

Sensible Communities: The senses and community formation in early modern cities and towns

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What can a sensory historical approach contribute to our understanding of urban community formation? In order to answer this question, early modernists, medievalists, an art historian, a literary scholar, a musicologist, and two scholars of Islamic Studies gathered in Tübingen for a two-day international workshop. The fifteen papers offered case studies of cities and towns from a wide range of places across Christian and Muslim Europe. The topics included urban rituals and spectacles, rhythms of urban life, the influence of religion on practices of perception, pollution and environmental concerns, sensory sub-cultures within the urban community, and the role of sense perception in situations of threatened order like revolts or sieges.

These diverse sensory phenomena affected the entire urban community, but they have mostly been studied from separate disciplinary perspectives so far. In their introduction, the organizers PHILIP HAHN and SAÚL MARTÍNEZ BERMEJO argued that if we want to know how urban societies were held together by common perceptions – and, conversely, what contributed to their disintegration –, we have to analyse how these factors interacted. The organizers then highlighted a number of methodological issues that have been raised by recent research in the history of the senses: to what extent can one reconstruct past practices of perception from indirect evidence? How can one achieve a balanced account, given that unusual phenomena were more likely to be recorded than the habituated perceptions of people's everyday life? How ought one relate the history of sense perception to chronologies based on different criteria?

Three papers analysed the production of

common perceptions, which was often closely related to specific spaces. TESS KNIGHTON's (Barcelona) paper on religious rituals in early modern Barcelona highlighted their intersensorial character as well as the great range of people actively involved in preparing and staging these events, from theologians and confraternities down to flower sellers, carpenters and musicians, each with their particular sensory awareness. Even though the semi-official „relaciones“ of processions described people's emotional reactions in a standardized way, they nonetheless allow to access the sensory stimuli and, if read against the grain, the range of townspeople's perceptions.

Two further papers were devoted to the effect of specific buildings on the formation of perception. DAVID AMELANG (FU Berlin) undertook a comparison of early Spanish and English theatres, which only at first glance looked rather similar. In fact, performance and listening conditions were considerably different regarding size, acoustics, and convenience for spectators, thus shaping different sorts of audiences, which were also noticed by foreign travellers. BILAL BADAT (Tübingen) presented a case study of the perception of the famous Selimiye mosque in Edirne, which was clearly intended to produce multi-sensory (and not just visual) impressions. Badat showed that the architect Sinan designed the dome like a musical instrument. People actually seem to have chosen their mosque according to the quality of voice of the Imam before this was prohibited by an Ottoman law forcing people to attend prayer in the mosque of their urban district. The floral imagery of the mosque's ornaments, moreover, referred to scents, and the sweet smell of lamps were meant to arouse spiritual associations, too. As the mosque was open to every Muslim, all such sensory stimuli were diffused in an egalitarian way, thus temporarily levelling social distinctions. Finally, the transferral of a piece of plaster from the Hagia Sophia to the Selimiye was meant to appeal to the Muslim sixth sense (*baraka*), the experience of the nearness to the sacred.

The religious material culture in Protestant towns was the topic of two papers. JAN-FRIEDRICH MISSFELDER (Zürich/Basel) presented an alternative story to the tradi-

tional visual bias of the acts of iconoclasm during the Swiss Reformation, focussing on the melting down of chalices in Zurich, which were then minted into coins. In this way, formerly consecrated objects which townspeople had only seen but not touched were now in everyone's hands. The Catholic counter-reaction of re-minting such coins with a chalice stamp made their former use visible again – and gave the Reformer Heinrich Bullinger the chance to argue that this money ought to go to the poor relief. LUISA COSCARELLI-LARKIN's (Hamburg) paper analysed portraits of Lutheran burghers displaying rosaries or pomanders. These precious objects, which stood at the intersection of religion, medicine and luxury, show that Lutherans were far from rejecting sensual forms of prayer. They moreover continued to serve as means of sensory (visual, tactile, and olfactory) distinction for urban elites, and as an olfactory means of warding off dangerous smells in times of epidemics.

A particular case of sensory distinction was presented by SARAH-MARIA SCHÖBER (Basel/ Zurich), who analysed how physicians in Basel marked themselves out as experts of smells who were at the same time habituated to endure them and control their emotional reactions. JACOB BAUM (Lubbock) pointed the attention to the other end of the sensory spectrum: to those who were excluded from sensory integration into the urban community due to sensory impairments like blindness or deafness. Baum observed that so far, there has hardly been any exchange between disability studies and sensory history. His special focus lay on cases of judicial blinding in German towns before 1530, which for him indicate that sensory ability was not regarded as an inherent right, but rather a privilege that could be taken away by the urban community.

Two papers on London studied the relation between sounds, smells, and urban identity. EMILY COCKAYNE (Norwich) put eighteenth-century efforts at sensory zoning in the context of the rising cult of sensibility; smelly industrial areas were allocated near the living quarters of the poor, who were thought to be less sensible. Then again, as WILL TULLETT (Cambridge) demonstrated,

eighteenth-century urban polemicists made fun of country dwellers who came into the city and could not find sleep due to urban noise. Tullett sketched out the potential of studying the change of urban rhythms over time rather than seemingly static soundscapes at the example of the changed meaning of news horns and bells.

Whereas Tullett highlighted perceived differences between the big city and country towns, three further papers analysed the role of perceptual practices as markers of cultural identity, difference, and hence also stigmatization. AMINA NAWAZ (Tübingen) used the travel account of Ahmad ibn Qasim Al-Hajarī (c. 1570–c. 1640), who travelled across Europe to recover stolen possessions of Moriscos, as a lens to study Christian-Muslim discussions about religious customs involving the senses like fasting, food and alcohol prohibitions as well as attitudes towards sex and the specific sensory capacities of God. Using the sensory historical approach, Nawaz pointed out differences and moments of connection between Al-Hajarī and his Protestant and Catholic interlocutors in Paris and the Hague. PHILIP HAHN (Tübingen) presented three cases of global travellers who came from the same town (Ulm) but from different social backgrounds. All three travellers experienced a change in their sensory habits as a consequence of their travel experience, whether it was forgetting the taste of wine, learning to cherish the normalized use of spices which were considered exotic back home, or the possibility of exercising violence abroad. His paper thus uncovered hidden sensory global entanglements in the German hinterlands. AARON STAMPER (Princeton) used inquisition records from post-Reconquista Granada in order to study the sensory stigmatization of Moriscos, who were regarded as „malsonantes“ due to their foreign language or accent or the sound of their melodies and musical instruments. Authorities' control even entered the domestic soundscape, as Moriscos were forced to leave their doors open on Fridays and holidays, while Christian sounds pervaded the city. Such measures were paralleled by the prohibition of the traditional lattice windows, but the construction of cultural difference in Spain was clearly not only a vi-

sual affair.

Sounds generally played a paramount role in the perception of threats in late medieval and early modern towns. VINCENT CHALLET (Montpellier) demonstrated at the example of urban revolts in Normandy and Flanders that urban authorities heard rebellions before they saw them, in a crescendo from rumour to clamour and tumult. In the face of this, authorities were required to be acoustically attentive and in control of loud sounds, for they could be employed effectively in the formation of rebellious communities and their pushing towards action. Aptly, many revolts were named after their particular sounds. HÉLOÏSE HERMANT (Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis) argued that especially repetitive sounds were characteristic of revolts, as they could encode messages. She pointed out that late medieval town-dwellers were well used to decipher such sounds and hence also alert to the re-semantization of them during revolts. SAÚL MARTÍNEZ BERMEJO (Madrid) analysed the use and perception of war noises in sieges during the Eighty Years War in the Netherlands, which was accompanied by increased use of artillery. He demonstrated that town chronicle writers as well as soldiers who wrote memoirs often had specific agendas when describing sounds; sometimes they even simulated a listening-point different from their own. Even though artillery noise was meant to frighten townspeople, they sometimes reacted with musical counterpoints, and chroniclers claimed that people got habituated to the noise and hence lost their fear.

In his final commentary, JAMES AMELANG (Universidad Autónoma, Madrid) considered the eclectic approach of sensory history as its strength: it is not just cultural history, but has the potential to address key issues of social and political history. Furthermore, it allows to study the correlation between phenomena that have so far been studied by separate subdisciplines. Still, the plenary discussion raised a number of critical points which future research has to tackle. Sensory history still lags behind the history of emotions in terms of methodological reflection. Unlike the latter, it has not yet managed to achieve broader institutional embed-

dedness. Sensory historians have to exploit the assets of their particular approach to the full – like, for instance, its focus on contemporary epistemologies. In order to do so, it is necessary to look at the grass roots level, the „vulgar“ science, for which the plethora of evidence from European towns offer ample material. They have, moreover, to ask how changes in the theories and practices of sense perception effected historical change, rather than just adding a sensual flair to existing narratives of urban history.

Conference Overview:

Saúl Martínez Bermejo (Madrid)/ Philip Hahn (Tübingen): Welcome and introduction

Panel 1: The senses in urban rituals and spectacles

Tess Knighton (Barcelona): Sensing the celestial: Multisensory experiences in early modern urban ritual

David J. Amelang (Berlin): ‘For God’s Love, Let me Hear’: An acoustic re-assessment of early modern European theatres

Panel 2: Comparing urban sensory regimes

Amina Nawaz (Tübingen): Seeing and hearing the religious other in Muslim travel accounts of early modern Christian cities

Philip Hahn (Tübingen): Challenging impressions: experiencing alternative urban sensory regimes abroad in the early modern period

Panel 3: Religious perception, material culture and the building of communities

Jan-Friedrich Missfelder (Zürich): Money Talks. Engaging with holy matter in the Zurich Reformation

Luisa Coscarelli-Larkin (Hamburg): The rosary in 16th century Lutheran portraiture. Material culture and scent in the Reformation

Bilal Badat (Tübingen): ‘Every corner is a rose garden’. Sensory descriptions of the Selimiye (Edirne)

Panel 4: From impairment to oversensitiveness

Jacob Baum (Lubbock): Sensory Impairment in the City: Disability as a category of analysis

in early modern urban sensory history

Sarah-Maria Schober (Oxford): Masters of the Nose. How early modern physicians staged their sense of smell and acted at the edge

Panel 5: A 'Great and Monstrous Thing'? The big city and the senses in the 18th century

Emily Cockayne (Norwich): Henry Longbottom's Smellscape. Industrial pollution in eighteenth-century London

William Tullett (London): 'Hark! 'tis the twanging horn!': Rhythm and keynotes in London, 1770-1815

Panel 6: The soundscapes of urban rebellions

Vincent Challet (Montpellier): Shaping and re-shaping urban soundscapes: Hearing and shouting and the emergence of emotional communities in medieval seditious towns

Héloïse Hermant (Nice): Soundscape and rebel communities in Saragossa (1591-1592). The potential of a sensitive approach to study urban revolts

Panel 7: Sensing Danger: urban communities under threat

Saúl Martínez Bermejo (Madrid): Sieges, sounds and urban communities in the Southern Netherlands

Aaron Stamper (Princeton): Malsonantes: Dangerous sounds in early modern Granada

James S. Amelang (Madrid): Commentary

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