

Kate Lacey. *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 239 S. ISBN 978-0-7456-6025-7.



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Kate Lacey's *Listening Publics. The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* draws attention to the often overlooked role of listening in conceptualizations of the public sphere. Lacey, a media studies scholar who has worked extensively on the history of broadcasting, sets out to bridge the discursive gap between the fields of sound studies and political philosophy.

Although Lacey describes her book as a “cultural and material history of listening in modernity” (p. 18), it is not strictly speaking structured along a historical narrative. Indeed, Lacey offers a disclaimer that some historically-minded readers may find the “rapid switching between fragments from different contexts disconcerting” (p. 20). Instead, she promises to engage with the notion of listening publics in relation to different media technologies at different historical moments, with the bulk of her material focusing on the early years of two technologies (phonograph and radio) in three countries: Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US).

The book consists of four parts, each itself divided into two or three chapters: an introductory

first part, a more empirically-minded second and third part, and a more theoretically oriented conclusion. In the first chapter, Lacey introduces the book by addressing the overlooked role of listening in media histories, as well as in conceptualizations of the public sphere. Where listening is discussed at all, Lacey argues, it is treated as a private, individual, passive activity. Against the notion of a passive ‘audience’, Lacey positions that of a ‘listening public’, which is engaged in active and public acts of ‘listening out’, as opposed to passive and private ‘listening in’. In her framing of the debate, Lacey makes copious use of the Oxford English Dictionary, but also draws upon recent literature from the field of sound studies. Unfortunately, however, she makes only scarce mention of the work within this tradition that most seems to share her interest in the public dimension of sound. For instance, the existing literature on controversies about urban noise is surveyed in a later chapter, but not used in framing Lacey’s overall argument; while other work on issues of sound and public space – for instance, a number of articles in a special issue in the *American Quarterly* 63 (2011), No. 3 (edited by Kara Keeling and

Josh Kun), or Steve Goodman's work on acoustic control and sonic warfare (*Sonic Warfare. Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge 2010; reviewed by Daniel Morat, in: *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 12.07.2011, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2011-3-028>> (27.09.2013)) – goes unmentioned. , or on the importance of listening practices for understanding the history of broadcasting. Most notably, Lacey refers to some isolated details of Susan J. Douglas' influential work on radio listening (*Listening In. Radio and the Public Imagination*, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern, New York 1999) later on in the book, but does not mention it in the introduction, nor does she reflect upon how her own notion of 'listening out' relates to Douglas' 'listening in'. As a result, the theoretical introduction remains somewhat unspecific at times.

The second chapter serves as a historical introduction to listening as a cultural practice and the notion of the 'modernization of listening'. While this chapter will not hold any big surprises to those familiar with the field of sound studies, it does provide an unusually concise and nuanced overview of the introduction of various sound technologies and their entanglement with listening practices – beginning not, as one might expect, with the phonograph, but with the written word.

The three chapters of the second part of the book promise to explore "how ideas of realism, noise and liveness figure in the construction of listening publics" (p. 19). The implied sense of equivalence of those three themes is somewhat misleading, as they are treated on very different levels of empirical specificity in the respective chapters. The third chapter surveys existing scholarship discussing the obsession with 'realness' in discourses about sound technologies. While Lacey provides an interesting overview of this vast literature within sound studies, she only occasionally hints at its relevance for studying the role of listening in the public sphere. Chapter four connects

to the theme of the book more clearly, as it convincingly shows how sound and public space are entangled in discourses about noise. Combining existing scholarship on the noises of modern cities with original archival sources, the chapter captures the paradoxical role of new sound media, which "contributed to the cacophony while at the same time promising radically new forms of control for the listener" (p. 72). The fifth chapter zooms in on one very specific moment in the history of radio by attending to the negotiations of 'radiogenic form' during the formative years of radio. Lacey focuses her account of these negotiations of what radio is (or could be) on Germany, beginning with the experiments of "render[ing] the unrepresentable in sound" (p. 107) during the Weimar era, and concluding with a chilling analysis of how radio found its ultimate 'radiogenic' form as a propaganda instrument for the Nazis.

It is in the third part of the book, 'Ways of Listening', that the two themes of the book – sound technologies and public spheres – are brought together most convincingly. Chapter six deals with the 'privatization of the listening public'. While Lacey identifies a clear trend in the history of 20th century media technologies towards an increasing privatization and individualization of the listening public, she also problematizes the distinction between 'public' and 'private' as often quite complex and paradoxical. Chapter seven, then, highlights the exceptions to this historical trend of privatization. Drawing upon primary sources from the UK and Germany from the 1920s and 1930s, Lacey shows that listening has by no means always been a private and individual act, but could also take a public and collective form.

The final section, 'Listening in the Public Sphere', turns away from the detailed media history of the previous chapters and towards questions of political philosophy. In the first of its two chapters, Lacey argues why listening should be taken seriously in political theory, and offers explanations for why it has nonetheless been mostly

neglected – without much reference, however, to the rich empirical material discussed in the rest of the book. In the final chapter, Lacey relates the current surge of interest within media studies in the ethics of media production and reception to a much earlier discourse about listening practices in the broadcasting world. In doing so, this chapter is one of the few places in the book in which the rich historical material and the theoretical discourse about public spheres and media are explicitly brought together.

Overall, then, the central promise of the book, of bridging the gaps between the discourse of sound studies and political philosophy, is only partially realized – the two traditions co-exist within the book, but are only occasionally brought together. The historical sections do not explicitly engage with literature or conceptual notions from political philosophy, while the more theoretical ones only sometimes refer back to the empirical analyses. Still, the building blocks are all here in this book, and they reinforce the potential benefit of bringing the discourses closer together. Despite the fact that some theoretical work remains to be done, Lacey's book provides a collection of thoughtful, interesting and finely nuanced analyses of listening practices in the media age.

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