Hearing and Belonging — On Sounds, Faiths, and Laws

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CHAPTER <mark>????</mark>

Hearing and Belonging — On Sounds, Faiths, and Laws

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Introduction: sounds and minorities

One of the most frustrating experiences a scholar can go through in Italy is trying to read a book while travelling by train. Upon entering a coach, the scholar will immediately find herself surrounded by passengers who relentlessly yell into their mobiles. The experience is particularly excruciating if the scholar understands Italian. After a few minutes, she will realize that no matter how acute her concentration power is, mental images evoked by the book will get contaminated by fragments of meaning from other people's lives: business information, intimate details, soccer opinions, and endless small talk (Leone 2006).

Irritated by the impossibility of reading on Italian trains, for years I have been quarrelling with other passengers, spent a fortune in high-quality earplugs, and envied Swiss colleagues and their perfectly silent coaches. Then, all of a sudden, I had an illumination: I tried to see myself, or rather, I tried to hear myself from the point of view of the other passengers. I realised that while their loudly talking into their mobiles was an annoyance to me and to my desire to read, my longing for silence was an annoyance to them and their perpetual chitchatting. I realised that we were both in competition for the same scarce resource: the air in the coach meant as a potential channel of communication (Jakobson 1976; Jakobson and Waugh 1979).

On the one hand, I wished to keep this channel empty in order to use my book in a way that German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk effectively analysed in the first volume of his trilogy *Sphären*: as an instrument that enables the reader to create a protective sphere around her personal identity (Sloterdijk 1998). On the other hand, my fellow passengers wished to use the same channel in order to break the isolation of their personal identity through connecting it with the other pole of a conversation. One might argue that, at a different level, we were both seeking to achieve the same result: avoiding the feeling of solitude, which is often a remainder of death, by either silent immersion into a book or noisy involvement in a phone conversation.

However, the metaphysics of book reading and mobile small talk is not at stake here. What matters is that I realised that at least in present-day Italian trains, I am a minority. The way in which I would like to manage the sound space of Italian trains is not in the mainstream. Furthermore, I realised that like most minorities not only am I treated as a nuisance by other passengers but I am also insufficiently protected by the state. In other countries, Switzerland for instance, passengers can choose to travel in silent, mobile-free coaches. I often amuse Swiss colleagues by saying that this is the main reason for their academic superiority.

But why do silent coaches not exist in Italy? Probably, because the lobby of book readers is not strong enough to politically and economically justify their creation. However, this is not the point of the present paper. After all I could just purchase an I-phone and participate in the national sport of loud phone conversation. I could join the

majority. The point is that the entire public space and to a certain extent also considerable portions of the private space are exactly like an Italian train coach.

Given the physics of the production of sounds and the physiology of their perception, when sound space is used as a communication channel, it turns into a limited resource. By sound space here I mean a space in which sounds can be produced, perceived, and potentially correlated with meaning. As I often tell my students in Italy, if you talk while I teach, you are stealing my channel. In this as in other examples, the limitedness of sound space is evident above all when its potential as a channel is privatised. My contract with the University of Torino implicitly says that during a certain number of hours per year the sound space of a certain classroom is mine and I have the exclusive right to use it as a communication channel.

However, owning a certain amount of sound space means that I can use this space to produce the sounds that I wish, but not that these sounds might be of whatever nature. From the legal point of view, one of the most interesting characteristics of the production of sounds is that they propagate through space. Therefore, owning a certain amount of sound space entails not only that I can use it to produce the sounds that I wish, but also that they must not propagate beyond the limits of this space. For instance, if I use a microphone when I teach, and my voice is so loud that propagates into the classroom next to mine — as it is often the case with the thin walls of Italian universities — I will steal the sound space, and therefore, the channel of my colleagues.

Technology for controlling the way in which sounds propagate through space is still primitive. Hence, sound spaces are usually conceived of as delimited by thresholds more than by frontiers. For instance, we would be quite annoyed if the neighbour's drill pierced the wall and intruded into our apartment, since we know that the current drilling technology allows the driller to respect the frontier between the neighbour's space and ours. On the contrary, we accept that a certain amount of sounds produced in the neighbour's sound space penetrates into ours.[1]

Tolerance to the permeability of private sound spaces is, of course, not only a matter of technology, but also a matter of culture: the thresholds of sound spaces in Naples are more porous, I guess, than those in Sydney. One of the main reasons for legal controversies about private sound spaces in multicultural cities stems from the fact that neighbours with different socio-cultural backgrounds sometimes conceive of the thresholds of their sound spaces in different ways. This is an issue not only for private citizens, but also for those who elaborate legal prescriptions about sounds in multicultural societies.

Nevertheless, even with the biases of their socio-cultural backgrounds, citizens are usually quite aware that private sound spaces are a limited resource, that people compete for using them as communication channel, and that property of a sound space entails the right to produce sounds within the thresholds of such space. On the contrary, what citizens usually ignore is that the public sound space too is the object of constant competition among different agencies. The sounds of the public space in which we usually live are often so familiar to us that we tend to 'naturalise' them. In contemporary cities, for instance, we frequently perceive sounds of traffic, sounds of construction works, sounds of commercial advertising, etc. as if they were the sound of the wind, the sounds of birds, the sound of the rain.

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[1] The different reactions stem also from the different materialities of the intruding objects, and therefore, from the different expectations about their permanence in the alien space.

The semio-geography of soundscapes

One of the purposes of a semio-geography of public soundscapes is to de-naturalize them by pinpointing the way in which they have been brought about through competition among specific social agencies. By "soundscape" here I mean the series of sounds that usually characterise a certain sound space (Shafer 1994; Bull and Back 2005; Mikola 2007; Cossali and Brighenti 2008). By "semio-geography" I refer to a contamination between semiotics and geography. The term "semio-geography" is modelled after that of "psycho-geography", first defined by Guy Débord as the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals (Débord 1955; Stein 1987; Stein and Niederland 1989; Coverley 2006; Self 2007). Similarly, semio-geography could be defined as the study of the way in which the environment is transformed into a fabric of signification patterns (Leone 2010a).

Some of the patterns that characterise the soundscapes of many contemporary cities are produced by religious agencies. This is particularly clear in certain urban environments. For instance, as a first year student at the University of Siena, in Italy, I realised too late that the tiny studio I had rented in the beautiful medieval town was adjacent to the bell-tower of a convent, and that the bell rang every morning at 6 a.m. to summon the local nuns for the office of Prime. My accomplishments as a young student owe a lot to my religious neighbours. Similarly, one of my most vivid memories of Marrakech is the sound of multiple adhans, the Islamic calls to prayer, reverberating through the medina at dawn.

However, contemporary urban soundscapes do not include only religious sounds like the ring of Christian bells or the voice of Islamic muezzins. In several Italian cities, for instance, some churches, including the one in front of my current house in Torino, have taken the habit of keeping their doors wide open during the Mass, in order to eliminate or at least nuance the threshold between the religious inside of the temple and the lay outside of the city. Some parish priests even place loudspeakers in the churchyard in order to broadcast the sounds of the Mass in the street.

The injection of religious sounds in the public sound space of contemporary cities is problematic from both the political and the legal point of view, especially as regards the present-day multicultural and multi-religious societies. On the one hand, the political and the legal discourse must strike an equilibrium between those who, with more or less enthusiasm, welcome the presence of religious sounds in the public sound space and those who, on the contrary, object to it. On the other hand, the same political and legal discourse must also strike an equilibrium among different religious agencies competing for the production of sounds in the public sound space.

No genius is required to realise that the need for these two equilibria, the one between believers and non-believers and the one among believers, concerns not only sounds but every manifestation of religion in the public sphere (Leone 2010b). However, focusing on sounds, as well as on the other sensuous manifestations of religions in present-day multicultural and multi-religious cities, is necessary mostly in order to avoid a fallacy that studies on multiculturalism have frequently incurred: if we want to understand the way in which individuals and groups shape their existence in multicultural environments we must not consider them as disembodied agents, but as sensuous agents, as agents who exist in the environment by producing and receiving images, sounds, smells, tastes, and contacts (Leone 2010c).

This is particularly urgent as far as the religious dimension of the social existence of individuals and groups is concerned: by disembodying religious agents, scholars do not adopt a neutral point of view, but rather project on their methodology the predominant religious sensibility of the 'Western' world, a disincarnated sensibility that

ultimately stems from the Christian, and especially from the Protestant, conception of the religious body (Keane 2003).

The trend of sensuous scholarship has been already developed in human geography, for instance, by Paul Rodaway's book on *Sensuous Geographies* (1994), in anthropology, for instance by Paul Stoller's book on *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997), and partially also in multicultural studies, for instance, by research on everyday and sensuous multiculturalism carried out by Amanda Wise and other scholars predominantly in Australia and Canada (Wise in press). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, few researchers have thus far investigated the intersection between legal studies and sensuous scholarship.

'Western' soundscapes and nationalist fantasies

I first became aware of the need to explore such intersection as I was analysing, thanks to a fellowship of the Australian government, legal controversies about the establishment of new places of worship in contemporary Australia (Leone 2009a). The main purpose of my research was to use the documents of these controversies, as well as the media coverage that they often generated, in order to understand how contemporary Australians react to the idea that their public environment might be modified by religious agencies, as well as in order to understand how these reactions interact with the Australian political and legal systems.

I was not surprised when I found out that reactions were particularly negative against religious minorities, and mostly against Islamic communities. Especially after 9/11, plans by Islamic groups to establish new places of worship in predominantly non-Islamic countries have been generally met with hostility (Humphrey 1989; Shadid 1996; Siemiatycki and Isin 1999; Dunn 2001; Siemiatycki 2002; Allievi 2009). In my country, for instance, such plans have been often received with aggressiveness (Leone 2009b). I have exposed the main results of this investigation in other contexts and I will not reproduce them here (Leone 2009a).

However, I would like to point out that a particular aspect of these results *was* surprising to me. In Australia as well as in other countries, non-Islamic citizens have been objecting to the establishment of new Islamic places of worship by using more or less always the same arguments. As if all these objectors around the 'Western' world had contracted the same lawyers. One of these arguments turns around sounds. In transcripts of legal controversies in this domain, someone routinely complains that the planned new mosque might inject unwanted sounds in the public sound space, or even in the private sound spaces adjacent to that of the intended new place of worship.[2]

Islamic sounds are not objected to qua generic sounds, in terms of decibels characterising their sound pressure level.[3] From this point of view, indeed, many other sounds in the public space of contemporary cities feature a higher level of sound pressure than Islamic sounds do, but are not as frequently objected to. A soccer stadium, for instance, probably produces louder sounds in the surrounding public environment than a mosque does. However, the establishment of new soccer stadiums does not attract the same level of public hostility than the establishment of new mosques does. Nor are Islamic sounds objected to qua specifically religious sounds, qua manifestation of the religious dimension in the lay public space. From this point of view, indeed, many other religious sounds in the public space of contemporary cities are as loud as the Islamic ones. Citizens who object to the sounds that a new mosque might produce, do

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2   For instance in QPEC 068.
3   The local pressure deviation from the ambient (average, or equilibrium) pressure caused by a sound wave.

not object, for instance, to the equally loud sounds that Christian churches already produce in the same public environment.

On the contrary, Islamic sounds are objected to neither qua sounds nor qua religious sounds, but qua Islamic sounds. The same adjective recurs over and over again in complaints about the establishment of new Islamic places of worship both in Australia and in other 'Western' countries: *uncharacteristic*. Non-Islamic citizens in Australia as well as in other 'Western' countries claim that new Islamic places of worship should not be established in their neighbourhood because they are likely to produce uncharacteristic sounds, sounds that would spoil the character of the local soundscape.

I have already pointed out on other occasions that this argument concerns not only sounds, but the entire aesthetics of religious places of worship planned by Islamic minorities (Leone 2009a). In many legal controversies, for instance, non-Islamic Australian citizens claim that new Islamic places of worship might spoil the architectural, sometimes even the rural or semi-rural character, of their neighbourhood. I have also pointed out that these arguments should not be simply dismissed as racism coated in acceptable legal terms, but as manifestations of those nationalistic fantasies that Ghassan Hage has so effectively analysed in his books (Hage 1998). I will not repeat my considerations on this point.

On the contrary, I would like to emphasize that the intersection between sensuous scholarship and legal studies is fundamental from another point of view: it is only by studying the way in which the political and legal discourse of contemporary multicultural and multi-religious societies allows individuals and groups to modify the sensuous fabric of the public environment according to their cultural and religious sensibilities that we shall be able to grasp that which I would like to call the phenomenology of belonging in multicultural societies (Leone 2010c).

Toward a phenomenology of belonging

"Belonging" is a frontier-concept in the field of present-day multicultural studies on cities and religion. Although the idea of "belonging" has been considered as central since the early development of city studies — for instance in *Human Communities* by Robert E. Park (1952) and in the other ground-breaking contributions of the Chicago 'urban ethnographers' —, both social researchers and policy makers currently believe that the concepts of "sense of belonging" and "feeling of belonging" urgently require further investigation.

Especially in societies with a long tradition in research on multicultural cities, such as Australia and Canada, it is increasingly found that the conceptual framework of "cultural integration", predominant thus far in social research and policy making about social cohesion and harmony, is largely unsatisfactory in dealing with the challenges of the so-called super-diverse cities (Vertovec 2007). In order to bring about social cohesion and harmony, many social scientists and policy makers now contend that it is not sufficient that new citizens, for instance migrants, integrate their identities with the socio-cultural fabric previously created by the identities of old citizens. In the conceptual framework of "cultural belonging", it is believed that social cohesion and harmony come about, on the contrary, when both old and new citizens feel that their identities are equally fundamental in shaping the socio-cultural fabric of the city in which they live. When they feel that they all belong to the city, and that the city belongs to them all.

Whereas in cultural integration, social cohesion and harmony are conceived as a situation in which no citizen feels *out of place*, and in which no citizen believes that her identity is incompatible with the pre-existent socio-cultural fabric of the city, in cultural

belonging, social cohesion and harmony are conceived as a situation in which every citizen feels *in place*, and believes that her identity is not only compatible, but also consubstantial with the socio-cultural fabric of the city (Kobayashi and Peake 2000).

It is in this conceptual framework of belonging that several contemporary social scientists and policy-makers have started to reconsider the cultural dynamics of social harmony and disharmony in present-day multicultural cities. What does it mean when one feels that she belongs to the city, and what does it mean when one feels that the city belongs to her? What urban dynamics create and increase this sense and feeling of belonging, and what dynamics, on the contrary, decrease and destroy it? In what situations, and through what socio-cultural practices are new citizens, for instance, migrants, able to develop a sense/feeling of belonging toward the city in which they live, and in what situations, on the contrary, are they unable to do so? What is the relation between the way in which new citizens seek to develop a sense/feeling of belonging to the city, and the way in which old citizens try to maintain such sense/feeling?

When are these processes in competition (for instance, when the newer citizens secure opportunities to 'shape the city' in order to feel that they belong to it, the older citizens feel that they 'do not belong to it any more', because they are losing, or they believe they are losing, such power)? When are they, on the contrary, compatible? How do multicultural cities encourage or discourage senses/feelings of multiple belonging, and how does this affect the relation between old and new citizens, and between citizens with a feeling of single belonging and citizens with a feeling of multiple belongings?

Most important of all, how does the social articulation of this sense/feeling of belonging influence the participation of citizens in the creation of the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the city? Do citizens who feel that they do not belong to the city act as merely passive citizens, whereas citizens who feel that they belong to it contribute actively to the social cohesion and harmony of the city? And what policies are the most suitable in order to bring about a 'common sense of belonging', and therefore a 'sense of common belonging' among all citizens?

In the last years, several social scientists have sought to answer these questions, for instance, by investigating the senses/feelings of multiple belonging in Hong Kong-born present-day Australian citizens (Mar 2004), or the way in which a common sense/feeling of belonging is currently developed in Australian multicultural suburbs (Wise 2005), or the role of senses/feelings of belonging in fuelling resilience in the poor neighbourhoods of present-day Los Angeles (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008), or the senses/feelings of belonging of families of Turkish origin in contemporary Germany (Bozkurt 2009), or by assessing anti-segregation housing policies in European cities (Bolt 2009, Van Kempen and Bolt 2009), or contestations that ensue from conflictive senses/feelings of belonging (Hage 2002; Ross 2009; Noble 2009), or by questioning the senses/feelings of belonging of new citizens of Chinese descent in the USA (Toyota 2010), but also by emphasizing the social tensions brought about by exclusive claims of belonging in the form of ideologies of autochthony (Gerschiere 2009).

It is my contention that developing the intersection between legal studies and a sensuous semio-geography is fundamental in order to analyse the phenomenology of belonging in present-day multicultural and multi-religious cities. The extent to which individuals and groups in a multicultural city feel that they belong to it and that, vice versa, the city belongs to them, also depends on the extent to which they are able to inject images, sounds, smells, tastes, and contacts in the sensuous fabric of the public environment. In contemporary studies on Aboriginal soundscapes, I have come across a word that describes this process of creation of a feeling of belonging perfectly: "interanimation". Bradley and Mackinley define it as follows:

> Through the sentience of their bodies, the Yanyuwa experience the different textures, scents, sounds of these places, and by utilizing their own in-depth knowledge of these phenomenal attributes are able to discern the place of places they are moving through. Thus this emplacement within the Yanyuwa world is not one of people creating places from a formless matrix or 'landscape', but instead describes a relationship where people and places exist as interrelated and co-dependent phenomena. Basso calls this 'interanimation': a process by which people animate places through their experience, emotions and knowledge.
>
> (Bradley and Mackinley 2007, 79)

A multiculturalism where individuals and groups are allowed to express their cultural sensibility only in private or in specific cultural precincts, whereas they must refrain from any "interanimation" of the public environment, seems to me a hypocritical multiculturalism, in which a majority keeps the cultural monopoly of the public space while revelling in an abstract rhetoric of cultural diversity.

The situation of Islamic minorities in many predominantly non-Islamic 'Western' countries is, from this point of view, paradigmatic. On the one hand, most non-Islamic opinion-leaders in these countries affirm that Islamic citizens are as entitled to express the religious dimension of their social identity as much as atheist, agnostic, or Christian citizens do. On the other hand, though, most attempts at modifying the public environment according to an Islamic aesthetics are met with hostility and sometimes even with violent aggressiveness. As I have pointed out elsewhere, this is not a new phenomenon in history. For centuries, Jewish communities in Italy and elsewhere have been tolerated only on the condition that their impact on the public environment should be minimal (Leone 2010d, 254-68). Analogously, Islamic communities in present-day predominantly non-Islamic cities are tolerated but only on the condition that they are practically invisible or, as I will indicate in the last part of my paper, inaudible.

Making Muslim sound space

Several studies have demonstrated that there is not such a thing as a single 'Islamic aesthetics' (Grabar 1983), and that Islamic individuals and groups in different historical periods and socio-cultural contexts show different ways of "making Muslim space", to quote an excellent collection of essays on this topic (Metcalf 1996). Therefore, speaking of "Islamic aesthetics", "Islamic architecture", or "Islamic sounds" is as meaningful as speaking of "Christian aesthetics", "Christian architecture", or "Christian sounds".

However, most scholars recognise that one of the most common limitations Islamic communities suffer in predominantly non-Islamic 'Western' countries concerns the impossibility to modify the public sound space. As Barbara Daly Metcalf puts it in presenting the collection of essays mentioned above:

> A particular absence in a largely non-Muslim environment is the lack of Islamic sounds, the sound of the *azan* (call to prayer) and the sound of the Qur'anic recitation, the latter especially marked in the nights of Ramadam. […]
>
> (Metcalf 1996)[4]

Islamic citizens in predominantly non-Islamic cities often seek to reproduce some features of the public Islamic soundscape in their private sound space. As Barbara Daly Metcalf indicates:

> Catalogues from Islamic shops and newspaper advertisements aimed at Muslims are full of such items to create the sounds of an Islamic space. An electronic "Azan Clock," for example, its digital display set in a replica of a domed mosque, can be set for the five daily prayers. Qur'anic tapes, produced in different styles and in different selections are widely available and certainly

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[4] Quotations from Metcalf 1996 are from the electronic version without page numbers.

portable: as a poster at the Islamic Society of North America urged: "Use Driving Time to Listen to Holy Qur'an".

<div align="right">(Ibidem)</div>

Michel de Certeau's theories on the "invention of everyday life" would be suitable to analyse the quotidian strategies through which cultural and religious minorities around the world seek to overcome the limits on the manifestation of their social identity imposed on them by majorities (Certeau 1980). However, one might argue that these strategies are nothing but palliatives, confirming to those who carry them on that they do not belong to the place in which they live, and that the place in which they live does not belong to them.

Limitations to the way in which Islamic European citizens can modify the public soundscapes of the cities in which they live are particularly evident, as Stefano Allievi, one of the most prominent sociologists of contemporary Islam, indicated in a recent survey on "Conflicts over mosques in Europe" (Allievi 2009, 48-9). Among the European countries whose Islamic population has considerably grown in recent years, mainly as a consequence of migration, only the Netherlands has officially recognised the *adhan* by voting a law in 1987 that granted to the Islamic call to prayer the same status of the Christian bells. Significantly, the only vote against this law came from three small Calvinist parties. However, there are no national prescriptions either on the number of times the adhan can be performed or on its volume. These matters are regulated by local authorities, usually in a restrictive way: in Amsterdam, for instance, the adhan can be performed only on Friday (Rath, Groenendijk, Penninx, and Rinus 1999).

In United Kingdom the adhan is often prohibited, and is allowed only in neighbourhoods with a strong presence of Islamic citizens. However, also in these cases non-Islamic citizens frequently complain about the audibility of the Islamic call for prayer. The mosque of East London, for instance, has been allowed to perform the adhan twice a day only thanks to the support of the local Anglican church (Eade 1996).

In Germany, several official documents declare that Christian bells and the Islamic adhan are both manifestations of the right of religious freedom and, within reasonable limits, deserve the same constitutional protection by the state, as it has been recommended in 1997 by both the *Bunderausländerbeauftragte*, the Federal Office for Foreigners, and the *Deutscher Städte und Gemeindebund*, the German Federation of Cities and Municipalities. However, these documents are usually interpreted in a way that grants constitutional protection to the adhan, but not to the loudspeakers that broadcast the adhan. Furthermore, the performing of the adhan is often received with hostility by non-Islamic citizens. For instance, in 1997-8 some exponents of the evangelical churches of Duisburg started to diffuse a misinterpretation of the text of the adhan, claiming that it was a call against Christianity (Goldberg 2002; Spuler-Stegemann 2002; Beinhauer-Köhler and Leggewie 2009).

In most European countries, including Belgium, France, and Italy, where consistent Islamic minorities are present, Islamic representatives usually censor themselves and do not even dare asking permission for the performance of the adhan, knowing that such requests would attract the hostility of the non-Islamic majority and eventually worsen the conditions of life of Islamic individuals and groups.

In Norway mosques are allowed to broadcast the adhan once a week, on Friday, and with a sound pressure limit of 60 decibels (Goran 2009), which is the average sound pressure of conversation at the distance of 1 meter.

In general, the adhan is performed in mosques and Islamic centres in Europe on special occasions and usually considered as an exceptional feature of the public sound space.

The only region of Europe where the adhan is performed on a regular basis is

Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is also the only European state with an Islamic majority (Aksamija 2008).

In Australia, as well as in other predominantly non-Islamic 'Western' countries, almost all legal controversies concerning the establishment of new mosques involve complaints about the construction of minarets, the towers usually adjacent to a mosque, from the top of which the adhan is performed (Allievi 2009, 45-7; Haenni and Lathion 2009).

Minarets are not objected to exclusively qua potential sources of production and diffusion of Islamic sounds in the public space. Minarets are objected to also when Islamic communities wish to build them as purely decorative elements, without requesting the permission to use them in order to broadcast the adhan. Indeed, non-Islamic citizens in predominantly non-Islamic 'Western' countries often consider minarets, consciously or unconsciously, as a clearly visible architectural sign of the growing control that Islamic minorities might exert on the public space.

However, minarets are also related to that which contemporary musicologists define as "soundmarks", that is, soundscape landmarks (Shafer 1994, 10; Lee 1999). For instance, Christian bell-towers, whose anthropological relevance has been effectively analysed by Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino (2002), are so central in the phenomenology of the public space not only because they are visible from everywhere, but also because sounds diffused from their top are potentially audible everywhere.

The idea that soon the minarets of European mosques might be used to broadcast adhans competing with secular or Christian sounds over the soundscapes of present-day European cities is currently received with hostility, at times even with aggressiveness, by many present-day non-Islamic European individuals and groups. Limitations are imposed on the construction of minarets everywhere in Europe, often with the clear intent to make them look shorter, and therefore, less symbolically present in the urban landscape than Christian campaniles or secular buildings (Allievi 2009, 45-7; Haenni and Lathion 2009).

Conclusions

On November 29, 2009, 57% of the Swiss electors approved a constitutional amendment banning the construction of new minarets in the country, with retroactive effect on four existing Swiss minarets. This referendum and its results have been interpreted in different, sometimes opposite ways. My personal opinion is that it represents an alarming sign of both a social and a political phenomenon. At the social level, it indicates that the societies of many present-day European countries are increasingly prone to nationalistic fantasies according to which the control that cultural and religious minorities might exert on the public space must be minimized at all cost. Certain cultural and religious minorities, such as Islamic or Gypsy individuals and groups in Europe, are recurrently victims of such fantasies, for reasons which are too complicated to be analysed here.

At the political level, the Swiss referendum shows that such nationalistic fantasies, as well as politicians and other opinion-leaders who hijack them in order to increase their personal power, feed each other in a vicious circle whose worrying result is the growing incapacity of European democracies to protect the fundamental rights of their minorities.

As globalisation and its migration flows increase the presence of cultural and religious minorities in 'Western' societies, intellectual, political, legal, and educational efforts should be made to contrast the entrepreneurs of xenophobia and make sure that all individuals and groups, independently from their cultural and religious background,

have equal access to the possibility of shaping the public space, including the public space of sounds, without having to betray their personal and social identity. Since the public space is a limited resource, negotiations and compromises will be needed.[5] However, it is evident that such negotiations and such compromises shall have to be different from what they are now, and bring about a fairer balance between the symbolical and material needs of majorities and minorities.[6]

Perhaps in the future, non-Islamic citizens in Western countries will not pay attention to adhans more than they do to Christian bells or traffic sounds. Perhaps in the future, Islamic sounds will perfectly belong to the soundscapes of 'Western' cities. Perhaps in the future, this article will make no sense. I definitely hope so, but I cannot foresee if and when this future will take place. Of one thing, however, I am certain: Italian train coaches will never be silent.

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[5] The present article focused on 'Western' urban religious soundscapes, but it is evident that such negotiation efforts are needed in predominantly Islamic countries too, where some individuals and groups also wish to modify urban religious soundscapes in order to make them more plural and suitable for the rhythms of contemporary urban life: as an instance, consider the inversion of loudspeakers in Singapore's mosques (toward the mosque rather than toward the city) (Lee 1999) or the recent attempts to synchronize and standardize adhans in Egypt.

[6] On the social tensions triggered by a plural urban religious soundscape when it does not correspond to a suitable equilibrium among different socio-cultural agencies, cfr Ivo Andrić's splendid description of Sarajevo's conflictive religious soundscape (Andrić 1946, 33).

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