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SONIC IDENTITIES / SHOUTING THE CITY

Vox Populi: The Soundscape of a Revolution
(Palermo 1848)

Gabriella Tigani Sava

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This article investigates the sound environment of the 1848 revolution in Sicily and how popular protest manifested itself through war songs, hymns, and satirical poems. The sources adopted are the memoirs of some main protagonists and eye-witnesses, the press of the age, government records, and popular literature, which enabled me to grasp the political-military and emotional aspects of a revolutionary experience that occurred in the island part of the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.¹

As the soundtrack of a movie underlines the most crucial moments with higher and more pressing tones, reserving the softer tones for the calmer scenes, the narratives related to a revolution can outline its parabola from the beginning to its final phase. Sounds such as that of artillery and the clanking of soldiers' weapons, the voices of the people from the streets, squares and barricades, or the cannon's shots fired by the ships or of the musketeers are 'vital elements' which form a semiotic system.² This is mainly the case when we speak of a revolution in an epoch when our modern means of communication (radio, television or internet) did not

1 For the reconstructions of the Sicilian Revolution of 1848, see P. Calvi, *Memorie storiche e critiche della rivoluzione siciliana* (Londra, 1851); F. Crispi, *Ultimi casi della rivoluzione siciliana esposti con documenti di un testimone oculare* (Torino, 1850; Capolago, 1851); Fardella di Torreaarsa, V., *Ricordi sulla rivoluzione siciliana degli anni 1848 e 1849* (Palermo, 1887); F. Ferrara, *Memorie su la rivoluzione siciliana del 1847 e 1848: Brani di una lettera da Palermo sul movimento avvenuto in quella città nella fine di novembre 1847* (Malta: Tonna, 1847); G. La Masa, *Documenti della rivoluzione siciliana del 1847-49 in rapporto all'Italia*, vols. 2 (Torino: Ferrero e Franco, 1850); C. Gemelli, *Storia della siciliana rivoluzione del 1848-49*, vols 2 (Bologna: Tipi Fava e Garagnani, 1867); G. La Farina, *Storia della siciliana rivoluzione del 1848-49*, vols 2 (Bologna: Tipi Fava e Garagnani, 1867).

2 D. Garrioch, 'Sounds of the City: the Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns', *Urban History* 30, no. 1 (2003), 5–25, 6.

yet exist and where the people's call to arms was made orally, preceded by the roll of the drums.

Regarding Italy, the now classic interpretation of 1848 by G. Candeloro proposed a Gramscian and non-apologetic reading, emphasising certain fundamental aspects, such as the economic crisis of the preceding years, the fracture between the bourgeoisie and the absolute monarchies, the failure of neo-Guelfism, with Pius IX's *Allocution* of 29 April and thus the break between the Catholic world and the patriotic front, the division between the two leading moderate and democratic forces.³ More up-to-date and recent culturalist is the reading offered by Enrico Francia, for whom the revolution of 1848 had a 'plural dimension', which succeeded in politicising the urban masses through the mythopoiesis of a political language spread through different circuits, such as newspapers, theatres, literary cafés, catechisms.⁴

The Sicilian revolt was the first of the great wave of popular uprisings that affected Europe but also had global repercussions (Brazil, Cuba, Spanish America, Australia, the Indian Ocean, and China).⁵ As for the characteristics of the revolution that broke out in Palermo on 12 January 1848, it was liberal, constitutional, and nationalist but had solid separatist connotations.

Discontent and disaffection towards the Bourbons were rife among all classes. The Neapolitan government pursued a policy contrary to the interests of the Sicilian nobility, which lost the privileges enjoyed before French rule. The loss of power within the Sicilian Parliament, increased taxes, and the severe economic crisis exacerbated by cholera riots in 1837 led to a break between the Neapolitan Court and the aristocratic classes. At the same time, social hardship was extreme among the popular classes, who also protested against the abolition of civic uses (namely, the legacy of the French hegemony that prevented the popular classes from taking advantage of grazing rights, making wood, using water in lands that in the past were owned by the state) and mandatory conscription.⁶ The emerging class of the urban bourgeoisie proved to be the most sensitive to the nationalist-patriotic discourse and the unitary solution, also for economic reasons, including maritime trade and exports.

3 G. Candeloro, *La Rivoluzione nazionale (1846-1849)*, (Milano, Feltrinelli, 1960).

4 E. Francia, *La rivoluzione del Risorgimento* (il Mulino: 2013). On the new aesthetic of politics, see G. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses, Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (Fertig, 1975).

5 C. Thibaud, *Les mondes de 1848. Au-delà du Printemps des peuples* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2023).

6 For a cultural reading of the cholera epidemic that struck the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the years 1836-1837, see M. Gabriella Tigani Sava, "Cholera Adunque is A Nervous Disease": The 1836-1837 Cholera Epidemic in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies: Reception, Resilience, and Revolution", F. Persson, M. Price, C. Recca (eds), *Resilience and Recovery at Royal Courts, 1200-1840*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

1.1 The Outbreak of the Revolution: The Starting Signal

The political and economic-social conditions of pre-unification Sicily after the French Decade (1800-1810) are summarised in the following passage by Luigi Settembrini, a man of letter and Sicilian patriot:

Nevertheless, no state in Europe is in a worse condition than ours, not even the Turks, who at least are barbarians, know that they have no laws [...] but in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, in the country that is called the garden of Europe, the people are dying of real hunger, they are in a worse condition than animals, the only law is caprice [...].⁷

The Mazzini patriot Giuseppe La Masa and the democrat Rosolino Pilo led the Sicilian Revolution, which broke out in Palermo on 12 January 1848. La Masa's memoirs contain a series of sound images that represent the high tension in the months preceding the outbreak of the revolution. In the early afternoon one day in late November 1847, in Via del Corso of the Sicilian capital, a tobacconist saw a large sheet outside his shop with an allegorical painting of a sad woman leaning on a column at the base of which a volcano was burning. The woman held a rifle, and a tricolour flag was near her. At the sight of that drawing, a crowd gathered around the old shop; when a policeman tried to detach the painting, a chorus of voices rose: 'Vile, infamous, leave that sheet not made for your hands.'⁸ The Bourbon policeman would have been overwhelmed by the fury of the people if a more compassionate voice had not risen to save his life. Meanwhile, the great crowd thundered with acclamations: 'Viva Pio IX, viva Palermo, Long live Sicily, long live Italy',⁹ which 'resounded loud and unanimous'.¹⁰ According to La Masa's account, the crowd was composed 'of [people of] every class', and his greatest joy was to hear the 'holy voices' coming from the lower classes, defined as 'shabby, ignorant, despised only by corruption and blasphemy and theft'.¹¹

The following representation of the beginnings of the anti-Bourbon war is taken from the chronicle of the Messina patriot Pasquale Calvi, a republican-oriented freemason Minister of the Interior of the revolutionary government, exiled to Malta

7 L. Settembrini, *La Protesta del popolo delle Due Sicilie* [1847] (Napoli: Morano, 1891), 3: ('[...] E pure nessuno stato d'Europa è in condizione peggiore della nostra, non eccettuati nemmeno i Turchi; i quali almeno son barbari, sanno che non han leggi [...] ma nel Regno delle Due Sicilie, nel paese che è detto giardino d'Europa, la gente muore di vera fame, è in istato peggiore delle bestie, sola legge è il capriccio [...]').

8 Masa, *Documenti*, 44: ('Vile, infame, lascia quel disegno non fatto per le tue mani').

9 Ibid., 45: ('Viva Pio IX, viva Palermo, lunga vita alla Sicilia, lunga vita all'Italia').

10 Ibid.: ('che risuonavano alte ed unanimi').

11 Ibid.: ('squallida, ignorante, spregiata, educata solo dalla corruzione e alla bestemmia e al furto').

after the surrender of Sicily in May 1849. The isolated cry of Pietro Amodeo calls the people to arms:

It was already eight o'clock in the morning when, in the end, a man armed with a musket appeared: he was Pietro Amodeo, who, having arrived in the middle of Toledo, out of desperation and seeing himself alone, or to give a sign to his companions, with whom he had convened, or to incite the people to arm themselves and follow him, he cried out, and set fire to his rifle in the air. A loud applause from all the people, men, women, and children, from the street, from the balconies, from the windows, answered that act [...].¹²

To my knowledge, no official anthem of the Sicilian patriots existed. However, some newspapers reported on compositions, such as songs, hymns and war poems, written on various occasions to arouse enthusiasm and instil courage in the patriots. S. Salomone-Marino wrote that the songs *La Palummedda Bianca* (The White Dove) and *Lu Tricolori* (The Tricolour) were widespread throughout the island.¹³

The day of the start of the Sicilian revolution is recalled in the song *Lu Dudici Jinnaru 1848* (January 12, 1848), which does not seem to reveal traces of municipalism within the Sicilian forces.¹⁴ Without a distinction between 'Cavalieri' (i.e. nobles) and 'gente di abbàsciu' (i.e. populace), the Sicilians fought together: 'Knights and common people with all my citizens united / Long live free Sicily and Don Ruggero [Ruggero Settimo]!¹⁵/death to the Bourbons with their assassins!¹⁶

On the same day evening, inside the city theatre of Syracuse, the people sang a hymn whose text was written by the deputy Salvatore Chindemi¹⁷ and set to music by maestro Vincenzo Moscuzza. Here is a passage: 'O Sicily, go to the last duel,

12 Calvi, *Memorie storiche*, 51: 'Eran già le otto del mattino quando finalmente apparve pel primo un uomo armato di moschetto era un Pietro Amodeo, che, giunto nel bel mezzo del Toledo, o per disperazione, nel vedersi solo, o, per darsi un segno ai compagni, coi quali si era indettato, o per incitare il popolo ad armarsi, e seguirlo, mandava fuori un grido, e dava fuoco in aria al suo fucile. Un fragoroso scoppio di applausi di tutti i circostanti, uomini, donne, fanciulli, dalla strada, dai balconi, dalle finestre, rispondea a quell'atto. [...]'

13 S. Salomone-Marino, *Leggende popolari siciliane in poesia raccolte ed annotate da Salvatore Marino* (Palermo: Pedone-Lauriel, 1880).

14 On Sicilian municipalism see, above all, E. Pontieri, *Il tramonto del baronaggio siciliano* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1943).

15 Ruggero Settimo (Palermo 1778-Malta 1863) was the head of the revolutionary and provisional government of 1848. In Malta in 1849, after the failure of the Sicilian revolution.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 326: ('Lu populu d'abbàsciu e cavalieri / cu tutti oniti li me citatini / Viva Sicilia libera e Don Ruggeri / morti a Borbuni cu li so' sassini!').

17 Salvatore Chindemi (Syracuse 1808-Palermo 1878) was a historian and patriot. His participation in the 1837 cholera riots cost him to exile in Malta. Back in Sicily in the 1840s, the Syracusan Patriotic Circle was involved in the riots of 1848. The failure of the latter brought Chindemi back into exile. He reached Belgium and later Piedmont, where he remained until 1860. He died in Palermo in 1878.

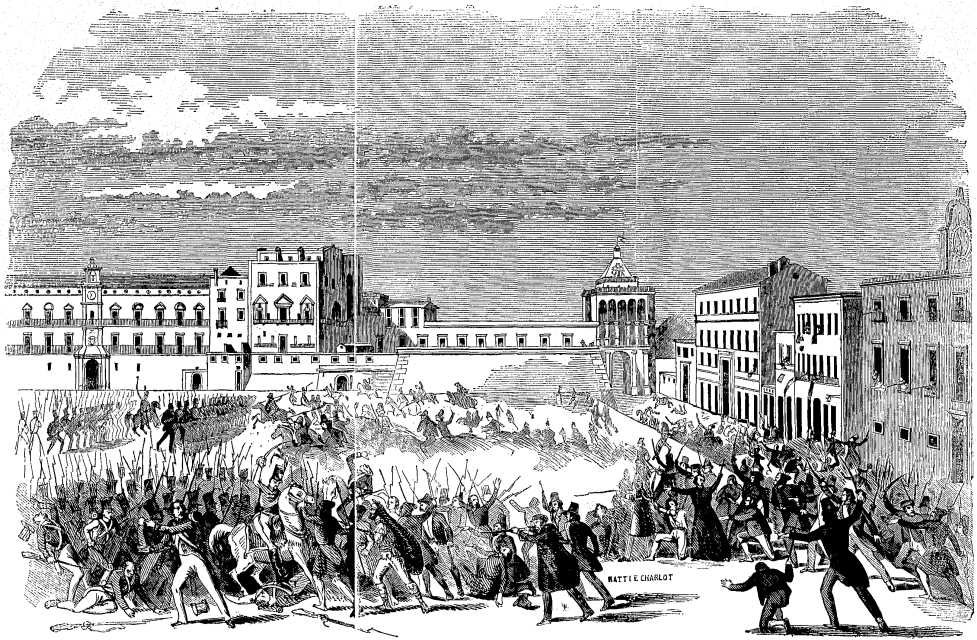


Fig. 1: Place of the Royal Palace in Palermo on January 12, 1848.

Il Mondo Illustrato Magazine, A. II, N. 4 (29 GENNAIO 1848), 49.

draw, hold your free sword / like Charles of Bourbons / in your destiny Europe will see / the blood of the wicked band will flow/ try again what a free heart can do/like dust in our worth/strength of us slaves will fall.'¹⁸

It was already eight o'clock in the morning when, in the end, a man armed with a musket appeared: he was Pietro Amodeo, who, having arrived in the middle of Toledo, out of desperation and seeing himself alone, or to give a sign to his companions, with whom he had convened, or to incite the people to arm themselves and follow him, he cried out, and set fire to his rifle in the air. A loud applause from all the people, men, women, and children, from the street, from the balconies, from the windows, answered that act [...]¹⁹

18 'Inno', *La Forbice*, 8 (1849), p. 32: ('Via Sicilia all'estrema tenzone / Snuda, impugna la libera spada, / Come Carlo sommerso il Borbone / Nel tuo fato l'Europa vedrà / Scorra il sangue dell'empia masnada, / Provi ancor, che può libero un core, / Come polvere al nostro valore / Degli schiavi la forza cadrà.').

19 P. Calvi, *Memorie storiche e critiche della rivoluzione siciliana del 1848*, p. 51: ('Eran già le otto del mattino quando finalmente apparve pel primo un uomo armato di moschetto era un Pietro Amodeo, che, giunto nel bel mezzo del Toledo, o per disperazione, nel vedersi solo, o, per darsi un segno ai compagni, coi quali si era indettato, o per incitare il popolo ad armarsi, e seguirlo, mandava fuori un grido, e dava fuoco in aria al suo fucile. Un fragoroso scoppio di applausi di tutti i circostanti, uomini, donne, fanciulli, dalla strada, dai balconi, dalle finestre, rispondea a quell'atto. [...]').

1.2 An urban and popular revolution: the sarcasm and irony of the Sicilian people

La Masa and Calvi's works describe how participation in the revolution concerned all sections of the population, even the minute people.²⁰ Seven months after the outbreak of the revolution, the *La Forbice* newspaper presented its readers with an inspiring article to the people of Messina, defining the Sicilian revolution as a 'people's war': 'Our war is a people's war, a war of religion, honour, and freedom [...] Sicilians, let us hurry! You are not fighting for the municipality but for the whole island.'²¹

On 25 March 1848, the revolutionary government proclaimed the independence of Sicily from the Bourbon government of Naples, to which the island had been united by a royal decree of 1816, resulting from the will of the International Assembly of Vienna. This latter had brought absolute monarchs back to the throne after the revolutionary wave of the Carbonari uprisings of 1820-21.

The feelings of anger and discontent of the Sicilian people towards the Bourbon dynasty also often found expression in satire. An example is offered by the fictitious heroic poem in 10 cantos, *La Ferdinandeide*, dedicated to the 'barbarian king' and published in instalments in the *La Forbice*, starting from 28 July 1848. Let us see an example: February 1849, when the Sicilian rebels did not accept King Ferdinand's proposal sent through a proclamation for a new statute and parliament on the island. In the ninth canto of the poem, King Ferdinand II is seated at a table with the queen, the ministers and Monsignor Cocle. The news arrives that Sicily has refused the request; the king, in desperation, tries to kill himself: 'To vent the bile that was devouring him / He bit both hands out of fury // And not finding on which to vent / He took a knife and wanted to slaughter himself;'.²² However, the father confessor tried to bring Ferdinand to his senses, making him a 'thousand crosses on his face' to dispel the 'infernal temptation'.²³

Due to widespread illiteracy among the popular classes, the use of dialect may also have helped to strengthen the local identity of a region in search of political independence.

Irony emerges from another example referring to the 'paternal love' of King Ferdinand and his dynasty towards Sicily: 'The signs of Bourbon affection are many

20 Popular participation is one of the pillars of the new historiography of the Italian Risorgimento, inaugurated by A.M. Banti and P. Ginsborg (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 22, Il Risorgimento* (Torino, Einaudi, 2007).

21 [Anonymous], in *La Forbice*, 74 (11 settembre 1848), p. 293: ('[...]': 'la nostra guerra è guerra popolare, guerra di religione di onore, di libertà [...]. Siciliani accorriamo! Non si combatte pel municipio, ma per l'isola intera.'

22 'Ferdinandeide', *La Forbice*, 58 (22 marzo 1849), pp. 231-32: ('Onde sfogar la bil che il divorava / Ambe le mani per furor si morse // E non trovando su di che sfogare / Prese un coltello e si volea scannare [...]).

23 Ibid.: ('facendogli mille croci sulla fronte' per dissipare 'l'infernale tentazione').

and still fresh in the minds of all Sicilian people. The grandfather [Ferdinand I] with the three feasts, gallows, flour; the grandson [Ferdinand II] with the three cops, hangmen, bombs, showed their love without mentioning the abolition of the constitution of 1812 or the cholera of 1837.²⁴

1.3 Towards the end of the Sicilian revolution

The Sicilian Revolution was an urban war fought in the streets, squares and city quarters of Palermo, Catania, Messina, Syracuse, and other minor cities. Some sounds (of the bells, of the shots of the cannons and rifles, or screams) constituted an effective system of alarm and defence for the peasants since they, living isolated, could not be aware of the events that happened, often very quickly, in cities: 'At night in the countryside cannon shots, shouts and bells ringing: continuous alarm.'²⁵

In September 1848, Messina was struck by a siege led by the Bourbon Army. The people felt terrible sounds under the hail of bombs, balls, and grenades. Despite this, with 'voices of jubilation, enthusiasm and passionate fervour, people waved white sheets, rang bells and shouted joyful and festive: 'long live Mary, long live Freedom, long live Italy [...].'²⁶ Messina declared surrender in September of the same year, but the war for independence continued in other cities, supported by revolutionary propaganda. The *La Fenice* journal published a hymn that was sung in Via Toledo in Palermo on 25 March 1849 to encourage unity without social divisions, appealing to the hatred shared by the people towards King Ferdinand II: 'We all moved to the sound of one voice, we are all enemies of the king.'²⁷

In the first months of 1849, Catania also capitulated. A few months later, on 15 May 1849, the royal soldiers headed for Palermo: the Neapolitan forces that 'arrived around 10.000' and gradually occupied the forts, the barracks [...]. They also blocked the coast.²⁸ The Sicilian 'glorious revolution' was over: 'and on a British ship was treated / The peace of the war already passed'.²⁹

24 'Il Proclama di re Ferdinando', *La Forbice*, 56 (19 marzo 1849), 222: ('I segni dell'affetto borbonico sono molteplici e tuttora freschi nella mente di tutta la Sicilia. Il nonno con le tre F, feste, forche, farina, il nipote con le tre B, Birri, Boja, Bombe manifestarono il loro affetto senza parlare nè della tolta costituzione del 1813 nè nel colera del 1837').

25 *La Forbice*, 106 (Palermo, 31 ottobre 1848), 421: ('Di notte in campagna fucilate, grida e suoni di campane improvviso; allarme continuo').

26 C. Gemelli, *Storia della siciliana rivoluzione del 1848-49*, vol 1, 243: ('Viva Maria, viva la Libertà, viva l'Italia [...]').

27 'Inno popolare', *La Forbice*, 65 (30 marzo 1849), 259: ('A na vuci ni mossimu tutti / Simu tutti nemici di re').

28 G. Dickinson, 'Diario della rivoluzione siciliana dal 9 gennaio 1848 al 2 giugno 1849', in *Memorie della rivoluzione siciliana dell'anno MDCCCXLVIII* (Palermo: Tip. cooperativa fra gli operai, 1898), 2-275 (here 260).

29 *Riassuntu pueticu di la Rivuluzioni di Palermu successa li 12 jinnaru 1848 cuntinuannu sinu a lu 1860: poesia di Antuninu Marotta* (Palermo: Stamperia di F. Spampinatu, 1860), 47: ('E supra un lignu 'nglisi fu trattata / La paci di la guerra già passata.').

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