Benjamin Tausig, *Bangkok Is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, xii + 207 pp. ISBN: 9780190847531, price: GBP 64.00 (paperback).

Bangkok Is Ringing is a detailed ethnography of the acoustics of Thailand's Red Shirt political activism during 2010 (Red Sunday), which was organized by the National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). The key terms underlying the study are acoustics (sound), political assemblies, symbolic figuration, mobilities, and constraints. Tausig's opening position is that all political movements undergo various forms of constraint and therefore are uncertain as to their outcome. The constraints are not only reflected in their sound production at any given time, but also determine it.

As Tausig stresses in the introduction, the 'materiality of sound' (sound waves) does not emerge and subsequently gains meaning, but is always enmeshed in multiple conceptual experiences at the moment of its emergence. He adds that 'sound is therefore not reducible to an acoustical analysis'. An acoustical analysis is only one of several explanatory modes of analysis (p. 4). Further, the manner in which sounds move, run into, and bounce off of obstacles is contextually dependent. And thus, like political movements, Tausig argues, sounds are caught in webs of significance that prevent them from moving freely. For example, slogans chanted at a protest event may be inhibited from reaching the larger audience by tall buildings, by being classified as noise, or they may be limited by a moral sense of which chants should be made, how and where. Constraints create sonic niches in a protest event. Sonic niches reveal the contours of constraint in the social makeup of a political movement which assembles people from diverse backgrounds around an issue that concerns them. Further, symbols and sonic symbols are (re-)configured in protest to provide coherency and push people's thoughts in new directions. In the Red Shirt movement, many symbols utilized and worked with were ones from the symbolic repertoire of the Thai state, such as the symbolic value for unity. Symbols drawn from the symbolic repertoire of the state as well as from other traditional moral and aesthetic sources constrained Red Shirt activists in the ways they could express themselves. The aim of the book then, as Tausig puts it, is to feel out the contours of these constraints through sound, and 'to understand how such limitations both reiterated existing power structure and at times offered opportunities for political transformations' (p. 30).

In each of the sixteen chapters of the book, Tausig explores the sonic production of one media item utilized by activists. Through personal accounts of people, he reveals how their sound productions navigated around various

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© NATHAN PORATH, 2020 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17601016

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 License.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 10:37:25AM
via free access

inherent constraints during the demonstrations. One important Thai expression that was chanted during the protests and which the book picks up on is '*kuu maa 'eeng*' which Tausig translates as 'I came by my goddamn self'. What this expression declared was that the assembled came on their own accord rather than were paid to come. It showed that the protest was self-directed rather than organized from above.

The Red Shirt protesters were mobilized by radio technology, which in their hands became a powerful counter-public medium. Through this medium, innocent songs were politically reconfigured and became charged with political meanings that could even incite people. The most popular music played on community radio was of the Luk Tung genre, which as Tausig rightly points out has roots in the agrarian provinces and particularly the North East. This popular music genre, though mainly love songs, is replete with images of the city/countryside disparity, of poverty, economic migration, and longing for home. Songs from this genre were not only played on the radio but prominently featured in the protests.

During the protest, the megaphone was the main medium to relay speeches in a type of demonstration called "Hyde Parking" in Thai. In Hyde Parking, a demonstrator would stand on a crate and provide an unscripted speech on a political topic. It was easy to carry and to use at any street corner and would attract people to stop and listen. With the megaphone people could also be moved to break out in a chant. It provided those who used it a sense of authority and an image of their own willful participation in the protest. The megaphone, which is commonly used in Thai institutions, such as schools to order and unify people, was configured in context and through speeches so that it came to reflect the movement's slogan of '*kuu maa eng*'. It became both a tool and a symbol of street protest.

Whistles were another sound-making medium of protest. Again whistles are commonly used by security personnel to direct vehicles in certain directions and who gain a feeling of empowerment in using them. In demonstrations, Red Shirt protesters blew them to make claims to public spaces and to show that they were trying to maintain order. Vehicles of Red Shirt protesters and sympathizers played music loudly and always received honks of approval or disgust from other vehicles passing by. Spontaneous chants, sometimes outrageous in content, would emerge from no particular point. The chants sounded musical and emotional.

Although protests are loud and noisy places, Tausig challenges the common assumption that loudness is equal to power. He argues that 'low loudness' can exert a power that rivals that of high loudness. In the Red Shirt protests, the power of 'low loudness' was exemplified through and around the concept of

naa song saang (pity). Tausig re-translates the specific Thai meaning that is lacking in the English word pity as 'pity-worthy'; that which is *naa song saan* deserves the pity that it causes others to feel. In Chapter 7 he provides three case examples of people who embodied the power of the 'low loudness' of '*naa song saan* quiet' in one form or another. One example is of a man who meditated in silence for a Japanese photo journalist who was accidentally killed by security forces during a demonstration. The other case is of two girls who suffered the death of their guardians who joined the protest and now were asking for donations on the street. The third case is that of the singer who lost her livelihood and suffered a serious illness before joining the Red Shirt movement. The people became symbols of 'pity-worthiness' for protesters. For one orphan, Tausig notes that when she was given the microphone to speak, some people felt her voice was too loud and not low and humble enough. Her tone raised questions of her sincerity. Hence, even in 'pity-worthiness', the vocal expression of a person's suffering was constrained according to a prior moral aesthetic.

Music was an important part of the activism and Tausig extends his discussion of the role of music production and vending over three chapters. The sonic aesthetics of the movement were rooted in the countryside and particularly associated with the sounds and sentiment of Thailand's north east (Isan). One instrument he discusses is the *phin*, a traditional instrument, and how it was reconfigured as an instrument of protest. If the movement was rooted in a rural aesthetic imaginary of poverty, Tausig shows how Red Shirt musical entrepreneurialism was constrained by being linked to the values of dissent. The movement had to incorporate the stardom of celebrities as it gained the support of some people in this category. Several musicians could and did benefit from their activism but to do so they had to act and express themselves within the values of humility that governed the movement. The Red Shirt movement was not anti-capitalism, but a show of financial excess could have invited criticism of the authenticity of motivation.

Throughout the book, Tausig develops his arguments about protest movements comparatively and in relation to other protest movements around the world. It is interesting that Tausig does end this book about the power of activism in a rather pessimistic tone. He asks 'how might sound, protest, and constraint still be thought of optimistically?' (p. 188) He answers with a moment when anti-Trump protestors chanted 'asshole' as they marched by his hotel. He writes that the 'asshole chant' did leave room for future strategic adjustments as to who can chant and in which idiom and for which audience. He stresses that personal reflections, media analysis, and further triangulation with activists' experiences in other places is desirable in moments of quiet that will again

become noise. Unfortunately, to my mind, his ending does not pull his discussion out of the political pessimism he leads the reader to. One feels there should have been another ending to the book.

Bangkok Is Ringing is an important contribution to sound studies and ethnomusicology as well as the ethnography of political movements. It will also serve as an important eyewitness account of the demonstrations of Red Sunday and as such will remain a valuable study for historians of Thai politics during this period.

Nathan Porath

University of Southampton

nathanporath@yahoo.co.uk