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**SOUNDSCAPES: THE SOUNDING CITY
AND URBAN SOCIAL LIFE**

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Soundscapes: The Sounding City and Urban Social Life*

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...I looked at the drifting urban landscape out of which the immense racket emerged and I understood that there was a reason for the tumult: it was the sound of the city...

A. Vitorino de Almeida, *O Som da Cidade* (The Sound of the City)

The question of the 'images of the city' has recently been the object of numerous reflections, both theoretical and empirical, in a wide range of different areas of knowledge. One might say that a new upsurge of research, of a multidisciplinary orientation, on the modes of representation of cities was started with Kevin Lynch (1960). Thus, to the more conventional analysis provided by city planning, architecture and landscape science, as well as by urban marketing research, was added the contribution of the social sciences, from history to anthropology, from geography to sociology. At present, the 'images of the city' are essentially an object of transversal analysis, productively traversed by so many cross-fertilizing disciplinary perspectives. The purpose of this essay is to consider a particular perspective on those images – the sound images of cities – seeking to emphasize the way in which the social sciences, most particularly sociology and geography, approach them and include them in the body of knowledge they produce. For that I avail myself of analogy and metaphor in order to consider the heuristic value of sonorities and their relationship with behaviours and urban social life and environments.

The paradigmatic process of transformation of contemporary scientific production gives an unusual character to emerging modes of research, where subject and object are commingled as never before. In other words, emerging knowledge carries an indelible mark of the autobiography of the researching subject, to the extent where it becomes legitimate to say, as Boaventura S. Santos (1992) does, that all contemporary knowledge is self-knowledge. Sharing this view, I therefore begin this essay with a brief reference to a personal experience of mine which both signals and justifies my interest and my incursion into these matters.

It has to do with my three-year experience of living in a city in the periphery of New York and my regular wanderings through the Big Apple. The geography of

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that metropolis was introduced and gradually taught to me by a friend – Anísio Correia – who, in his blind condition, showed me how the city can be read and perceived through its soundscapes and different sonorities. I confess that the reflection on the sound images of the city presented here is perhaps not so rewarding an experience as it was for me to let myself be led and seduced by the ‘geography of sounds’ which was permanently altered by snowfalls and which led Anísio Correia, whom I followed down the Broadway, or past the Blue Note, or walking the meanderings of popular 14th Street, or admiring Brooklyn Bridge and walking around Soho. To each of those places I saw I tried to match their distinctive sounds. I recognize now that all I was trying to do was to reduce the level of perplexity and confusion typically felt by those who can merely see, either because they cannot, or will not, hear, which is generally a higher level of perplexity than that of those who can only hear and cannot, or will not, see. A neophyte to those places, I was soon given to understand how the city sounds and resounds, which is also the matter out of which its image and its identity are constructed.

If the city sounds and resounds, do sociology and the other social sciences listen to it? The immediate answer is no. The rule seems to be that both sociology and most of the other social sciences prove to be deaf when they examine the city. That is a corollary of rationalist epistemologies of Weberian and Bachelardian inspiration, with their objectivism based on cold, distanced analysis expunged of the supposedly distorting effects of feelings, emotions, and subjectivities. As this text will show, I believe that desideratum is not always possible to reach, it is certainly not easy to accomplish, and I even suspect that frequently, and given the objects under analysis, it may probably even be uncommendable.

Social Sciences and Sonorities

Our culture is generally presented as a principally written culture, where the sonority of oral expression only marginally interferes with social and cultural arrangements and configurations. In recent decades, recognizing the importance of looking and of visual culture in the conformation and the modes of representation of society, while it contradicts the epistemological objectivism that tends to be hegemonic in the social sciences, it also corroborates the strategy of marginalization of sonority as a socially relevant cultural ingredient. That is why, for instance, while denouncing and simultaneously confirming this state of things, some anthropology has helped reinforce the idea that written cultures are ‘inferior’ cultures which, by underestimating their oral, and therefore also their auditory, component, run the risk of reducing the degree of their intelligibility.

In sociology, even in its relativistic currents, more open to the recognition of the sensitive and emotional element, undermining the importance of the sound and auditory variable is legitimated by the influent works of the most distinguished discipline's founders, Georg Simmel. In fact, after he abandoned his early formalistic theories on social organization and the constitution of groups, Simmel admits that our sense of hearing can provide but a partial revelation of human beings and, thus, of society, since it merely authorizes a momentary interpretation which is limited by the duration of the manifestation and recognition of their sounding presence (Simmel, 1997a). For Simmel, the sense of hearing is a passive sense, with no autonomy of its own, which forms an evident contrast with that of vision. In a face-to-face relationship, the latter always implies communication. That is why the author of *Sociology of the Senses* recognizes that the look 'cannot give without taking', while hearing is destined to take without (the possibility of) giving (*idem*).

Following this line of reasoning, it might be argued that sociological currents with a stronger phenomenological, ethno-methodological and symbolic-interacionist approach were the ones that emphasized the dynamic and symbolic component of the look in human interaction and in the unfolding of micro-events, as well as in direct daily social relations. In numerous symbolic analyses of the social, the look has even been converted into a privileged methodological protocol for research (Goffman, 1971a), in detriment of other modes of perception. For that reason, although I do not wish to minimize the contributions of such authors as Michel Foucault (1979), Martin Jay (1992), or John Urry (1990), among others, I believe that we should recover Simmel's sociology so as to better contextualize the current emphasis given to looking and to visual culture as a field for reflecting upon and understanding the ways in which modern socio-political configurations were structured.

Simmel seems to analyse the human senses as a zero sum game. The dynamism of vision and of the look entails the marginality of hearing. For Simmel, egotism and passivity are therefore the characteristics of the human sense of hearing, condemned as it is, contrary to seeing, to indiscriminately 'take' all the stimuli it is offered without the possibility of being deliberately interrupted or withdrawn from whatever is uninteresting or despicable. It might be said that Simmel is thus taking social sonority to a paroxysm: its continuous insinuation into social spaces is equivalent to its neutralization as a specific variable, making the recognition of the presence and of the individuality of subjects depend on their capacity to imprint their own sound marks and signs upon the social environments wherein they move. It also becomes clear that Simmel is himself also responsible for the silencing and the epistemological devaluation of society's sonorities. But he does it his own way, it should be added. In truth, somewhat paradoxically, while he seems to believe in the fragile capacity of the sense of hearing to explain how society is constructed, Simmel

admits that sharing the same sound environment (a recital or a music performance, for instance) can promote a particular sense of ‘commonality’, even when the awareness of its ‘unity’, based on sound and auditory means, is far more abstract than that which is achieved around oral communication and speech (Simmel, 1997a). I believe this particular sense of commonality is what could be explored in a reflection on the sound images of cities, which, although collectively shared and disseminated, have nonetheless differentiated senses and meanings, depending on their respective senders and receivers.

There is a remarkable heuristic value in Simmel’s reflections on the senses, in general, and on the social roles of sonorities, in particular. His speculative matrix, which evinces a non-objectivistic and, in some cases, impressionist orientation of social relations, also present in *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 1978) or in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Simmel, 1997b), can be seen as constituting an alternative to the Weberian or Bachelardian *episteme* in positing the centrality of the sensitive and immaterial element in the construction of the knowledge of social reality.

Having said that on the deafness of sociology, a deafness which, as a matter of fact, seems to be dissipating, let me now refer briefly to geography. Does geography listen? Here, my answer to the question of whether social knowledge incorporates the sound of the city, and how it does or does not do it, is more affirmative. The reason is the fact that sound has itself a close relationship with *movement*, which, by its turn, induces alterations in the molecular structure around the moving person or object, propagating in space, by successive waves, until it reaches our ear (Ackerman, 1990). This intimacy of sound, movement, and space endows geography, as a social science, with a higher degree of sensitivity vis-à-vis social sonorities. In this context, we should mention the Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro (1968) and do him justice for his repeated references to the characteristic sound environments (as well as to other dimensions of sensory reality) of Islamic cities, to understand how strong the relationship between geography and sounds is. For Ribeiro, the identities or the images of those cities are something more than just their morphologic, spatial, or functional features. They include also not only their colours and odours, but also their specific sonorities. Therefore, there are strong indications that geography does listen, or can listen to the pulse of the city and thence draw conclusions regarding both its mode of functional organization and its aesthetic order¹.

A particularly convincing argument concerning the relationship between geography and sonorities can be found in the recent work of Paul Rodaway (1994),

¹ Besides this, there are numerous other works in this line of thought which, in spite of their more philosophical and speculative nature, have a direct relationship with the science of geography, town planning and the social ordering of spaces and territories [among others, Augoyard (1978; 1985), Amphoux (1994), Borzeix (1995), Delage (1980), Haumont (1994), and Schafer (1977; 1985)].

where he analyses 'auditory geographies' as a specific field for the analysis of sensory experience and the acoustic properties of the environment². As he reviews an important number of contributions on the relationship between space, its ordering/regulation, and social sonorities, Paul Rodaway emphasizes the work of Canadian musician R. Murray Schafer and notes his conceptual framework, insisting upon the distinction between *soundfield* and *soundscape*. Using these notions, one might say that the former, *soundfield*, refers to the acoustic space generated by a particular emitting source which irradiates and makes its sonority distend to a well-defined area or territory. The center of this *soundfield* is a particular emitting agent, either human or material, whose origin tends to become obscure and indefinite as the sound it produces propagates and mixes with other sounds. The acoustic expression that constitutes the *soundfield* is therefore always an hybrid, and, in a certain sense, a de-territorialized expression. However, within certain physical and geographical limits, such as the space of the city, the most common situation is that of the simultaneous presence of several superimposed, articulated *soundfields*. The *soundscape* is what results from that superimposition, that is, a multifaceted environment which surrounds the different subject-receivers. The *soundscape* is thus fundamentally anthropocentric, since, unlike the *soundfield*, its center is constituted not by an undifferentiated emitting agent - human or material - but rather by the concrete human subject, in his/her capacity as a receiver. In other words, while *soundfields* emphasize the action of producing/emitting sonorities, *soundscapes* have to do with the act of their reception/appropriation and thus seem capable of re-territorializing and specifying the undifferentiated acoustics of the *soundfield*.

As an agglomeration of sounds originating from different sources that is, if we may put it so, imposed upon the subject/receiver, modern *soundscapes*, more specifically those occurring in big cities, suggest a state of mind that is permanently conditioned by the environmental sound as socially experienced. In contemporary cities, as I shall be arguing later, it becomes impossible to avoid noise, and enjoying silence is but a cultural and psychological stratagem based on the individuals's capacity to increase their threshold of acoustic tolerance. A very neat parallel could be drawn here between this and the historical regulation/adaptation of society vis-à-vis smells. As Norbert Elias (1978) argues, in the domain of social sonorities, we are still cultivating elementary forms of a civilizational control of drives, seeking to regulate our reactive capacity.

As formless masses of sounds, modern *soundscapes* tend to reach to the receiver in their multi-sonority, with a low acoustic fidelity that makes it difficult, or even impossible, to clearly distinguish each of the sound signs that constitute them, as well as identify their different origins. This low acoustic fidelity makes the

² I am following Paul Rodaway closely in this paragraph.

soundscape a *Low-Fi soundscape*, the 'sound mist' (to use R. Murray Schafer's words again) which surrounds denser urban environments being an example of that. It is a cacophony similar to what we call noise and which tends to be perceived and to suggest a psychological state of absent-mindedness on the part of the subject-receiver, resembling the condition of enjoyment/reception of common artistic creation identified by Walter Benjamin (1968).

Benjamin's critique suggests, above all, an opposition regarding the terms and the conditions of enjoyment/reception of auratic art. Contrary to ordinary art, it requires a higher degree of concentration and of psychological and emotional contemplation, as well as a calculated physical and sentimental detachment, both of them indispensable to a total understanding of the meaning of the artistic object, which is otherwise never adequately captured, and tends to become banal. Similarly, the 'sound mist' surrounding today's urban environments renders communication difficult and lowers its quality. This effect of social disturbance is not merely a consequence of the unruly propagation of the noisiest *soundfields* in the cities. Parallel to it, paradoxically, one might say, the excessive presence of supposedly more melodious *soundfields*, as is the case of music, may also interfere with the quality of communication. As a matter of fact, if the technological revolution which started in the 19th century on the one hand rendered music more socially accessible, withdrawing it from the exclusive possession of those who played it or could frequent specific places where it was produced, on the other hand, it made it unrestrictedly common as mass production (Spice, 1995). The type of music whose presence was regulated and determined according to a particular space-time relation is now totally deregulated and it therefore becomes excessive and shows itself to be enervating and 'de-humanizing' of urban conviviality (Almeida, 1987). Increasingly, all urban spaces are constantly being invaded by music as a component of their 'sound mist'. There is no silence in the city and, with the hegemony of this sound *continuum*, shelters in urban space and intervals in urban time disappear. With them, also the minimum conditions for reflection and for listening, which sustain communication and conviviality in cities, are being reduced.

Excessive sound and *soundscape*s in the city can in fact devalue individuals and render their history insignificant. Again, there is a contrast here between sight and hearing. When, after the 1930's, cities started to have their most important public buildings and historical monuments lit up, the small detail was perfected and made more visible (Choay, 1992). The spotlight gave a new stage-like framework to the city, subtracting a part of the visual environment from sight and thereby re-emphasizing what it had made (more) visible. However, the urban *mise-en-scène* did not stop there; recently, sound came to complete the stage setting of many of those places, with many different 'light and sound' shows (Fortuna, 1997a). Contrary to

light, however, the artificial sound which surrounds public buildings and historical monuments (music or oral discourse in parallel) impacts on the audience rather than on the object under display. In these circumstances, the surrounding sonority creates an out of focus, blurring effect on visual images, making them look unreal. Thus, the individual becomes the object and it is he/she himself/herself, as a consumer, the designed target, not the architectural mark he/she is looking at (Choay, 1992). The perverse success of this strategy of artificial sound surrounding buildings and historical monuments therefore resides in the belittlement of the nobility and exemplary character of the latter, rendering them too banal and almost insignificant.

In specific situations and in opposition to the rule of multi-sonority, there may also be single-*soundscapes*; and contrary to cacophony, they may suggest a sense of symphony, with a singular, maybe even melodious, sonority, which allows an accurate identification of both its nature and its sound source. In this case, one might say that it is the state of concentration, of the type required for reading auratic art, that marks the perception and appropriation of sonorities. By analogy, this is a high resolution, acoustically clear, *soundscape*, that is, using Schafer's terminology once again, a *Hi-Fi* type *soundscape*. Admissibly, that symphony is more appropriate to the sonorities or musicality of natural environments, rural spaces, or small urban communities than to artificial environments, or big metropolitan spaces. Vocality and direct oral communication are perhaps the best examples for that, while the sounds of the metropolis are rendered uniform and become devoid of character at the moment when human speech and material, instrumental, and technological sonorities are articulated.

Deciphering a *soundscape*, whatever its level of sound resolution, always entails ascription of meaning (Rodaway, 1994). The meaning of a sound is therefore always relative. And that not only *vis-à-vis* the singularity of the source or of the objective activity which generates it – a situation where there would be a denotative meaning of the sound interpreted – but also *vis-à-vis* other sounds it combines with – in which case one may speak of a connotative meaning. This sound relativism is also connected with our social and biographical experience, since it may both reveal a memory and a past, and thus a lived identity, and it may equally express a state of estrangement and discomfort *vis-à-vis* unknown sonorities (and, in extreme cases, *vis-à-vis* absent sonorities) which one wants to decipher in terms of their meaning or their abstract sense.

In a stimulating essay, suggestively entitled 'O som da cidade' (the sound of the city), the Portuguese composer A. Vitorino de Almeida illustrates that sound relativism when he writes about the image of the city of Lisbon of some decades ago that is centred on its social sonorities (Almeida, 1987). In his text, where the denotative and the connotative meanings of the sounds of the city are equally

privileged, the sound biography of the city appears blended with the autobiographical memory of the writer-maestro. The social memory of the former is also in part the personal memory of the latter, in an inter-textual narrative that evinces a parallelism of the sound cadencies that regulate both public and private lives in urban environments. The sound of the city, as dealt with by António Vitorino de Almeida, clearly illustrates how fragile the distinction is between the public and the private spheres, especially when we consider our sensory capacities. Recognizing how he had finished composing his 'Sinfonia Concertante' in the public space, therefore subject to all kinds of sound disturbances, the writer-maestro acknowledges that the bustle of the city did not affect his mental concentration, for the simple reason that 'all of that was human and natural: it was the sound of the city' (Almeida, 1987: 565).

Not wishing to deal upon this aspect in too much detail, I must however say that what is in question here is one of the basic assumptions on which both sociology and most of the social sciences have grounded their objectivism: the marginalization of the senses and of subjectivities. Only thus, that is, only by expurgating their analysis of the physical-sensorial and psychic dimension of social relations and the aesthetics of social spaces, has it been possible for both the political and the sociological discourses to posit the separation between the public and the private spheres of social life for so long and in such a radical manner. From the socio-political point of view, the validity of the thesis which asserts the impermeability of the public and the private has a fundamentally heuristic nature, not a functional one. From the physical and material point of view, both sound and the sense of hearing, as well as other sensorial and cognitive ingredients, can be counted amongst the most potent mediating agents between both spheres. Like Simmel's 'bridge and door' (Simmel, 1997c), the daily sound experience of the city separates human beings into never-ending stratifications of producers and receivers of urban sounds, while it unites them in sharing the same experience (Simmel's sense of a 'sound commonality'). From the point of view of social sonorities and their relation to the public/private dyad, separators are fragile or they do not exist at all. That is why hearing a conversation that is occurring outside from inside a house is a banal mode of potential access to the public space (Chelkoff and Thibaud, 1992). Therefore, sound accessibility interrogates both the perspectives and the limits of the private and the public, multiplying direct, physical, and bodily access into an indirect access from a distance. Thence, we must recognize not only the extreme porosity of both the public and the private spaces when seen in the light of *soundscares*, but also the fact that social relations and the different ways of perceiving the world can be shared by physically distant individuals and social groups.

When I mentioned the relativism of sounds and their meanings above, I implied that their abstract meaning can both activate socio-biographical memories and

generate situations of estrangement and irritability, and I even went as to admit that the absence of an expected sonority can become as disconcerting as its (excessive) presence. I would now like to take up the issue again, and try to situate it in a socio-temporal context. My starting point lies in the relation between sonority and the city, admitting that, through the former, it becomes possible, to anticipate the consolidation and the growth of the latter. This relationship is inscribed in an historical time flow which is itself not alien to the nature and the diversity of *soundfields* and images. The city of our times has its own image and its identity, and these can be detected in its sonorities. Many of these sounds have superseded other older sonorities, in an evolutionary path parallel to the slow transition from the baroque city to the city of the industrial era, and thence to the postmodern metropolis.

The Heuristics of Sounds and the City

Since it was institutionalised, classical urban sociology postulated the opposition between the emergence of big cities and small traditional communities where the bonds of urbanity as we know them today were fragile. In an attempt to delineate this opposition, we may imagine that such an evolutionary process either led to the elimination of a good deal of the typical sounds of those communities or relegated them to a position of extreme rarity which surprises us when we encounter them in normal situations of daily life. I am thinking of a series of 'natural' or animal sounds, or even of pre-urban, pre-industrial professional life, like the strident crow of a rooster at dawn, or the sound of the manual water pump supplying water for the household, or the rhythmic pounding of the hammer on the blacksmith's anvil. Following what I said above, those are sounds with a high level of fidelity and acoustic personality, a sort of *Hi-Fi* sounds whose origin is immediately and easily identifiable. As long as they disappear or become rare in the urban environment, they become signs of the loss of the capacity to individualize social and natural pre-urban situations. In the modern city, where sound seems to be what makes the thing, something is constantly being muted to soon succumb, suggesting an adaptation of the old saying, according to which what is out of sight remains out of the heart, which then becomes what is out of our *hearing* remains out of our *knowledge*.

Curiously enough, since many of our cities still keep indelible traces of their constitution as dispersed superimpositions of spheres of action, activities, and social environments, some of them traditional, others modern, the city can surprise us through the persistence of some of those sonorities, which can be detected in the meanderings of its chaotic *soundscape*s. I am not thinking here of the increasingly frequent situations of museum-like display or of artificial production of culturally lost sounds. More useful for the purpose of understanding the persistence of those sonorities is perhaps to deal with some of those sounds as sounds which constitute

themselves as a kind of heritage markers, although in a situation of closure. The presence and the permanence of these sounds, albeit kept under control, can suggest situations of social cultural hybridity which, in some cities more than in others, seems to characterize their present economic, political, social and spatial structuring modes. I am suggesting, thence, that one may argue for the existence of transitional sounds or of forms of sound resistance and revanchism of the baroque city within the modern city.

The sound of the church bell or its modern mechanical clock which still insists in being heard in many of our cities is a good example of the closure and of the resistance of old sonorities. The centrality of the belfry in the old days is lost in the big city. It was a geographical and spatial centrality, as well as a political and cultural one. In fact, many activities and traditional functions of villages and neighbourhoods, some of which now absorbed by urban expansion, were structured around it. Therefore, even when it persists, the single sound sign of the church bell no longer marks the cadence of collective life. Social life in an urban context has become diversified, and, in the present urban industrial context, neither the time told by the church bell nor its cadency correspond to the times or the cadencies of daily work, or of rest, or festivity. Be it present or absent, the sound of the church bell cannot but cause a nostalgic feeling for days gone by. The same could be said concerning the urban street cries of medieval origin, generally associated to peddlers, which have not only become rare in the city, but are also no longer a marker of rhythms, temporalities, and ways of living of urban daily life (Almeida, 1987).

If so many traditional sounds were gradually lost with the advent of the modern city, other, new sounds emerged in their place. New *soundscape*s, especially of a technological and industrial nature, have now gained prominence. The predominant sound of the city is now a mechanical, rhythmic sound with a regular, continuous, and routine cadence. The best instance of that is perhaps represented by the combustion engine, which, besides being a symbol of industrialization, has also been converted into a “privilege” of urban modernity. In parallel with the combustion engine, we could of course mention many other sound signs of a lost type of urbanity. Let’s for instance imagine the sound of a tram-car, slowly and romantically gliding upon its rails, or the rhythmic sound of the keys of the old Remington. Through their sounds, they both symbolise the vertiginous speed which has taken over the city of modernity (Virilio, 1986). Cities evolve, and their sounds with them. Like so many other symbols of modernity, those technological artifacts and their sound marks were inescapably destined to be replaced by others. They were sacrificed in the altar of the very same speed they proclaimed. Suddenly, the old typewriting machine was replaced by the electrical typewriter, the latter being eventually replaced by the computer, in a ever-ending succession of new artifacts. The whistling sound of the old

telephone, an indelible sign of urban sociability, had a similar fate, being displaced by the digital phone and its technological sound.

Between the new sounds that dominate the soundscapes of the city and extinct or endangered sounds, the city can be seen as a agglomeration of endless and countless sonorities. This superimposition marks an unparalleled impact on the structuring modes of both territories and social conviviality. The overlapping *soundfields* of the city no longer make it possible to establish a clear definition of their boundaries. The sounds of the city, like cultures, individuals, and urban social groups are transitory, fraught with ambiguity, and, so it seems, devoid of history or roots, without a single identity, but rather with multiple identifications. Within this sound entropy, sounds seem to wander like that paradigmatic character of modernity, the *flâneur*, wanders through the urban environment.

The overlapping sounds that constitute the *soundscape* of a public office or of the informal atmosphere of the city street are not identifiable, single, individual sounds. They are sinusoidal sounds, devoid of both harmony and quality, and, in the language adopted here, they would be equivalent to cacophony and the *Low-Fi soundscape*. They symbolise an urbanity made of mixtures of sounds and of the loss of relationships of mutual knowledge. Without these the relationships of anonymity and estrangement typical of big cities are installed and strengthened. The contrast with the small community mentioned above is very clear. From a political and historical perspective, that contrast is synonymous with individual liberation, for within it there is a flight from the confined space of the traditional community, from its personalist bonds and engagements, based on deeply ingrained traditions, on the family, professional status, and religion. Using our initial metaphor, we may say that the limit of the individual liberation provided by the city seems to reside in the risk of anomie and of personal and collective insecurity present in many of our cities.

The liberating city is the same city that makes us run the risks of disorganization and disorder. Do these have a specific sonority? The answer is yes, if we think of the sibilant sound of the ambulance slicing the sound environment of the city, or even the more prosaic car alarm. Fear and insecurity, or better, the cultural images our civilization gradually constructed around them, have taken many of the city's inhabitants and political decision-makers. I am not suggesting that, because it promotes anonymity, the city leads inescapably to urban delinquency and violence. I rather wish to think that the city is a disciplined social space, both regulated and regulating, and that the aggressiveness that stems from it can only be adequately understood within that framework of discipline and order.

I will go so far as daring to illustrate the regulating activity of the city by means of *soundfields* such as those originating in the railway barrier or the traffic lights. Through them, while it manages the regular flows of urban transport, the city

also disciplines the walk of pedestrians, organizing the otherwise chaotic urban comings and goings. It does that impersonally, in such a way that its mentors or agents are not perceptible or identifiable, for they are located backstage, in rooms equipped with sophisticated computer systems for traffic control. The invisibility of those responsible for the traffic disciplining sonorities offers a clear contrast to the city of decades ago, when the same traffic regulating function was identified with the physical effort of policemen, with their ready whistle and exuberant dance. Today, the modern city hides and impersonalises its regulating agents, replacing them by 'invisible' expert systems, typical of advanced technologic rationalities. The only thing one knows about them is the sound effectiveness of the function they control.

That is a new, technological form of promoting anonymity in cities and metropolis. When sociology examined the emergence of big cities, it did not consider this type of anonymity, one made of invisibilities. In its place, classical urban sociology analysed, on the one hand, the anonymity which stems from the advent of crowds and, on the other, albeit in articulation with the former, the enormous individualization of subjects promoted by the city. Both situations have their own specific sonorities. First, if the city moves in groups, the factory whistle, for example, continues to illustrate the way how crowds of workers start or stop their day's work or their movement across the city, whose sound profile changes as the day advances. In this sense, the underground is the muffled, subterranean sound of the city being crossed by crowds with well-defined starting points and destinations. In both cases, those *soundfields* posit a collective movement, capable of breaking limits of space and time and therefore rendering urban territories more fluid than ever before. The citizen seems to have become an individual with no identity, immersed as he/she is in the formless mass of subjects in regulated motion.

In such conditions, can the subject resist its own de-personalization? This is the second aspect of contemporary urban anonymity. Simmel asked the same question when he analysed individualistic culture and saw it as a positive attitude, reactive rather than defeatist, on the part of the culturally uprooted subject who had left a personalist culture behind to become immersed in the big city. Individualism would therefore be a personal conquest, not a perverse product of the urban condition, as it is commonly considered.

Does the typical individualism of the urban world have a specific sound? The answer is yes if we try to ascribe meaning to the sounds of the beeper, the mobile phone and the walkman. All of them are technologic artifacts designed to filter communication, aggressively exposing individuality. The first two – beepers and mobile phones – make it subject to the higher and egotistical choice of the owner. The latter – the walkman – allowed subjects for the first time to transport a sound atmosphere along with them to any place; privatised, that sound atmosphere becomes

a sign of one of the most radical expressions of today's individualism (Gay *et al.*, 1997). In spite of the fact that it is an artifact whose consumption evinces exacerbated forms of individualism and of isolationism, the walkman is also a sign of a lifestyle as well as of a social attitude. Besides the play of its privatised sonorities, the use of a walkman, and also of beepers and mobile phones, indicate particular modalities of communication and significant practices of relationship among individuals, as well as between these and certain social-cultural expressions (music, fashion, and contemporary urban culture in general) (Chambers, 1985; 1990). For these reasons, the dissemination of the consumption of the walkman, a silent device for distant third parties placed at a distance, although a noisy one for those near, while it transfers an act of a private nature to the public space, it decisively contributes to reinforcing the indistinctness of the boundaries between those two spheres – an aspect which was mentioned above – thereby emphasizing one of the most characteristic traits of modern urban culture.

Besides exposing the individualisation of subjects, all those artifacts, together with their respective sonorities, illustrate the typical situation of what sociological discourse currently names civil indifference. However, when Erwin Goffman (1971b), and later Anthony Giddens (1991) theorized about it, they specially meant the individual capacity for self-protection represented for instance in the act of looking away from everything unpleasant or inconvenient for us in the city. This intimist reaction of looking without seeing is a sign of an extreme form of individualism. But civil indifference can also be exercised through the ear. Concentrated on the sound of their walkman, for example, individuals can allow themselves to hear what they want without listening to what is around them. We may therefore conclude that, in fact, in our times, hearing is not so passive a sense as Simmel had described it in the beginning of the 20th century.

I must also mention the central role of economy and finance as the sap that feeds social relations in the modern city. Both economy and financial play are basic pillars of the globalisation process in our days. But globalisation is not only financial, economic or technological. It also includes cultural patterns and modes of governing that have become global and are therefore increasingly similar. The same is true of cities and of their cultural, physical-spatial, tourist, smell, and sound cityscapes, for only their socio-historical evolution can become a distinctive identitary resource. If money is responsible for the present state of globalisation, its sound is none the less responsible for it. In fact, how many of us have not experienced some level of surprise at the presence of the distinctive sound mark of an ATM cashing machine or of the universal sound of a payment made by credit card, whether it be in Coimbra, São Paulo, Maputo, or New York? By its presence in such differentiated spaces, the very same *soundfield* makes those spaces both similar to each other and familiar. This

closeness of dispersed spaces by way of sound is comforting, and it gives a new dimension to our conception of territory and of frontiers. The most basic principle of modern cosmopolitanism, understood as a way of feeling comfortable anywhere, resides in this trans-locality, and is therefore a condition made up also of urban sonorities. Because it disrespects borders and comforts us by being familiar, this cosmopolitanism of sound can only become a surprise when it reveals how much of globalisation is due to expressions of domesticity and to localist feelings.

Given the globalizing mixture of sonorities, one last issue to be dealt with has to do with knowing to what extent will it be legitimate to argue that cities have, or may have, a specific (sound) identity of their own. Or whether they once had one and have now lost it. Or whether they have it and will be able to keep it. The exercise consists in asking the questions posed by contemporary sociology regarding the relationship between local cultures and global cultures in the context of the issues discussed in this paper. While reflecting on it, I again yielded to autobiography and thought about the city of Coimbra. Coimbra is a university town whose origin dates back to medieval times, and it still has a traditionalist, not very dynamic image, now confronted with the challenges of modernization. Does this city have a sonority of its own? I found three possibilities of answering the question affirmatively: (i) the old greeting cry of the academy (the famous 'F - R - A' mock-spelling exercise); (ii) the unmistakable sound of the announcement of the train departure from Coimbra to Alfarelos (a small suburban place near Coimbra which is also a railroad intersection); and (iii) the typical Coimbra popular song — *fado*. These constitute a set of undeniably local sound expressions. However, what makes them different from other sounds is the fact that they are vocal sound manifestations. Although they may be propagated through the support of technical devices, their origin lies in human speech, not in technologic artifact. These sonorities are therefore forms of resisting the uniformization of contemporary urban *soundscape*s. Do they convey a specific image of the city which produces them?

I shall try to answer that question on the assumption that the images of cities may belong to either of two main types – modernising images and heritage-type images. The former correspond to the notions of competitiveness, technicality, and entrepreneurial culture. The latter are led by the order of customs and traditions, of local festivities and architecture (Santos, 1996; Fortuna, 1997b). While the former seem to correspond to the cities that have been more open to globalisation, the latter, the heritage-type, seem to have escaped or to be missing the challenge of that modernising globalisation. If the metallic, motorized and technologically-based sonority provides the best example of cities of the first type mentioned. Coimbra, with the predominance and the singularity of its vocal sonorities, offers the image of a traditional old-fashioned city. Its sound heritage may signify both a sonority of

resistance and one of inaction. What to do with such *soundscape*s, which is the same as asking, what to do with this city? The answer is not easy, although it might seem expeditious to recommend that it should be detraditionalized³ and that it should learn how to creatively combine the challenges of globalisation and the resources of tradition. That is, the terms of that detraditionalization should be carefully pondered, while being aware of the distortions that urban growth can create on a city's genuine heritage resources, both in general social aspects and also as regards its sounds.

Reflecting on the *soundscape*s of cities I cannot help thinking that the detraditionalization of Coimbra, or of any other city whose most remarkable sound heritage is running the risk of de-characterization, requires that the city be capable of listening to itself in order to gain an understanding of itself. On the other hand, however, it should still be able to listen to the sonorities of other cities. That is the only way to *tune up* its own detraditionalization through different *soundscape*s and social environments, both local and global.

If cities sound and resound it is important that they know how to listen generally, and how to listen to themselves in particular. This is another side of the heuristics of urban sonorities. It is, in itself, a reverberation of the two thousand year-old stoic axiom ascribed to the philosopher Epictetus, according to whom 'God gave man two ears, but only one mouth, that he might hear twice as much as he speaks'.

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³ I have dealt with the process of 'detraditionalization' of the city images elsewhere (Fortuna, 1997b).

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