and in the face of reactionary tendencies, the theoretical 'righteousness' or 'humanism' of this republican model. Contrasting his music with, in his own words, some tendencies towards anger in French rap, he considered that « [liberté, égalité, fraternité] voilà la vraie colère, le vrai combat, celui de la maturité » (Télérama 09/98). With this, Cherfi presented Zebda as carving a rather conventional identity space, taking republican politics seriously and appealing to already existing fundamental values of French identity. In Autumn 2000, when some members of Zebda created an electoral roll in preparation for the Toulouse 2001 municipal elections (called *Motivé-e-s*), the artists involved stressed again their republican affinity. The electoral roll's broad identity was '*une liste citoyenne*', supposedly crossing over party allegiances, while remaining linked to the left. The *Motivé-e-s* wanted to provide an incentive for Toulouse citizens to come and express themselves in forums, so that their personal involvement in the town's community life would signify a reappropriation of local politics. In a radio interview in December 2000, Cherfi explained that participative democracy was the list's central credo, and that his desire was to « renouer avec la politique, le sérieux et l'engagement » (Là-bas si j'y suis, France Inter 05/12/00). He assessed his political identity as reflexive, again quite conventionally in line with republicanism.

However, the paradox of the French republic is that, with its abstract or idealist goal, the revolution seems never-ending and can be constantly reassessed as a valid political end. The revolutionary heritage of French history justifies rebellion as a means to attain social justice, and legitimizes a certain 'radical' discourse as a national tradition. It resets the agenda for ever more rebellion. In this sense, defending their republicanism is for Zebda the way to affirm their 'radicality'. Indeed, Cherfi claimed the necessity to « *foutre le bordel* » when existing institutions were thought to be unfair. Rekindling a 'people seize the power' discourse, he linked traditional republican themes (seriousness) with rebellion, calling for disruption of the political *status quo* when considered appropriate. Zebda's identity thus appears in tension between a certain tradition or filiation with French history (and previous *chanson*), and, in the face of conservative forces in French politics, as the renewal of supposedly 'radical' politics. The *Motivé-e-s* ran for

the elections (March 2001), gathered 12% of votes on the first round and redistributed them towards the Socialist candidate François Simon in the second round. Simon did not win, but the impact of combination of rock music and politics attracted a large following and contributed to Zebda being considered a beacon of 'resistance' in French political and cultural life (see above). Their 'alternative' identity is thus essentially shifting, fluid, and maps over several, and at times conflicting, cultural zones (Morley and Robins, 1989).

***Métissage* and challenging traditional French identities**

Another facet of the band's 'alternative' identity is their emphasis on *métissage* and their reflection on the place of cultural differences in contemporary France. Just as the word '*métis*' in French applies to the child of a mixed relationship, so the birth of French *rock métissé* implies a new production, the combination of differences, a hybridity. Zebda has coined its musical identity by apparently redefining, at least in musical terms, the usually acoustic sound of 'serious' French *chanson*. In the late 1980s, Mano Negra had already operated such fusion, and Les Nègresses Vertes, other precursors of *métissage*, were described as « a French band that are a kind of mix of punk, folk, raï and Latin » (Chris Ridd, 1998). For their part, Zebda's members play a mixture « de raï, de rock, et de musette », which sets them, as they say, « à la périphérie des succès cathodiques » ('Toulouse', 1995). This musical hybridity has been crucial in charting their 'alternative' or 'resistant' identity, in the sense that mixed music seems to challenge the compartmentalisation of traditional categories (Chris Warne, 1997). Plaiting so-far separate identities into a hybrid *rock métissé* style of music, Zebda is perceived as disruptive of traditional identities.

The band's name, Zebda, means 'butter' in Arabic and is a pun on the double-entendre of the French '*beurre*' (butter) with '*beur*', designating second-generation Arab immigrants. The main singers and composers of the band (Magyd Cherfi and the Amokrane brothers) were born in France and are of Algerian backgrounds, so that Zebda identifies itself jokingly and inter-linguistically as Arab. In turn, the band raises questions about the place of North-African immigrants in French society. French republicanism traditionally overlooks cultural and ethnic differences by positing the abstract ideal of republican citizenship. This is an aspect of French national identity that Cherfi agrees with, and his lyrics are crammed with such declarations as « moi je suis français, j'ai tous mes papiers, je suis bien intégré, je suis dans la norme française » ('France 2', 1995), or « je suis laïc et républicain » ('Le bruit et l'odeur', 1995). He has taken lai-

city and integration to heart, agreeing to shed his Arab identity: « Beur, (...) c'est une transition. Nous étions arabes, puis beurs avant de devenir français. C'est l'aspect positif de la société » (EDJ, 15/02/99). Cherfi trusts the republican framework to be adequate for taking every individual into account. Quickly, it is interesting to note that the term is *beur* is subject to controversy, including among second-generation immigrants themselves. The lead singer and composer of the other *rock métissé* band Gnawa, Amazigh Kateb, finds it condescending and an overarching replacement for origins that may be more precise, as Kabyl or Berber for instance. Kateb considers that the word is « un peu des façons de nous exclure, parce qu'on invente des identités hybrides, des trucs qui ne correspondent à rien » (Périphéries). Although Gnawa is a music band entering the same musical category as Zebda, and roughly associated to the same '*métissage*' spirit, Kateb rejects the notion of hybridity while Cherfi, from Zebda, precisely highlights the effectiveness of hybridity for the purpose of challenging French society .

Following this principle, Zebda insists that contemporary France is made up of a variety of cultural heritages, including the particularities of being North African and Arab. In 'Toulouse' (1995), they pay homage to the mixed identity of their hometown. Thirty years before, in 1966, the singer-songwriter Claude Nougaro had composed a song about Toulouse too, describing his adult's return to the town of his childhood. Using profusive strings, Nougaro rendered the idealized and nostalgic vision of a warm community. In their 'Toulouse', Zebda opens up with the sample of a slow Arabic prayer, and kicks off with a fast raggamuffin beat, underlining the contemporary (musical and ethnic) melange of the town. In its lyrics, the song described the social and ethnic diversity of its inhabitants: the tramps of the train station, the North African and Spanish immigrants of the *banlieues*, the neat engineers of the city centre.

Upon first hearing, Zebda's identity seems to « indiscriminately celebrate the post-modern play of hybrid difference » (Hargreaves, 1997). Commenting on 'the French' in general, Hargreaves underlined the fact that for the French, whose identity has been framed by years of Republicanism, ethnic and cultural differences were gradually taken into account insofar as they seemed to redesign France as an 'open' country on principle, and all cultures as 'equal' on principle. For instance, commenting on the evolution of French music towards *métissage* since the 1980s, journalist Garapon waxed lyrical as he noted that « devenus parties du langage commun, musique africaine, raï, rap contribuent, avec toutes les autres couleurs de la palette musicale planétaire dont dispose désormais le chanteur, à façonner le nouveau visage de la chanson française » (Esprit 07/99). He assumed that French society had a universal potential, and that the existence of 'mixity' befitted France's evolution, almost naturally, and certainly with a happy outcome.

However, celebrating *métissage* is not enough when ethnic differences still cause social discrimination. In his influential research on the black British community, Paul Gilroy (1993) criticized the 'anti-essentialist' position which sees the existence of cultural differences as a reason for praising tolerance and 'progress' in Western societies. Gilroy's 'anti-anti-essentialist' attitude, on the other hand, warns against the facile satisfaction of those, usually from the dominant ethnic and social groups, who celebrate this apparently accomplished inter-cultural *métissage*. My research conducted in French festivals and in the concerts of Zebda reveals that the band's audience is, in its vast majority, white, well-educated and usually middle-class. At the same time in France, and as Gilroy demonstrates, ethnic differences continue to discriminate against settled immigrants in many cases. Zebda thus insists that 'looking' North African in France (having a 'brown' face) is enough to shape tensions and rejections. Challenging the traditionally white ethnicity of French popular music (because of their own brown faces), Zebda's lead members still remind us that, overall, French society produces social inequalities on the basis of racial discrimination. In 'Le bruit et l'odeur' (1995), and parodying another line by Nougaro who said he wished to be a black singer, Zebda sung « si certains regrettent de ne pas être noir de peau, je n'ai qu'une réponse, les gars, vous avez du pot! ». This underlined that racial disparities did not assume equality, and that, in a contemporary context where Chirac commented on the smell of immigrants, there was much leeway for further assertion of the respect and inclusion of differences. Zebda's songs thus evoke the flaws of integration and tell of racist events taking place every day against French citizens of North African origin, like in the humorous song 'Je crois que ça va pas être possible' (1999) where an 'Arab-looking' man is refused entrance to a nightclub, a bank and a letting agency. With its musical mix, Zebda shows that *métissage* can be a political argument challenging both the dismissal of differences as in traditional republicanism, and the ill-informed complacency of those promoting differences as equal.

Thus far (Summer 2002), Zebda has pointed to the inadequacies of contemporary French society and the irrelevance of purely festive *métissage*. Cherfi's reflections on French identity have also remained open, at times reaching a bewildered dead-end about the ambivalence of French society. In the song 'Je suis' (1999), he wrote: « Je suis pas né le jour de ma naissance, je suis né lorsque j'ai compris ma différence », implying that if integration was supposed to level differences, it did not work for non-white people who were still referred to as 'different' and thus non-assimilable. Two other songs revealed the incapacity of French institutions (and of most French people) to deal with those of North African origins. « Quand j'ai compris la loi j'ai compris ma défaite: 'intégrez-vous' disait-elle, mais c'était chose faite » ('Le bruit et l'odeur',

1995) and « intégré je le suis où est la solution, intégré je le suis où est la solution...? » ('Quinze ans', 1999) are two extracts stressing the impasse reached by French politics. Zebda has thus reflected on the need for French society to accept cultural and ethnic differences, while insisting that the abstract ideal of republicanism did not pass beyond differences, and in some instances generated racist assumptions impeding the development of an equitable society. Thus, being Arab (or other than white French) *and* French is a concept that still has to be asserted, and Zebda's role in this struggle has proved to be prominent in contemporary French popular music.

'Authentic' Legitimacy and Mainstream Success

Another area of expression and perception of 'alternativity' in French popular music is record production and the commercialization of artists. Since its first album, Zebda has come across as a 'non-mainstream' band because of its support of left-wing causes, its commitment to social justice and its use of the stage circuit as opposed to TV broadcast (see its reception in the left-wing press above). However, Zebda was from the start signed by Barclay, a subsidiary of the US major Polygram/Universal since 1978. This is not the place to examine the conflicts between majors and independent record labels in France (which is an important aspect of my PhD research), but let us say that in record production as elsewhere, the cultural identity of 'alternativity' maps out over conflicting zones. Zebda is a band produced by one of the most powerful French 'integrated' labels, and yet could be, at least initially, perceived as promoting 'alternative' and 'resistant' values.

Since 1999, the position of Zebda in the French cultural landscape has shifted from 'authenticity' to 'commerciality', following the huge success of their song 'Tomber la Chemise', best-selling French single for that year. After the reasonable success of their 1995 album, Barclay wished to push the band to further commercial exposure, and chose to release this extract as a single to promote on radios and TV channels (from *Essence ordinaire*, 1998). The song is a raggamuffin celebration of relentlessness, an uplifting tune about 'getting down with it', hence the sweaty shirt that needs taking off. The time factor played a role in its success, as it was carefully launched prior to the summer period. In an interview given to Charlie-Hebdo (January 2000), Zebda's members admitted that, « sur cette chanson notre démarche ne va pas très loin » (Charlie-Hebdo 26/01/00), and regretted that Barclay had selected this song for promotion, instead of another, perhaps more 'serious', track. However, the band eventually agreed to this

selection, and agreed to attend prime-time TV shows to further the sales of their single and album. In fact, Zebda claimed to have always looked for success and ‘mainstream’ access, and the sudden possibility, offered by their label, of facing a large audience did not, *a priori*, contradict their ideological positions. They just hoped that intensive media coverage would help expose their political ideas: « proposant des chansons populaires et accessibles, on a toujours voulu avoir du succès (...). Par ailleurs, connaissant l’attente des radios et du public, on pensait que ce titre marcherait, surtout à cette époque de l’année » (Libération, 06/09/99). In this, Zebda represents one position of ‘authenticity’, which is not understood as elitism or purism (aiming at a restricted audience for instance), but as the possibility to air challenging ideas to as large and as democratic a public as possible. Back in the 1980s, the ‘independent’ labels Bondage and Boucherie fought over the definition of ‘alternativity’, Bondage trying to reject what they saw as ‘compromise’ with majors, while Boucherie hoped that selected contracts with majors would give wide access to their artists. The fact that Zebda accepted Barclay’s commercial methods of exposure stands in the wake of Boucherie’s declarations, and defines one possible ‘identity space’ for the expression of alternativity in contemporary France. We must insist that it is not the sole comprehension of that culture.

The massive promotion of ‘Tomber la chemise’ attracted a different audience from the band’s initial followers, this time mostly comprised of listeners of commercial radios and viewers of prime-time TV shows. Conducting interviews in concerts and festivals, and using narrative analysis as a method, my thesis examined the rather defensive arguments of Zebda’s initial audience, feeling almost ‘swindled’ by the sudden commercial success of an until-then ‘indie’ band. I shall not develop this point here, but suffice it to say that many critics also felt confused by Zebda’s success, and made sure they set the record straight about their prior acknowledgement of the band’s ‘authenticity’. In Libération, one read « Il convient *illico* de remplacer leur action musicale et sociale dans un contexte autrement plus réfléchi qu’il n’y paraît » (Libération 06/09/99). The adverb implied the diligence of the journalist to distinguish himself from Zebda’s new public, apparently less ‘*réfléchi*’ than himself. Underlining one’s prior knowledge is what Bourdieu called the *antécédent culturel*, and this journalist (and many of my interviewees) expressed their difference, their alterity, from sudden massive fame in this way (Bourdieu, 1979). Partaking in a common ‘alternative’ culture, media and audience reflect the resilience of cultural divides in French popular music, and provide insight into the formation of cultural tastes in response to the perception of a threatening (but undifferentiated) ‘mass’ audience.

Commenting on their success, Zebda's spokesmen explained how external pressure and censorship had generated a misunderstanding. In 1999, the band had attended prime-time TV debates, and were given, during shooting, the opportunity to speak about political issues such as the problem of *double peine*. As said above, they agreed with the principle of maximum exposure if it could further their 'serious' identity. On four occasions however, with Thierry Ardisson, Michel Field, Georges Pernaut and Ruth Elkrief, they realized during broadcast that this section of their interviews had been systematically edited. Their 'commitment' never came across, only their Toulouse jocularly. Further, upon Zebda's refusal to do an interview for M6 (because of M6's overly 'commercial' image), the private music channel threatened to stop broadcasting their videos. Upon Zebda's refusal to be sponsored by NRJ for their concert tour, for similar reasons, the private radio station threatened to stop broadcasting their songs. Each time, however, the commercial media had to give in, such was the success of the band and the potential profit to be derived from broadcasting them. This situation demonstrates the tensions at stake in shaping a music product (the pressures that commercial media and record production put on artists), and the diverse responses of artists and audience to these pressures. In the case of Zebda, it becomes clear that 'dissidence' or 'rebellion' are huge stakes in their commercial promotion, at the same time as powerful media reject arguments that may threaten the progress of sales. As a result, Zebda has gathered a 'mainstream' and a 'non-mainstream' audience, the latter changing and adjusting its identity in relation to the former.

In 2000, the French conglomerate Vivendi bought the major Universal which owns Barclay. Up to that point, the position of Barclay within the French industry had been an ambiguous one of promoting French artists while relying on an American superstructure. Many other French labels were in the same position, which has generated debates over the expression of national 'resistance' to foreign businesses during the 1980s and 1990s. These debates were, again, mapped over different and conflicting definitions of what the French national identity and its so-called 'cultural exception' could be. Since 2000, however, the question of strengthening a national presence within a foreign structure has subsided, and been replaced by a 'franco-French' debate about resistance and oppression 'at home'. The fact that Vivendi is one of most powerful companies today, and is headed by a French manager, while France has traditionally favoured its role as an rebellious 'outsider' on the international stage and against economic liberalism, highlights the internal struggle now taking place in French media and culture. In a bid to detach himself from the unfavourable connotations that his super-company attracted, and using them as a token of his own interest in 'dissidence' and support of artistic

integrity, Messier has praised Zebda as an example of 'rebellious' music (see *Télérama* 2715). In the ongoing debate about 'French exceptionalism' and potential 'resistance' to neo-liberalism, Messier's declarations were ridiculed as opportunist, but they underlined how popular music could be an object of dissent between opposite cultural forces on a given national territory.

Conclusion

With the group's initial political legitimacy and sudden mainstream success since 1999, Zebda interestingly illuminates the contradictions at stake in contemporary French popular music, and shed light on resilient debates about French identity, elitism and the expression of cultural 'difference'. On an international scale, Zebda also shows that French *rock métissé* can play a part in shaping a so-called resistance to neo-liberalism. In 2000, the band attended the Millau gathering to support the eco-leader José Bové. Bové is linked to the cause of ATTAC, as is the American Michael Moore, who, together with Pierre Carles who interviewed Zebda in *Charlie-Hebdo*, attended the 'Charivari' festival last May in Paris. There, « une mondialisation des alternatives [au capitalisme], des luttes et des solidarités » was promoted (programme in *Inrockuptibles* 01/05/02). Thus we see an international and cultural chain forming, with French rock artists playing a role in it (Manu Chao obviously playing a more prominent role than Zebda on the global scale). This demonstrates the resilience of the concept of 'alternativity' in French culture, and the pride and conflicts at stake in keeping with this identity.

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