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Rebecca P. Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ix + 299 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781107108677; \$80.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781316490709.

Review by Adam C. Stanley, University of Wisconsin-Platteville.

In this engaging study, Rebecca Scales examines the ways in which developments in radio and “auditory culture” more broadly were central to French society and politics in the 1920s and 1930s. Listening to radio broadcasts became a defining element of citizenship for the French in the interwar years, as the airwaves came to be conceived as a “radio nation”—a new kind of collective space where the contours of the body politic and the nature of participation in national life were defined and contested. As a “sound revolution” transformed the auditory landscape of France (not only through radio, but also in terms of the noise generated by a variety of new sound-producing technologies that became more and more inescapable in daily life) and made listening a primary means for the French to engage with the world around them, politicians and cultural elites sought to harness the power of sound to shape French society. However, those attempts frequently were negotiated, if not resisted, by ordinary citizens who actively sought to fashion the “radio nation” for their own ends and on their own terms, irrespective of official efforts to control the discourses of the airwaves.

Exploring what she calls the “state of the ear” (the new auditory culture and environment created by the wider dissemination of radio and other noise-generating technologies, and the changes these wrought upon the daily soundscape, especially in urban areas) after World War I, Scales outlines the concerns of contemporaries in the interwar years about the increasing unavoidability of noise in daily life—from the sounds of a neighbor’s radio drifting over to one’s own domicile, to the use of loudspeakers at public gatherings and the installation of sound systems in retail businesses. Yet the desire in some quarters to be able to escape such sounds in day-to-day life coexisted with the emergence of the notion of a “right to listen” to broadcast sound. Part of the concerns about incessant sound derived from the traumatic memory of the way in which new and inescapable forms of noise had likewise been inextricable from the experience of the First World War and its devastations, and Scales in turn examines the ways in which French society sought to come to terms with both the sound revolution and the trauma of the war by utilizing new sound technologies to reintegrate disabled World War I veterans into national life in the interwar era. Convalescing or home-bound former soldiers, especially those with visual disabilities resulting from the military conflict, were thought to be primary potential beneficiaries of broadcast sound, as listening to the radio could negate the social isolation engendered by their physical infirmities, with commentators analogizing radio and broadcast sound to prostheses for disabled veterans. As Scales notes, this in turn demonstrates the way in which radio listening was seen as increasingly vital to the exercise of citizenship and participation in the French body politic.

At the same time that the notion of a radio nation was thus emerging in French discourse, questions of national and international listening became sites of contestation in those discussions, in ways that were often reflective of wider geopolitical developments. Radio’s seeming ability to overcome traditional spatial

and temporal boundaries made it appear a promising ground for greater national integration, as well as global awareness. In the 1920s, a political environment of optimism about postwar rapprochement across the continent had as its counterpart in French auditory culture the consumption of foreign radio broadcasts that could be received in France. Yet with the arrival of the Great Depression and the growing international diplomatic tensions of the 1930s, although French listeners continued to assert their “right to listen” to foreign broadcasts, simultaneously increasing pressure was evident, from both official and popular standpoints, for the maintenance of France as an international “radio power” by protecting its broadcasts from interference from foreign signals on the international radio spectrum, and to ensure that French voices and broadcasts were readily available and audible to all of France, so that all citizens could participate in French national life via access to French broadcasts in the airwaves. Many French viewed radio, then, as a significant instrument by which to measure France’s geopolitical prowess as well as citizens’ own place in the radio nation.

Questions about the politics of the airwaves assumed an added dimension in the second half of the 1930s. After sweeping into power, the Popular Front government used state-run stations to organize the broadcasting of educational programming that could be incorporated into French classrooms across the country. The justification for this *radio scolaire* program was that it could contribute to the Popular Front’s larger goals of unifying the French nation and fighting against the threat of fascism (both within and outside France) by building a future generation of French citizens inculcated in the virtues of democratic values and civic involvement. Critics, however, contended that the program constituted a project more akin to political indoctrination *à la* Europe’s totalitarian regimes. Skeptics also rejected radio’s utility as an effective tool for educational reform, depicting broadcast sound as counterproductive to intellectual growth and development. Indeed, Scales shows that concerns over the negative intellectual impact of increasingly popular commercial broadcasts, with their jingles, game shows, and other “low” programming fare, persisted. Despite critics’ litany of complaints about the Popular Front’s educational programming on the airwaves, the *radio scolaire* program was continued after the fall of the Popular Front government, as both left- and right-wing elites feared the consequences of listeners’ preference for commercial programming, and felt it imperative to use state-run stations to broadcast what those elites viewed as higher quality material.

Fears of the effects of broadcast sound gained greater currency in the postwar era among French officials vis-à-vis France’s empire, and Scales explores such concerns by exploring the history of broadcast sound in Algeria between the world wars. French colonial administrators worried about sedition among their North African subjects at a variety of levels, with a particular locus of concern being the possibility of the airwaves becoming a site where Algerians could subvert and contest French authority. Indeed, Scales argues that the uneven results of colonial officials’ attempts to monitor and control Algerians’ radio listening is illustrative of the limits of French colonial hegemony in North Africa in the interwar decades. The creation of Radio-Algiers, for instance, by the colonial government was meant to allow the French to transmit their own messages to what they viewed as a passive Algerian audience who would invariably absorb the information coming across the airwaves, and at the same time provide a connection to French culture for more isolated European settlers in more rural Algerian locales. Yet it proved difficult for French authorities to control what Algerians listened to and what meanings they attached to broadcasts, as in many cases the multiplicity of meanings that could be derived from broadcast performances frustrated French officials’ attempts to transmit discursive messages on their own terms. It also complicated making a determination about when listening acquired a political or subversive aspect. The meaning of Algerians singing along to nationalist songs, for example, would be more easily transparent than, say, what a listener was thinking when hearing the content of a broadcast program whose meaning(s) proved more malleable than the French had anticipated.

There is much in this book to commend, as Scales handles with consistent adroitness a complex array of issues surrounding interwar French auditory culture. Her treatment of the interplay between state officials, cultural elites and commentators, and listeners in the contested construction of the French radio

nation yields a nuanced and valuable assessment of the complexities of the meaning and significance of broadcast sound in interwar France. In particular, while focusing to a considerable degree on the motives and actions of policymakers, executives, and intellectual commentators, the text consistently emphasizes the agency of ordinary French individuals and audiences in the building of the radio nation. Especially fascinating in this respect is her analysis of disabled World War I veterans and their relationship to the radio nation. Scales shows that those veterans did not passively accept the efforts of charitable organizations to broadcast specialized programming for them. Instead, veterans (and other disabled French) frequently eschewed such specialized programming designed to cater to their alleged interests, preferring instead to listen to “ordinary” broadcasts. Moreover, some hearing-impaired veterans modified radios themselves, converting radio receivers into makeshift hearing aids whose effectiveness and cost were sometimes more favorable than hearing aids available on the market.

Scales likewise navigates the potential vexations of state-run versus commercial stations with aplomb. Over the course of the interwar years, commercial stations were allowed to transmit in France despite the official existence of a state monopoly on the airwaves. This broadcasting environment considerably complicates any attempt to analyze the history of French radio, and Scales is to be credited for not neglecting or ignoring the impact of commercial broadcasting on interwar French auditory culture. Indeed, as she demonstrates, commercial stations proved vital to the French “radio nation”—whether by their adoption of more “Americanized” programming choices (game shows, soap operas, and the like) and marketing tactics, which French intellectuals held up as evidence of the dangers of broadcast sound to the intellectual health of the French body politic, or by their confounding of the French government by refusing to abide by its international agreements regarding usage of the radio spectrum.

While, in many instances, precedence is (understandably) given in the text to issues of class and regionalism as it pertained to French auditory culture, the book also effectively incorporates gender at various points. As one example, Scales addresses the uncertainties and concerns surrounding women’s access to radio technology, especially in light of the wider cultural phenomenon of the “New Woman,” preoccupation with whom constituted a significant element of postwar gender anxieties. Discussions of the role of radio as occupying both public and private space allowed radio manufacturers to portray their technology as not incompatible with more “traditional” social conventions in this regard, particularly as it related to the production of radios for household use. Most notable, though, in this realm is Scales’s treatment of issues of gender in terms of the radio nation in colonial Algeria, where she convincingly contends that the French colonial administration’s prioritization of monitoring public, rather than domestic listening—in part due to the belief that the former was more problematic because it more easily facilitated listening in larger groups and debating what was heard in the airwaves—indicates its dismissal of Algerian women as a viable political threat, since males comprised the bulk of radio listeners in Algerian public spaces.

On the whole, then, this is a compelling and relevant study, one that situates radio—and auditory culture more broadly—into the wider narrative of French interwar history. Seeking to alleviate what she presents as a neglect of studies of sound in comparison to visual culture, Scales demonstrates the significance of listening in interwar France as a central component of the French encounter with modernity. Edifying and engaging with every turn of the page, *Radio and the Politics of Sound* makes a significant contribution to the historical literature on interwar France, and should be of interest to students and scholars in realms ranging from the social history of technology, interwar French domestic and colonial politics, and any aspect of the social and cultural history of the *entre deux guerres*.

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