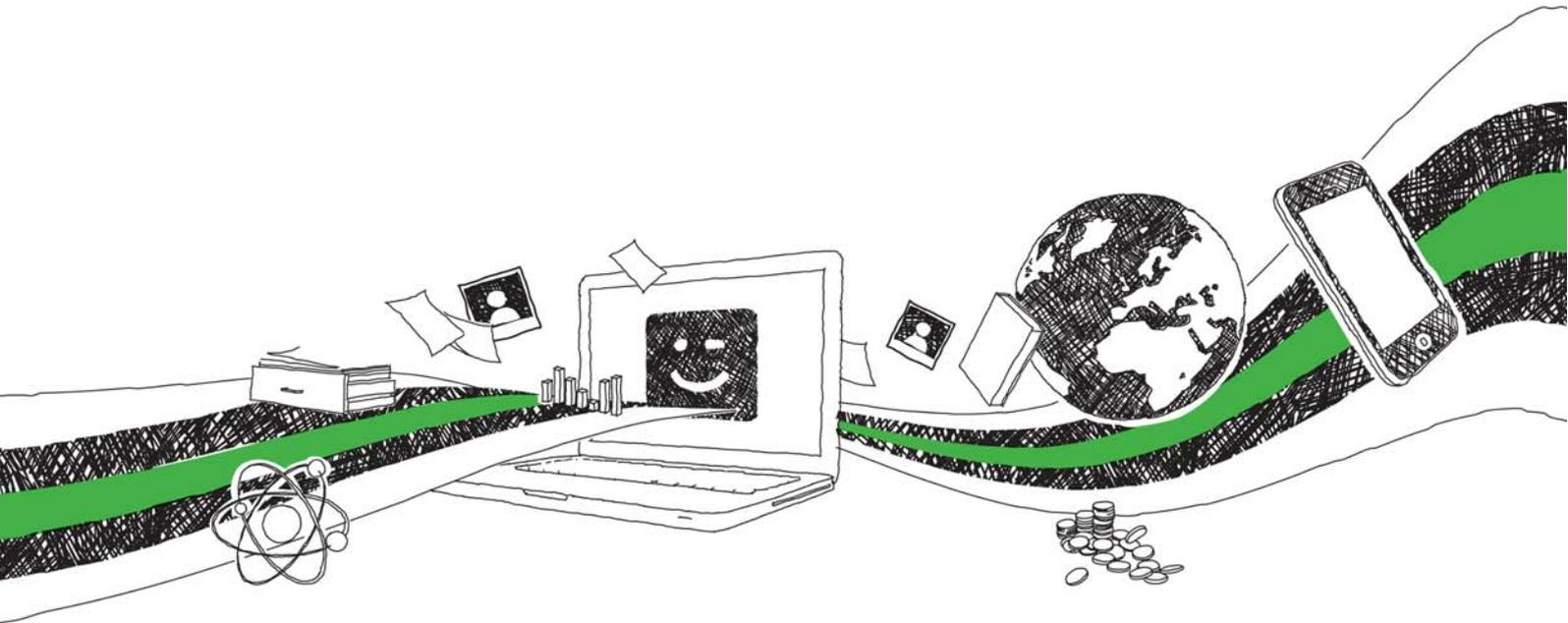**Anja Thümmler**

British Popular Music and National Identity in the 1990s

Thesis (M.A.)

YOUR KNOWLEDGE HAS VALUE

Universität Leipzig

Institut für Anglistik

British Popular Music

and

National Identity

in the 1990s

Contents

1. Introduction

> Irish blood, English heart
> This I'm made of
> There is no one on earth I'm afraid of
> And no regime can buy or sell me
>
> I've been dreaming of a time when
> to be English is not to be baneful
> to be standing by the flag, not feeling shameful
> racist or racial
>
> Irish blood, English heart
> this I'm made of
> There is no one on earth I'm afraid of
> And I will die with both of my hands untied
>
> I've been dreaming of a time when
> the English are sick to death
> of Labour, and Tories
> and spit upon the name Oliver Cromwell
> and denounce this royal line that still salute him
> and will salute him
> forever

These lines are taken from the song "Irish Blood, English Heart" by the British singer Morrissey. Released in May 2004, it immediately entered the official UK charts at number 3. The record not only draws public attention because it marks the long-awaited return of a popular artist, but also because it stimulates discussions on national identity, especially at politically sensitive times like during the stationing of British troops in Iraq. Obviously a reference to the difficult Anglo-Irish relationship, the lyrics also criticize general symbols of Englishness, like political parties or the royal family. The title of the song implies that national identities can be a mixture of several cultural backgrounds (Morrissey originates from the Irish community in Manchester). At the same time, this form of Englishness is also depicted as a possible source of pride and courage. Above all, the song creates the vision of a new English identity. The performing character wants to re-signify the flag into a symbol that does not, unlike as it implies nowadays, raise "baneful", "shameful", "racist or racial" connotations. In this way, "Irish Blood, English Heart" provokes various questions: Is it actually possible to re-signify national identity in such a way? Or would this simply be a re-interpretation and thus denial of the past? Should national identity maybe

instead take a step further and leave the realms of already established symbols? And how does a song like this relate the public opinion within a country? Has music the power to actually influence people's outlook on the world?

Questions like these cannot be answered for just one record, I much deeper enquiry back into the history of popular music and discourses on national identity is needed. Therefore, this thesis will try to evaluate the relation between British popular music and national identity. I will concentrate on developments during the 1990s, bringing together all genres of popular music during that period. Within academic research, this genre-exceeding approach has previously been rejected. There are a few essays on the Britpop discourse, and many books on black music as well as dance music, but hardly any writings have compared these genres.

Taking into account theoretical considerations on popular music, I will try to apply theories of collective identities in general and national identity in particular to Ninities pop. I will try to compare the discourse within popular music culture to general discourses on questions of national identity within Great Britain. And I will, as far as possible, try to examine what role popular British music actually plays within general discourses on national British identity.

2. Collective identities

<u>Identity as a "Plastikwort"</u>

In recent years, identity has become one of the most talked-about subjects in all kinds of fields in society, be it politics, the media, or the academic discourse. However, as Lutz Niethammer has pointed out, the term "identity" has turned into a so-called "Plastikwort", a word that means so much that it doesn't actually mean anything at all any more[1]. According to Niethammer it is mainly this vagueness which actually arouses a need for "identity". In general, identity is understood as the condition or rather the process of being an individual person or distinct collective. Identity is about how we are constituted and how we see ourselves as subjects. Thus, an identity promises coherence, continuity and stability. Identity links the individual's personal experiences of the world with the social structure of society. However, society has been fragmenting and segmenting, and individuals feel they are accompanying more and more different social fields[2]. Whenever these social roles overlap or contradict each other or determine a power struggle, conflict and crisis are at hand. It is this growing uncertainty, which has turned identity into an issue, or, as Niethammer has put it: "Identität ist wie Gesundheit, positiv nicht bestimmbar, tritt sie erst bei Verlust ins Bewußtsein."[3] Discussions about identity have ranged from demanding a return to stable identities to the facilitation of flexible and multiple identities. Within this thesis, I too, will try to evaluate the accuracy of such demands and its potentials and dangers.

<u>Different categories of collective identities</u>

Individuals tend to identify themselves as a part of collective identities. Such collective identities can be apparently natural and innate like gender, class, race, ethnicity or nationality, but also apparently self-chosen categories like lifestyle or subculture.
Gender studies differentiate between biological sex and social gender. Thus, the category "gender" is viewed as a construct, that does not automatically result from

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[1] Niethammer, p. 35ff
[2] see for example Niklas Luhmann's Systemtheorie
[3] Niethammer, p. 12

the category "sex". Gender has established a binary opposition between male and female, which has throughout history been connected to other binary oppositions such as culture/nature, active/passive, reason/emotion, mind/body. The first is always perceived as the "normal", the second has always got a negative, "other" connotation. According to gender theories, even languages and the structure of society are determined by constructs of gender and male domination. In a lot of ways, gender can therefore be seen as the most fundamental collective identity.

The term "class" describes groups with an economically similar situation. Especially in Great Britain, the distinction between different social classes has been very influential since the Industrial Revolution. Little by little, there was an increasing consciousness that these social positions are "made rather then merely inherited"[4], and that categories[5] such as "class" not only describe an economic situation, but also education, work sphere, or cultural values and activities. Already since the theories of Marx it has been heatedly debated how these different aspects interrelate with each other and whether "class" is merely an external attribute or rather a conscious formation that might struggle for its own needs.

The term "race" originally means "a common stock". Race categorizes people according to physical features like the colour of their skin, and often, these features were believed to carry radical scientific differences, which lead to ideas of a competitive struggle for existence and the superiority of (white) races. Today, "race" has been identified as another cultural construct rather than scientific fact, but, as Raymond Williams has noted, even though the term keeps dissolving, racism continues:

> It is clear that the very vagueness of 'race' in its modern social and political senses is one of the reasons for its loose and damaging influence. It has been used against groups as different in terms of classification as the Jews, American Blacks, 'Orientals', 'West Indians' and then, in different ways, both Irish and Pakistanis, where the 'Aryan' (Indo-European) assumption is stretched literally to its limits, but in excluding ways. Physical, cultural and socio-economic differences are taken up, projected and generalized, and so confused that different kinds of variation are made to stand for or imply each other.[6]

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[4] Williams, p. 61
[5] Sociologists have tried to differentiate between class, stratum, lifestyle etc, but the borderlines between these categories have always stayed blurred.
[6] Williams, p. 250

Closely related to race is the concept of ethnicity, which can be defined as belonging to a certain race, people or nation. In this way, ethnicity stresses the political and cultural determination rather than a supposedly scientific "nature". Both race and ethnicity are intimately intervened with the concept of "national identity", which often relies on categorizations via race or ethnicity.

Many researchers have claimed, that today's growing internationalisation goes hand in hand with a growing importance of regional identity. A region is always defined as a distinct area as a part of a bigger area (i.e. a nation). On the one hand, this relation implies a subordinate status of region, especially as the term "regional" is usually applied to provincial rather than metropolitan areas. On the other hand, however, the idea of regional cultures acknowledges distinct ways of life and is therefore often used to substantiate demands for local self-government.

Modernity has also pushed forward the idea that you can choose your identity, rather than just be born into it. However, "choosing your identity" is usually connected with "buying an identity". Consumption means social distinction, but as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, "taste" is still determined by education, class, etc., and the possibilities for consumption are still dependent on a person's economic situation. Even if lifestyles are chosen relatively independent from social class, there is still the problem presenting only a surface phenomenon. Subcultures in popular music, for example, are usually perceived as a certain style of fashion and music, and even though there might be more to subcultures than just consumption (like the spirit of DIY and independence in punk), they tend to be reduced to their style and conspicuously consumed. As Holert and Terkessidis have pointed out, today's society hails identities which display difference. Provocation sells, and thus, true subcultures are no longer possible but only incorporated into a "mainstream of minorities".[7]

All these identities interrelate with each other, nobody is "only a woman" or "only English" or "only a punk". Black women, for example, have a different status than white women, and in this way the experience of one category is also determined by the other roles an individual takes on in society. The deeper relations between these different collective identities and the concept of "national identity" I will discuss later on.

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[7] Holert und Terkessidis, p. 8f

Identities as a construct

It might already have become obvious that all these identity categories are affected by debates about whether they are "natural" or "constructed". And indeed, there are two main approaches to identity theory, namely the essentialist and the constructionist approach. Essentialists assume that there is an essential core to an identity which is common for all members of the group. Such a clear set of characteristics which the whole group shares also offers stability and authenticity and thus a basis for solidarity and unity. The constructionist approach on the other hand denies these ideas of "a true self" and essential affiliation. Today, most theorists argue, that identities are constructed through discourses, that they change over time and are therefore unstable, and that they depend on certain contexts.

Lutz Niethammer, however, thinks this differentiation between essentialist and constructionist approach to be trifling:

> Als essentialistisch erscheint dann ein Blick, der seinen Wahrnehmungen glaubt und naiv, mutwillig oder konventionell [...] mit der Wirklichkeit identifiziert, während jene Wesensaussagen als Konstrukte entlarvt, die man selbst für naiv und falsch hält.[8]

According to him, identity always depends on the position and perception of the observer, who wants to see a common aspect rather than differences. He concludes:

> Identität als solche gibt es nicht und sie kann deshalb (jenseits der Setzung A=A) materiell auch nicht weiter definiert werden. Sie ist ein reiner Operationsbegriff und als solcher leer und kann nur je und je annähernd, subjektiv und differentiell gefüllt werden.[9]

Instead of the term „identity" Niethammer favours „we"-statements, because they make its subjectivity visible. Niethammer's argumentation would render any work on identity that is not one's own as worthless, but no matter whether identities are "real", groups *do* search for and perceive themselves as collective identities, and the processes of such a self-perception needs to be analysed as objectively as possible. Even Niethammer agrees, that collective identities are constructed, and the constructionist approach is the most common in today's academic world. So how are

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[8] Niethammer, p. 43
[9] Niethammer, p. 44

identities being constructed then? In their introductory book on Cultural Studies, Lutter and Reisenleitner emphasise that identities depend on symbolic representation and culture:

> Identitäten werden in und durch Kultur produziert, konsumiert und reguliert, indem Bedeutungen durch symbolische Repräsentationssysteme geschaffen werden: Sie geben den Rahmen vor, innerhalb dessen wir unseren Erfahrungen Sinn geben, indem Identität und Differenz symbolisch markiert werden. Die symbolischen Markierungen haben ihrerseits reale soziale Effekte, weil Repräsentationen immer im Rahmen von Machtverhältnissen stattfinden.[10]

This idea goes with the „linguistic turn" that social sciences and arts have gone through since the first half of the 20th century. The „linguistic turn" implied the realization, that knowledge depends on language, and that history and culture exist only in discourses, and that meaning is therefore only gained on the level of communication, and dependent on its historical place. This means, that identity, too, only comes into being through interacting or even contradicting discourses. The term "discourse" generally means "language in use", but more specifically it has taken on the meaning of "any coherent body of statements that produces a self-confirming account of reality by defining an object of attention and generating concepts with which to analyse it"[11]. The most influential work on discourse has been written by Michel Foucault.[12] He emphasised the idea, that discourses are controlled, organised and channelled by forces of power, be they repressive or resistant. Thus, texts always become facts of power themselves. To uncover those structures of power and the means used to achieve power, as well as the relations between different texts, Foucault demanded discourse analysis. Foucault himself mainly referred to written texts, however, every cultural system can be read as a text and they all constitute discourse. Therefore, I will apply discourse analysis to diverse forms of texts throughout this thesis.

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[10] Lutter und Reisenleitner, p. 95
[11] Baldick cited by Kramer, p. 112
[12] see Kramer, p. 112f

<u>Identities as systems of signs</u>

The academic field concerned with how texts actually gain meaning is semiotics. According to semiotics, texts are systems of conventional signs, that help members of a social group to communicate. Ferdinand de Saussure saw two sides to every linguistic sign (i.e. word), the signified (the concept) and the signifier (the image). The signified only acquires meaning in difference to other signifiers, this meaning is arbitrary and conventional. That means that language does not represent a reality outside itself, but only allows us to access reality. Cultural signs work in the same relational way as linguistic signs. In culture, too, meaning is only constituted through difference and binary oppositions and there is no experience outside cultural sign systems, they determine how we view the world. Roland Barthes applied Saussure's theories to cultural signs. In *Mythen des Alltags* he deepened Saussure's model, according to Barthes there are two levels to both signifier and signified. There is always a literal denotative meaning and a mythical connotative meaning based on the literal meaning. This myth is interpellative, it makes the cultural appear natural, and in this way myths are a means of power. One sign can have different myths, like for example popular music, which can imply freedom and rebellion as well as manipulation and conformity. This ambiguity is due to the arbitrary relationship between sign and myth, and poststructuralists have stressed, that there is actually no signifier which is definitely connected with a signified. Instead, all signs relate to each other and create an infinite web of intertextuality. There is no definite meaning as such, rather, meaning is a continuous process. These processes of producing and reproducing meaning are called "signifying practices", they need to be analysed if we want to learn how culture works. However, signifying practices alone don't tell us enough about the influencing social structures, which has been a continuing problem in Cultural Studies in general.

One of the most important objects of analysis in semiotics is style, a system of meaning which is very central to popular music culture. The most influential book on this topic is Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* Hebdige describes how subcultures use style to position themselves against mainstream society: