

Antiphon: *Notes on the People's Microphone*

The people's microphone is a means for amplifying speech in large crowds. The premise is simple: all those within earshot repeat loudly and in unison what the speaker on the floor has just said. In smaller groups, a single repetition can suffice for all to hear. In assemblies of hundreds or thousands, several rounds may be necessary for the message to reach those on the outskirts. It's a surprisingly effective medium, one that works best when the speaker delivers her message in short segments: no fillers, no contorted grammar, or you simply won't be heard.

The human mic is an ingenious solution to the problem of mass discourse in sites where amplified sound is banned, including the original Occupy Wall Street encampment at Liberty Plaza in New York. It was used in the occupation of the Madison, Wisconsin capitol building in February 2011, and was documented on video in use over a decade ago in the WTO protests of 1999 in Seattle. In an era that prefigures the ubiquity of smart phones,

texting, and twitter, protestors have found ingenious ways to disseminate vital information quickly through large groups without recourse to any prosthetic beyond the human voice and a few well-chosen hand signals.

In less exigent circumstances, it's a cumbersome system, at times counter-productive: as Richard Kim notes, General Assembly meetings and group decision-making processes conducted by these means can be "incredibly, agonizingly, astonishingly slow." And yet despite the obvious drawbacks, people seem compelled and mesmerized by this form of vocalization. Some speakers opt to use the people's mic even when a megaphone is ready to hand and sanctioned by permit: Francis Fox Piven, speaking at Occupy Philadelphia on November 8, 2011, began her remarks through the human mic before switching to an electrically powered one. With the latter, she made several adjustments before discovering the right angle at which to hold the electric mic, and a few words were lost to the ether

in the process. At times, the human mic seems more intuitive, perhaps even more effective, than technologically reproduced sound. At least there is no crackle, feedback, or electric shock. State-of-the-art technology can help move things along: computers, camera phones, and live-streamed video have been instrumental to the success of the Occupy movement. But arguments about efficiency aside, the performative, ritual, and relational capacities of this vocal medium exceed its utility as a means of spreading information.

The human mic is less a tool than a mode of speech. As Hannah Chadeayne Appel suggests, it is "a synecdoche for the larger issues at stake." The human mic involves a special kind of speech-act, an actualization of principles in viva voce. Amplification, but also reverb, chorus, equalization, and distortion. It's a kind of speech at once radically new and ancient, evocative of the choruses of Greek drama, the antiphonal cadences of Gregorian chant, and the liturgical call and response of certain religious ceremonies, in the ety-

mological sense of the word (liturgies = “work of the people”).

Amplification

The human microphone goes up to eleven. Or rather, it doesn't go up — it goes across, horizontally, radiating in concentric circles, or fanning out in a wedge-shaped pattern. In this medium, speech skips away and comes back to mirrored but also transformed by the crowd. Through collective speech, the people's mic shifts away from unified, solitary personhood. There is “something inherently

pluralistic about the human mic,” writes Kim, for “it exudes solidarity over ego.” It also marks a shift away from the idea that our speech belongs to us, as if it were a commodity, and the idea that when others reiterate it, it is somehow used up or stolen rather than bolstered and enhanced. The mode is not appropriation, but rather forwarding, reposting, making bigger and better.

The human mic not only amplifies; it also enacts. It is related to what J. L. Austin calls a performative utterance: a statement that actualizes what it invokes.

Each use of the people's microphone carries with it an implicit enactment of the very thing being demanded: This is what democracy looks like. Kim calls this a “prefigurative politics...living in the conditional tense.” Each fragment of speech amplified by the people's mic expresses a desire for, and also models and genuinely creates, a pluralistic process.

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