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KEYNOTE

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## On Being Heard 2.0: The Historical Ear Revisited

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Sophia Rosenfeld

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### **Sophia Rosenfeld**

The author is Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania with a special interest in European intellectual and cultural history particularly on subjects related to the Enlightenment, the trans-Atlantic Age of Revolutions, and the legacy of the eighteenth century for modern democracy.

When President Macron of France announced in winter 2023 that he would be raising the age at which one qualified for a pension from sixty-two to sixty-four, protests broke out in many French cities. Thousands of French citizens massed in central squares and streets, marched, displayed homemade signs, and chanted their frustrations. There was also some vandalism, like the burning of trash bins, a familiar kind of resistance by deed. But then Macron went ahead anyway in April, despite what appeared to be substantial and deep-seated opposition to the measure, using what many people perceived to be an anti-democratic, though legal, process of getting his reforms passed without a direct vote by the French parliament. In response, people in cities all across France did something different. They took up a very old and distinctive mode of urban protest: the so-called *casserolade*.

Following a televised speech that same month (April 2023) in which Macron tried to shift the conversation away from the discussion of pension reform, ordinary people took to squares and plazas in front of city halls across France with pots and pans, or casseroles, from their kitchens, as well as both wooden and metal spoons to hit them with, in the hopes of making a very public din. In Paris, people joined in the noise-making from apartment windows too, further enhancing the racket in an effort to literally fill central urban neighborhoods with sound. Soon every one of Macron's public appearances, not to mention those of officials or spokespersons for his government, were met with cacophonous but often rhythmic, amateur banging of pots and pans, along with the more expected singing, chanting, and even dancing. What were these chants? One repeated one: "Macron

won't listen to us? We won't listen to him." Some were hard to hear over the racket of homespun instruments.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, this particular mode of protest – characterized by the often ear-splitting banging of pots and pans brought out from the kitchen to the urban public sphere – has most famously been deployed in Latin American cities, where it is known as a *cacerolazo* (meaning, literally, the hitting or punching of a saucepan). The most famous example takes us back to 1971, in Santiago, Chile, where elite and middle-class women publicly hitting pots with utensils and clashing lids like cymbals in protest against food shortages and inflation helped bring down the socialist regime of Salvador Allende. But this form of demonstration has proven to be extremely politically flexible, in Latin America and elsewhere. It was also used in Santiago, largely out of windows under the cover of night, to register opposition to Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile during the 1980s. And in just the last fifteen years, protestors have staged *cacerolazos* and their variants for a wide variety of causes on the left and on the right: in Latin American cities in Argentina, Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, and Puerto Rico, but also in Lebanon, Morocco, Kenya, India, Canada, Turkey, Senegal, Gabon, and Myanmar (where car horns and bicycle bells added to the aural assault). They have also popped up in Europe, from France even before the pension debate, to Catalan parts of Spain, to the Netherlands, where a *casserolade* is called a *lawaaideemonstratie*, literally "noise protest" or "noise demonstration."<sup>2</sup> Here in Copenhagen, I gather, a form of *casserolade* was used to protest Denmark's emergency epidemic act of March 2020 just after the Covid-19 outbreak.

Indeed, though *casserolades* are now a global phenomenon (you can even reproduce one with a noise-making smartphone app if kitchen utensils aren't available!), they likely spread initially as a result of European colonialism, and their roots run deep in European culture. Historians trace them back to the Middle Ages. But they became particularly common in the early modern period under such different labels as *Katzenmusik*, *charivari*, *mattinata*, and, in England since the seventeenth century, "rough music." The great historian E. P. Thompson defined the later as signifying "a rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual, which is usually

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- 1 For this chant, see Sylvie Corbet, "Macron says he hears France's anger, but defends pension law," AP, April 17, 2023. For additional accounts of this phenomenon, see Constant Méheut, "In France, Clanging Cookware Hounds Macron," *New York Times* (May 22, 2023) and Frédéric Joignot "Kling! Klang! Plunk! Des Casserolades Contre Macron," *Le Monde* (April 24, 2023).
  - 2 For a sophisticated analysis of modern Spanish *cacerolazos*, see Matthew Kerry, "The Death of 'Traditional' Charivari and the Invention of Pot-Banging in Spain, c. 1960-2020," *Past and Present* (January 2024), <https://academic.oup.com/past/advance-article/doi/10.1093/pastj/gtad016/7505499>. Good lists of various national examples can be found under both *cacerolazo* and *concert des casserolles* on wikipedia; see [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concert\\_de\\_casserolles](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concert_de_casserolles) and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cacerolazo>.

directed in mockery or hostility against individuals who offended certain community norms.”

Thompson, though, also suggested close connections between all of these different European variants, British and continental; even as their symbolic elements and the focus of their insults were various, they were best understood as related forms of crowd action. What they shared in good part was the deliberate, collective production of what Thompson calls “ear-shattering noise” through the clanging of pots and pans and sometimes kettles with stones inside, but also tongs, gridirons, frying pans, and all sorts of horns, bells, pipes, whistles, and more--what we might call a combination of improvised and mundane instruments employed to unconventional ends--as well as singing, chanting of often obscene verses, and rhythmic clapping. At either end of the eighteenth century, we can find accounts of these rituals in which participants are described as making “a most grating Noise” (that’s in 1698) and a “hideous hullabaloo” (that’s in 1790).<sup>3</sup>

In fact, even though they are rarely studied from the perspective of sound,<sup>4</sup> there is some evidence that the “ear-shattering noise” was the last element of charivaris to disappear in the post-revolutionary world of the nineteenth century. Even as some of the elaborate ritual elements were replaced by new, more modern kinds of protest behavior, like the strike and the public meeting, intense, disruptive, and often parodic popular sound-making by both men and women continued to occur on specific occasions. Many later commentators refer back to the English writer Thomas Hardy’s account in his great novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1884) of a “skimmington ride” (yet another name for a charivari or casserolade) marked by “the din of cleavers, tongs, tambourines, kits, crouds, humstrums, serpents, ram’s horns, and other historical kinds of music.”

What changed over time is primarily the function of this kind of popular sound production rather than the form (or sound) itself. When charivaris and casserolades occurred in the nineteenth century, they were now often directed towards explicitly *political* targets. Instead of being used in the traditional Medieval or early modern fashion--primarily to attack and humiliate those who had offended familial, sexual and/or marital norms, including through adultery or remarriage, or, less frequently, to shame unpopular local figures like judges in an effort to restore

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3 On the history of “rough music,” the most famous source is E. P. Thompson, *Rough Music*, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991). On the French charivari, see the classic collection of Jacques Le Goff and Jean Claude Schmitt, eds., *Le Charivari* (Paris: EHESS, 1981). An overview can be found in Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

4 Rarely are these events analyzed from the perspective of sound studies or participants’ experiences, but for an exception, on contemporary “manifs casserolades” (as they are known in French Canada), see Jonathan Sterne, “Quebec’s #casserolades: on participation, percussion and protest,” *Sounding Out! blog*, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2012/06/04/casserolades/>.

a community's status quo – they were, in the first half of the nineteenth century, more often turned towards national ends with a message about legitimate rule. They also became concentrated in urban spaces.

That was especially the case in France. In the 1820s, they were used by republicans to jeer at priests. Then, after the July Revolution of 1830, which led to the abdication of Charles X, republicans repeatedly made their opposition to new king, Louis Philippe, known through this customary ritual. Protestors directed it (often under cover of evening) towards all kinds of representatives of the new regime, including deputies, prefects, and mayors, in an effort to call attention to and then mock and denounce them for their political stance. For those *without* much power in cities and towns across France in an era of very restricted franchise, the *casserolade* became one way to show hostility towards those *with* power and what they stood for. Sometimes shading into real violence, sometimes staving it off as an outlet for collective hostilities, this noise-producing phenomenon turned, in the aftermath of the 1830s, into something like a repertoire of sound practices that could be, and have been, sporadically revived, in particular circumstances, as a part of modern urban political behavior, not least today.<sup>5</sup> From the musicologist and electronic composer Pierre Schaeffer's "Étude aux casseroles" or "Saucepan Study" of 1948 onward, variants have also remained a staple of the aesthetic avant-garde in its dedication to "noise" and even sonic discomfort over more socially-acceptable acceptable forms of "music."<sup>6</sup>

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All of which leaves us with a question: Why does sonic protest in general and the *casserolade* in particular still seem an effective tool in the complex modern world of democratic politics, not to mention new communications technologies? What should we make of the remarkable endurance of explosions of homemade and

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5 On the employment of charivaris as political tools in 19th-century France, see Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); and especially Emmanuel Fureix, "Le Charivari politique: un rite de surveillance civique dans les années 1830," in *L'entre-deux électoral: une autre histoire de la représentation politique en France, XIX-XXe siècle*, eds. Adeline Beaurepaire-Hernandez and Jérémie Guedj (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 53-70. Recent journalistic efforts to give the modern practice of the *casserolade* a backstory include: Helen Sullivan, "The Long History of Protesting with Pots and Pans," *The Guardian* (April 20, 2023); Théophile Larcher, "What are the origins of France's saucepan-banging protests?" *connexionfrance.com* (April 27, 2023); and Robert Zaretsky, "Why French Protesters are Banging Pots and Pans," *Wall Street Journal* (May 4, 2023).

6 Pierre Schaeffer's "Étude aux casseroles," combining the sounds of sauce pans, canal boats, harmonica, piano, bits of Balinese music, and the human voice, formed the final part of his composition "Cinq études de bruit," which premiered in Paris in 1949, introducing what would come to be known as "la musique concrète." On Schaeffer's aims, see his own explanation in *In Search of a Concrete Music* (California, 2012 [1952]).

raucous sound in urban settings such as what French people witnessed this past year?

A little more than a decade ago, I wrote an article for the *American Historical Review* (referenced in the title of this talk) called “On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear.”<sup>7</sup> In it, I attempted, first, to summarize the already burgeoning scholarship on the history and theory of sound and, second, to make a case for thinking about sound politically. What I argued was that democracy, in its modern rather than antique form, was from the beginning framed as requiring not just the people “giving voice” (as early forms of voting were known in English) or winning and exercising a “right to speak.” It also required ordinary people “getting a hearing” or a “right to be heard” – indeed, that politics was rethought as a mode of two-way communication with sound production and reception at its heart. Moreover, we could trace the trajectory of such claims all the way back to French revolutionaries at the end of the eighteenth century but also forward to nineteenth-century trans-Atlantic women’s suffrage advocates, twentieth-century Black activists in civil rights movements, and more. However, be that as it may, the history of sound-making and the lived experience of sound, on the one hand, and the history of political thought and especially free speech and the parameters of expression, on the other, were rarely ever connected by historians. So, I took the occasion of a special issue of the *American Historical Review* on “sensory history” to argue for some kind of rapprochement, not least at the level of the metaphor.

I stand by those conclusions today. I am also very happy to see much new work emerge on both the sound of politics and the politics of sound, though still too little of it is linked to discussions of freedom of speech.<sup>8</sup> But I would like to emphasize two fresher points in the remainder of this essay. One is that we also need to think about sound literally, just as much as we do visual representations, when thinking about politics; metaphor is not all. Mainly, I’ve come to see the story of modern politics as more complicated in sonic terms than I did back in 2011. For I would now argue that, in fact, modern democratic politics can be characterized by two distinct

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7 Sophia Rosenfeld, “On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (April 2011): 316–334.

8 A sampling of subsequent Anglophone work on sound and politics includes: Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); “Special Issue: Sound Politics: Critically Listening to Local and Global Soundscapes,” *Radical History Review*, no. 121 (January 2015); Christopher Cox, “The Politics of Sound: Flows, Codes, and Capture,” *Resonance* (2020): 225–243; and “Special Issue: The Politics of Sound: Intersections of Music, Discourse and Political Communication,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 18, no. 4 (2019). In recent years, political theorists, following often on the work of Jacques Rancière, have become more attentive to the sensory and aesthetic dimension of democratic politics, though they generally still privilege the visual over the aural; see, for example, Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

sonic trajectories, or stories, that could be said to have a dialectic relationship with each other. I would also like to propose that *both* stories need to be spelled out before we can really understand the endurance or, really, renaissance, of a seemingly atavistic practice like the casserolade today.

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One of these big stories about modern democratic politics since the eighteenth century, especially in the trans-Atlantic world, is actually about the gradual growth of quietness – and not by accident, but rather by design. I could just as well have begun this essay by writing about discipline and regulation aimed at the tamping down of popular sound as a key element of the maturation of democratic rulership and, indeed, of modernity more generally.

This did not happen overnight. Traditionally, of course, democratic politics was – especially by contrast to monarchy – an outdoor, street-level business, especially in cities and towns. Consequently, it was noisy. Think of the French revolutionaries and their festivals, both official and spontaneous, and their predilection for songs, for orations, for bells (tocsins), cannon booms, and gun salutes. Noise-making, especially when generated by representatives of the whole population – male and female, young and old, celebrated and modest in background alike – was encouraged in the 1790s because it was taken to be a concrete expression of public spiritedness or civic-minded fraternity. Immersive experience in sound making, including formal music, in public spaces in cities and towns was also supposed to generate a feeling of civic belonging because it stimulated the emotions, including love for others. The obvious point of comparison was to the church. Collective sound production helped make “the sovereign people” (once “the faithful”) into a reality.<sup>9</sup>

And even apart from revolutionary contexts, the culture of popular elections was, in the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, rife with sound, much of it spontaneously generated. Think no further than English or early American election culture in which crowds of electors and non-electors alike gathered on the hustings, with competing bands and other forms of merriment and insult hurling,

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9 On sound and the French Revolution, see Julien Tiersot, *Fêtes et chants de la Révolution française* (Paris: Hoche, 2015 [1908]); Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); and Laura Mason, *Singing the Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), among other works. Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), is especially attuned to what he calls sensory warfare and auditory terrorism during the American Revolution.

and the voting itself was often *vive voce* or at least accompanied by the reading of names out loud into poll books.<sup>10</sup> Democracy began as, in part, an aural event.

All that began to disappear, however, in the period between the 1870s and the First World War with the rise in Europe of the so-called secret ballot, a change that I consider a critical one for the study of both sound and democracy. Indeed, it could even be called a revolution in the precincts of the quiet. For where once people had voted by acclamation or yelled out results in the presence of a cross-section of the population as a whole, as I've just noted, now – in an effort to protect people from pressures coming from either above or below – they were to do the very opposite. They were to enter walled-off booths silently, to check boxes that represented their inner, unspoken preferences, and then to exit quickly so as to get back either to the private confines of the home or to the closed space of the workplace. All evidence suggests that people largely acquiesced in this new choreography too (which is why we don't consider it as more of a turning point in the historical record). The new ritual that was to mark one's duty as a citizen was, in a sense, already in tune with bourgeois and Victorian values that placed a premium on individual sentiments, sincerity, reasoned choice, and proper comportment, including avoiding disruptive forms of sound.<sup>11</sup>

So maybe we should not be surprised that when the first-ever experiment in instituting the secret ballot for a national election for a member of parliament took place in the good-sized northern England town of Pontefract in England in 1872, all anyone in the domestic or foreign press could remark upon was how quiet the whole business had become. The press dwelled mainly on what was absent: there were no bands, no yelling of results, no bell ringing, no revelry. The *Daily News* of London noted "a total absence of excitement and apparently of interest."<sup>12</sup> And for most commentators, this counted as a surprising but stunning success. In making voting so quiet, the secret ballot might even have helped make the act of voting respectable enough in bourgeois terms to be imaginable for British women as well as men. But the British example also isn't an outlier. Across much of the world, democratic political participation became – starting a full century *after* the age of the first democratic revolutions – gradually more individuated, more privatized

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10 On the traditional culture of voting, see Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832* (Oxford, 1989).

11 On Victorian election culture, see Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009) and Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 2010), esp. chapt. 3. See too chapter 4 of my forthcoming book where this subject is discussed in much greater detail: *The Age of Choice: A History of Freedom in Modern Life* (Princeton, 2025).

12 *The Daily News* (London) (August 16, 1872).



(even if conducted within public spaces), and quieter and quieter, in theory *and* in practice.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, all of this happened against a backdrop in which urban life in the North Atlantic and much of continental Europe was probably getting quieter in general, despite growing population density and new forms of public transportation. For people also gradually ceased to cry wares in the street, roads ceased to be built of cobblestone and traversed mainly by horses, church bells ceased to be a primary way to convey messages of all sorts, and there was less public singing or processing, religious or secular.<sup>14</sup> Elections might be seen as just one more aspect of public life whose volume ultimately declined with modernity, though they are rarely mentioned in historical accounts of urban sound.

Today, we still live with the consequences of this pattern. Not only has an even more minimalist conception of democratic life, in which voting has become *the* primary function of citizenship, seemingly prevailed. But voting itself—which now generally happens indoors with the windows closed, in private booths or even online, and with the results emerging later from the computer’s aggregation of millions of individual, silently determined preferences—has made “the sovereign people” even more of an abstraction than in the nineteenth century. Suffrage now lacks almost any sensory dimension at all. And despite some critiques—famously, the political theorist Benjamin Barber has compared voting in the modern world to using a toilet—this approach to the primary act of citizenship has been the gold standard for election behavior globally for almost one hundred years and a key element of the set of democratic requirements associated with human rights as well.<sup>15</sup>

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13 On the emergence of the secret ballot, see Malcolm Crook and Tom Crook, “The Advent of the Secret Ballot in Britain and France, 1789-1914: From Public Assembly to Private Compartment,” *History* xcii (2007): 449-471; and Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet, and Peter Pels, eds., *Cultures of Voting: The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). On the significance of various forms of voting in sonic terms, see Rosenfeld, “The Social Life of the Senses: A New Approach to Eighteenth-Century Politics and Public Life” in *The Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Anne C. Vila (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 21-39 and her forthcoming book on the history of choice (Princeton University Press, 2024).

14 For descriptions of the sounds common to early modern cities, see David Garrioch, “Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns,” *Urban History* 30, no. 1 (2003): 5-25, as well as Timothy Tackett, *The Glory and the Sorrow: A Parisian in His World in the Age of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 28, esp. on Paris. On the endurance of this urban soundscape but also its gradual quieting after the Revolution, see Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth Century Paris* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

15 Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 188.

However, that said, it is precisely this long-term trend towards the ideal of a quiet citizenry and an almost silent public culture that makes explosions of sound like the *casserolade* a) all the more noticeable as exceptions to the rule and b) a residual tool of popular protest and resistance. In fact, the *casserolade* has maintained two important and enduring functions in this regard. What are these functions?

One of the functions of this form of “sonic protest” is that it can be used deliberately to interrupt or drown out official speech, whether live or televised—and there is good evidence that *casserolades* were used in France this past spring just this way: to make Macron’s speeches unintelligible, as when he first tried to address the nation after signing the pension reform bill into law. Or at least that’s how he saw it. As he noted after an ill-fated trip to Alsace this past spring, “If we are in a society where we only listen to people who want to make noise to cover up words, then we won’t do very well.”<sup>16</sup>

In US law, this drowning out tactic is known as “the heckler’s veto,” and there are important arguments and counter-arguments about whether the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects freedom of speech in a particularly broad way in global terms, does or does not entail the right to speak so loudly that someone else can no longer be heard (though I should point out that the legal issue usually revolves around the noise-making of individuals more than the crowd as a whole). “The heckler’s veto” also now has an online counterpart in the concept of “flooding the zone” or producing so much *written* speech that it overwhelms the speech acts of everyone else.<sup>17</sup> The *casserolade* can certainly function as a way to impede some sound through the production of other, greater sound, all for political gain for the producer of the louder effects.

But there is also a second function in our era of quiet democracy for “sonic protest” like the *casserolade*: to create pure sound as an expression of presence (usually of men *and* women) in an era largely marked by absence, especially in urban spaces where people can mass. Macron has denounced this strategy too as retrograde, and in certain places it has become illegal. The French police have tried in some locations to forbid truly noisy gatherings under anti-terrorism laws, and in the Hérault, where Macron went in April, a prefectural decree was announced

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16 Larcher, “What are the origins of France’s saucepan-banging protests?”

17 In Black’s Law Dictionary, one meaning of the Heckler’s Veto is given as “an interruptive or disruptive act by a private person intending to prevent a speaker from being heard, such as shouting down the speaker, hurling personal insults, and carrying on loud side-conversations.” (e.g., *Harcz v. Boucher* (W.D. Mich. 2021)); see Eugene Volokh, “Heckler’s Veto: Two Meanings,” at <https://reason.com/volokh/2022/03/25/hecklers-veto-two-related-meanings/>. For a law school dean’s discussion of a recent case relating to the drowning out of the speech of an Israeli ambassador at the University of California-Irvine, see <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-feb-18-la-oe-chemerinsky18-2010feb18-story.html>. On flooding the zone as a new form of *de facto* online censorship, see Timothy Wu, “Is the First Amendment Obsolete?,” *Michigan Law Review* 117, no. 3 (2018).

ahead of time banning “dispositifs sonores ambulants” or portable sound devices.<sup>18</sup> Still, outdoor, political noise production is generally legally protected, unless truly a physical assault on others or otherwise endangering people, by the rights to assemble and to dissent, or to show visual, oral, or written disdain for fiat from on high, that is also a part of modern democratic politics. Acoustical agency and sonic disobedience, as others have labeled such acts, remain recognizable political tactics and forms of community justice, especially in the modern world of quiet that is generally taken for consent to the status quo.<sup>19</sup>

Let’s consider the recent *casserolades* one more time. Clearly, they depend upon inversions of expectations or the regular order of things. The tradition involves, as a starting point, literally bringing the stuff of the home, or private life, into the public sphere – that’s the first level of inversion. The ordinariness is the point. Then the *casserolade* involves using this stuff not to express individual choices quietly, as in the kind of purely symbolic giving of voice demanded in a modern election, but collectively, through pure, undifferentiable sound. That’s a second level of inversion. A *casserolade* creates a public where there hasn’t been one visible or audible before. Then it amplifies this public’s collective grievance through a form of communal performance designed to capture the attention of officials who have failed to listen, onlookers who may be otherwise indifferent or even hostile, and media (local and distant) too, who can be counted on to amplify it even further by reproducing it, whether in video clips, TV segments, or newspaper accounts. Participants make it literally impossible for others to remain deaf to their voice (and one of the risks in trying to suppress a *casserolade* is that the very act of suppression further publicizes both the cause and the public support behind it.) This is yet another level of inversion. A 2019 article in the Colombian press cites a male English teacher in Bogotá explaining why he is engaging in a *cacerolazo*: “We’re trying to show that we have a voice...The *cacerolazo* is just a call. People bring out whatever they can to make noise. If voices are not enough, then noise can be something that the government might listen to.”<sup>20</sup>

A few years later, a French female environmental activist participating in a *casserolade* says something quite similar to a reporter, also conceptualizing sound as

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18 On this law, see Paul Sugy, “De Louis-Philippe à Macron, deux siècles d’opposition politique à coups de casseroles,” *Le Figaro* (April 18, 2003).

19 On acoustical agency and noise as a tactic, see Tom Rice, “Sounds Inside: Prison, Prisoners, and Acoustical Agency,” *Sound Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 6-20; and Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018). On sonic disobedience, see Michael Nardone, “Skirmish at the Oasis: On Sonic Disobedience,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 26 (2016): 92-96. See too the classic work of Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

20 Tasha Sandoval, “A Journey Around the World with the History of the *Cacerolazo*,” *Bogotá Post*, citing Sebastián Rojas.

a political instrument: “In face of the arrogance and the contempt of Emmanuel Macron, we must multiply the means of making ourselves heard.”<sup>21</sup> Any expectation of quiet on the part of the public, or of knowing its place sonically and physically, is reversed.

What’s more, all of this sound-production takes place according to informal, community-generated rules and norms, often spread in informal, copycat fashion, rather than according to the rules of the state or the judiciary. In the recent French case, the protests announced to the world that Macron was literally acting like a king, not a democrat – and in the circumstances, the people would not be backing down and consenting but, rather, would show him, symbolically but noisily, that they will not be “silenced” any more than “hidden from view” (which was also a message of the *gilets jaunes* or yellow vests before them). On the contrary, the crowd would discredit anything Macron has to say (as undemocratic, corrupt, and the words of a usurper of the power of the people) and reassert, through sonic means, the proper balance of power. Indeed, by self-consciously adopting an antique and also historically avant-garde form of disruption and defiance to do so, the people would be tapping into a tradition of both sound and political life that pre-existed the current, unacceptable status quo.

What, then, of the *casserolade*’s relation to language? Importantly, the modern *casserolade* both supports and defies other forms of communication. On the one hand, it can, as we’ve seen, be combined with written or oral language, providing rhythmic reinforcement for chants and songs. But on the other, it is also transgressive of language and even music, replacing or even overwhelming other forms of sound-making as essentially irrelevant, including actual speech. Moreover, the sound itself can also exceed spatial, educational, and social boundaries and borders, blurring public and private, official and not, especially in the context of a city. The din of the *casserolade* becomes at once a tactic and also a meaningful statement about where power really lies.

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For all its inherent interest, this example of the French *casserolades* of 2023 is, however, introduced here mainly to illustrate some larger points. One is that in discussions of sound and sound studies, we cannot put politics to the side. Our political world is structured by and through sounds of different kinds and intensities, and sound is always related to hierarchies and power as well as various forms

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21 “Casserolades: ‘on va continuer à faire du bruit!’” (May 2, 2023), <https://reporterre.net/Casserolades-On-va-continuer-a-faire-du-bruit>.

of belonging. That's the first, general point. The more specific point is that as we discuss both the triumph and the crises of democracy in the contemporary world, we would do well to keep in mind the constant tension, or really dialectic, between an official politics that is sound-adverse at the level of the public and a protest politics that instrumentalizes sound both to speak *and* to be heard and, ultimately, to make the rule of the people more reality than abstraction. Finally, this is a dynamic that is always particularly acute where there are concentrations of people in tight spaces, which is to say, in urban centers.

Collective sound production can still, in a revolutionary context, mark the beginning of a new regime and even spark a kind of ecstatic joy. I mentioned, in a note in my 2011 *American Historical Review* article, the hundreds of thousands of Czech citizens who gathered in Wenceslas Square in Prague in November of 1989 and who participated in a mass shaking of keys, using the sound generated both to create a common feeling within the crowd and to show solidarity (or strength in numbers) to the outside just as communism came undone.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, during the darkest moments of Covid-19 in 2020-21, the banging of pots was used in a number of cities around the world, including New York, to signal that residents and neighbors were still connected to one another even as they were miserably isolated from one another in their apartments.

But in this moment, sonic protest has perhaps more often been used, as in the casserolades of France, to push back at the unresponsiveness to popular will of what we still call representative democracies (which is why the very same gesture of banging pots out of windows could also be a rebuke to official restrictions, such as public health measures established during the pandemic). The summer of 2023 also marked more than six months of protest in Israeli cities, to take another recent example, in which ordinary people came out daily to airports and intersections to blow whistles at hair-raising pitches, as well as beat drums, toot horns, and chant and sing the national anthem, in protest against the Netanyahu government's reform of the judiciary. And here too, though they did not succeed (at least yet) in reversing policy from on high any more than in France, Israeli citizens succeeded in another sense. Under banners reading simply "Democracy," they managed temporarily to disrupt the existing auditory regime (even as many protestors donned earplugs for these events); to create a new, sonically-connected community among strangers; and to send a loud message, with nothing more than cheap, improvised, and widely available instruments, in a country already known for employing sonic warfare in the past. Israeli protestors were at once fighting for democracy (in the

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22 Rosenfeld, "On Being Heard," 330.

sense of the rule of law) and enacting it, meaning engaging in a pure form of what political theorists call participatory democracy (possibly in violation of the law).

Again, as with all crowd actions, it is important to point out the dangerous as well as liberating potential of such gestures; sonic protest does not ensure that no one gets hurt. It is also important to note that even when they are protesting loudly, some people are “heard” more than others by virtue of their social position but also the auditory stereotypes that they already embody for listeners (this is true for Black protestors in the US, for example, who often go unheard until such moment as they are accused of being *too* noisily confrontational). And it is important to recognize that silence can be, and often is, successfully attached to various forms of resistance politics, just the way blank or empty signs have been in China, Russia, and the UK in recent years.<sup>23</sup>

And yet, if we want to understand our combustible political situation today, it is worth keeping an ear (as well as eye) on sonic actions – that is, conflict staged in urban spaces through noise as well as over noise. It is also important to do so against the backdrop of official, closed-door, apparently noiseless politics. In moments of democratic crisis, sensory politics are not atavistic at all.

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23 Jody Rosen, “White Noise,” *New York Times Magazine* (December 25, 2022).

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