Review – Discordant Democracy: Noise, Affect, Populism and the Presidential Campaign

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Discordant Democracy: Noise, Affect, Populism, and the Presidential Campaign
By Justin Patch
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Reading Justin Patch's recent book, *Discordant Democracy: Noise, Affect, Populism, and the Presidential Campaign* during the 2020 campaign of Trump and Biden was an uncanny experience. While Patch's book centers on the 2008 and 2016 campaigns in the United States, his analysis of affect and noise can easily be applied to the most recent election, even during a pandemic that stifled much of the 'noise' of campaigns. Centered around six key concepts – spin, magic, noise, affect, deafness, and populism – Patch argues that sound (and particularly noise) needs to be at the center of our understanding of democracy. He focuses ethnographically on the Texas Democratic Party, analyzing throughout the book the everyday activities of campaigning that get at the "savage heart of the American Dream." Trained in the interdisciplinary field of ethnomusicology, Patch listens closely to the affect generated in classic sounds of democracy: rallies, political speeches, crowd chants, and, of course, music. Musical theory becomes one way into understanding the sounds of democracy, but music itself does not occupy the central stage of his analysis. Instead, Patch focuses on a broad question: What exactly are the sounds of campaigning, and how do they relate to the experience and the *feeling* of participatory democracy? *Discordant Democracy* contributes to a range of studies that ask, in a variety of settings, what it means to *hear* or to *feel* democracy? (See, for example, Abé 2016; Kunreuther 2018; Manabe 2015; Novak 2015; Tausig 2019; Sonevytsky 2016) The end result is an eclectic book that mirrors its subject matter, one that inscribes a variety of discordant modes of reflection in ways that echo the various modes through which politicians address their audience. It will be a book of interest not only to ethnomusicologists, but also, to political theorists, sound studies scholars, affect theorists, and political ethnographers.

There are several interlocking arguments that frame *Discordant Democracy*. First, Patch is interested in the place of sound and emotion within political philosophy and cultural theory. Second, in turning his attention to the specific sounds of campaigns, Patch inverts the usual contrast between meaningless noise and meaningful signals. Noise, Patch argues, *is* the signal of campaigns. Finally, once we recognize that noise is a crucial signal of campaign success, Patch goes on to argue that the "populist sensorium" that characterizes recent campaigns are rooted in affects that bring about new and sometimes unexpected subjectivities. When tracing the affective quality of campaigns through sound, Patch allows himself to "get spun" like other campaign workers.

The concept of 'spin' is central in the ethnography. Chapter Two centers on the ethnographic stance as a mimetic method, which in this case mimes the notion of spin. In employing this mimetic device, Patch produces a text that "seeks a close contact with its object…It is never an exact replication or reproduction, it is a constant becoming" (p.30). Asking the reader to come along with him and "to spin", Patch addresses his audience as a flaneur, a browser, someone who might like one theory and not another, and be able to skim across them all. In the writing, Patch conveys snippets of campaign life in the form of italicized *fieldnote-like* narratives. Consider Patch's description of the "spin room" following one of the debates between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton:

"*We were assigned to an expert and accompanied them around the spin room with their identifying signage so reporters looking for a quote or an angle would spot them and ask them questions on the record…. In these encounters, we are the gears in the machine, being spun and spinning, taking the kinetic energy of affect, and converting it into political motion." (p.21)*

I found myself drawn into these passages, yet desiring more integration with the heavy and, at times obtuse, theoretical sections. But perhaps that disjuncture provides a glimpse into what it feels like to be inside the spin machine.

Sound and Emotion in Political Campaigns

Discordant Democracy follows the usual separation between sound and vision in much literature on the senses. In Chapter Three, 'The Campaign as Modern Magic,' Patch turns to the ear and sound as the site of enchantment, engagement, and religion in contrast to the rationalism and distance presumed of the eye and visuality. Sound helps understand the social extension of participatory democracy, just as soundwaves spread out from their source and with amplifying devices extend much further than the eye can see, crossing material boundaries in ways that light waves cannot. Thus, to understand the rise of figures like Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump, whose campaigns were dominated by a contagious affective tone (at varying sides of the political spectrum), Patch argues that we need to move away from older theories of democratic politics that emphasize reading the press or laws (vision) over oral, charismatic speakers (sound). Modern campaigns are like magic shows, Patch suggests; illusion, deception, myth and mysticism are at work in both.

At first glance, Patch seems to reproduce what Jonathan Sterne has critiqued as the 'audio visual litany', with its roots in Christian metaphysics.In this dichotomy, sound appears closer to presence, immersion, subjectivity, while vision implies distance, removal from the world but presumably also leads us to reason. As Sterne argues, the binary of seeing vs. hearing, evident particularly in "Toronto School" media theorists (McLuhan, Ong, Havelock), smuggles in a Christian spiritualism and theory of listening that claims modernity's celebration of reason, rationality, and even capitalism emerged through the sensory dominance of sight over hearing. Targeting Walter Ong's work on Orality and Literacyin particular, Sterne suggests that "Ong's…history of the senses is clearly and urgently linked to the problem of how to hear the word of God in the modern age. The sonic dimension of experience is closest to divinity" (p.18). Patch similarly suggests that the noise of democracy resembles a divine voice. People feel a responsibility to answer a democratic call to action just like "the voices that spoke to Apostle Paul in light and Moses through the burning bush, tasking them with heroic action" (p.61). Quoting a Texas delegate, who turned to him at during democratic rally, Patch recalls "Remember…this here is your church" (p.61). Both the Church and democratic politics rely on audible voices that hail people into action, and Patch suggests there is little difference between the two. While Patch's analysis repeats the audio-visual litany in some respects, *Discordant Democracy* nevertheless does not present a teleological argument that leads from orality to literacy.

Noise as Signal

The most evocative ethnographic moments of Discordant Democracy occur in the middle of the book (especially Chapter Five, called 'Sonic Democracy') which valorize noise as a core signal within democratic campaigns. Here Patch compares a candidate to a 'conductor' who co-creates noise with his audience (p.83). In delivering speeches, candidates need to calibrate just the right amount of their own speech, while also leaving room for noise from the audience that signals their consent. Patch's analysis complicates the work of statistician and political analyst Nate Silver, who built his career on clearly identifying "data" that ultimately excludes distracting "noise" from relevant information necessary for accurate future predictions. *Discordant Democracy*, by contrast,turns our attention to the sounds that other political theorists tend to ignore: clapping, screaming, chanting, and the strategic use of 'you' in political speeches. Noise that was generated by the Tea Party during the 2008 election, Patch suggests, took another eight years to fully surface again in Trump's electoral victory. Patch's analysis thus begs the question: what is a signal and what is noise in this instance?

A beautiful ethnographic example of 'noise as signal' occurs in one of the *italicized* sections of Chapter Five. Here

Patch describes an event when Barack Obama was speaking as the democratic candidate (or the newly elected president – the context is unclear). An enthusiastic middle-aged Black man standing in front of Patch began to school two middle-aged white women on how to respond to Obama's speech. "If you want him to keep talkin', you've got it let him know. Say "Say it!" (p.94), the man instructed. Throughout the speech, the man continued to prod the women on. "*Come on, let me hear it,"* he encouraged, or "You can do better than that," until finally the women produced an enthusiastic and loud-enough utterance for the man to reply with satisfaction: "That's it. Now that's how it's done." (p.94). In this example, the reader can feel the way that participatory democracy means nothing through speeches or policies alone. As this particular political fan implies, the audience is in fact the motor of a candidate's speech.

Affect as Political Action

In the last thread of argument and focus of Chapter Six and Seven, *Discordant Democracy* illustrates that affect is a form of political action. Here, Patch takes on a range of affect theorists – from Spinoza to recent critics who draw on Spinoza (Antonio Damasio, Gilles

Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Lauren Berlant) – to address what he calls the "populist sensorium" in which the senses are central to campaigning and central to formation of the political self. Affective action involves expressions of the body that break down boundaries between individuals and links the world of hearts/minds to the world of action and reaction (p.105). The elusive nature of affect, as several ethnographers note, makes it hard to trace ethnographically given that such feelings are not always fully or empirically known, and they may or may not stick in persisting discourse (See Rubin 2012; Rutherford 2016; Stewart 2007). By focusing on affective expressions, like collective clapping (one of my favorite examples in the book, which he calls 'body-voice'), Patch shows ethnographically how the body is made audible. Clapping and chanting quickly dissolve boundaries between people and become themselves a kind of contagious agent that reverberates through a crowd (p.95).

Within a populist frame of campaigning – one that positions itself against dominant political figures and parties – affect is core political strategy. In the 2008 and 2016 campaigns, two very different candidates (Obama and Trump) used populist rhetoric to address groups outside the political center, to create the *feelings* of being heard. (Many would disagree that Obama was a "populist" candidate, but as Patch shows, Obama uses the term 'populism' to describe himself). Again, the sounds of democratic participation are crucial to this circulation of affect and the sense of being listened to. Both campaigns animated short three words chants that became synonymous with their campaigns; the difference was that Obama's chant came from his speech ("Yes, We Can") whereas the two chants that signified the affective tone of Trump's 2016 campaign ("Build a Wall" & "Lock Her Up") emerged from the crowd, in response to Trump's promises and allegations. For Patch (and many other political analysts), this marks a crucial difference between Obama's message of uplifting empowerment and Trump's message of domination, white supremacy, and exclusion. Both campaigns, however, relied primarily upon affective messages to effectively help bring two unlikely candidates to office. To be sure, this is not unusual. "Affect is not…so much a site of radical otherness to be policed or preserved," notes William Mazzarella, an anthropologist who writes about affect, "but rather a necessary moment of any institution with aspirations of public efficacy" (p.298).

Discordant Democracy ends with a chapter that interrogates the current political moment ("Our politics") as one that he characterizes as "deafened and dumbstruck" – or the inability to hear one another. While in the previous chapters, Patch seems to celebrate the noisiness of campaigns, here he takes a reverse position to suggest that "[d]eafened politics are a response to the tremendous proliferation of noise that surrounds the political experience…In confronting this noise, we are deafened… and in this state we mute our capacity for empathy, and for democracy itself" (148). We are in a crisis of listening that can only be resolved, Patch claims, with true listening to what might otherwise be tuned out as "noise." "Noise and our ambivalent relationship to it (both joyful and fearful)," writes Patch, "tell us that we are uncomfortable with our own democracy – the actual authentic practice of representation, long denied to many – not that we are losing it" (p.96). The reader is left with a series of questions, none of which are fully answered – nor, perhaps, can they be in this still uncertain moment: Will listening to the noise of "others" lead towards new forms of governance that begin to break open the deafened state we are in? *Discordant Democracy* does not provide final answers, but for many, the book will resonate with the current political context in which noise continues to reverberate as a sometimes buried, sometimes amplified key within the overall chords of democratic politics.

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