Writing in 1612, the English anatomist Helkiah Crooke offered his readers a complex, if unoriginal, account of human hearing as a function of the ear and the brain. Sound, he explained, is produced far from its destination, even when generated by the human voice. Oscillations of the air, resulting from “the percussion of two hard and solide bodyes,” must proceed from their initial source across what are often great distances to the opening of the ear. From there, they travel all the way down through the many parts of the middle and inner ear until they finally hit the auditory nerve, the true organ of hearing. Then there is still one final step. These initial impulses we call sound must be conveyed to the common sense, which acts as “Censor and Judge” because its job is to regulate the raw sensations produced by all the external senses. In the “privy-chamber of the soule,” as Crooke also pegged the space of common sense within the mind, the many bits of sound that greet us as we make our way through life are both coordinated with data acquired by other senses and sorted into particular notions worthy of human attention.1

Over the next hundred or more years, this essentially Aristotelian explanatory model slowly fell out of favor.2 The business of hearing was reconceptualized, and the common sense, as a faculty of perception, eventually disappeared from depictions of the human brain altogether. But before we too hastily cast Crooke and his contemporaries into the historical dustbin, we should consider the long shadow cast

1 Helkiah Crooke, Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man. Together with the Controversies Thereto Belonging (London, 1615). The key passages on the ear’s structure and “the manner of hearing” are on 573–612 and 691–698. The trope of the common sense as censor and judge is cribbed from André Du Laurens’s Opera Anatomica of 1595 and reappears frequently in both French and English accounts of the inner senses during the seventeenth century.

over the modern Western world by such accounts of the voice, the ear, and the common sense. One way to think about them would be to build upon the claims of the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière regarding the effects of various “distributions of the sensible,” or perceptual boundaries, on the dominant political order, and to probe the connection between the auditory and political imaginations.¹ Crooke’s epistemology, after all, depended upon a recurring set of political metaphors in which the brain, or “Prince and King of all the rest,” is surrounded by a “royall Court” complete with “guard[s] of outward Sences,” “Councellors of state,” and even “spies” and “censors.”² The emergence of modern democratic political culture, with its foundational commitment to the idea of freedom of speech, depended upon a transfer of metaphors in the other direction: the appropriation of a particular and already politicized understanding of the work of the senses, and especially audition, to conceptualize, put into action, and ultimately delimit a new set of power relations.

Exploring the subfield that can be described as the history of hearing—its foundational assumptions, key moments, chief arguments, and potential contribution to the discipline of history more generally—is essential to making sense of this claim. Using as an example the seeming cacophony that followed the constitutional protection of free speech at the onset of the French Revolution of 1789, we can then begin to consider what it might mean to read the coming of modern democratic politics in terms that look back to Crooke’s integrative metaphors for the ear and the common sense but also forward to Rancière’s sensual political theory. The right to speak freely has an established history. Should not the right to hear and be heard have a history, too?

Con tempor ary histories of sound and hearing often open with a lament that this subject matter has too long been ignored in favor of studies of the written word or of vision. But it is hard to take this complaint seriously anymore. Over the last two decades, auditory history has entered the discipline with a vengeance—at the intersection of the history of music, the body, technology, medicine, disability, the environment, and everyday life.

A few basic premises, many of them borrowed from cultural anthropology, provide a shared conceptual platform for these studies.⁵ First, and most basically, it is

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¹ In The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2004; orig. French ed. 2000), Jacques Rancière proposes that the tacit boundaries around not only what is sayable but also what is audible at any moment in time determine to a significant degree the dominant or “explicit” political order. For a related argument about the ordering of the senses and the ordering of the political and legal sphere, see Lionel Bently and Leo Flynn, eds., Law and the Senses: Sensational Jurisprudence (London, 1996).

² Crooke, Mikrokosmographia, 453, 432. The representation of the mind as an ideal state or community, with different faculties serving different administrative functions, goes back to Plato’s Republic.

³ On the anthropology of the senses in general, see Paul Stoller, The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology (Philadelphia, 1989); Constance Classen, Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures (New York, 1993); Michael Taussig, Mimasis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses (New York, 1993); C. Nadia Seremetakis, The Senses Still: Memory and Perception as Material Culture in Modernity (Chicago, 1994); Michel Serres, Les cinq sens (Paris, 1999); Kathryn Linn Geurts, Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community (Berkeley, Calif., 2002); and David Howes, Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory (Ann Arbor, Mich.,

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On Being Heard
axiomatic that every culture produces different sounds, both natural and manufactured, musical and otherwise. These sounds, considered together, form what is variously referred to as an “auditory landscape,” “soundscape,” or “sonic environment” specific to that culture.6 Second, these sounds—whether as initially novel and unanticipated as a steam engine moving across the nineteenth-century countryside or as universally recognizable as a crying baby—are perceived, hierarchized, regulated, manipulated, and endowed with meaning differently in different places and at different times. This results in varied “regime[s] of listening,” which is to say different forms of auditory experience or modes of auditory attention dependent not only on the sounds themselves but also on the specific interpreters and their settings.7 Finally, the very act of hearing and remembering sound can be imagined in a variety of ways. Doctors trying to understand the functioning of the ear, composers arranging sounds in novel configurations, philosophers or theologians exploring the human subject, and ordinary people making sense of their own sound-based activities are likely to come to different conclusions about how hearing happens or what listening is. Such conceptions also shift across time and space. This variety in both perception and interpretation exists not because our bodies can change overnight; almost all scholars acknowledge the role of certain biological constants—namely, the voice and the ear—in this story. But they also insist that basic auditory perception, as well as the kind of hearing we call active listening, is historically variable; it depends on incidental and deliberate changes in technology, the environment, aesthetics, and social relations and is also generative of those changes. Hearing as a form of sense perception is, in this literature, a cultural effect as much as a physiological one. Even as simple a question as what rises to the level of music or sinks to the level of noise turns out to be largely socially and ideologically determined, a question of prevailing standards of taste and toleration as well as habits of attention.

For historians, the project of reconstituting the sounds of the past and their reception and uses poses obvious difficulties. We are forced to confront the poverty of the language that we possess for talking about sound.8 We must also face the poverty of our evidence, a problem that is particularly acute—given not only the fleeting experience of hearing but also the fugitive quality of sound—for the study of eras prior to the invention of recording technology. Even today, as Douglas Kahn


points out, “[sound’s] life is too brief and too ephemeral to . . . occupy the tangible duration favored by methods of research.” But innovative historians have, in recent years, turned to sources ranging from the built environment to the punctuation of texts to uncover clues to the experience of audition in the past. What scholars agree upon is that these traces, considered collectively, provide a window onto their subjects’ passions, social relations, means of establishing and conveying knowledge, conceptions of time and space, distribution and marking of power, even senses of body and self. They are, as the influential historian of the senses Alain Corbin has repeatedly argued, vital keys to discovering how people in other eras navigated their world both practically and imaginatively.

In fact, so many distinct historical studies involving sound, audition, or auditory knowledge now exist that we can begin to construct something like a grand narrative for the ear, at least for Western Europe and North America. Even leaving aside the development of what has been formally labeled “music,” there is a full account of Western modernity here, beginning in the era of Helkiah Crooke. Let us sketch its broad contours.

Despite perennial Christian fears of the seductions of the eye, the old Aristotelian hierarchy of the senses, with sight at the top, survived the Reformation intact. But as Crooke himself suggests, early modern Western subjects generally conceived of the body’s senses in interconnected, networked terms. And it was widely accepted that all five external senses played vital, complementary roles in human existence.


10 Bruce R. Smith offers a fascinating account of the range of sources one might use for reconstructing the history of hearing, from maps and building design, to period musical notation, to graphic signs and typefaces within literary texts; Smith, “Listening to the Wild Blue Yonder: The Challenges of Acoustic Ecology,” in Erlmann, Hearing Cultures, 21–41. For examples of historical applications of the latter type of source, see Roger Chartier, Publishing Drama in Early Modern Europe (London, 1999); and Jay Fliegelman, Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance (Stanford, Calif., 1993).


12 The closest to this project to date is Robert Jütte’s necessarily schematic but ambitious A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace, trans. James Lynn (Cambridge, 2005; orig. German ed. 2000), in which the history of hearing figures prominently. See too Mark M. Smith, Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History (Berkeley, Calif., 2007), 41–58; as well as his edited volume Hearing History: A Reader (Athens, Ga., 2004), though it does not draw lines between the various (primarily American) case studies. Veit Erlmann, Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality (New York, 2010), appeared too late to be incorporated into this account.


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Not surprisingly in a primarily non-literate world, audition was deemed particularly important to the transmission of information, whether metaphysical or mundane. As Crooke explained it, “The use of the Sense of Hearing according to Aristotle . . . is to acquire or get knowledge or wisedome.” Hearing was also, in both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions, considered essential to faith. Religious instruction and access to divine truth, that vital prerequisite for salvation, were thought to depend upon the ear (which goes a long way toward explaining the early clerical preoccupation with inventing alternative means to communicate with the deaf). Attention to sound was even considered useful in the cure of diseases. Moreover, daily life in early modern Europe depended upon acute attention to a variety of sonic phenomena, from gossip in the marketplace to the regular pealing of bells.

Taking such examples into account, the great French historian Lucien Febvre proposed in the 1940s that early modern French people had experienced and imagined the world to a much greater degree at the level of sound (not to mention taste and touch) than modern people do. To avoid anachronistic readings of the distant past, historians had to recognize this difference. Then, in Febvre’s telling, they had to re-quicken their ears.

Febvre’s claim and counsel have both been enthusiastically adopted in recent years by historians of early modern Europe and its colonial outposts. According to a host of specialized studies, prior to the late eighteenth century, French people, whether rural or urban, were attuned to myriad now-forgotten sounds, including charivaris, Te Deums, and a host of noises from the street, from people hawking goods to animals being slaughtered in the open. Renaissance Londoners similarly formed what literary critic Bruce Smith calls shifting “acoustic communities” organized around various “soundmarks,” including parish bells, the speech of different nationalities, horse and foot traffic, and the sounds of trades being practiced or products being sold. And these commonplace sounds took on heightened significance—relevancies we have now largely lost—as they met early modern ears. North American colonists, for example, gave portentous meanings to the sound of thunder, as well as to the unfathomable speech of native peoples. They also manifested an intense desire to regulate who could say what to whom—and to guard against what they categorized as dangerous forms of “noise.”

14 Crooke, Mikrokosmographia, 612.
18 See, for example, Richard Cullen Rath, How Early America Sounded (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003), which opens with the blunt statement “Sound was more important to early Americans than it is to you” (ix).
19 On the auditory landscape of early modern France, the key book is Jean-Pierre Gutton, Bruit et sons dans notre histoire: Essai sur la reconstitution du paysage sonore (Paris, 2000). On the noises of the street in France from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, see also Claude Gauvard and Altan
But what of modernity? At some specific moment—often the late seventeenth century, as an older narrative focused on Europe would have it—the story of audition ostensibly took a new turn. Partly as a result of Descartes’ challenge to Aristotelian understandings of cognition, the idea of a common sense faculty, or any other internal sense sorting through a host of random sense impressions and arriving at firm judgments, began to disappear from both psychology and studies of human physiology.20 At the same time, according to this schema, the external senses became increasingly conceptually distinguished from one another. In Michel Foucault’s terms, “The eye was thenceforth destined to see and only to see, the ear to hear and only to hear.”21 Moreover, in their eternal competition, hearing was both theoretically and practically denigrated, in favor of the growing ascendancy of vision.

Scholars have come up with a host of explanations for this perceived change. The rise of literacy and print culture disconnected speech from reading and writing—to the advantage of the visual. That which was oral was increasingly tagged as untrustworthy (as in the legal category “hearsay”) or backward and pre-rational.22 Concurrently, in the realm of science, observation became the preferred path to sure knowledge. The empiricism of the eye replaced the ostensibly more subjective, more spiritual, and, ultimately, more primal ear.23 What is more, the civilizing impulse, so


20 On the effects of Cartesianism on understandings of the workings of the senses, including the idea of a common sense, see especially Daniel Heller-Roazen, The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation (New York, 2007), 164–169.


22 According to Bernard J. Hibbitts, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, oral tradition came to play less and less of a role in English law governing customary property rights. At the same time, “hearsay evidence”—literally, evidence consisting in what the witness has heard others say about facts of which the witness him- or herself has no original knowledge—was increasingly refused in legal proceedings, and slander was marginalized as a legitimate cause of legal action. Hibbitts, “Making Sense of Metaphors: Visuality, Aurality, and the Reconfiguration of American Legal Discourse,” Cardoza Law Review 16, no. 2 (1994): 262. On the status of hearing in modern legal proceedings, see Marianne Constable, Just Silences: The Limits and Possibilities of Modern Law (Princeton, N.J., 2005), esp. 171–173.

23 On the centrality of vision to empiricism, see Barbara M. Benedict, Curiosity: A Cultural History
famously identified by Norbert Elias as a key component of the rise of court society and the expanded state, worked against sound as well. Both at the level of the individual, who felt new pressure to control the outward manifestations of emotions and bodily habits, and at the level of polite social interaction, where new, more stringent codes of conversation and conduct held sway, sonic discretion became attached to social distinction. Keeping quiet emerged as a way of displaying good manners. The age of loud burping and guffawing familiar to us from Dutch genre painting had come to an end, at least for the upper classes.24

The Enlightenment can be understood both as a product of these multiple shifts in the direction of the visual and as the cause of further erosion in the prestige of hearing. As commentators in the field like to note, the term “Enlightenment,” like Aufklärung, l’Illuminismo, or les Lumieres, has a visual rather than aural metaphor at its core.25 The subsequent expansion of capitalism and consumer culture, with its emphasis on spectacle and visual dazzle, can be said to have simply finished the job that the philosophes began: it relegated hearing to an inferior cultural rung.26 One line of inquiry thus still takes it as historians’ charge to explain “how to understand the nature, causes, and timing of the shift from sound toward vision” in the modern era.27 This is, of course, the historical counterpart to the long insistence, on the part of critics in particular, that the last two centuries are distinguished as a visual age, a world that revolves around techniques of observation, surveillance, commodification, and spectacularization.

Yet when it comes to print culture, or science, or commerce, or even the development of the modern state, many historians of North America and Western Europe now tell a considerably more complicated story, one marked by the persistence of all kinds of oral practices alongside the expansion of text.28 Similarly, a
new generation of historians now refuses to accept the idea that sound and its chief receptacle, the ear, became less important with the passage of time, or even Marx’s famous claim that all the senses ended up alienated under industrial capitalism. Rather, it is argued that as the Western soundscape changed under pressure from other forces, the uses of hearing, the meaning invested in sound, modes of aural attention, and conflict over the noises of everyday life all evolved accordingly.

The twin processes of industrialization and urbanization clearly played a critical role. Between the late eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, city dwellers perhaps began to pay less attention to the sounds of nature. But new, typically endogenous or manmade noises, many of them mechanical, began to fill the sonic void. Steam engines, mechanical looms, streetcars: their auditory effects permeated the rural landscape, the interior of the factory, and, especially, the modern city street. At the same time, attitudes toward these unfamiliar sounds—indeed, toward all heard sounds—shifted as they entered private spaces, including that new form of dwelling, the densely populated modern apartment house. There, inescapable noise increasingly registered as a source of auditory distress (though John Picker warns us that the sounds in question were not always industrial, as in the case of the Italian organ-grinders, who were thought to constitute a key street noise problem in mid-nineteenth-century London). Hearing too much of the outside world, including the crowd in the street, challenged the idea of the home as a sanctuary from the public sphere. And as uninvited sound began to be perceived as disruptive, especially inside elite settings, noise levels and kinds of noise became new ways of distinguishing among classes, races, ages, religions, sexes, and occupational groups.

Silence consequently took on new contours, too. It became a commodity, a form of luxury available only at the right price. It also became the end result of the new discipline of the senses associated with prisons, factories, and especially schools, although it could simultaneously signal, as James Johnson points out, the kind of attentive listening that became characteristic of the nineteenth-century concert audience. What is more, certain kinds of sounds, bells among them, remained inti-
mately tied to the emotional life of communities insofar as they triggered memories and served as markers of family, faith, locality, region, or even nation. Indeed, metropolitan and colonial governments alike soon discovered that the business of listening could be manipulated to great effect for purposes ranging from the development of national belonging and cultural dominance to eavesdropping and waging war. Think, for example, of the production of imperial pageantry as a form of “sonic spectacle” in turn-of-the-century British India. Not surprisingly, then, historians routinely stress the ways in which what should be heard—and even what could legitimately be heard by the human ear—became contested in the aftermath of the revolutionary era. Hearing turned into a new kind of battleground.

Then a second wave of technological innovation, this time centered on the amplification and extension of sense experience for the purposes of enhanced communication, altered the nature of auditory perception once again. The rise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of mechanically reproduced sound, with its myriad potential applications in politics, the arts, and everyday life alike, had a transformative effect on both hearing and active listening. In a 2003 study titled The Audible Past, Jonathan Sterne rightly issues a warning against a kind of technological determinism that fails to recognize how earlier changes in listening practices and even understandings of the ear and hearing shaped the emergence of sound repro-

_Naked Heart_ (New York, 1995), 11–35. On the growth of attentive musical listening, see Matthew Riley, _Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment: Attention, Wonder and Astonishment_ (Aldershot, 2004). Garrioch sees connections between the development in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries of a distinct elite, urban musical culture, on the one hand, and official and unofficial attacks on street music and other noisy public activities, on the other; “Sounds of the City,” 24–25.


35 See, for example, Corbin, _Village Bells_; Smith, _Listening to Nineteenth-Century America_; and Schmidt, _Hearing Things_.

duction technology. But it also remains indisputable that new, ultimately revolu-

tionary kinds of listening (as well as new kinds of auditory stimuli) emerged partly

as effects of the telephone, the phonograph and gramophone, the radio, the public

address system, the microphone, the sound film, the telegraph, and the loudspeaker.

One result was the growth of acousmatic listening, that is, the experience of listening
to sounds apart from their original, visible source. Amplification and sound repro-
duction made it possible for sound to be perceived in a pure or, one might equally

say, highly commodified form. Another effect was the spread of ambient listening

as such commodified forms of music were increasingly pumped into the spaces of
daily life and became the barely noticeable but ubiquitous background to a range of
ordinary leisure-time and workplace activities. The passive, unavoidable apprehen-
sion of recorded music became the norm everywhere, from riding in the elevator,
to visiting the dentist, to, indeed, shopping for sound recordings.

At various moments in the last 150 years, these new communicative technologies
provoked positively utopian aspirations centered upon the effects of new forms of
hearing. Telephones, for example, promised to create intimacy without spatial con-
straints, uniting communities through the exchange of sound alone. (Cell phones
are still marketed on this basis today.) Similarly, fascists, socialists, and capitalists
alike fixed on collective radio listening as an especially efficacious form of mass
persuasion and education. These audible technologies were also often spontane-
ously incorporated into more traditional forms of street life and celebration. But
new kinds of listening, as well as new kinds of sound, also produced novel anxieties,
including medical ones. Intensely amplified popular music raised the specter of both
nervous disorders and real hearing loss. Moreover, the same technology that prom-
ised to create new forms of community also introduced the possibility of ever greater
withdrawal into private soundworlds, a worry that has resurfaced in recent years in
discussions of the Walkman and now the iPod. Even older notions of the self were
seemingly thrown into question by the changing effects of audition on individuals’

37 Sterne, The Audible Past. Szendy, in Listen, makes a similar point about the role of intellectual
property law in shaping both hearing and hearing technologies.

38 On these categories, see the essays in Part II, “Modes of Listening,” in Cox and Warner, Audio
Culture. The article by Pierre Schaeffer on acousmatic listening (76–81) is particularly interesting. For
a historical perspective on ambient listening, see Tim J. Anderson, Making Easy Listening: Material
Culture and Postwar American Recording (Minneapolis, 2006).

39 See Claude S. Fischer, America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940 (Berkeley, Calif.,
1992); as well as Steven Connor’s more wide-ranging Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism
(Oxford, 2000).

40 For a small sampling of the literature on radio and politics and the mass distribution of auditory
propaganda in the twentieth century, see Douglas B. Craig, Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture
in the United States, 1920–1940 (Baltimore, 2000); Peter Jelavich, Berlin Alexanderplatz: Radio, Film, and
the Death of Weimar Culture (Berkeley, Calif., 2006); Gianni Isola, Abbassa la tua radio per favore: Storia
dell’ascolto radiofonico nell’Italia fascista (Scandicci, 1990); Inge Marssolek and Adelheid von Saldern,
ed., Radio im Nationalsozialismus: Zwischen Lenkung und Ablenkung (Tübingen, 1998); and Klaus Ar-

nold and Christoph Classen, eds., Zwischen Pop und Propaganda: Radio in der DDR (Berlin, 2004). There
is also a growing literature on the different politics of mass listening in postcolonial contexts; see, for
example, Charles Hirschkind, The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics
(New York, 2006), which focuses on contemporary Cairo.

41 See Adrian Rifkin, Street Noises: Parisian Pleasure, 1900–40 (Manchester, 1993); and Rosemary
Wakeman, “Street Noises: Celebrating the Liberation of Paris in Music and Dance,” in Alexander
Cowan and Jill Steward, eds., The City and the Senses: Urban Culture since 1500 (Aldershot, 2007),
219–237.
lives and bodies. As early as 1888, the German Association of Public Hygiene passed a resolution calling for stronger measures to protect individuals’ senses of smell and hearing from assault. The “din” of modern life was on its way to becoming oppressive noise pollution. By the early twentieth century, one can speak of one final effect of the advent of altered experiences of hearing: the rise of new kinds of professionals whose job was to use urban planning techniques, architectural acoustic design, behavioral modification, and even the law to regulate or contain unwanted sound. These experts should be seen as participants in an ongoing struggle to distinguish between what constitutes dissonance and what might be considered a beneficial and beneficial use of sound.

This story is mirrored quite directly by the changing history of music and its production and reception, not least in the course of the twentieth century. The fabled tale of the rise of the cultural avant-garde over the last hundred years similarly depends upon the breakdown of the performer and audience dichotomy; a refusal to distinguish neatly among music, sound, or even noise; a love/hate relationship with new technology; and a rejection of longstanding distinctions between the different arenas of the different senses. There are contemporary cultural critics who argue forcefully that the present moment marks only the newest stage in the modern dominance of the visual. But the emergence of ever-newer media, including those that offer the prospect of sensory recombination, and the related explosion of hybrid forms of art and music, including so-called “sound art,” easily spawn counterarguments. If nothing else, the transitional auditory landscape in which we currently reside should stimulate us to keep rethinking the broad outlines of this narrative of the sonic past—and the role of the ear and hearing within history more generally.

Let us, then, consider one way that this schematic story might be extended and potentially enhanced. Recall once again Helkiah Crooke and his vision of the brain...
as a palace, the ear as a royal guard, and the common sense as a judge and censor. In many recent studies of hearing’s history, politics functions largely as a backdrop, one of a series of abstract forces that shape the conditions of sound reception either incidentally or as a result of conscious manipulation by those in power. But as Crooke’s metaphors remind us, politics is always, in large part, inseparable from communication. And communication is necessarily bound up with power relations. Taking auditory and perceptual metaphors seriously—that is, reading them in conjunction with an actual and ever-changing “heard world”—offers the possibility of making the history of efforts to be heard or to get a hearing a fundamental aspect of the story of the emergence of modern political culture. Moreover, it moves us one step closer to bringing the emergent field of sensory history into direct contact with the history of politics.

Our test case is one of the turning points in the general narrative of modernity. That is the legal protection of speech—the physiological counterpart to hearing—which accompanied the start of the French Revolution. The abandonment of pre-publication censorship in summer 1788, formalized in the second article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789 as a right to “the free communication of thoughts,” has, despite its limitations and subsequent reversals, long been celebrated in hindsight as a vital step toward the establishment of self- or democratic governance. It has come to represent the turn toward public judgment and opinion as a foundation for law-making. It has also been seen to mark the culmination of the civil libertarian strain of the Enlightenment and the triumph of the idea of the reasonableness of the individual subject.

In its moment, though, the dismantling of the royal censorship apparatus was experienced quite differently: as a visceral explosion of human-produced sound. Contemporaries remarked immediately and repeatedly on the outpouring of voices, both famous and obscure, that crowded an expanding public sphere in the form of gossip, speeches, orations, oaths, debates, and songs, as well as printed matter such as newspapers, handbills, posters, and pamphlets of every sort. “Everyone is talking,” reported one astonished observer after a trip to the newly opened Palais Royal in

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48 On how metaphors shape and constrain our perceptions of the world, the classic text is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago, 1980). On the particular significance of bodily and sense experience to figurative language, see Mark Johnson, The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason (Chicago, 1987). Political and legal language, with its focus on communication, makes especially heavy use of such metaphors; see Hibbitts, “Making Sense of Metaphors,” and, as a historical example, Antoine de Baecque, The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770–1800, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, Calif., 1997; orig. French ed. 1993). Less attention has been paid to the fact that the metaphors used to describe sense experience are necessarily derived from other areas of experience, including forms of governance and commerce, as in the case of Crooke and many of his ancient predecessors. My interest is in the figurative as well as actual relationship between these two spheres, the sensual and the political. And I follow Michael Walzer in assuming that the evolution of dominant metaphors is connected to changes both in what is to be explained and in what referents are available for use, even if (as Corbin reminds us) linguistic formulas related to the senses typically stay in place well after certain practices or even knowledge come to an end. See Walzer, The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

the spring of 1789.\footnote{Marquis de Ferrière, Correspondance inédite (1789, 1790, 1791), quoted in Paul Friedland, Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca, N.Y., 2002), 127.} The same seemed to be the case whether one turned up at cafés, on street corners, in living rooms, or at marketplaces across the nation. This avalanche of self-expression, proponents suggested, was a public riposte to centuries of imposed silence and secrecy, qualities that soon became potent symbols of a despotic past.\footnote{On the effects of the deregulation of speech and the press in terms of increased public expression at the start of the Revolution, see Raymonde Monnier, L'espace public démocratique: Essai sur l'opinion à Paris de la Révolution au Directoire (Paris, 1994).} But here is where we need to turn to questions of reception and consumption as well as production, which is to say, the history of listening as well as speaking.\footnote{There is not much free-speech literature that takes up the role of the attentive listener, the other half of the speaking-listening equation, but the following are suggestive: Gemma Corradi Fiumara, The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening (New York, 1990); Amit Pinchevski, “Freedom from Speech (or the Silent Demand),” diacritics 31, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 71–84; and the discussion of “the Stoic notion of the listening citizen” in John Durham Peters, Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition (Chicago, 2005), 130–135.}

For what Frenchmen soon discovered in practice (thanks, in part, to the prodding of a new class of journalists and rabble-rousers created by the liberation of speech) was what twentieth- and twenty-first-century proponents of deliberative democracy from Hannah Arendt onward have repeatedly emphasized in theory. All those people talking in 1789 found that subjects truly turn into citizens neither at the moment when abstract rights are bestowed upon them nor at the moment when some kind of consensus emerges regarding the common good. Rather, true citizenship entails becoming a full participant in the intersubjective game that is politics. Furthermore, this activity involves not only getting to speak (i.e., having “a say” or “a voice”), but also being actively and attentively heard. In Arendt’s terms, “communicability,” the starting point of public life, depends on “a community of men who can be addressed and who are listening and can be listened to.”\footnote{Arendt did not write extensively about either listening or hearing as a specific practice. See, though, her suggestive remarks in Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, 1992), quotation from 40; as well as Arendt, On Revolution (New York, 1963); and Arendt, The Human Condition, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1998), esp. 57–58. Insofar as much of her work concentrated on the activity of politics and on what citizens do and how, a few contemporary political theorists have expanded upon Arendt’s arguments to make a case for the centrality of listening within democratic political life; see, for example, Benjamin Barber, Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age (Berkeley, Calif., 1984), esp. 173–175; Susan Bickford, The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship (Ithaca, N.Y., 1996); and James Tully, “The Agonic Freedom of Citizens,” Economy and Society 28, no. 2 (May 1999): 161–182.}

This assumption—that real political freedom results from interactions among equal citizens in which speaking and listening are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing—also lies at the heart of what some contemporary legal scholars refer to as “listeners’ rights” and as “the right to be heard.”\footnote{American legal theorists, following Alexander Meiklejohn’s vision of self-government as something akin to a traditional town meeting in which “each [man] has a right and a duty to think his own thoughts, to express them, and to listen to the arguments of others” and in which “no suggestion of a policy shall be denied a hearing,” sometimes also argue for the extension of free-speech rights to listeners. These claims can take the form of arguments for “the right to hear” (meaning the right to read, listen, see, and receive communications or otherwise obtain information) or for “the right to be heard” (meaning the right to an audience for one’s ideas or speech). Neither rubric is, however, central to a...}
a reasoned dialogue or an exchange among equals. Nor did it suggest the imminent emergence of a single, collective public voice. Cacophony was more like it, as everyone seemed to be shouting, whether literally or figuratively, at once. *Cri de la douleur, Cri de la vérité, and Cri de la justice et de l’humanité*: these were the sonically exaggerated titles of the pamphlets of the moment. In the immediate aftermath of the radical deregulation of the conditions of public speech, the question of how to make oneself, or one’s associates, audible above the din—indeed, of how to get anyone to actually listen—surfaced almost immediately. Clearly it was not going to be enough simply to create physical proximity or to exercise one’s right to make a lot of noise. One had to be actively, intentionally heard and attended to in order to make any difference at all.

This distinction became apparent first within the walls of that extraordinary experiment in parliamentary politics, the National Assembly, formed in the summer of 1789. The twelve hundred or so deputies who gathered in the cavernous Menus Plaisirs at Versailles and then the Salle du Manège in the Tuileries immediately confronted the practical problem that they could barely see or even hear each other, at least without standing on benches and screaming at the top of their lungs. Some tried to remedy the problem by establishing procedural rules to counter what the Comte de Mirabeau described as “everyone in the French manner, wishing to speak before they listen.” Other commentators demanded an architectural solution or sought technical improvements at the level of sound itself, proposing devices such as megaphones and speaking platforms intended to “facilitate the passage of sonorous rays” in spaces too large for the kind of direct democracy—literally, a show of hands under a tree—once imagined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

It was, however, the represented even more than the representatives who understood in the first years of the Revolution that the right to talk had not been translated into a right to be heard. For if not all the deputies could manage to garner equal auditory attention on the floor of the assembly hall, the problem of attracting...
the ears of the powerful proved that much more daunting for ordinary people—especially those with less status as public speakers, less access to any public platform or medium, less facility with words, and often less welcome messages to convey. Frustration with sonic inequality seemingly almost immediately produced an intense desire on the part of anonymous crowds to reverse the expectation that they (alone) would listen passively to all that transpired. Instead, new citizens tried repeatedly to force the experience of listening on others. How else can we explain the continual concerted effort of the _menu peuple_ to make their presence felt aurally as well as visually in the galleries of the various early revolutionary assemblies?

Arthur Young, like other English observers, described with considerable horror in May of 1789 not only the “want of order” among the deputies of the Estates-General themselves but also the “noisy expressions”—the hissing, the clapping, and other “grossly indecent” forms of noisemaking—that issued from ordinary people gathered in the assembly hall eager to “over-rule the debate and influence the deliberations.” Arthur Young, _Travels during the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789: Undertaken More Particularly with a View of Ascertaining the Cultivation, Wealth, Resources, and Natural Prosperity of the Kingdom of France_, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1794), 1: 125 (June 15, 1789).

Others depict an indignant crowd bent on keeping up the auditory pressure by means of whistling, booing, singing, shouting down enemies, cheering, chanting slogans, and even beating drums both inside the meeting hall and out in the surrounding streets. On the impact of the crowd in the galleries on the meetings of the National Assembly, see Tackett, _Becoming a Revolutionary_; and Patrick Brasart, _Paroles de la Révolution: Les assemblées parlementaires, 1789–1794_ (Paris, 1988), 69–78. David Garrioch depicts public insults in an earlier era as a similar kind of auditory performance conducted primarily for the benefit of the audience; “Sounds of the City,” 20. Peter Hoffer, writing on the American Revolution, also describes mobs and demonstrators engaging in “sensory warfare,” including violations of “aural etiquette” and “auditory terrorism,” although he draws too strong a distinction between a sensory people, on the one hand, and a political class invested in cold, rational natural rights language, on the other; _Sensory Worlds in Early America_, 218.

61 In his fascinating “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” William Sewell cites the following account from the _Révolutions de Paris_ of the aftereffects of the storming of the Bastille: “Applause, an excess of joy, insults, imprecations hurled at the perfidious prisoners of war, all were mixed together; cries of vengeance and of pleasure leapt forth from every heart.” See Sewell, _Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation_ (Chicago, 2005), 250. Sewell, however, takes this passage to be evidence of the heightened emotion that was characteristic of revolutionary events, whereas I see it as part of a process, beginning early in the Revolution, of turning crowd noise into an aspect of the mythology of revolutionary events.

62 Timothy Garton Ash, an observer, recounted the spontaneous gesture of the hundreds of thousands of Czech citizens who gathered in Wenceslas Square in November 1989: “They all take their keys out of their pockets and shake them, 300,000 key-rings, producing a sound like massed Chinese bells.” See Ash, _The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague_ (New York, 1990), 96. A decade later, in the late 1990s, thousands of whistle-blowing protesters amassed repeatedly in the streets of Belgrade, the capital of the former Yugoslavia, to oppose the regime of...
order soon became figurative as well, a question of the rhetoric of popular *porte-paroles* in the relative silence of print. The great radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat was especially successful in the first years of the Revolution in stirring the popular classes to indignation by framing the present moment as a drama of failed communication. In Marat’s repeated telling, “the most frightful tyranny is that which imposes silence on the patrie.” This, of course, had been the condition of the Old Regime, when most of the work of government had happened behind the sound barrier of closed doors. Then the people had been forced into a passive role as receptacles of information, their own cries continually rejected by a king who refused to listen in return. The issue for Marat was that despite the public’s newfound right to make noise, and the theoretical importance of this noise to the formation of the national will, little in practice had changed. Even the members of the Parisian municipal government, Marat reported, continued to “close their ears to my voice” and to “turn a deaf ear, to maintain silence” in response to his repeated and serious charges. The same went for his complaints and objections before the National Assembly, where the president, in trying to “make them heard,” had “his voice stifled” by opposing factions. Hence Marat’s continual demand starting in late 1789 was no longer that the people be allowed to speak, but rather that their voices, or often cries of distress, be recognized as such, that they be able—in his frequent phrase—“se faire entendre,” to make themselves heard. Marat kept up a steady demand that the general public remain present and audible in the meeting space of the Assembly even as the galleries shrunk in size in the Manège and toleration for the presence of observers declined. More abstractly, he argued repeatedly that both the king and the people’s currently “inaccessible” representatives be compelled to heed what they heard and that those who persisted in being “deaf to the voice of justice” or “deaf to the voice of duty” be purged from the national body.

For Marat, democratic governance had nothing to do with moderating between, or even taking seriously, diverse points of view. His ideal was the rule of a consensual national will, not the endless dialogue and negotiation imagined by some modern
theorists of democracy. But the reciprocity of listening (and not just speaking) was, for Marat, essential to the actualization of both popular sovereignty and new notions of equality—or what the political theorist James Tully, two centuries later, would call “intersubjective recognition.” And Marat, like many of his contemporaries, articulated this need largely through metaphors of deafness and audition, figures of speech that would remain fundamental to modern political struggles long after the actual sonic landscape changed.

It was, though, precisely this kind of rhetoric—and its success in creating an ever more multivocal public sphere at the same time as demands for unity grew—that produced a second recognizable effect at the time of the French Revolution. This was a subsequent public call for a collective return, at the level of metaphor, to what had once been considered the final stage in the hearing process, or “common sense.”

Public pleas for the reintroduction of common sense (generally in the guise of le bon sens rather than le sens commun) began to make themselves heard in late 1790 and into 1791, principally among moderates within the new political establishment. These were men who accepted in theory the idea of free speech as a basic right of man and vital protection against tyranny but who also found themselves increasingly alarmed by the scale and pitch of an extraparliamentary political culture in which, from every direction, in the words of one anti-Jacobin journal, “one hundred mouths open at once to vomit out lies.” What they hoped to accomplish in producing and distributing (largely for free) journals and pamphlets with titles such as Le crieur de bon sens et patriote (The Patriotic Crier of Good Sense) and Mon patience est à bout: Un mot de bon sens (My Patience Is at Its End: A Word of Good Sense) was, paradoxically, to reduce the polyphony of revolutionary culture and, by focusing on hearing, mitigate the dangerous effects of free speech.

In all of these texts, le bon sens stood first for a minimalist, quotidian way of...
apprehending and talking about reality. Knowledge was to be reduced to nothing more than the ordinary person’s direct sense experience and a style of expression that did not betray the elemental quality of such perceptions. One anonymous anti-Jacobin propagandist devoted an entire pamphlet in 1791 to depicting an imaginary “Society of Friends of Good Sense” in which the only rule was that all speechifying was to be purged of “sophisms . . . metaphors, antitheses, the smallest excesses of warmth . . . emphatic phrases, new locutions, exclamations, outrageous exaggerations,” and any other “tours de force.” The idea was that such a stripped-down approach to communication could not fail to result in the collective agreement of all people, with the exception of the imbecilic, perverse, or crazy. But le bon sens was envisioned not only as a foundation for perception and speech. It also became a standard by which to clarify, assess, and filter the myriad opinions in circulation, or to establish what might today be called extralegal or “constitutive” censorship. The echoes of Crooke are obvious. Although there were counterrevolutionary pamphleteers who wrote longingly, at least for rhetorical effect, of a future world in which people simply would no longer possess ears, the moderate attachment to an imagined “sovereign tribunal of good sense” was never about a kind of self-imposed deafness. Rather, the goal was to push the “sensible” public to make aural discriminations, to hear through the hyperbole, obfuscations, and exclamations of popular journalists, club members, and what one ephemeral journal called “charlatan preachers in the streets . . . to whom the people rush to listen.” And this desire must be seen as part of a concerted effort by a tenuous new ruling elite to control the nature of politics by restoring (to use Rancière’s term) an established “distribution of the sensible,” or informal limits around not only what gets articulated but also what gets actively heard and attended to in the first place.

Of course, this plea for the return of a normativizing good or common sense did not actually succeed in early revolutionary France. It neither ended the cacophony associated with freedom of expression nor created a consensual, unitary public voice. On the contrary, such pleas only generated further animosity around the question of who had the authority to determine or to impose what version of common sense. By late 1792, the revolutionary government had begun, ironically, to restore a formal, regulative censorship apparatus, in part based on the claim that a consensual and impartial common sense was no longer anywhere to be found. This oscillation

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74 Le greffe patriotique de la Société des amis du bon sens (Anthropolis [Paris], n.d. [ca. March 1791]). Compare Joseph Addison’s remarks in The Spectator, no. 126 (July 15, 1711), where a similar club is imagined. On the context for this earlier English recourse to the trope of common sense, see Rosenfeld, Common Sense, chap. 1.


76 Un philosophe virois aux prises avec le sens commun, par un catholico-républicain (n.p. [Délivrande], 1793–1794), 12; Le stationnaire patriote aux frontières, ou l’appel au bon sens, no. 15 (October 5, 1791), 5–6.

77 Le bon sens: Réflexions libres sur les affaires actuelles, no. 1.

78 On censorship during the later phases of the Revolution, see Jeremy D. Popkin, Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789–1799 (Durham, N.C., 1990), esp. 171–177. The Paris Commune led the
among different modes for regulating what is heard—that of the market, that of tacit norms associated with common sense, and that of a punitive legal system—also became part of the dance of modern political culture. The challenge now is to integrate this history with the better-known story of the struggle over speech. It is time to begin the process of constructing a truly political history of the senses.

way by banning counterrevolutionary newspapers in late 1792. The Convention followed in 1793 with a series of ever more punitive measures directed against hostile journalists and printers. The legal limits of freedom of the press and expression were subject to repeated modifications over the rest of the revolutionary era.

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