

**The politics of listening: Possibilities and challenges for democratic life (Book Review)**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Leah Bassel 2017 *The Politics of Listening: Possibilities and Challenges for Democratic Life*, Palgrave Macmillan UK. ISBN 978-1-137-53166-7.**

Attention to listening is often eschewed in favour of the more academically popular concept of voice. But, much like the ill-fated tree in the forest, what good is voice if there's no-one to listen? *The Politics of Listening* shifts attention away from voice and towards the less-explored concept of listening. In exploration of the micropolitics of listening, Leah Bassel investigates whose voices are silenced or ignored, and questions the political attitudes and environments that allow this.

In this short yet illuminating book, Bassel builds on the work of influential authors, most notably Susan Bickford and Nick Couldry, to ground the abstract concept of listening through topical case studies. The book provides a whirlwind introduction to exploring how the politics of listening impacts who and what is given an audience in the public sphere. Exploring examples from Canada, France, and the United Kingdom, Bassel's focus is on those whose voices are politically excluded by being silenced, ignored, or confined by narrow stereotypes, particularly migrants, indigenous people, and other marginalised communities.

The book explores several cases that illustrate how a micropolitics of listening can identify 'Us' versus 'Them' dichotomies in media and political representation. Bassel discusses the challenges of representation that face some marginalised groups. The first case study that Bassel explores is the struggles of minority women, most visibly Muslim women, to speak outside of the audible positions of "victim" or "entrepreneur". Tellingly, the title of that particular chapter is a quote from an interview: "They only listen when we bash our culture". This case study is an excellent introduction to the concept of political listening, as it clearly demonstrates how the voices of these women are either pigeon-holed or completely ignored.

The second case explores two examples when young, racialised men have acted out against the state in an effort to be politically heard. Bassel discusses both the Tottenham riots in the UK, and the suburban unrest in France in 2005. In both instances, class and race barriers were used to silence the political voices of those involved, reducing the space for listening. Participants were portrayed as apolitical and 'criminals', with then Minister of the Interior, Nicholas Sarkozy, going so far as to refer to them as '*racaille*' (scum). Bassel suggests that events like these stem from a lack of intersectional listening and the difficulty in speaking outside of the us/them binary, particularly in an environment that leaves little room for discussions and different interpretations of such events.

The final cases turn to more uplifting examples of how groups and individuals are subverting the dominant political norms to carve out their own space in the public sphere. The first example continues the previous chapter's discussion about the Tottenham riots. This time, however, the focus is on how the community and the media came together to address the 'us' and 'them' dichotomies exposed throughout coverage of the riots. Following the divisive sensationalist coverage of the events, journalists met with local communities to discuss how media coverage could represent the area beyond the stereotypes of poverty and violence. Local journalism emerged as a way of contributing to media coverage that is sensitive to the socio-political context and grounded in community relationships. This type of reporting stands in stark contrast to the reporters who were 'parachuted in' to cover the riots. Citizen journalism was also explored as a way for local residents to enact equality through self-expression. Bassel explains that, 'In a critical but productive way, participants sought to make sense together actively and recast meaning, outside of binaries, and to demand change' (2017: 57). Listening is framed as an act of solidarity and as a way of changing the way we speak.

*The Politics of Listening* provides a useful starting point for further explorations of the micropolitics of listening. The case studies discussed make for interesting reading and provide an accessible entry to deeper discussions on the micropolitics of listening. Critically reflecting on whose voices are prominent in the public sphere is a valuable exercise in the modern media environment, and *The Politics of Listening* offers a guide on how we might begin to do this.

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