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Conference conversations: Monique Charles on Corbyn and Grime

Yesterday *Renewal* co-hosted an event with [The Corbyn Effect](#) at Momentum's conference, [The World Transformed](#), in Brighton. One of the speakers, Monique Charles, recently completed a PhD on grime music. In *The Corbyn Effect* she looks at the phenomenon of Grime for Corbyn, and we had coffee with her to talk about her work, Jeremy Corbyn, and the Labour Party.

24 September 2017

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite: So could you start by saying a bit about your work on grime music?

Monique Charles: My interest was sparked mainly by politicians who came out and condemned grime music – lumping together all black music, really, and saying it was gangster rap, it was making killing a fashion accessory. So that was how I got interested in studying it. When I looked at grime, I looked at the musical family tree, the social conditions in the areas grime came from. And as I was researching, I realised this was a genre of music that came up alongside the internet and easy access to technology. Kids were making music on playstations, and uploading their music on MySpace, or sharing it on MSN chat. I explored how that enabled the scene to expand. And I was interested to find out how they carried on doing what they wanted to do when the authorities were still trying to crack down on the scene. I also looked at how grime music is connected to performance and emotion and to West African musical practices and spirituality. To quote Stormzy, I wanted my work to be just a massive shut up to the authorities – it's much more complex than you said.

FSB: There's this similarity with the DIY punk ethic in the grime scene, where does that come from?

MC: The DIY element comes from – you have nothing, so you work with what you have, you just make do. Also people who had some involvement with punk, and punky reggae, they were involved with some of the production stuff that was happening with the early grime scene. But really, it just comes from not having anything. Like one of my respondents said, it was boredom – it was a way to pass the time. None of the people I spoke to thought it was going to be a career, because they hadn't seen that blueprint. It was something they could do, something they got respect and recognition from their peers for. It was a sonic footprint timestamp – you've made something to announce your existence to the world, because no one is listening to you. Music is one of the cheapest ways to express yourself. Everyone has a voice, everyone has hands – you can clap a beat, you can spit or sing.

FSB: Is the social context the key to understanding the grime scene then?

MC: Yes, the social context is important, along with the cultural context, the legal context, and the musical context. So the Social Exclusion Unit, ASBOs, the demonization of the working classes, or 'chavs', all that stuff that was going on in the early 2000s, was important. Then you had the introduction of tuition fees, and the raising of tuition fees, and it seemed like possibilities for social aspiration, for social mobility, were less. And particularly for young people who were in failing schools, grime was a way to express themselves. It gave them the space to articulate their position, about race, class, and – because most of the people making grime music are men – about asserting some kind of masculinity that they feel they need to assert. The local is also important, because a lot of people are very tied to the local. It costs money to go to central London. So grime was an outlet – especially as the internet expanded. It's not all roses, it's not all positive, but it is a way to create, to express yourself, to gain recognition, to try to find joy in the world.

FSB: So where does Grime for Corbyn fit in?

MC: People who have been in grime for the longest, as well as the newer people, the children of the squeezed middle, they can connect to Jeremy Corbyn because he's been saying the same things for such a long time. He's not just saying things for votes. They connect to this sense of authenticity and to the idea that everyone should have an equal chance, because they know they've had to fight and push to get what they've achieved, but it shouldn't have to be that way. People shouldn't have to worry about where they live, they should have access to education. The connection to communities that have experienced hardship is very real, and Corbyn seems to represent a real chance for change and a reason to get involved in politics. Because he's been concerned with these issues for so long – right back to the 80s when he was involved with anti-apartheid campaigning. And it's also important that Corbyn engaged with them authentically when he did interviews with grime artists.

FSB: It feels like there's this danger that there's Grime for Corbyn over here, and the Labour Party over there, and Jeremy Corbyn is the only point of contact between the two. Is that ok, or do the two need to be brought together more?

MC: I think they should come together. If the Labour Party wants to lead, you have to engage with the people you're planning on leading. The Labour Party has to be present in those spaces. How they do that is hard to say. You can have internships to try to get young people from those communities involved in Labour. You also need to think about how you invite people into Labour Party meetings and Party business, how you communicate with people to find out what their concerns are, and communicate the outcomes of the political process. Politics needs to be local and tailored, because grime is very linked to the local. You need to have connections with organisations that are working in particular locations already – things like mentoring schemes, Saturday schools.

FSB: When you're talking about grime and about Grime for Corbyn, it's interesting that technology is really important in shaping both. It makes possible very local, autonomous organising, but also large networks.

MC: The digital space is key, because it does mesh people together, it keeps people in the loop.

FSB: Do you think Grime for Corbyn will be important at the next General Election?

MC: I think so. And if not them, then some other similar network or model. The danger is that these digital networks can form quickly but also dissipate quickly, and then you need new people to make it happen again. Which is why it would be a good idea for Labour and Grime for Corbyn to work together. There needs to be some kind of membrane across which the two can communicate.

FSB: Finally, earlier you talked about ‘Corbynism as organism’, and lots of people in the audience picked up on that. Can you say a bit more about that?

MC: Well whenever I speak, because grime is my area, I feel like I have to come with some lyricism! I guess ‘Corbynism as organism’ is a way of expressing the idea that the local is really important. It’s also a way of saying that not everyone can do everything, but, no matter what your social coordinates are, we can all work for these fundamental values or goals – housing, education, health, jobs, the environment.

FSB: Thanks for speaking to us!

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