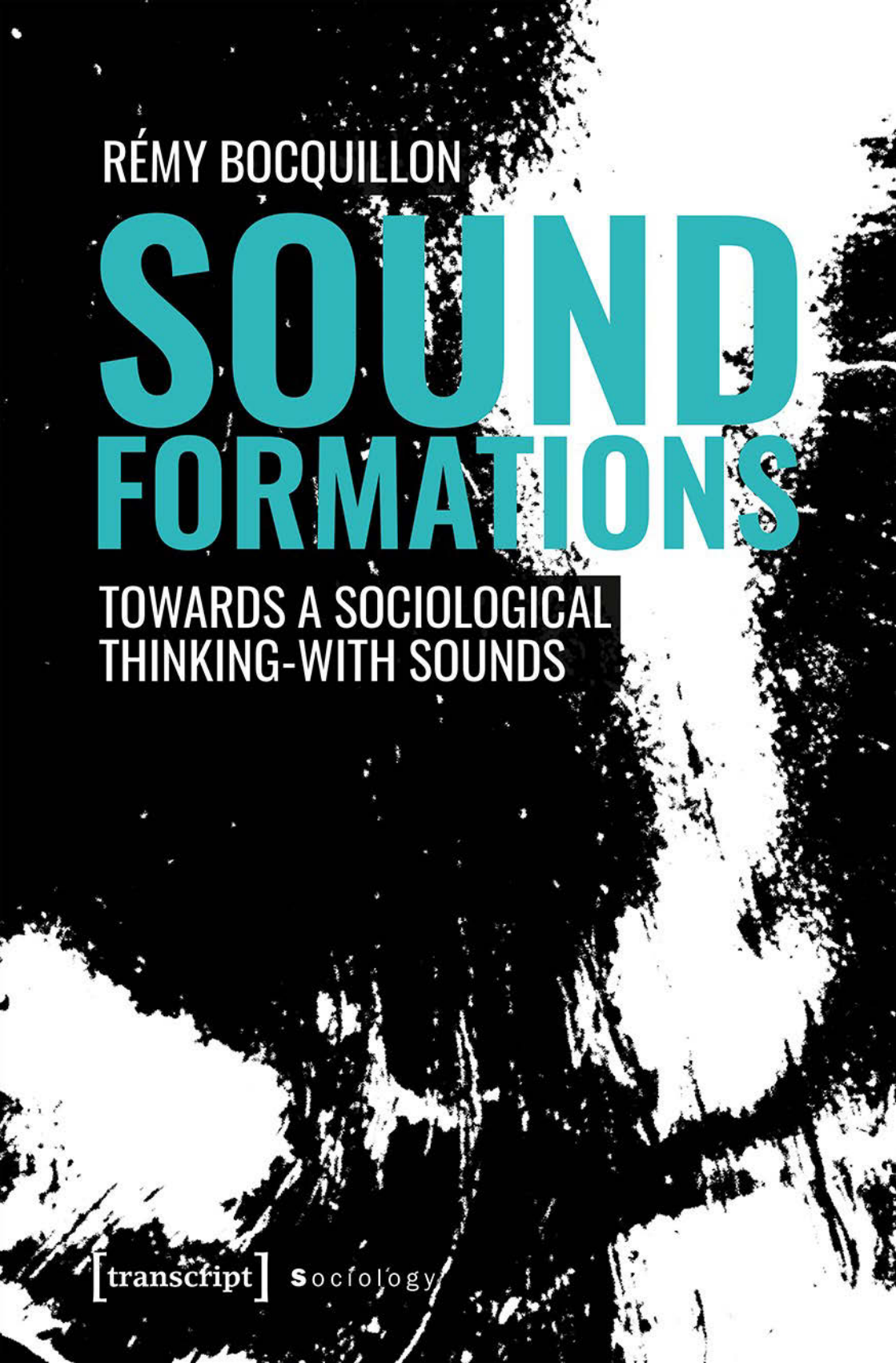
RÉMY BOCQUILLON
SOUND FORMATIONS
TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING-WITH SOUNDS
[transcript] Sociology

From:

Rémy Bocquillon
Sound Formations
Towards a Sociological Thinking-with Sounds

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Is it possible to work *with* sound in sociology rather than *being about* sound? Can there be a »sonic sociology«? Rémy Bocquillon reflects on the process-oriented character of sociology as an experimental science by including aesthetic practices of *sounding* and *listening* as constitutive for the making of sociological theory. Following new materialist and speculative philosophies, this study is thus a combination of sociological theory, philosophical thought and aesthetic practices, not understood as discrete fields of inquiry, but co-constituting each other. It also features an audio chapter, »feeding-back« the sonic experimentations at the core of the research in new and engaging ways.

Rémy Bocquillon, born in 1990, works at the chair for General Sociology and Sociological Theories at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany. His research interests revolve around epistemic practices bridging the gap between arts, science and philosophy, mostly, but not exclusively, through sound.

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Introduction

»Rappelons-le : au-delà des entités actuelles, il n'y a rien, le ›reste est silence‹.« (Debaise, 2006, p. 162).

»There is no such things as silence.« (Cage, 2011, p. 191).

1. Where to begin?

May 2017, Edmonton, Canada. A long awaited lunch break, after a morning of conferences. I am hungry, and to be honest, a bit impatient to escape the hard artificial light typical of university buildings, to discover the city, take advantage of a beautiful sunny day, and get something to eat.

Still, I decide to postpone my meal outside and come back to the room where Ipek Oskay chaired one of the morning sessions a few hours ago. It was a session dedicated to different research topics around sounding, including soundscapes and soundwalking, Ipek's own sonic project *Sesol.org*, as well as a presentation of the intriguing device MIDI Sprout, a device for »making music with plants«[1]. The curiosity generated by the device led Ipek to invite the audience to come back at lunchtime, continue the discussion and discover the MIDI Sprout in more details, how it worked and how to play music with plants. An unofficial workshop of sorts, one could say.

1 The device, now rebranded as *Plantwave*, was then presented by one of the maker, Joe Patitucci.

I hear the plants before I see them. A recognizable music, reminding of the demonstration experienced earlier. Notes (were they piano notes, synthesized sounds?) playing, building (almost) random melodies and rhythms, clusters of sounds rendering a special atmosphere. A breath of fresh air (yes, a window is open, but it's not only the wind), relieving any mental fatigue that might have squashed itself in between the quantity of information and diverse knowledges that tend to be incorporated during an academic congress.

After some time playing with the plants inside, Ipek announces that she wants to take the device outside and test it on the lawn bordering the campus buildings. I ask if I may join her. I can't tell much about Edmonton's weather in May, but on this particular day, it was ideal. The sun was shining, it was warm, but luckily not too hot (I still had to retreat and seek shadows after a while). We played with the MIDI Sprout, put the sensors on the ground, experimented with how far apart they could be to still share a common link (a common root, a connection through water?), to close the loop and make sounds. We touched the ground, varying the pressure of our fingers on the soil, awaiting any reaction. Scanning the sky, waiting and wondering if the passing of clouds would bring any change (they did, slightly so, but they did). Experiencing another change when relocating under the shadows of a tree. An unexpected moment of play and joy, within the institution of knowledge production which still took nothing away from the impression of learning, of creating something of importance.

Needless to say that I keep a very intense memory of that lunch break, which morphed into a good portion of the afternoon, and of that trip altogether. One could surely argue that my depiction is ran by a nostalgic feeling. One could retort however that this is not the point. This trip and everything it encompasses — between the talks, the walks, the bars, the punk concert caught by chance — all that started a process that changed how I feel towards my own work. Or better said, all of them constitute a collection of impacts that changed how I thought of my work and how I think with others. It was not enlightenment, not a »aha« moment. It was a feeling, subtle but already persistent, diffuse but still distinct. A feeling initiated by the diversity of perspectives at

the conference, the multiplicity of ways of working, the kindness and awareness of those viewpoints, all in all, an openness. It took me by surprise. And I took this feeling home. It did not leave me. It grew, still unsure what to become. From the talks followed readings and the feeling became clearer, it found a basis for expression, for formulation. It found words. It does not only matter what you say, but how you say it. It does not only matter what your work is about but also how it is done. It does not only matter what you think but how it is thought.

2. Aesthetic play, sound and sociology

One aspect that particularly struck me then, and took quite some time to take form in what constitutes the following work, was how such a process of play, of aesthetic engagement with sound, even if quite »simple« in appearance, did bear something very important for the construction of sociological knowledge and could itself be presented as a mode of »doing sociology«, of »doing research«. »Sounding« as a possibility to produce knowledge, presented not only through the MIDI sprout demonstration, but through the other talks as well, where soundwalking and field recordings were constituting the core of the research, as a combination of ethnographic observation and aesthetic engagement. Not necessarily as tools or skills for the collection of scientific data (Bijsterveld, 2019), but as the maker of theory itself (Schulze, 2019). In short, a sonic sociology.

It raises epistemological and methodological questions. Not necessarily in the typical sense of which methods are best suited to a particular object of inquiry, but as a more general query: how come do we do sociology the way we do it? And to be expected, the question is itself opening up to a multitude of others: who is this »we«? What is it that »we« »do«? And a very much recurrent candidate within sociological theory: what is sociology, even? Taking that very experience of sounding seriously, as a possibility for theory making and knowledge production, what would it mean for the process of writing of a PhD thesis, what does it mean for the process of researching? In other words,

taking such a posture would not only show an engagement with what is being done, but as importantly, how it is being done. The production of knowledge not reduced to the silent world of ideas, to »intellectualised modes« (Montebello, 2015b) but a knowledge material, sounding, corporeal, beyond what is considered »scientific«, made through the aesthetic play. Sound then, in its immediacy and movement, in its multidirectional propagation, conceived as a flux of matter-energy-information (Cox, 2018) becomes a vector of intensities leading to the production of knowledge.

3. The importance of thinking-with

The following work is therefore not about sound, but rather about the possibility to think a »sonic sociology«, how it might look like, and how it might *sound* like. It aims for the possibility to work *with* sound in sociology, rather than write sociologically *about* it. It is not about the use of plants in music, but about how plants and music might be the co-creators of a sonic sociology. About how the materiality of sound itself is central to the production of sociological knowledge. Non-human actors as co-writers, ants and plants. A *thinking-with sounds*.

However, to propose such a work is already to involve as multiplicity of entities as bodies, theories, knowledges. At once, it is a *thinking-with*, which, through the use of the hyphen, emphasises the co-production of thinking processes. If the »how« is as important as the »what«, the »who« to think »with« is as well. First of all, as a nod, it refers to the work of new materialist and speculative philosophies and sociologies, building a posture towards the work itself rather than only being theory texts to cite from. To name a few, the works of Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour bear particular importance, but also who they themselves think-with, who those thought-with think-with and who thinks-with them: Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Sha Xin Wei, Gilbert Simondon, Alfred North Whitehead, amongst others. Furthermore, it also includes all the other actors, non-human and more than human, friends, and of course, sounds. It therefore also implies

to *think with sounds*, which itself already gathers noteworthy entanglements with sound itself, as well as with the aforementioned philosophies, from the fluidity of sound in Christoph Cox's sonic flux, to Holger Schulze's process of *sonic thinking* and Salomé Voegelin's own thinking.

As Haraway puts it, »It matters which thoughts think thoughts. It matters which knowledges know knowledges« (Haraway, 2016, p. 35). It is a question of situation, of situatedness, as she explained elsewhere (Haraway, 1988). Proposing to *think-with sound* in producing knowledge in sociology is also a reflection on situation. On which knowledges are thought and produced, on the situation of scientific knowledge itself. On the one hand, because *sonic thinking* permits to challenge a certain hegemony in what it means to produce legitimate knowledge. It challenges the hierarchy of what is acceptable as scientific knowledge. On the other hand, it makes visible, or rather audible, as Schulze repeatedly notes (Schulze, 2018, 2020b), that scientific knowledge does not exist beyond but within power relations, and consequently, discrimination and alienation.

4. A posture towards

Accordingly, a sociological *thinking-with sound* is not only an epistemological or methodological discussion, but also necessarily an ethico-aesthetic engagement (Guattari, 1992), a posture that should reflect on the political and ecological implications at the core of the practice itself and the *matters of concern* it is entangled with. Experimenting with such practices in the scope of the knowledges »thought-with« implies to »stay with the trouble«, to quote Haraway again. It is not a political commentary or societal diagnosis however, but intends to reflect on how to propose a caring, meaningful and playful sociology in troubled times and thus already constitute a very critical perspective. As Isabelle Stengers explains, it implies to slow down as science. The illusion of timely responses and construction of readymade solutions only adds to the frenzied rhythm of capitalist necro-nomies, neglecting the ap-

parent »society« it analyses and reproducing the gap between »science« and »civil society« (Stengers, 2017; Stengers & James, 2013).

In this, *thinking-with sounds* is also a *speculative* venture. Not as a perspective retrieved from reality, but on the contrary, adding to reality, increasing the importance of experience, of the multiplicity of discourses and storytellings. In *Staying with the trouble*, Haraway proposes a declension over the letters *SF* as common denominator: »science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures.« (Haraway, 2016, p. 10). The title of this work is another nod, to *SF* this time, as an extensible list of possibles: *SF* as »sociological fabulation«, as »sonic fiction«, as *sound formations*.

5. Overview of the work

The following work can be seen as an iteration leading to the construction of a *thinking-with sounds*, or rather, as an iterative process itself becoming *thinking-with sounds*. The first chapter deals with the *thinking with*, and will serve as a re-framing of the question of alienation of knowledge as well as a theoretical positioning. It is introduced in the mode of controversies, as developed by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (Callon, 2013; van Loon, 2014). Arguing that it matters how sociology is being done does indeed asks the question of how knowledge is being produced. However, instead of a history of epistemology, it rather takes a particular starting point in philosophy, namely Immanuel Kant's work, which, through Alfred North Whitehead, will be understood as a *bifurcation of nature*, a separation between the nature in itself and the nature as apprehended by human beings. A bifurcation disseminated in the making and establishment of modern sciences as discrete fields of inquiry. It will be argued that this bifurcation as »split in thought« not only led to the strict separation between scientific knowledge and »the rest«, thus denying a plurality of modes of production, but also led to a form of alienation of knowledge, from its materiality echoing a hierarchisation in accepted and legitimate knowledges. The main perspective adopted in this chapter, and which will propagate through the work,

is that through a new materialist, speculative, radical empiricist inclination, an engagement with the multiplicity of modes of knowledge production is not only a possibility, but also constitutes a necessity, an attitude towards the making of sociology.

Sound, the second chapter, will propose and discuss the affirmation that the aforementioned alienation of knowledge from materiality is linked, or even constituted by the way knowledge has been produced in science: as a mostly visual endeavour. Through the impulses and thought probes of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, it will be argued that the »acoustic space«, often reduced to archaic societies, not only would help to regain that said materiality, but that such a sonic material knowledge already exists and is being produced. Sounding as knowledge-generating. However, this perspective will also bring further challenges, namely the use of sound as merely *representational* medium, which not only applies »visual« limitations to the use of sound, but also reifies it to the extent where it becomes »sonification« reduced to human perception. The theoretical grounding started in the first chapter will therefore be continued in discussing how a nonanthorpocentric conception of prehension — as proposed by Alfred North Whitehead — could escape the representation and the need to make »sense of«, to explain.

The following chapter, *Thinking with sound*, introduces the possibility for a sociological sonic thinking. Taking on the challenges presented at the end of the second chapter, it reflects about the practices of sounding and how sound can be understood beyond the fixated object of inquiry. Through the work of Christoph Cox and Holger Schulze, it follows a shift from a thinking *about* sound, to a thinking *through* sound, *in* sound, a thinking *with* sound. It is an ontological question, to which Cox delivers a new materialist reading. However, beyond Cox's understanding of the sonic flux, the ontology of sound will rather be read through Gilbert Simondon's *ontogenesis* and the processes of individuation, central to his philosophy. Simondon's strength is to think the individual not through the defined and stable being, but through a notion of *becoming* that is itself very fluid and implies a multiplicity of actors involved. In other words, the third chapter proposes a reading of the sonic flux through

Simondon's philosophy of individuation and transduction. In addition, the sonic *thinking* at the heart of the sonic flux will be looked at in more detail, still through Simondon, and how as practice, it could become an integral part of sociological research.

The fourth chapter takes a step back to emphasise this time on the *thinking-with*. The hyphenated inclusion, as described earlier, is a particular gathering of thoughts and sounds, a nod to certain speculative philosophies, but in this part, it also gains another meaning: it will be argued that at the core of the attitude, the posture underlying *thinking-with sounds*, is an aesthetic engagement. This aesthetic thought, not as judgement of Beauty, but as *aesthesis*, the sensible, becomes a gateway to other modes of knowledge production that are not necessarily mediated by anthropocentric perspective, either as »perception« or intellectualised through representation. Once again, it is through Simondon that the notion of *aesthetic thought* will be pursued, as a possibility to bring back magic, as certain »enchantment« of the world, as an addition to reality, a thickening of the real, a different relation between entities, beyond dualisms nature/culture, technique/culture, through a *thinking-with sounds*. It is therefore more than a simple »aesthetisation« of research, but rather an attempt to echo Félix Guattari's ethico-aesthetic paradigm, as a multiplicity of possible creative and critical practices.

The fifth and last chapter is itself an overview, a re-collection of sounding experiments and thinking processes which co-constructed the following work. Not a presentation of results, or research design, but an archive of the thinking|doing practices that were part of the research over the span of the last few years. It includes a description of installations and workshops conducted both inside and outside the university, which themselves are not applications of clearly defined methods, but part of the process of writing the thesis altogether. Moreover, it also adds further theoretical reflections on particular aspects of *thinking-with sounds*, which also manifested themselves through the thinking|doing entanglements, as propositions either resonating with aspects presented in other chapters, or expanding from them onto new possibles. Finally, because such a work should also be sounding rather than remain a flat reduction of sound, the fifth chapter is also fol-

lowed by an audio counterpart, completing the *thinking-with sounds* anarchive: a sounding feedback, presented in the form of an »audio chapter«, where bits of narration illustrate recordings or sonic re-creations of the mentioned installations. They are not only passive renderings, but inviting for further actualisations and experimentations, through the inclusion of every program, sound and data used in the making of those installations. An extension of possibles hopefully, beyond academic particularism.