

Sounds from

**Protest in Times of Authoritarianism
and the COVID-19 Pandemic**



Below

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Look at this photograph and listen to this image. Can you feel the sonic atmosphere of the 18th feminist night march in Siraselviler street in Taksim? Do you hear the slogans being chanted as the photograph was taken? Raised arms and open mouths ... Do you feel the anger and the joy?

The 2020 “Istanbul Feminist Night March” had a rather extraordinary atmosphere. That year’s march, which has been bringing thousands of women from all walks of life and generations together in the very centre of Istanbul since its first realization in 2003, was banned by the Governorship of Istanbul – same as the year before. Despite the ban and the massive presence of riot police, I too joined the crowd around the Taksim Square. You could feel the tension in the air. It was extremely noisy. It felt like the march was not only taking back the urban centre and reclaiming the night, but also creating a sound-clash: never-ending hum of whistles, roaring slogans, and screams from the crowd tore the “civilized” urban soundscape apart with its cacophonous rumble.¹

While all political regimes regulate socio-cultural soundscapes, authoritarian regimes might have specific and intricate ways of controlling the auditory and other sensory aspects of public life. The neo-liberal authoritarian populist regime of Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) not only represses social and political movements and impedes the right of assembly, it also denies movements the right to speak up and be heard. However, while public gatherings might be suppressed, social movements develop distinctive ways of making themselves heard by inventing new forms of collective action that are possible without necessarily coming together physically.² Different auditory tactics are used by diverse movements as a response to the sensory restrictions and regulations of the existing political regime. This contribution focuses on noise actions re-invented during the COVID-19 lockdowns, at the intersection of drastic intensification of social movement repression and socio-spatial restrictions that exemplified the first wave of the pandemic.

Local soundscapes of the pandemic

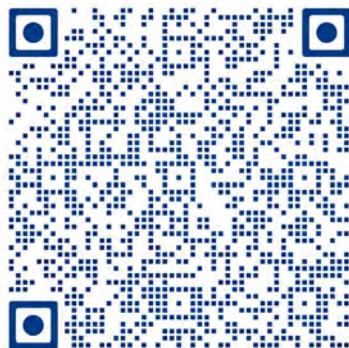
A few days after the Feminist Night March, the first COVID-19 case in Turkey was publicly announced. In the aftermath of this announcement, cities gradually became quiet as the practices of lockdown and self-isolation became the urban rule. Yet, pandemic cities had a polyphonic texture to them even when they were thought to be completely silent. Kate Wagner proposes to think of pandemic cities as a combination of silenced urban centres on the one hand and massive crowds and noisy protests, such as the Black Lives Matter protests,

on the other. She argues that these two soundscapes encapsulate an age-old battle between noise and silence, which is a struggle for control over city life, and “resolving the conflict between them demands facing broader issues of environmental, social, and political power”.³

As Wagner underlines, this sonic struggle between noise and silence endured not only in urban centres but also in the peripheries. During the so-called first state-imposed lockdown, which took place roughly between March and July 2020 all over Turkey, cyclical protests, public celebrations, and commemorations were performed noisily from the thresholds of dwellings – such as windows and balconies – enabling people to join in collective protest and joy without leaving their homes. In this sense, it is plausible to argue that while the imposition of lockdowns gave the state a chance to expand its domains of power and strengthen technologies of surveillance and control, it also turned local neighbourhoods into spaces of solidarity with a vivid sonic atmosphere.

The first instance of noise protests was the applause action, held from balconies at 9 p.m. and which offered symbolic support for health-care workers. This solidarity action, which was organized from below on social media was immediately co-opted by state authorities, with the Minister of Health and President Erdoğan announcing various calls for applause. After this action was initiated, the General Directorate of Religious Services published a statement inviting mosques all over the country to recite the salah, and to chant prayers and hymns. Every night for a couple of weeks, applause and chants were in competition with the ever-intensifying sound of imams praying. The urban pandemic soundscape of Istanbul, shaped by the contesting sounds of chants during public celebrations, cyclical national and political events, applause actions, religious hymns, and ordinary everyday sounds is captured in the short documentary “The Lightwell”.

In research conducted during the 2020 lockdowns, one of our interviewees from the middle-class Şişli neighbourhood in Istanbul stated that noise protests gave people, who had been for many years afraid to take to the streets, the chance to raise their voices without taking the risk of being seen and identified as a protester.⁴ In this sense, such protests politicized local neighbourhoods and turned them into a space where clashes between hegemonic and non-hegemonic sounds take place. Yet this does not mean that such protests are not containable by ruling powers, or that local protests do not repress the minority voices within.



Scan the QR code to watch “The Lightwell” (directed by Begüm Özden Fırat, 2020) or go to tinyurl.com/2whthrfe

Organizing public celebrations and protests on balconies

Similar to the ways in which the autonomously initiated applause actions were contained, state officials sent top-down “invitations” to celebrate on balconies the “National Sovereignty and

Children’s Day” festivities on 23 April and the “Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day” on 19 May. As nationalist songs sung by people echoed on the streets, other voices and languages were locked in the private realm and were silenced. It seemed like 24 April, which marks the beginning of the Armenian Genocide in Istanbul, had never been so silent before.

While the nationalist sounds of public commemorations took over local soundscapes,

radical unions called people to give a voice to May Day celebrations from their balconies, since it was impossible to get together in urban squares. Similarly, Taksim Solidarity sent out a call to commemorate the anniversary of the Gezi Uprising on 31 May. Newroz, a traditional spring festival celebrated by the Kurds in Turkey, was also celebrated with noise actions on roofs and balconies. Such organization of sounds from below created a feeling of an alternative community through the presence of sheer sound. In our research, another interviewee named Emek, a woman identifying herself as a leftist, described the formation of community through noise protests as follows:

“At Newroz, I heard noises from the windows in our street. I realized that the noises were coming from my neighbours next door, whom I never met face to face before. They were chanting slogans for Newroz or playing May Day revolutionary songs on tape, I felt like I belonged to a community without ever meeting them. I felt like I knew them, without meeting them, even before seeing them.”

However, Emek also knew that there were others who were disturbed and felt uncomfortable with such radical sounds echoing through their neighbourhoods. In this sense, noise spilling from windows, balconies, and sometimes even rooftops has turned the soundscape of cities into a conflict zone. Yet again, the recent celebration of festivities, such as the national holiday on 23 April, reveals that dominant voices rule not only the national, but also the local soundscapes during the pandemic as well.

In 2021, the “Feminist Night March” took place in the streets despite the burgeoning repression against the feminist movement and threat of the spread of the coronavirus. The Governorship of Istanbul banned the march again, and yet again the march took place in the streets – and it was epic and lurid. From then on, social movements started taking to the streets again, while organized rallies were usually banned on grounds of the coronavirus. Under these circumstances, local noise protests became customary even after state-imposed lockdowns were over. For example, during the Boğaziçi University protests of 2021, which started as a response to

Erdoğan naming a AKP loyalist as the rector of the university, massive demonstrations in and around the campus, as well as local noise protests in several neighbourhoods, were held. While I am writing this text, Turkey is going through one of the worst economic crises in its history with the Turkish lira hitting an

all-time low. Overnight, the crisis sparked popular protests demanding the resignation of the government. Socialist parties organized small neighbourhood-scale protests in the streets, and those who stayed indoors accompanied them by banging pots and pans from their balconies and windows.

These recent examples show that a new protest (sound)scape might be in formation. The noise demonstrations organized in local neighbourhoods and that became popular during the pandemic lockdowns, seem to have had a lasting effect on the action repertoire of social movements. This could be a temporary phenomenon, but it might also well become a lasting method used as collective warming up, a testing of the waters, before hitting the streets.

Illustrations

p. 60: The 2020 Feminist Night March, Ateş Alpar, 2020.

p. 66: Action call made by Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey – DİSK for MayDay 2020. It reads: “Every balcony is May 1 area / Every window is a square! / On May 1 evening we are on the balconies / For a new social order”.



Endnotes

- 1 See Ege Akdemir, "Listening to Possible Worlds: The 2019 İstanbul Feminist Night March and its Acoustic Conflicts", Unpublished master thesis, İstanbul: Boğaziçi University, 2021.
- 2 For different and dispersed forms of collective action before and during the pandemic, see Aylin Kuryel and Begüm Özden Fırat, "Remembering the Crowd: Collective Action During the Pandemic", *Prospections: How to Assemble Now*, 2020. bakonline.org/prospections/remembering-the-crowd-collective-action-during-the-pandemic/
- 3 Kate Wagner, "The Struggle For The Urban Soundscape" *The Atlantic*, 2020. theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/07/the-struggle-for-the-urban-soundscape/614044/
- 4 This research conducted by Berfin Atlı, Çisel Karacebe, Suzi Asa, and myself examined the acoustic experiences of Kurtuluş inhabitants, living in two distinct neighborhoods Son Durak and Pangaltı, during the first wave of the pandemic, when there were strict curfews. The study focuses on how each neighbourhood, with its different socio-economic demographics, architectures, and topographies, operates as an acoustic community.