Arlette Farge (translated by Liesl Yamaguchi)

Speak, Shout, Beseech – Making History in the Streets of the Eighteenth Century: Afterword

In the eighteenth century, to live is to speak. For the masses who live outside, mostly without any privacy, the essential vehicles of all communication are vocal: quick, dense, jumbled conversations, malicious banter, speaking, shouting, reading aloud. Women and men "are what they say", although it bears noting that writing inserted itself into their daily lives as well, and that they had a particular fondness for it. Speaking, reciting, shouting, poking fun, insulting – these are acts of necessity: moments that make and break lives. They are also the makings of history. In the eighteenth century, there is no such thing as a crowd without voices, neither in the street nor on the corner, in the garden, in the workshop or even at church. Public attitudes, opinions, and dispositions first take shape as vocal sound: a historical fact before which the historian remains helpless. The stumbling block is not the absence of voices (chroniclers and commentators are forever remarking on the 'thundering clamor of the voices of Paris'), but the absence of their tone. Figures of the period, such as Louis Sébastien Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris*, often comment on this noisy Parisian atmosphere, writing about the constant stream of speech flowing from windows, carriages and reckless coaches; from merchants who, peddling their wares, are forever breaking out in song in the streets and along the river banks; from processions and religious ceremonies, not to mention the cabarets, taverns and salons where conversations break out, sparked by lively proposals and impassioned arguments for and against. If ordinary voices and everyday speech are frequently mentioned and described, it is because they form the bedrock of the popular classes, their various forms of assembly, and the life of the public space.

These ephemeral voices fell silent long ago, to be sure, and they will never be fully restored. But they were expressed once, and they left many a trace. Police archives (in which official complaints, testimonies, and interrogations are held) offer records of their speech, revealing the complex dynamism of a world composed of voices, gestures, attitudes, and emotions, social and political opinions often tinged with devastating details.

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Police reports collect whispers of the popular voices concerning to the government.[1] Under-cover officers haunting public spaces and cafés would listen in on "the murmurs about town", their reports reaching the King himself within the week. The anonymous voices overheard by the police are of capital importance: the King refers to them derisively as "the frogs' croaking", but he is also obsessively preoccupied with their tone and contents. The reports clash and coalesce, inviting consideration alongside the speech of children – who play a key role in their neighborhoods as the bearers of news – as well as that of convicts, prisoners, and the insane, whose pained, broken voices pierce the clear, Parisian nights.

These so-called lost voices are full of demands, so much so that in recovering them one comes to realize that each one bears meaning: meaning that has been obscured by time, but which is nonetheless present. Our knowledge of the past can also be constructed by means of these voices, as there can be no doubt that they too have constructed our presence.

I Everyday Voices of the People

So difficult is it to get one's bearings in the midst of the people's voices that some observers use the word "cacophony" to designate them. Indeed, ordinary voices are interspersed with song, tolling bells, town criers, representatives of the crown reading out royal decrees, and so forth. Sounds and voices circulate, going this way and that.

1) Between Childhood and Adulthood

Generally speaking, children begin working as apprentices between the ages of ten and fifteen. It is a complicated moment, as youth come up against the brutal command of masters, often accompanied by severity and mistreatment. The archives offer a trace of such a case in little Joseph Langlois, aged eleven, apprenticed to a jeweler in 1753.[2] Mistreated by his master, he whimpers often and occasionally cries out. His mother lodges a complaint with the superintendent of the local police department, specifying that "it's made the child lose his voice and made him so upset that he no longer speaks". This example is far from unique. In depositions to defend their children, parents insist on the extent to which children in cases like

1 Archives de la Bastille, Ms-10155–10170.

2 Archives de la Bastille Ms-10096.

these lose their ability to speak and communicate. It must be added that at the time, there was no school system to assist children in learning to speak, read, and write.

The apprentices do seek to defend themselves, however, and it does happen that they band together by night, singing "despicable songs" under the window of some malevolent master. It is a sort of oral vengeance on the part of those who must assemble to regain their communal voice – or else borrow that of the pamphleteer. A great uprising takes place in 1750, as the so-called "naughty children" – children of artisans for the most part – are taken into police custody on the charge of disturbing the peace. Police officers (often under-cover), emerge from carriages, rounding up children at intersections and in public squares and taking them to prison. An uprising stirs, bubbling up with fury as the children who escaped abduction shout out in alarm, rushing to tell all the neighborhoods of Paris why they are hearing abducted children screaming from passing carriages. The police archives make it possible to "hear" these voices, those of the parents, and those of the children sounding the alarm. Over three days of riots, it is children's voices that alert the people, who waste no time in mounting a response.

2) The Voices of Lovers' Banter

Most of the time, these meetings take place in the street, around the neighborhood, in the parks or along the banks of the Seine. People live outside because they have hardly any private space. Lovers often call out to one another, chat, and caress before any and all: voices are heard, gestures observed. Thus, in the popular classes, lovers' discourse assumes quite specific voices. Women's voices are often described by writers and philosophers, but recovering the words and voices of lovers' speech as pronounced in the open street is nonetheless no easy task. In aristocratic circles it is far easier, especially if one considers that in salons, witty remarks prompt laughter; laughter becomes the gauge of romantic success. One still recognizes the virile seducer and the response of the woman said to be "delightfully conquered".

In reading through the police archives, one finds cross-examinations of women who, seduced and abandoned, lodge formal complaints against the men who promised to marry them only to leave them when they became pregnant. The words of seduction are then repeated to the officer: words pronounced "gently" some women report. He who seeks to accomplish his goal by means of "smooth words". This is according to the confession of Denise Richard, chambermaid, aged 21, whose lover came to see her every day. Most of the time, the "smooth words" seek to charm, poke gentle fun, or entertain. These are what the women call "provocations". It's a polite

word that reveals all the mischief lurking in an exchange whose aim is seduction. It's a sparkling, light-hearted melody made up of sounds pronounced like little bells. The seduced woman may then be so moved that tears muffle the sounds of her response. Some men turn to books, reading a few passages to their partners. However, as soon as the complaint reported to the officer touches upon the theme of abandonment following the period of seduction, the rhythm of the words composing the account makes itself felt. Here the report starts to thrash about, vengeful, flashing with anger.

The cross-examinations of men brought in to account for seductions undertaken to obtain sexual relations are fairly uniform, unlike the complaints lodged by women, which are very detailed. More or less all of the men are in denial, finishing off their statements with expressions of anger or even insults rather shocking in tone: they declare that in the end the woman is nothing but a tramp, a "soldiers' girl". Even better, sometimes they add that these women were "mesmerized" by their syrupy claptrap, holding them prisoners of their words. Such are the portraits of women whose voices are stigmatized in order to accommodate a convenient ruse: a specific, soothing pronunciation with light lisp or stutter that seeks to seduce them.

The lovers' dialogue itself employs particular vocal sounds, soft and enchanting as the babble of infants. Between laughter and tears, vocal melodies and puzzling stuttering lie particular sounds that are often very attractive, and which clearly do not escape the ears of the chroniclers and writers who describe them (Marivaux, Restif de la Bretonne etc.).

3) Disputes and "Bacanals"

No city, street, or cabaret along the banks of the Seine is without its conflicts and skirmishes. In this oral society whose members are obliged to exist in close proximity, voices ring out, are overheard, rise up in argument. It is a part of everyday life, an inevitable rather than elective aspect of "being in the world". Relations are negotiated in the middle of the public space as a general rule.

Arguments are everyday occurrences in Paris. They break out, unannounced, over the slightest incident. One could cite the quarrels in marketplaces and cabarets, or the arguments emanating from workshops and coaches crossing town. In truth, these disputes almost always index some social issue (which is to say, some political issue). Disputes amongst women are very frequent, and their shouts frighten the neighbors. But their raised voices are so habitual that their arguments do not garner any attention from the police, hence the proverb "Disputes amongst women don't count."

The real 'bacanal' arises when serious conflicts erupt between boys, workers, and journeymen, and these are quite frequent, all things considered. They can put the whole neighborhood on alert, along with all the streets of Paris. For example: the archives of Officer Hugues (1757–1778)[3] at the central market Les Halles feature a remarkable number of conflicts between workers. The working population rises up against masters or guild jurors of their community deemed offensive. The reports written up by the police depict neighborhoods echoing with enraged voices, cynical and angry. These bitter voices are the arms of the King's subjects raised up in opposition to the authorities. Indeed, the voices' function is to signal and affirm the collective position that has been taken. The year 1763 witnesses a long, drawn-out plot amongst the cobblers. They go from workshop to workshop, street to street; yelling, they throw their tools (a form of sacrilege in the artisan world), hurling countless violent insults and abominations.[4] The collective clamor of these very violent, contemptuous voices puts the entire population on alert. The popular ear is very keen, and all disturbances amongst workers attract massive crowds. Here, the social and political stakes are completely "legible", or rather audible, and they alert the authorities to the gravity of the situation. The cobblers' rallying cry of "*Houet! Houet!*" is familiar to all, and the brevity and sharp accents of its pronunciation put everyone on alert. Shouts of "*Aya!*" emanate from the windows in expressions of solidarity and satisfaction. As for the on-call officers brought in as reinforcements, they rush in shouting "Beware! Beware!", prompting the people to ask them emphatically to quit making such a "racket."

4) Raised Voices and Rows on the Main Thoroughfares

The main roads, towpaths, and riverbanks overflow with a walking world that, most of the time, is searching for work. Within it, one must know just how to cross paths with others, just as one must know the proper way to enter and leave a cabaret. The botched crossings that erupt in rows are particularly visible in the requests for pardon submitted to the King at the moment of coronation. Here the accounts are very precise, punctuated with the sounds and shouting of roadside arguments, as well as their violence. One can hear the shouts, the "*holà!*"s of the aggressors, the howls in disputes of honor, the quarrels about encroaching on someone else's property, etc. Remarked above all are accusations of smuggling,

3 Archives Nationales Y 10 000–11 004.

4 Archives Nationales, Y 11 004 A, 7 mai 1763.

street fights, suspected arsonists, and problems concerning vagrant soldiers or deserters.

The detailed accounts of those seeking pardon are punctuated with noises, sounds, and vocal expressions very typical of those living in the many forms of homelessness found in the countryside.

The inn is without question the site of greatest conflict, between the drunkenness, the attempts at seduction, the unexpected encounters, the deafening discussions of hiring, and the "sweet, hoarse voices of young ladies", in the words of Restif de la Bretonne.

II When Riots Break Out

When riots break out, they break out in voices: voices intensely feared by the authorities. Words uttered in anger prompt rebellious mouths to shout particular insults and exclamations, bringing the anxiety of the monarchy to its highest pitch. Take the example of the Revolt of 1775 (The Flour War), when the hungry people rise up thunderously. The furor is enormous. The demand for bread takes the form of a symbolic event: someone steals the bread with great fanfare before a crowd that, cheering its approval, demands that the thief escape arrest. Public outcry ensues, women are enraged, ringleaders harangue the authorities. These shouts are also calls to arms: hearing them, the crowd gains momentum, building up steam. Some of the accused endeavor to defend themselves, like the 47-year-old porter Francis Coret, who explains "that he does not remember anything, though having been drinking during the day, he may have done more shouting than he thought, but it was hunger that drove him to it". A hunger that drives a man to scream . . . some of the rioters are accused of possessing voices that ring out over the others, voices "capable of inciting revolt" and used to do precisely that.

In the case of riots, women's' voices are very present, even essential, and characterized as extremely abrasive. Chroniclers pounce on the opportunity to castigate these sharp, piercing voices. When women of "the lower classes" are upset, one notices that the police archives retain their voices, and their remarkable vociferations, if only to underscore the presence of imminent danger. The chroniclers call it "the belly scream", or even "the scream of the womb" (*le cri du ventre*), though without ever noting the collective, social aspect of the women's' actions. "Women can only make noise" – discourse is denied them.

III What Does it Mean to "Say" Badly? Translated by Liesl Yamaguchi

For those who live primarily in the street, sound provides the first opening into society. All voices are not equal, however: there is little equality – and significant difference – between the voice of the King, the voices of the salons, the voices of those who have left this world (the Convulsionaries, for example), and the voices of the suffering and the oppressed.

1) One finds the voice of the people assigned to its underprivileged condition, bumbling about with provincial accents, so-called vulgar outbursts, damaged by work, degraded, even dangerous. All while condemning this voice and characterizing it as animalistic and inept, the elites fear it. After the Revolution of 1789, some would prefer that the Nation speak with but "a single voice". This means that the people must be instructed, assisted in the use of punctuation and kept from being led astray by expressions one hoots rather than pronounces.

A police inspector tasked with collecting the "vulgar expressions" in use in the city (that the King be kept abreast of them and hear their sounds), explains that the people never cease "muttering". He listens on street corners and in public squares. The 18th-century police often write at considerable length about the strength of conviction in this popular speech, and of its vehement sound. In the police leaflets in which all of this street speech is collected,[5] one finds numerous allusions, such as: "certain individuals belonging to the coarse classes employ merciless sound inflections, speaking with excessive passion and bias, rife with abuse".

And to cite a few more of these voices: "this bloody King's been leaving us to starve to death from the moment he was born"; "you've always walked all over the poor, we'll return the favor when you get back, which is tomorrow, right? Why not?"

2) Still more reported speech is to be found in the complaints brought before the police superintendent and in the interrogations of the accused. The court clerk, of course, learned his trade before taking down actual sentences. This is why many of the complaints display identical expressions and syntax. The court clerk summarizes the plantiff's first words, then delves into the heart of the speech by inscribing it as it was spoken. Here we find inflamed outbursts that defy summary. The complaints take on a particular coloring: they are pictorial, full of images, rife with very specific vocal sounds. Reading them today, one cannot help hearing

5 Archives de la Bastille, M. 10 155, 1725.

the vocal timbres and 'seeing' the bright colors of their intonation slipped into writing. Melancholy, tenderness, hate, gentleness, "nastiness", a sense of loss: erything comes pouring out and the court clerk takes it all down. Here is life in its own words. In June 1765, a jealous young man sees his mistress being courted at the cabaret. Caught between anger and woe, he loses himself before the police officer, describing the man attempting to seduce his beloved: "so here's this goddamn pretty-face prince trying to make off with my lady";[6] this is not the invention of the court clerk. The words' brutality echoes with an impassioned energy, full of rage. Another man, hoping to punish his wife, wants to "skin her character" while a certain Mr. Leroux yells vehemently at the police officer, "I know she's a woman for the dirtiest use". A stunning and dramatic expression.

It also happens that people speak just as vehemently about the person of the King. After the Damiens' attack on Louis XV in 1757, the people are interrogated in the interest of getting a "feel" for how they are thinking, as the police lieutenant puts it. Some of the responses might as well be shouts: "If France had two eyes less today, everything would be restored". Another man in the King's service does not hesitate to say that he "would very much like to give him a swift kick in the ass since the King is a waste of space and really none too good looking with that long nose of his". All of these words provide verbal scansions that allow us to infer the sound of the voices that pronounced them.

The emotions that imbue these voices transform their syntax, coloring comments on all levels, be they phonic, grammatical, or lexical. The words taken down by the court clerks distinguish utterances of a single breath, identifiable vocal units that are completely colored by often extreme affects: astonishment, torment, defiance. The emotional qualities perceived in an utterance often form part of its message, as in the expression "*Jame la vite*", which means "No way" (*jamais de la vie*). It's a very frequent turn of phrase in the popular classes who are obliged to defend themselves as spontaneously as possible against whatever accusation may be thrown their way, which means condensing everything into a sonic exclamation one can throw like a punch: "*jam lavit*" means "No way", but also "How could you possibly think that I [. . .]"

3) The sounds of suffering resound through other voices still. The archive does not transmit sound, but one can listen for snatches of words moaned: expressions of suffering that emanate outward. Hoarse, husky, broken voices bearing the traces of work, illness, and imprisonment. They lend themselves to being heard as the end result of hardships endured. Or, to go further still, one might say weakness and misery rob the body of its voice. In his *Tableau de Paris*, Louis Sébastien

6 National Archives, Y 9713, June 1765.

Mercier often describes the sound of suffering voices; he describes their intonations as "pained," "plaintive," "mournful," and "heartbreaking". It is generally in discussions of the areas around hospitals (*Hôtel-Dieu*, for example) that the two writers Mercier and Restif de la Bretonne are fond of describing the wounded, heartbreaking melodies of extreme suffering. It is worth pointing out that these terms rarely appear in the conversational or philosophical discussion, which would appear to be completely oblivious to the fact that these aural invocations, in their infinite multiplicity, express the unbearable disfigurement of men and women who have been subjected to bodily harm. The fury in these voices is drowned out by an exaltation of suffering: the voices make history, as well, because it has been confirmed (by L.S. Mercier) that riots did take place right next to Bicêtre, in 1763 for example, when the screams of the famished, defiant prisoners attracted a scandalized crowd.

To Conclude?

This text was written out of a desire to "recover the impossible", which is to say, the voice-object. To draw out what will never again be heard, but which left its trace, allowing others to capture the inaudible and gain a new foothold in the world of the penniless whose language was stigmatized because it failed to correspond to the norm. The oralities of the past live on in ours, and the "flesh" of the voice constitutes both event and history. Today we must make these voices resonate within us because they are of the present every bit as much as they are of the past. We must hear them all, including the countless number that we have devalued, as they form the link *par excellence* to popular expression.

Bibliographical Note

The cases referred to in this essay have been drawn from the police archives of Paris, now held at the Archives de la Bastille (part of the national archives). Further sources include

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Further Reading

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