

“The Police as Amplifiers”: Noise, the State, and Policing the Crisis

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Abstract

This paper argues for the methodological and theoretical use of sound in studies of policing, through an examination of police radio dispatches detailing the police eviction of an Occupy Movement encampment in Oakland, California in the United States in 2011. The paper mobilizes Stuart Hall, et al.'s concept of the “police as amplifiers,” as well as aspects of Control Theory, to theorize that listening to and analyzing the sound of the police (via police dispatches and other sonic archives) might serve to “amplify” otherwise silenced “disturbances” in urban space, and allow for a consideration of how social, economic, and political crises may be managed (or heard) differently on local and global scales.

Keywords: noise, police, amplifiers, state, Occupy Movement

“...the central apparatuses of social control in the state: the police and the courts.”

Stuart Hall, et al.¹

“...this order by noise is not born without crisis.”

Jacques Attali²

1. Noise, Control, and Amplifiers

The history of noise is a history of control. Control Theory, a concept originally emerging from the fields of engineering and mathematics (and now used in Psychology, Sociology, and Criminology, among other fields) theorizes about the design and maintenance of stable and predictable systems. Audio technologies, such as amplifiers, were invented to control, manage, and reduce noise, and informed early theories of control. Today, the policing of noise is evidenced in noise ordinances, crowd control, and sound-proofing technologies in prisons and detention centers globally. The control of noise is, in many ways, the control of society. Theorist Stuart Bennett, wrote in his history of control engineering, that the goal of amplifiers specifically was to increase the power of a signal, while reducing “the noise and disturbance in the system”.³ Another control theorist, James R. Leigh observed, “...to achieve successful control we must have a defined objective and be able to predict adequately, over some sufficient time scale, all the outcomes of all the actions that are open to us”⁴. System control is a concern of audio engineers, as well as local police. It is within this “control intersection” that this research resides. I seek to apply Stuart Hall, et al’s, assessment of the “po-

1. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978) 30.

2. Jacques Attali. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 31.

3. Stuart Bennet. *A History of Control Engineering, 1930-1955* (London: The Institution of Electrical Engineers, 1993), 97.

4. James R. Leigh. *Control Theory* (London: The Institution of Electrical Engineers, 2004), 4.

lice as amplifiers,”⁵ to listen to and analyze the role of police in increasing, while controlling, disturbances in social, political, and economic systems.

One way to access an understanding of the “police as amplifiers” is through studying the sounds of the police; in the case of this research, through listening to police dispatches. Sound is a crucial missing link in the study of policing, particularly given the silence and inaccessibility surrounding internal police communications. Making these sounds public does much to offer transparency and accountability in regards to criminal justice agencies around the world. Taking the notion of the police as amplifiers literally here, I am interested in applying the materiality and theory of amplification as a way to think through how power works in and around policing and practices of criminal justice. Indeed, amplification itself is about power, energy, and the focusing of power toward a particular (sonic) end.

Stuart Hall, et al., in the book *Policing the Crisis* (1978), a study of anti-mugging policing in the U.K., argued that policing both structured and amplified particular crimes with their overt attention to them. Hall, et al. noted that over-policing of particular behaviors can provoke a criminal response from the general public, thus producing a self-fulfilling prophecy and cycle of crime that confirms police suspicious of criminal activity among particular populations. As a participant in the Occupy Movement in 2011 and other forms of organized social protest that have been heavily policed, I am interested in understanding Hall, et al.’s argument of the “police as amplifiers” in the context of mass protest policing and arrest. How might the sound of protest policing help one understand the nature of the crises being policed, or perhaps the crises being produced by policing itself?

2. Occupy Noise

This study of police dispatches engaging Occupy protests, links practices of everyday, local policing to mass global policing. The worldwide Occupy Movement and the corresponding

5. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978),38.

global police response offers insight into dynamics of capture and escape on a worldwide scale, and also amplifies sonic dimensions of systems of global capitalism and incarceration. Police dispatches of the eviction of a large Occupy encampment at City Hall in Oakland, California in the United States in 2011, for example, offer a window into contemporary realities and possible futures of mass policing and mass protest. The rarity of these kinds of recordings being made public speaks to the importance of studying sound in general, and these recordings in particular, in the context of global police accountability and transparency. The police dispatches of the eviction of Occupy Oakland are the only sonic documents of an Occupy eviction made public by a police department that this researcher could locate, making these dispatches a crucial site for studying sound, policing, and global protest in the contemporary moment.

Jacques Attali wrote, “change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society.”⁶ Attali observed that noise may even function as a herald for society, predicting and sometimes predicating the future. Listening to dispatches of the police-led eviction of Occupy Oakland offers a sonic exploration of possible futures in regards to global capture and/or escape. The Occupy Movement, an unprecedented global interrogation of wealth distribution, which coalesced in over 700 confirmed simultaneous linked protests in over 80 countries signals one possible future. Another future is represented by the coordinated police response to Occupy, successfully evicting multiple encampments in the U.S. through coordinated federal, regional, and local action.⁷

The sonic juxtaposition of attempts to capture protestors by Oakland police, and attempts by Oakland protestors to escape, heard here, offer a sonic text through which to study the nuances of managing, protesting, and policing the global political economic crisis. Attali reminds us that noise (in all forms) is a source of power, and as such, power has always listened to it with fascination.⁸ He wrote: “eavesdropping, censorship, recording, and surveillance are weapons of power. The technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise is at the heart of this apparatus.”⁹ What, then, is the power and the potential to eavesdrop on the eavesdroppers, to record the recorders, to surveill the surveillers? How might turning the power of listening on the state shift power from the state to everyday people?

6. Jacques Attali. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 31.

7. Naomi Wolf, “The shocking truth about the crackdown on Occupy,” *The Guardian*, November 25, 2011.

8. Jacques Attali. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 32.

9. *Ibid.*

3. The Sound of the Police

The criminalization of non-violent protest in the United States has a long history, and exists as the backdrop to the Occupy Oakland eviction of October 25, 2011, as well as the evictions of other non-violent Occupy encampments globally preceding and following the Occupy Oakland eviction. The scholarly concerns of Stuart Hall, et al., are “not the individual abuses of police power by this or that policeman on this or that occasion, but effects which stem from the organisational structure and social role of the police force itself.”¹⁰ Analyzing the “police as amplifiers” allows one to consider the control system of criminal justice beyond the actions of individual officers. Attention to the process of amplification as control clarifies the role of police in U.S. and global society, and broadens an understanding of how, in the words of Hall et al., police both “structure” and “amplify” behavior which the state deems criminal.

What role do police agencies and the criminal justice system play in structuring and amplifying local and global crises? One place to begin answering this question is within police dispatch sound recordings and related documentation. Sonic clues located therein indicate where and how social “crises” are articulated (and at times produced) by police, as well as the process of policing those crises.

The “After Action Report” (2012) by the Oakland Police Department (OPD) summarized lessons from the October 25, 2011 eviction of Occupy Oakland and offered police justifications for the use of recording technologies in policing. Under “INTELLIGENCE” the following information is stated: “The mission of the Intelligence Section was to gather information, regarding the Occupy Oakland group, of use to commanders planning the eventual removal of the camp. Intelligence gathering began shortly after the camp was established and continued up to the morning of the operation, when the role turned to surveillance of the operation.”¹¹ This report indicated that surveillance was applied by the OPD with the particular goal of removal of Occupy Oakland. With this goal, the control system for Occupy Oakland was set in place, and a course of action was implemented by the OPD toward the eviction of Occupy. Occupy was deemed to be a disturbance in the system.

Noteworthy here is Stuart Hall et al.’s quoting of Jock Young’s work that identified an approach to policing “whereby the behavior of a stigmatized or deviant group comes pro-

10. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978), 43.

11. Oakland Police Department, “After Action Report: Analysis of Operation BF01-2011-000. October 25, 2011” (Oakland: Oakland Police Department, 2012), 6.

gressively to fit the stereotype of it which the control agencies already hold... 'translation of fantasy into reality.'¹² In the OPD's surveillance of Occupy Oakland, the police surmised a criminal threat in the protest and determined only one possible outcome - the eviction of Occupy. With surveillance and tactical operations mobilized by the OPD, information was collected toward fulfilling the goals of arrest and eviction. In this way, following Hall's theoretical line, the OPD assisted in amplifying "the crisis" of Occupy in their very process of policing it. The police made Occupy a social crisis by identifying it as such, and mobilizing police personnel and resources in the form of a crisis response.

The sounds of this can be heard through the amplifier of the police dispatch, in the lead up to the physical eviction of Occupy Oakland protestors: "Unlawful assembly being read now, they have 5 minutes from now," identified one Sargent on the dispatch in the early morning hours of October 25, 2011. I recall here control theorist, James R. Leigh: "...to achieve successful control we must have a defined objective and be able to predict adequately, over some sufficient time scale, all the outcomes of all the actions that are open to us."¹³ The classification of Occupy Oakland's assembly as "unlawful," and setting a timetable of "5 minutes"¹⁴ until the eviction, allowed the Oakland Police Department to implement an immediate system of control in regards to the Occupy encampment. The police then proceeded to amplify their response: through bullhorns, police mobilization, arrests, and barricades of the Oakland City Hall park.

Absent from the justifications of eviction of Occupy by the OPD in the "After-Action Report" were the political aspects of the protest and larger Occupy Movement. Occupy's questioning of city and police authority and resources, and critique of wealth inequality, were set aside, ostensibly, for OPD concerns over "fire hazards, sanitation, food storage, unsafe structures built into the Plaza, noise."¹⁵ This framing and approach to the policing of Occupy Oakland was replicated in the evictions of other Occupy encampments globally in the following weeks. Minor legal infractions, such as fire hazards, sanitation, and food storage, were suddenly immediate and top city concerns, justifying the mobilization of entire police forces as a response, and in the case of Occupy Oakland, police forces from several surrounding cities assisting in the eviction. The police focus on property, as a proxy for a focus on people, ironically supported the Occupy Movement's critique of systems of govern-

12. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978), 42.

13. James R. Leigh. 2004. *Control Theory* (London: The Institution of Electrical Engineers, pp. 4.

14. Oakland Police Department. "COMM Disk 1" (Oakland, CA: Occupy Oakland Public Records, 2012).

15. Oakland Police Department, "After Action Report: Analysis of Operation BF01-2011-000. October 25, 2011" (Oakland: Oakland Police Department, 2012), 2.

ance and U.S. institutions prioritizing property and profit over people. The repeated sonic references in the OPD dispatches to police surrounding, retaking, and barricading “city hall” are not without symbolic meaning in the context of “occupation.” Here one can hear the sonic manifestation of the state privatizing what was formerly public space, government, and resources; the sounds of reoccupation / recolonization in the form of sirens, static, and marching orders from the Oakland Police Department.

Heard on one portion of dispatch that chronicled the minutes before and after the physical eviction of Occupy, one voice periodically gives updates about the protestors. “For the record” is the introductory phrase given each time, with updates anticipating resistance from the protestors: “for the record, the crowd is saying ‘Man the barricades’; “for the record, the crowd starting chanting [censored]”; “for the record, we’ve seen more shields come out”; “for the record, they are trying to make plans to do something.”¹⁶ This phrasing suggests a hyper-consciousness by the speaker that the police dispatch may exist as a archival document of the events unfolding. The phrasing is explicit and precise in its delivery, and stands out from the variety of other police chatter coordinating the eviction. This is the embodied voice of the surveillance state, one that is aware of and intentional with its purpose and process. The majority of the voices on the dispatch, however, are the rank-and-file officers: noisy, disorganized, questioning, requiring order (“where should we line up?”; “can someone turn lights on?”, “captain, should we make arrests of these people?”) This is the sound of the state in crisis. Sergeants order the rank-and-file in complacent, even tones, commanding officers to “line up!” “hold the line!” “keep pushing!” “yes, everyone is subject to arrest.”¹⁷

Through this attempted system of control, this amplifier, one hears other noises and disturbances, in the form of the Occupy protestors resisting with drums and chants. The words are intelligible, but a rhythm of drum beats can be heard as an occasional soundtrack to the police convergence on City Hall.¹⁸ At times, the sounds of the protest are indecipherable from the dispatch static (it is all noise), and exemplifies the collective sonic and political disturbances in the police amplification system. Control theorist, Stuart Bennett, reminds us that the history of systems engineering in the United States is a history of “struggling to get control systems working in the presence of noise and non-linearities.”¹⁹ The OPD dispatch chronicles the sound of a control system working to get noise, and the people that emit noise (both protestors and officers), under control.

16. Oakland Police Department. “COMM Disk 2” (Oakland, CA: Occupy Oakland Public Records, 2012).

17. Oakland Police Department. “COMM Disk 2” (Oakland, CA: Occupy Oakland Public Records, 2012).

18. Ibid.

19. Stuart Bennett. *A History of Control Engineering, 1930-1955*. (London: The Institution of Electrical Engineers, 1993), 120.

The system of control enacted by the OPD was wide-ranging. In terms of forms of surveillance of Occupy Oakland, the OPD had identified as “successes,” the following: “electronic intelligence...gathered via Internet; Human intelligence... gathered via surveillance and interaction with group participants; Real time surveillance... to alert law enforcement participants that the operation had been compromised and that occupiers were barricading the plaza; Surveillance during the camp removal served to assist commanders with directing resources”.²⁰ These various forms of surveillance coalesced in the OPD dispatch record on Occupy Oakland, which constituted almost 12 hours of police activity on the day of the eviction. The initial eviction of Occupy Oakland and some 300 protestors around 5 a.m. on the morning of October 25, 2011, amplified a response from city residents. Over 1000 residents converged on downtown Oakland in the hours following the eviction and engaged in an 8-hour clash with the OPD.²¹

Three days later on October 28, 2011, protestors returned to “re-Occupy” Oakland’s City Hall with about 25 tents. Oakland Mayor Jean Quan responded with the statement, “We have decided to have a minimal police presence at the plaza for the short term and build a community effort to improve communications and dialogue with the demonstrators.”²² Amplifiers, designed to manage feedback, as well, is exhibited here in the Mayor’s actions. Stuart Bennett wrote of the history of amplification, “ the lack of knowledge and understanding of the effect of feedback in systems resulted in... a greater interest in the problems of control.”²³ Mayor Quan, in managing feedback from Occupy protestors to the eviction of the original Occupy encampment, retooled the city’s approach to control. Applying a “delay” to the sound and sight of police at Occupy, Quan administered the system of control via silence: an intermission of almost two weeks, before the OPD would return for a final and permanent eviction of Occupy Oakland.

The noise of Occupy Oakland, however, was not reduced in the interim. A “General Strike” of about 7000 people, according to city estimates at the time, followed a week after the initial eviction. It shut down the Port of Oakland, the fifth largest port in the United States, on November 3, 2011.²⁴ Success was heard from an Occupy bullhorn at the port that evening:

20. Oakland Police Department, “After Action Report: Analysis of Operation BF01-2011-000. October 25, 2011” (Oakland: Oakland Police Department, 2012), 6.

21. Kristin J. Bender, Scott Johnson, Sean Maher, Cecily Burt, and Angela Woodall, “Occupy Oakland: Clashes last into night after pre-dawn raid on encampment,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 25, 2011.

22. David Morgan, “Oakland protesters re-‘Occupy’ plaza,” *Associated Press / CBS News*, October 28, 2011.

23. Stuart Bennett. *A History of Control Engineering, 1930-1955* (London: The Institution of Electrical Engineers, 1993), vii.

24. Oakland Tribune, “Occupy Oakland Live Blog Nov. 2, 2011,” *Oakland Tribune*, November 2, 2011.

“The port has been shut down. Let’s head back to the plaza,” the original location of Occupy Oakland at City Hall. ²⁵

Mayor Quan would order the removal of Occupy Oakland a second and final time on November 14, 2011. Amplifying Occupy yet again with this police action, a second shutdown of the Port of Oakland by Occupy protestors occurred on December 12, 2011. The eviction of Occupy Oakland, and evictions of other Occupy Movement encampments globally between 2011 and 2012, reduced the original energy of Occupy, but did not silence it. The voices and sounds of the Occupy Movement, and other global protests since, have echoed into popular culture and media, and remain as ringing reminders of the power and possibility of listening to noise.

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