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Book Review

Review of Benjamin Tausig, *Bangkok is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint* (New York: Oxford University, 2019)

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In the not-so-distant past of the social sciences, the study and representation of 'others' came under scrutiny, often leading to soul searching within the field of anthropology in particular that manifest itself in a self-consciously reflective writing style. Some writers may have gotten tangled in knots while trying to address the complexities of ethnography, but Benjamin Tausig is not one of them. His book *Bangkok is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint* on protest movements and sound in Thailand's political demonstrations in 2010-2011 illustrates the best that thoughtful, attentive observation along with meaningful engagement and critical reflection can offer. Tausig's work is both an extraordinary recording of and a meditative and theoretical reflection on the nature of sound and protest movements.

Tausig eschews the more obvious and attention grabbing moments of the 'Red Shirt' protests (for the color associated with this movement), choosing instead to focus on other aspects that help readers to get a sense of what it might have been like in the sometimes quieter, sometimes eventful stretches when there was little media attention: "Much has been written about the spectacular violence that drew international attention to Thailand on May 19, 2010 and other major dates, but comparatively little research exists about the everyday oscillations of the movement and its events, about its internal structure and heterogeneity, about its niches and their thick interrelations, which transformed Thailand in stillunclear ways. What did it sound like to be at these protests? What was said, unsaid, expressed, implied, echoed, and heard?"[1]

Tausig looks at sound and protest in tandem not merely as a structuring device for the study but because he persuasively argues that there is a vital connection between the "constrained mobility" of both sound and political movement arguing that "the constrained mobility of movements—the uncertainties borne when attempting to move—is not only analogous to the constrained mobility of sound, but closely connected to it. [2] The range of sounds that helped comprise those events are recorded, communicated, and analyzed in relationship to protest.

Tausig's measured voice is inviting and compelling, and it sets the tone of his analyses as well: "Of all the intense sensory forms that engaged and impelled protesters, an analysis of sound will not offer the only possible vantage into the motivations or structure of the protests. What it offers, what it helps to explain, is limited or constrained mobility, which is so routinely felt at political rallies and by entire political movements."[3] *Bangkok Is Ringing*'s task is to "feel out the contours of these constraints ethnographically, through sound in particular, and to understand how such limitations both reiterated existing power structures and at times offered opportunities for political transformation."[4]

Taking issue with the tendency of scholars of sound to give too much emphasis to the ability of sound to transcend boundaries, he maintains that sound is often constrained by physical/technological limits and by political/legal ones as well: a poor loud speaker or a radio frequency with limited range might be deliberately linked to a political regime's determination to keep certain music, words and ideas from being heard. The movement required of readers back and forth between these two phenomena can be challenging, especially for those (including this reviewer) more at home in scholarship on political movements than in sound studies. But the rewards for stretching outside our 'comfort zones' are plentiful.

The structure of the book, Tausig writes, with its "abnormally high number of chapters" is intended to "represent the heterogeneity of media and sonic space at Red Shirt protests, to portray the mess without enervating it."[5] "The chapters are a heaped, heterogeneous bundle that sometimes resonate with each other, and sometimes conflict."[6] The chapters can be read as discrete entities but they also relate to one another. The masterful yet nuanced interweaving lends weight to the heterogeneity as well as the not-necessarily resolvable moments that Tausig notes is constitutive of protest and movements. Tausig's refreshingly different approach is evident in his acknowledgement that the book is "incomplete even in its published form."[7]

The book is organized in an original manner: the chapters vary in length and in tone and they are themed according to the range of groups, experiences or modes of being heard: for example Chapter 4 is titled "Wireless Road and the Ground of Modernity" and Chapter 9 is called "Vehicular Stereo Systems." Tausig explains how he devised these frames or what he calls 'sonic niches': "After several months of regular attendance, I began to sketch a typology of the sonic niches of the Red Shirt protests, so that I might begin to explain how each expressed ideological significance. I noted the broadcasting technologies in each spatial type, which ranged from professional sound systems to tiny, barely functional amplifiers—and the extents and contours of their range. As the book stands, incomplete even in its published form, these comprise spaces of traffic (Chapter 1); republican middle-class activism (Chapter 2); atrocity video viewing (Chapter 3); regional radio station trucks (Chapter 4); megaphone singing (Chapter 5); megaphone lecturing (Chapter 6); quiet and silence (Chapter 7); whistle-blowing (Chapter 8); vehicular audio (Chapter 9); CD vending tables (Chapter 10); stage music (Chapter 11); chanting (Chapter 12); entrepreneurial busking (Chapter 13); surveillance and propaganda (Chapter 14); fatigue and respite (Chapter 15); and the imaginary points from which some of us tried, neck-deep and witless, to parse everything (Chapter 16)."[8]

There is also a poignancy to the study because of how brutally the aspirations of the protesters were crushed when the right wing in Thailand (along with many a willing middle-class protester in yet another phase of color-coded politics) joined forces and the Thai military staged a coup in 2014 to overthrow an elected government. The quote he includes early on from James Scott's classic work *Weapons of the Weak* captures the tone of this book inasmuch as the realities of the protesters' defeat informed Tausig's writing: "James Scott noted several decades ago, the gains wrought by revolutions are 'uncertain, while the carnage, the repression, and the demoralization of defeat are all too certain and real.'"[9] Indeed, repression and demoralization have been rife in Thailand since the 2014 junta regime consolidated royalist, conservative, bureaucratic power.

Tausig ends his book on a philosophical note: "We must study quiet in order to know when it might become noise. But we must also intuit … that our voices are not ours, that we may speak fearlessly but never under circumstances of our own choosing. Constraints are the condition of possibility for sound to be mobile, and for movements to move, just as the mobility promised by sound and dissent is precisely what makes them each vulnerable to constraint. The sound of our voice is contingent and radically limited."[10]

The unfinished and sometimes open-endedness of his insights serve the work well. As I write this review, in Bangkok and throughout Thailand anti-government/pro-democracy protests are underway. There is a young sound to these protests; high-schoolers and university are at the helm. The sounds ringing out demanding a more just society are both familiar and new.

Notes

[1] Benjamin Tausig, *Bangkok Is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint* (New York: Oxford University, 2019), 3.

[2] Ibid., 4.

[3] Ibid., 7.

[4] Ibid., 30.

[5] Ibid., 29.

[6] Ibid., 29.

[7] Ibid., 28.

[8] Ibid., 28–29.

[9] Ibid., 4. The quotation is from James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 29.

[10] Ibid., 189.