

Book review

***Sound Tactics: Auditory Power in Political
Protests***

By Justin Eckstein

The RSA series in Transdisciplinary Rhetoric.

University Park Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University
Press, 2025.

ISBN: 978-0-271-09938-5

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Keywords: acousmatic rhetoric, auditory argument, protests, sound

Recent research in argumentation and rhetoric has increasingly recognized the importance of sound—not merely as a component of delivery (an appeal to the ear, as described in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*), nor solely as a contributor to ethos or pathos, but also as an element of invention and a contributor to logos. Although Eckstein’s book is not explicitly devoted to argumentation theory, it undoubtedly makes a valuable and much-needed contribution to the growing field of multimodal argumentation. As Eckstein (p. 131)

states: “This book is about what happens when sound, as a noun, becomes understood as a process, when sound is disseminated through the public screen soundly (adjective).”

The book’s primary strength lies in its ability to unify several compelling contemporary phenomena: argumentation and rhetoric, politics and social protest, and sound. While many scholars have built their careers focusing on one of these domains—advancing research in sound studies, protest movements, or rhetorical theory—Eckstein succeeds in weaving them together into a coherent and original work. The book explores the social and political dimensions of protest, while also drawing a critical distinction between *sound* as a physical/acoustic phenomenon (traditionally studied in physics, phonetics, and music) and *sound* as a rhetorical device, often employed strategically in protest contexts.

Building on Robin James’s critique of the categorization of sound as a purely “natural” phenomenon, Eckstein repositions sound as a social, rhetorical, and argumentative force, thoroughly analyzing recent case studies that combine acoustic features with rhetorical affect.

Throughout the book, Eckstein underscores the interdisciplinary—more precisely, transdisciplinary—nature of his project, explicitly noting: “The purpose of this book is a transdisciplinary exchange between sound studies and rhetoric to think about how sound can be used for resistance soundly” (p. 138). Was Eckstein successful in this ambitious endeavor? Most certainly.

If we consider the widely accepted definition of social protest by Snow et al. (2004, p. 11)—that is, “collective actions by individuals or groups aimed at expressing dissatisfaction with and demanding change to social, political, or economic conditions, typically through public demonstrations or symbolic acts of resistance”—then Eckstein’s focus on “symbolic acts of resistance,” manifested through sound, aligns precisely with this framework.

Eckstein’s analysis centers on four major protest events:

- March for Our Lives (Florida, USA, 2018),
- Howard University student protests (Washington, D.C., USA, 2017),
- Casserole protests (Quebec, Canada, 2012), *and*
- Freedom Convoy (Ottawa, Canada, 2022).

Each of these protests received significant media attention, mobilized large public support, and sustained momentum over time. Notably, March for Our Lives, although initially conceived as a one-day event, evolved into an ongoing movement advocating for gun control.

Despite differences in geographical location, timing, and objectives, Eckstein identifies a common thread: the use of sound as a symbolic and strategic form of resistance. This thematic focus not only enriches the understanding of protest rhetoric but also opens new avenues for considering how sound functions as a tool of argumentative force in public discourse.

March for Our Lives was a protest movement that emerged in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018. In this tragic event, a student killed 14 classmates and 3 staff members and injured many others. In response, students—supported by a broad coalition of allies—organized a demonstration calling for stronger gun control laws. Led primarily by survivors, the *March for Our Lives* movement framed gun violence as a public health crisis and emphasized that young people should not have to fear for their safety at school or in their communities. The first nationwide protest took place on March 24, 2018, becoming one of the largest youth-led demonstrations in United States history.

Eckstein devotes particular attention to one speaker: X González. As Eckstein notes (p. 68), “There is tremendous surrounding when the next shooting would occur, and Gonzalez used sound to impose on the audience. They used their voice as an instrument to modulate intensity and time to place audience in the shooting.” González incorporated a prolonged silence—lasting over four minutes—into their speech, mirroring the exact duration of the Parkland shooting. This rhetorical strategy left a lasting impression on the audience. The discomfort, anxiety, and unease experienced during this silence served as a powerful approximation of the fear and trauma felt by students and teachers during the attack. González employed silence not only as a rhetorical device but also as a form of collective memory and resistance.

Eckstein analyzes this silent segment as a deliberate rhetorical tactic—one that proved highly effective, widely shared, and

extensively commented upon across social media. The speech received over 1.5 million views on YouTube, accompanied by comments such as, “The most powerful speech of all time.” It is undeniable that González’s address resonated deeply with audiences, with the strategic use of silence playing a crucial role in its impact.

Traditionally, speeches are analyzed and remembered for their verbal content. However, in this instance, the absence of sound was arguably the most persuasive element. I contend that silence, in this context, possesses argumentative value. Argumentation should be interpreted in light of its context, and here, silence functions as a meaningful rhetorical negation of gun violence. While some scholars, such as Burke (1996, as cited in Lake & Pickering, 1998), argue that “there are no negatives in nature,” silence in this case operates as the negative counterpart to the sound of gunfire. Although Eckstein’s primary focus is on the rhetorical effect of silence, I argue that both sound (i.e., gunshots) and silence should be viewed as components of argumentative discourse—specifically, as auditory arguments. This perspective positions Eckstein’s work as a significant contribution to the fields of informal logic and multimodal argumentation.

Eckstein also explores “heckling” as a form of auditory rhetoric. He examines the 2017 student protests at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where students disrupted a convocation speech by then-FBI Director James Comey. These protests were part of broader efforts to address perceived disconnects between Howard students—predominantly Black—and the wider Black community. Students expressed outrage over Comey’s appointment, citing his association with controversial FBI policies and the agency’s treatment of Black activists. Despite efforts by university officials and Comey to proceed with the event, students continued chanting throughout, eventually curtailing the speech.

Eckstein (p. 80) explains: “What differentiates a heckle from other kinds of audience participation is the way that it operates as a potential turn, moving the audience from spectator to the new speaker.” On page 90, he further emphasizes: “By transitioning from the member of the audience into a chorus, HU Resist audibly shifted from being a part of the audience to engaging directly with Comey...”

In my view, heckling in this context also carries argumentative significance. It functions as an auditory refutation—a spontaneous, public challenge to the speaker’s authority and message. As McIlvenny (1996, p. 29) argues, “A heckle can urgently undermine an argument or an assertion by providing an alternative hearing: by disagreeing, by questioning, or by adding information that negates the premise.” Thus, heckling should not be dismissed merely as disruption but rather acknowledged as a legitimate rhetorical and argumentative act.

The third case analyzed by Eckstein is the Casseroles protest in Quebec, Canada, in 2012. Also known as the Casseroles movement or *Manif de casseroles*, it was a grassroots protest that emerged in May 2012 amid a broader student uprising against proposed tuition increases. The Casseroles protest became one of the most iconic and creative expressions of the 2012 Quebec student movement, which is often referred to as the Maple Spring (*Printemps érable* in French, a play on the term “Arab Spring”). Participants protested by banging pots and pans (*casseroles*) from their balconies, in the streets, and during marches—a method inspired by similar protests in Latin America, particularly in Chile and Argentina, where the practice is known as *cacerolazo*.

This sonic form of protest symbolized civil disobedience and was a response to Bill 78 (Law 12), emergency legislation passed by the Quebec government to restrict protest activities. Many viewed the law as an infringement on freedom of expression and assembly, prompting even non-students to join the Casseroles movement. Ultimately, the Casseroles became an enduring symbol of grassroots activism, civil liberties, and collective solidarity in Quebec’s recent history.

As Eckstein observes (p. 115): “The shift from student protest to broader democratic movement enacted a sound tactic, a method of galvanizing a collective identified as the Casseroles but representative of a larger social position.”

Although different in form from heckling, I would argue that the Casseroles protest serves a similar argumentative function: highlighting the weaknesses of opposing arguments—a practice that argumentation scholars define as refutation (e.g., Hollihan &

Baaske, 1994, pp. 126–127). The examples Eckstein provides clearly illustrate the argumentative potential of sound.

However, Eckstein’s final example may be the most contentious. He examines the Freedom Convoy protests that took place in Canada in January 2022—a movement primarily organized by truck drivers, supported by various groups and individuals opposed to COVID-19 vaccine mandates and other public health measures. While the protests began in response to vaccine requirements for cross-border truckers, they quickly broadened to include opposition to general vaccine mandates, mask requirements, and pandemic-related restrictions, as well as criticism of the federal government’s overall pandemic response under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The protests deeply polarized Canadian society. While some citizens supported the demonstrators’ demands for freedom and an end to mandates, others condemned the movement as disruptive, unlawful, and aligned with fringe ideologies.

From a rhetorical and argumentative standpoint, Eckstein (p. 131) poses the questions: “Can we imagine the Freedom Convoy as a sound body? Can we imagine their protest as a sound tactic? Trucks were transformed into colossal symbols of resistance, created a pulsating hum in the city’s core, underpinned by the incessant rhythm of engines running.”

Compared to the three previously discussed examples of sound as a tactic, the Freedom Convoy appears to be a rhetorical act with the least argumentative potential. Eckstein’s (p. 131) observation captures this succinctly: “The Freedom Convoy violated decorum because the protesters felt that their autonomy was being violated.”

Based on the examples analyzed throughout the book, it is evident that Eckstein successfully proves his central thesis: sound is not only an important factor in social protests but also functions as a rhetorical tactic with significant argumentative potential. Although not his explicit aim, Eckstein also provides compelling evidence of auditory argumentation within the broader realm of multimodal discourse.

One of the book’s most valuable contributions lies in Eckstein’s development of the concept of “acousmatic rhetoric”, which links sound and rhetorical theory. While he is not the first to use this term (see Beard, 2019), he is the first to apply it systematically to

the context of social protest, demonstrating convincingly how sound can be essential—even decisive—in shaping collective messages and political impact.

From the perspective of rhetoric and argumentation theory, some scholars might critique the brevity of the chapter titled “Speech, Rhetoric, Argument,” especially given the long-standing theoretical debates concerning the boundaries between these overlapping domains. For instance, in discussions surrounding visual argumentation in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, authors such as Blair (1996) and Johnson (2003) argued that visual elements fall within the domain of rhetoric but lack argumentative status. In this context, it would have been enlightening to hear more from Eckstein on how he differentiates rhetoric from argumentation, particularly as it applies to the auditory mode.

However, it is clear that resolving these disciplinary debates was not Eckstein’s primary intention. Rather than engaging in theoretical boundary-drawing, he chooses to concentrate on the strategic and affective role of sound in protest. He leaves it to readers to interpret the rhetorical and argumentative function of specific sonic elements within specific contexts.

Eckstein’s effort to write about sound—notoriously elusive and under-theorized—while evaluating its rhetorical and argumentative dimensions, is truly pioneering. His work is a much needed and highly original contribution to the study of multimodal rhetoric and argumentation. It opens up new theoretical and methodological possibilities for researchers across disciplines.

In sum, this book is a significant and timely intervention in rhetorical and communication studies. It will be of great interest to scholars seeking to move beyond text-centric approaches and to explore the full sensory range of persuasion and protest. I am confident that *Sound Tactics Auditory Power in Political Protests* will be widely read, discussed, and cited across fields such as rhetoric, communication, media studies, and political theory. It not only expands the conceptual vocabulary of rhetorical scholarship but also deepens our understanding of how sound shapes public life.

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