

Call for Contributions

**Democratization of the Senses – Senses of Democracy: Emancipation as Experience of
Equality in Hierarchical Otherwise Sensorial Spaces**

**An International and Transdisciplinary Conference Organized by the Department of
Sports Science and *Motologie* and the Department of Studies in Culture and History**

April 4 – 6, 2025 at the University of Marburg

“The existence of democracy presupposes that there is an ability of all, no matter who {...}. There is an ability shared by all. In this sense, politics can be said to be based on the distribution of the sensual (Jaques Ranciere 2016: 69).”

Recent studies from Radical Democracy Theory have not only critiqued the reduction of democratic processes to a representative, juridico-economic, or institutional act (cf. Agamben 2012:12; Balibar 2012; Mouffe 2005), but have paved the way for an ontic framing of “the democratic” itself.

Politics, then, is no longer understood as a mere space of negotiation, as a “system of producing and deploying collectively binding decisions” (Comtesse et al. 2019; Friedrichs 2021: 24). The focus shifts to the epistemic institutions that precede democracy and the political (cf. Friedrichs 2021: 24; Rancière 2016; Rancière 2002; Abbas 2019; Marchart 2019). Particularly those discourses on democratic theory that follow Jacques Rancière seek to understand democracy as holistic process. Concepts like “democracy of the senses” (Butler 2010), “sensory citizenship” (Trnka et al. 2013), “senses of democracy” (Masiello 2018), “democracy as sensual space” (Dietrich 2022: 90), “political aesthesis” (Friedrichs 2021), “posthumanist democracy as a form of life” (Spahn/Wieners 2023), or the understanding of the political field as “somato-sensorial gestalt” (Linke 2006) point toward a novel understanding of democracy.

Such approaches focus on the sensual prerequisites for the existence of a space for negotiations among equals and on the question which (non-human) actors are excluded from it. Moreover, they question a concept of understanding that is built exclusively on rational thinking. Jacques Rancière's often cited phrase of a "(new) division of the sensual" (Ranciere 2008; 2008a; 2016) can thus be taken as call for the further integration of a somatic-sensual dimension into the discourse on democracy and participation. The interdisciplinary conference aims to explore how a sensual-meaningful, socio-somatic understanding of the democratic as a form of experience may look like (without furthering a dichotomy of *logos* and *sensus*).

If indeed sensual perception and, consequently, the experience of relations of power and domination differ among social groups and if, in turn, political life is constituted by using the senses (cf. Ranciere 2002; 2008; 2008a; 2016; Bünger/Trautmann 2012; Trnka u.a. 2013; Vannini u.a. 2014; Kwek/Siefert 2016), then we must pay attention to a democratization of the senses in everyday social and political practices to account for the sensual dimension of democracy. The perception of different cultural constructions in social movement contexts and their somatic-sensual inscriptions is only made possible by the existence of democracy. For this reason, democracy is a primordial precondition for dissident somatic reflections.

The conference will focus on the question if and how the late-capitalist, Western modular and hierarchical understanding of the senses as (intertwined) expression of ocular-, logo-, andro- and anthro-centrism (cf. Howes 2006; Mraczny 2012; Kwek/Siefert 2016; Hubermann 2023) entails a hierarchical pre-structuring of the democratic political field. Visual culture, for example, produces "specific practices, discourses, and ways of speaking that encompass various fields and privilege them before others" (Mraczny 2012, 197).

At the same time, it becomes apparent that an understanding of democracy that considers the *logos* as superior to the *sensus*, excludes the articulation of somatic-affective discomfort from the democratic sensorium. The non-human Other is thus all but silenced.

Equally little research has been done on the sensual-somatic basis of the animation of collective affects in both human and non-human contexts. The question arises how these affects produce a sensorium in a possibly discriminating way and how they are involved in sensorial-sensual processes of ordering and dividing (Slaby 2019; Ahmed 2004, 2014; Bucher 2017, 2018; Beer 2017).

For this reason, the conference will focus on the analysis of the hegemonic use of the senses, particularly the visual sense. It aims to explore avenues toward a democratization of the senses through the irritation of the visual sense by the deployment of other senses.

Based on our assumption that political emancipation hinges less on marginalized groups' lack of knowledge than on their lack of opportunity to gain diverse experiences (cf. Rancière 2016), the conference also aims to open an egalitarian space of speech and experience. Equality is understood in terms of “enabling the juxtaposition of two voices” (Ranciere 2008, 11) and as the “fact of mutual understanding” (ibid., 14).

The conference will provide hierarchically-different sensorial spaces and situations, thus creating, as we hope, a condition for political emancipation. This arrangement enables the sensorial perception in bodily interiors and interstices as a political public where sensorial inequality is collectively negotiated. We ask, how can we come to terms with the sensually and socially hierarchical distinction between meaning and the senses, as well as with the production of diverse sensual situations (not only) among humans? And how can strategies toward achieving a sensually accessible emancipation be developed?

Questions and topics to be addressed include the following:

- How can micro-level hierarchical structures that are embedded in sensually motivated everyday behavior be described, analyzed, and thus disclosed?
- How can the dominance of certain senses be understood against the backdrop of *white-patriarchal* and ableist hegemony? How can a rational understanding of democracy be identified in terms of its practical embodiment?
- What other regimes (Schäfer 2006; Atkinson 2012) aside from the visual and the socio-acoustic are there and where do they manifest themselves?
- How (i.e., by means of what sensorimotor/empirical/practice-theoretical methods) can the conditions of experiencing (non-)democratic situations be understood?
- What is the relationship of somatically embedded affects like shame, discomfort, fear, joy, aggression, etc. to (in-)equality and democracy?
- How could the democratization of the senses be made tangible, perceptible, and audible through aesthetical-performative practices? What is the relevance of auditory, proprioceptive, vestibular, and haptic-kinesthetic perception for the experience of equality?
- How can the role of the senses themselves in terms of knowledge production be emphasized in the analysis of (in-)equality?
- How can concepts from fields like feminist theory, postcolonial studies, disability studies, queer phenomenology, science and technology studies, Indigenous studies, or soma studies be employed in the analysis of power (in the widest sense) to achieve a “democratization of the senses – senses of democracy”?

- How can the relationship among space, the senses, and equality be conceived?
- How can public spaces be sensorially democratized in terms of their practical and material dimensions with reference to Lefebvre's (2005, 2016) relational theory of space?
- How can everyday personal space (Goffman 1974) be described in multi-sensual terms, distinguished from other spaces, defended, and protected? What situational and social rules or cultural constructions define the somatically sensed subjective space?
- What appropriative qualities (Lefebvre 2016, 204) are needed to (re-)claim a visually homogenized space?
- What «both ordered and ordering forces» (Atkinson 2011), historic and current, can be identified in a specific setting - like sounds in a city - to illustrate hierarchies of the sensuous?
- What forms of resistant subjectivations are lived throughout sensual-performative practices? How do such somatic experiences materialize themselves?
- What role does the recourse to (one's own) sensorial-sensual body experience and embodied memory play in democratic processes?
- How can those aspects of democratic negotiations between two actors be identified that transcend linguistic interaction?
- How can the concept of democratization of the senses contribute to the discourse on an “intensification of democracy” (Mouffe 2007)?
- What is the relevance of (invasive and non-invasive) digital tools for the formation for a collective sensorium? What for equality?
- How are algorithms involved in the production of meaning and the senses? How do they contribute to the orchestration and hierarchization of sensoria and what is their impact on a holistic understanding of democracy?
- How are divisions of the sensual that may pose a threat to democracy configured by social media? How do algorithms become a part of the lived body and the organism?
- How can the scope of protection of more-than-human actors be defined in bodily and somatic-affective terms? How can the sensorium's democratic expansion be promoted?
- What essentialist assumptions concerning the coexistence of humans and more-than-humans must be overcome to allow for a concept of sensual plurality?

The conference format seeks to deconstruct dominant visual structures. We explicitly ask for multi-sensorial contributions like audio walks, sound installations and interjections, collective walks, and conversations. Lecture performances are equally welcome as sensorimotor and

perception-oriented field trips, both with and without experiences of touch, considering and negotiating sensual-affective boundaries. To experiment with sensual didactics and irritate the fond habit of following the order of “eyes-seeing-thinking”, we discourage the classical lecture format and the showing of visual material in favor of otherwise-sensorial approaches.

Please submit abstracts of maximal two pages or an audio format alike by Sept. 15th, 2024 to wuttig@uni-marburg.de and ellen.thuma@uni-marburg.de

We explicitly encourage the participation of disabled (young) scientists. Feel free to inform us about your specific requirements for low-barrier attendance – we will do our best to provide solutions.

Conference languages are German and English.

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Conference location: Schloss Rauschholzhausen, Schlosspark 1, 35085 Ebsdorfergrund

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