

Against Consonance

The Power of Sound Patterns in Recent Brazilian Uprisings

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The uprisings of June 2013 marked the return of social unrest to the mainstream political vocabulary of Brazil. What started in São Paulo against a twenty-centavo increase in bus fares quickly became a catalyst for massive protests and demonstrations—largely unseen since the 1990s—that quickly spread to a good portion of the country. Yet it was particularly after the outcome of the 2014 general elections, narrowly won by then-president Dilma Rousseff and securing for her a second term, that the language of Brazilian protest underwent strong changes in both form and content. By listening closely to some of these protests, we find potent lenses with which we can examine this mutation.

The reelection of Rousseff signaled the continuation of the (arguably) left-leaning political project of the Worker's Party, initiated by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2000, which stood directly against the political and economic interests of the old Brazilian oligarchies. Brazilian media and their political and economic stakeholders took the opportunity created by June 2013 to learn how to redirect the language of protest to fully reclaim and secure their power once again. Joining forces with the neoliberal agendas of so-called nonpartisan online groups such as *Vem pra Rua* and *Movimento Brasil Livre*, they orchestrated an appropriation of the Latin American *cacerolazos*, using social media to encourage the Brazilian middle class to stand at windows or balconies, banging pots and pans whenever Rousseff (or anyone from her Workers' Party) spoke on national television.¹ This form of protest was largely amplified by the main media conglomerates of Brazil, namely *Organizações Globo* for television and print media, the newspapers *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo*, as well as the right-wing magazine *Veja*. While the uprisings of June 2013 were also covered by these media outlets, it was only after the 2014 elections that they began to openly endorse and encourage political demonstrations. Soon enough, the protesters also took to the streets.

Unlike a form of protest that uses the street as a place of contestation, in this case the taking up of physical and auditory space unfolded with endorsement from the media and their corporate capital as well as from the conservative opposition in control of the armed wing of the state: the Military Police.² In full consensus with and support from the police, the collective construction of a provisional bond is clearly demonstrated by the control of auditory space. With the monotonous, rhythmic beat of wooden spoons clashing against pots and pans, accompanied by pulsating electronic dance music blasted by celebrity DJs on top of sound trucks, these protests took place in sonic and political unison with the status quo.

Dissent—political and sonic—was obliterated, eschewing any form of ambiguity in favor of an assimilated narrative of mutual “identification.” It is exactly in this moment of sounding together that a *schismatic consonance* can be heard.

A schismatic consonance is an articulation of (musical) rhythm that conveys a desire for homogenous identification. Staying on the beat means to be always-in-time, reinforcing normative power (and rhythmic) structures. Thus, in synchronized unity the Brazilian middle class stood together against an empty signifier: “corruption,” a marker simplistic enough to be easy to stand in opposition to. As an illusionary and choreographed homogeneity, the protesters formed a sort of orchestrated parade. The disruptive nature of protesting was undermined in favor of a seemingly innocuous form of unrest, rendered sonically harmless. In effect, these protests ended up giving a beat of approval to the ultra-neoliberal status quo, culminating with the removal of Rousseff from power, and the subsequent advancement of austerity measures impacting students, workers, and disenfranchised populations for decades to come.

Yet it is precisely in the *offbeat* that the political takes place. The offbeat is a manifestation of Rancière’s theory of the “gap,” which evinces the sensorial “in-betweenness” of partaking in political discourse.³ The occupation of public schools by young students all over Brazil, happening at two distinct moments in 2015 and 2016, evinced a break with the schismatic consonance in favor of plural worldviews. Starting as a local movement protesting the precariousness of the public school system in the state of São Paulo, occupations spread across the country particularly after the coup in August 2016 and the subsequent austerity measures, which froze investments in public education for the next twenty years. The sonic practices heard in the “Primavera Secundarista” take place in the offbeat; they relied on plurality and dissensus, thereby opening up the possibility for other worldviews to emerge, and delineating, even if provisionally, the conditions for what the educator and philosopher Paulo Freire called a “revolutionary futurity.”⁴

In these student protests, syncopated beats, vocalized or drummed on chairs and tables, laid ground for impromptu lyrics, reassuring family and friends that the students are safe, that their demands are legitimate, and, more importantly, that they are fighting for the right to have a future. These sounds echoed the necessity of reclaiming space, of demanding the right to participate in the political. Their rhythmic construction was one that, in itself borrowing from the defiant beat of funk carioca, challenged sonic normalcy and plundered the auditory space of the power the students directly spoke to. Theirs was a beat dropping against the pulse of the state, dwelling instead on the border that opens up a hope for meaningful change.

When the students occupied the streets, they were sonic and physical dissensus incarnate. Their demands were aligned, but in counterpoint. A schismatic consonance thus emerges not only from the tension of being pulled toward unison with the prevailing power structures, but also from the distinct forms of political action that materialize from a direct rupture with them. The students' consonance was one that sounds not with but against the dominating beat of power. They filled the auditory space with musics, sounds, and noises that are the diametrical opposite of the normative and monotonic beat of pot-banging—both politically and sonically. Back in the streets, clashing batons on shields, the riot control police marched in rhythmic unison against the student occupants. In this moment, even though fundamentally different in their nature and separated by time and space, a sonic continuum from the banging of pots to the banging of shields opened up. Both demand unison and seek to enforce the simplest of narratives—assimilation. Demanding nothing but rhythmic and political obedience, the beat of the Military Police tried to set the pace, and sent out a menacing signal to the protesters: they will face violence.

Yet the students refused to be silenced by violent assimilation, neither in sound nor demands. Their dissonance ran beyond what could be heard in the streets. Their self-organization directly challenged homogenous and hegemonic narratives crafted by media, capital, the illegitimate state, its Military Police, and a reactionary middle class. The students' communal respect for the space and their appeal for a revolutionary futurity are imaginaries that begin with and make use of the sonic practices found at the moment of rupture with a political unison. Against consonance, these practices and demands, while in themselves romantic, are, above all, hopeful.

This contribution has an accompanying sound composition that is meant to be listened to alongside the text. Sources for this composition came from amateur recordings of the protests that are being collected for an ongoing archive of protest language initiated by the author and artist Lucas Odahara. Soundfile available at: <http://soundcloud.com/partido-alto/against-consonance>

¹ Right-wing political parties and US think tanks such as the Atlas Network support and finance—directly and indirectly—neoliberal groups in Latin America, Movimento Brasil Livre and Mises Institute Brazil among them. These groups were fundamental in mobilizing post-2014 demonstrations—both online and on the streets—that served as leverage for the articulation of the judiciary coup d'état that effectively removed Rousseff from power in August 2016. See Lee Fang, "Sphere of Influence: How American Libertarians Are Remaking Latin American Politics," *The Intercept*, August 9, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/08/09/atlas-network-alejandro-chafuen-libertarian-think-tank-latin-america-brazil/>; Dom Phillips, "Brazil's Right on the Rise as Anger Grows over Scandal and Corruption," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/26/brazil-rightwing-dilma-rousseff-lula>; Pedro Lopes and Vinícius Segalla, "Áudios Mostram Que Partidos Financiaram MBL Em Atos Pró-Impeachment," *UOL Política*, May 27, 2016, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2016/05/27/maquina-de-partidos-foi-utilizada-em-atos-pro-impeachment-diz-lider-do-mbl.htm>.

² The Brazilian Military Police is one of the most violent police forces in the world; according to the annual report of Human Rights Watch, 3,345 people were murdered by the Police in 2015 alone, whereas 393 police officers were killed while on duty. See: "Brazil: Events of 2016," *Human Rights Watch World Report 2017*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/brazil> (accessed July 31, 2017).

³ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran, repr. ed., London, 2015, pp. 36–38.

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., New York, 2000, pp. 84–85.