

Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921–1939

by Rebecca P Scales

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We easily forget the central role that radio played in peoples' lives during the early to mid-twentieth century. Radio was the primary mode of entertainment and information for many across the globe, and it played a central role in key social and political events of the era. In *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921–1939*, the twenty-second book in the Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories series, Rebecca P Scales examines the impact of radio on French society in the interwar period (1918–39) and the debates over its emergence as a key feature of everyday life and political culture in the late Third Republic. She argues that French commentators began to conceive of the airwaves as a 'radio nation' during this period, a term that positioned radio listening as an important part of citizenship practice.

Historians of radio, including Bridget Griffen-Foley and Lesley Johnson, have shown that the medium was initially greeted as a scientific wonder that would help to integrate the disenfranchised into the public sphere. In her book, Scales contributes to this existing scholarship by arguing that the development of the French 'radio nation' began with advocacy for radio's role in reintegrating disabled ex-soldiers into French civil society. Radio supported the national recovery by providing a way for disabled veterans to reclaim their role and responsibilities as active citizens. The 'radio nation' therefore became an alternative public sphere that enabled a greater number of citizens to participate in French politics and society.

French broadcasting is an interesting case study in European radio as it was not used as an authoritarian weapon in the same way it was in Germany and Italy—nor as a tool for public intellectualism as in Britain.

Rather, France's radio industry developed in a less organised way that made it a dual system of both commercial and public broadcasting, as found in Australia. This dual system exacerbated tensions between those who felt that radio could act as a nation-building technology and those who believed in its potential to promote internationalism. With a turn of the dial, French listeners could hear broadcasts from across Europe and judge whether France's broadcast outputs met the standard of a modern radio nation. While many listeners embraced the opportunity to hear broadcasts from other countries, and even in other languages, some commentators became concerned at the intrusion of foreign voices onto the airwaves and lobbied for an increase in French content.

Scales challenges the commonly accepted argument among historians that the radio was primarily a domestic medium that facilitated a new way for the public to enter the private sphere. Instead, she demonstrates that public ways of listening to the radio continued well into the 1930s, a trend that had important implications for how radio was understood in interwar France. Broadcast sound was especially embedded in a broader discourse of noise in modern cities, where it was often seen as a noisy intrusion into the public and private spaces of Paris. Radio was part of the soundscape of the modern city, not just the modern home.

One of the main strengths of *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921–1939* is the way that Scales examines how radio was deeply embedded in both the practices of, and resistance to, French colonialism. She argues that, in Algeria, French broadcasting became a 'centerpiece of colonial modernity, as imperial lobbyists and colonial bureaucrats experimented with radio as a novel form of distance communication, a source of entertainment, and a weapon of propaganda' (Chapter 5). French colonists created Radio-Algiers, the French Empire's first public broadcasting station, to promote French culture and 'civilisation' among the Algerian population. But Algerians resisted this colonialism of the airwaves, and instead made use of the station to challenge colonial society and demand a greater role in their own governance. Scales argues that this 'war of the airwaves' made broadcasting a key part of the struggle against colonial hegemony in French Algeria.

Scales does not focus on analysing the content of radio programs, noting that there is a scarcity of reliable source material and a more pressing need to examine the discursive constructions of the meanings of radio listening. While she is correct in arguing that debates over the meaning

of radio certainly shaped how it was understood by producers and listeners, research in other countries, including Kristin Skoog's work on the BBC and my own work on Australia, has shown that focusing on such debates without a corresponding examination of the actual programming can lead to a distorted picture of radio content and listeners' attitudes. Moreover, this approach disproportionately privileges the voices of those with the power to have their opinions widely circulated in print. Nevertheless, Scales has produced an impressive study that claims radio's rightful place as a key feature of the political experience of ordinary French citizens in the interwar years. *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921–1939* is an important contribution to international radio history that reveals how the medium shaped French identity, politics and Empire in the interwar years.

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