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Noisy Neighbors. Acoustic Experience, Emotions, and Social Order in Dortmund's North during the 1950s

This article explores how acoustic perceptions shaped urban life and social boundaries in postwar Germany. Drawing on survey material from the Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund (1954), it analyzes the soundscapes of the city's northern district, a working-class neighborhood marked by dense housing, industrial workplaces, and a reputation for disorder. Complaints about thin walls, radios, and drunken singing merged into moral judgments about families; children's noise was tolerated as vitality, while adolescent motorbikes symbolized unruliness and deviance. Industrial and work-related noises – from construction sites to the Hoesch steelworks – embodied structural inequalities, fostering feelings of collective powerlessness. Traffic noise, in turn, linked the rhythms of harbor logistics and motorways to the intimate vibrations of homes. In all these cases, sounds operated rhythmically, not as isolated events, reinforcing mental maps of inclusion and exclusion within the city. By combining sensory history with the history of emotions, the article argues that acoustic experiences were crucial practices of everyday life that stabilized social hierarchies and contributed to the stigmatization of Dortmund's northern district as a "noisy" and marginalized space.

*Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie akustische Wahrnehmungen das städtische Leben und soziale Grenzen im Nachkriegsdeutschland geprägt haben. Anhand von Umfragematerial der Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund (1954) analysiert er die Klanglandschaften des nördlichen Stadtteils, eines Arbeiterviertels, das durch dichte Bebauung, industrielle Arbeitsstätten und einen Ruf als schwierige Gegend gekennzeichnet war. Lärm war nicht nur eine physische Störung, sondern ein zentrales Medium, durch das die Bewohner*innen ihre Umgebung interpretierten und ihre Nachbar*innen kategorisierten. Beschwerden über dünne Wände, Radios und Singen im betrunkenen Zustand verschmolzen zu moralischen Urteilen über Familien; Kinderlärm wurde als Zeichen von Lebendigkeit toleriert, während die Geräusche von Motorrädern von Jugendlichen für ungezogenes Benehmen und Abweichung von der Norm standen. Industrie- und Arbeitsgeräusche – von Baustellen bis zum Hoesch-Stahlwerk – verkörperten strukturelle Ungleichheiten und förderten Gefühle kollektiver Ohnmacht. Verkehrslärm wiederum verband den Rhythmus der Hafenlogistik und der Autobahnen mit den intimen Schwingungen*

der Wohnungen. In all diesen Fällen wirkten Geräusche rhythmisch statt als isolierte Ereignisse und verstärkten so die mentalen Karten der Inklusion und Exklusion innerhalb der Stadt. Indem er Sinnesgeschichte und Emotionsgeschichte verbindet, zeigt der Artikel, dass akustische Erfahrungen entscheidende Praktiken des Alltagslebens waren, die soziale Hierarchien stabilisierten und zur Stigmatisierung des nördlichen Stadtteils von Dortmund als „lautem" und marginalisiertem Raum beitrugen.

1. Introduction

When in February 1962, Karl Schulte told his drinking companions that his family would relocate to the southern part of Dortmund, he framed the move as a long-awaited escape from the burdens of everyday life in the northern district where the pub was located. The move, he conceded, meant paying higher rent, "but at least we are finally leaving the North. My wife has struggled all these years, with dust and dirt lying finger-thick in the apartment. Cleaning and wiping every single day, endlessly. And after only a few hours, the dirt would pile up again on the window ledges. Say what you will: the North is and remains a stepchild. Once people are financially a little better off, they try to move elsewhere. That includes me. Cheers!"[1] Schulte's brief justification shows how ideas of the city and of urban life were shaped by everyday routines in residents' minds. These routines were closely tied not only to the constant dust and dirt but also to omnipresent noise – layers of sensory experience that together shaped the Nordstadt's reputation as a burdensome and disadvantaged space. The mental representation of social boundaries and inequalities was also formed through such sensual experiences. In Schulte's account, Dortmund's North appears as an exclusive space set apart from the rest of the city not through distinction but through symbolic degradation.[2] That this negative exclusivity was not merely an individual opinion but reflected widespread notions and experiences regarding Dortmund's Nordstadt transpires later in the

[1] Original Quotation: "aber wir kommen doch endlich aus dem Norden heraus. Wie hat sich meine Frau die ganzen Jahre hindurch plagen müssen, Staub und Schmutz lagen in der Wohnung fingerdick. Jeden Tag putzen und wischen, ohne Unterlaß. Und nach wenigen Stunden häufte sich der Schmutz wieder auf den Fensterbänken. Ihr könnt sagen, was ihr wollt: Der Norden ist und bleibt ein Stiefkind. Wer sich finanziell ein wenig erholt hat, sieht zu, daß er anderswo unterkommt. Dazu gehöre ich eben auch. Prost!" Der Norden legt "Make up" auf; unklare Zeitung, 24.02.62, in: Pressesammlung zur Nordstadt, Stadtarchiv Dortmund, Bestand 501/02, Nr. 61.

[2] For a discussion of the dual meaning of exclusivity in the context of spatial conceptions, see: Pierre Bourdieu, Physischer, sozialer und angeeigneter physischer Raum, in: Martin Wentz (ed.), Stadt-Räume, Frankfurt am Main 1991, 25-34, here 32.

same article. There, negative connotations concerning urban space are explicitly expressed: "In the North, the days are simply uglier, more monotonous, more oppressive. When the sun does shine, it does not take long before the massive yellow-brown clouds from the spewing converters wipe away the delicate blue of the sky."[3]

How urban space was experienced, ordered, and evaluated through sensory perceptions lies at the heart of this article. The sensory and emotional worlds of the city play a central yet insufficiently researched role for contemporary historians interested in everyday life.[4] Urban residents defined space by identifying with collective actors, attaching themselves to particular places, or distancing themselves from them. In this way, they mapped the city through sensory perception.[5] To pursue this approach, the present article examines acoustic perceptions and the emotions attached to them as a way of "doing city," through which urban space was continuously produced and negotiated.

Urban space is both the carrier and the result of ordering processes,[6] which makes it necessary to ask which acoustically striking spaces, places, actors, and objects were used to delineate it individually and collectively.[7] Estelle Murail,

3 Original Quotation: "Im Norden sind nun mal die Tage häßlicher, eintöniger, bedrückender. Wenn dort die Sonne scheint, dauert es nicht lange, und die mächtigen gelbbraunen Wolken aus den speienden Kovertern löschen das zarte Blau des Himmels aus." Der Norden legt "Make up" auf, 24.02.62, Pressesammlung zur Nordstadt, in: Stadtarchiv Dortmund, Bestand 501/02, Nr. 61.

4 This is by no means entirely uncharted territory. Peter Payer, for example, has structured the urban history of Vienna from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War around urban noise and attempts to combat it. On methodology and the state of research see: Peter Payer, Der Klang der Großstadt. Eine Geschichte des Hörens. Wien 1850–1914, Cologne 2018, 16-18; for a perspective that examines sensory perceptions through the example of industrial odors in a transnational framework see: Bodo Mrozek/Doubravka Olšáková, Die Katzengestank-Affäre. Grenzüberschreitende Geruchskonflikte zwischen der Bundesrepublik, der ČSSR und der DDR 1976 bis 1989, Geschichte und Gesellschaft 71:2, 2023, 311-49; as a collection of different topics and methods for studying urban soundscapes: Karin Bijsterveld (ed.), Soundscapes of the Urban Past. Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage, Bielefeld 2013.

5 In the courtyards of working-class neighbourhoods cow stalls were still widely common during the 1930s. The sound and smell of the animals was as much of a constant in urban life as the smell of Pferdebouletten, the grilled horsemeat burgers sold by local butchers. Pamela E. Swett, Neighbors and Enemies, The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin 1929–1933, Cambridge 2004, 30-1.

6 See Lutz Raphael, Grenzen von Inklusion und Exklusion. Sozialräumliche Regulierung von Armut und Fremdheit im Europa der Neuzeit, Journal of Modern European History 11:2, 2013, 147-67, here 148.

7 For an instructive use spatial constructs and abstractions in the context of crime-related urban research, see Georg Glasze/Robert Pütz/Manfred Rolfes, Die Verräumlichung von (Un-)Sicherheit, Kriminalität und Sicherheitspolitiken – Herausforderungen einer kritis-

drawing on Jean-François Augoyard, has pointed to the difficulties posed by the multiplicity of impressions in urban environments. The abundance of visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli in constant flux can produce very different perceptions, even within a single day.[8] Nevertheless, the analysis of urban sounds offers potential, since sounds that provoke negative emotions and are consequently described as noise do not represent purely objective facts, but rather the result of a reflexion process that decisively shapes the perception of urban space.[9] Noise was not merely a momentary disturbance. The significance lays in the recurrence throughout one day or within the rhythm of a week. This repetition turned them into stable points of reference on which perceptions, emotions, and social distinctions were built. Sounds thus became part of the routines that order and structure urban space.

Sensory impressions, especially those provoking negative emotions, contributed to the categorization of spaces and people. Repetition reinforced these boundaries and set in motion processes of inclusion and exclusion.[10] Following Monique Scheer, sensory perceptions and emotions can be understood as social practices. They structured perceptions of urban space and its inhabitants, underpinning value judgments and social hierarchies.[11]

Such a perspective is challenging for historians, since individual assessments from the past are often scarce. For this reason, I draw on material from sociology and empirical social research, which is often preserved in archives of universities or research institutions.[12] For this article I use sociological questionnaires produced in 1954 as part of a research project conducted by the Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund. The project was part of a broader program on the living and housing conditions of postwar industrial cities. A large number of materials from these studies, conducted until the Center's temporary

chen Kriminalgeographie, in: Glasze/Pütz/Rolfes (eds.), Diskurs – Stadt – Kriminalität: Städtische (Un-)Sicherheiten aus der Perspektive von Stadtforschung und Kritischer Kriminalgeographie, Bielefeld 2015, 13-58, here 32.

8 Cf. Estelle Murail, A Body Passes By. The Flâneur and the Senses in Nineteenth-Century London and Paris, The Senses and Society 12:2, 2017, 162-76, here 168-9.

9 Cf. Sieglinde Geisel, Lärm, in: Daniel Morat/Hansjakob Ziemer (eds.), Handbuch Sound. Geschichte – Begriffe – Ansätze, Stuttgart 2018, 199-204, here 199.

10 For an instructive analytical tool to investigate such boundary-drawing processes, see Charles Tilly, Social Boundary Mechanisms, Philosophy of the Social Sciences 34:2, 2004, 211-36.

11 See Monique Scheer, Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And What Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion, History and Theory 51:2, 2012, 193-220.

12 The GESIS Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences provides data from over 7.000 studies for a secondary analysis. Their data base can be found here: https://www.gesis.org/en/services/finding-and-accessing-data [31.08.2025].

dissolution in 1969, are preserved in the archives of the Technical University Dortmund.[13]

For this article, I analyze 234 questionnaires from Dortmund's northern inner district. They were designed to capture both the residents' housing conditions and their social environments. Thus the forms provide a detailed snapshot of postwar life in an industrially shaped urban space of the Ruhr region.[14] The questionnaires consisted of two parts. Part A collected general information about the house, the respondent, and their family, housing, and working conditions, as well as their wishes regarding housing. Part B addressed questions about the neighborhood and social networks. Together, the two sections comprised 138 questions, some answered through multiple choice and others through open responses.[15]

The surveys were conducted in seven housing blocks, each covering all four surrounding streets. Preserved are questionnaires from 18 streets in Dortmund's northern district. A focal point of the study is the intersection of Bornstraße (running south–north) and Mallinckrodtstraße (running west–east), a major traffic junction. From these two streets and from the adjacent Schüchtermannstraße (west–east) and Alsenstraße (north–south), nearly 100 questionnaires are archived.

For historical re-analysis the material is especially valuable. In the mid-1950s, Parts A and B were analyzed separately, so that neighborhood relations were studied primarily through Part B. Yet Part A also contains information on sensory perceptions of the residential environment and neighborhood ties that is highly relevant for the perspective outlined here. In addition, Part B includes many handwritten notes and quotations. These entered only into aggregated results at the time and otherwise remained unused.[16]

[13] The Sozialforschungsstelle was founded in 1946 and until the late 1950s primarily produced studies in the field of empirical social research, before its new director, Helmut Schelsky, steered it more strongly toward theoretical sociological research (Grundlagenforschung) from 1960 onward. The institute was closed in 1969 and re-established in 1972 as a state institute for labor studies. On its history and an overview of holdings, see Jens Adamski, Findbuch zum Bestand der "Sozialforschungsstelle an der Universität Münster, Sitz zu Dortmund" im Archiv der Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund (sfs), Dortmund 2008, https://sfs.sowi.tu-dortmund.de/storages/sfs-sowi/r/Publikationen/Beitraege_aus_der_Forschung/Band_166.pdf [11.08.2025].

[14] The files form part of the following collection: Wirtschafts- und Sozialmonographien/Großstadtuntersuchungen (1948–1959), in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[15] A reproduction of the complete questionnaire can be found in Gunter Ipsen (ed.), Daseinsformen der Großstadt. Typische Formen sozialer Existenz in Stadtmitte, Vorstadt und Gürtel der industriellen Großstadt, Tübingen 1959, 332-7.

The following sections examine how these questionnaires reveal the role of sound in structuring everyday life in Dortmund's northern district. I begin with the broader urban soundscape and residents' perceptions of quiet and noise. I then turn to specific groups such as children and adolescents, whose sounds were judged differently according to age and status. The analysis continues with work-related and industrial noise, followed by traffic noise as a defining feature of modern urban life. The article concludes by showing how these sounds shaped social hierarchies and contributed to the stigmatization of the Nordstadt. These dynamics are approached from the perspective of "doing city," which understands acoustic perceptions and the practices of evaluating them as everyday actions. Through these actions, urban space was continually produced, negotiated, and experienced.

2. Sounds in Everyday Urban Life

Sounds played a crucial role in how people evaluated urban space. The first question is therefore which sounds made up an urban soundscape. Certain sounds in the residential environment were likely shared by most people, whether in towns or in the countryside. These included natural phenomena such as rain beating on roofs and windows or the whistling of the wind. The range of man-made sounds, by contrast, varied greatly between densely and sparsely populated areas. An urban soundscape was shaped above all by human activity. Sounds that carried negative connotations, whether individually or socially, were closely tied to judgments about the quality of a place and one's own quality of life.[17] These perceptions could also be influenced, and at times amplified, by climate and weather. Respondents repeatedly noted that on hot summer nights they were forced to open their windows in order to sleep. This in turn let in the noise of the street, which disturbed their rest and provoked negative emotions.[18]

[16] Survey questionnaires, as well as other forms of social data, constitute a rich source for contemporary history as products of social self-observation at a given moment. At the same time, it is essential to critically examine their constructed character and the methodological and theoretical assumptions underlying them. See Kerstin Bückweh et. al, Sozialdaten als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte: Zur Einführung, Geschichte und Gesellschaft 48:1, 2022, 5-27, here 6-7.

[17] Cf. Cristina Capineri/Haosheng Huang/Georg Gartner, Tracking Emotions in Urban Space. Two Experiments in Vienna and Siena, Rivista Geografica Italiana 125, 2018, 273-88, here 274.

[18] Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 160, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

For both respondents and interviewers, the imagined ideal state was the absence of sounds. This is evident from the questionnaires, which did not ask about acoustic impressions in general but only about sources of noise from the street, the courtyard, or neighboring apartments.[19] In their answers, residents of Dortmund's northern district often equated quiet with social harmony. Some spoke vaguely of living in "a quiet house,"[20] while others framed it in explicitly communal terms: "We cannot complain about the neighbors; they are all quiet people here."[21]

In many accounts, quiet was described as a personal trait that defined a good neighbor and, by extension, a good neighborhood. Respondents drew here on a social norm of coexistence, codified for example in house rules (Hausordnung), that sought to prevent residents from disturbing one another.[22] This is not specific to the middle of the 20th Century as mutual consideration and the avoidance of noise still count as accepted norms of neighborhood interaction today.[23]

Dortmund's northern district in the 1950s was, however, a noisy place. Only 26 percent of respondents in 1954 stated that they were not disturbed by noise.[24] Most linked their complaints to the poor construction quality of housing. Thin walls[25], adjoining kitchens[26], or toilets[27] made it easy to overhear everyday life next door. Especially in the evening and at night this became a burden – whether through conversations, squeaking beds, or music from radios penetrating the walls. The radio in particular, already one of the defining sounds of modern life by the 1950s, could become a serious nuisance at night.[28]

19 Cf.. Fragen 55 bis 57 des Fragebogens, see Ipsen, Daseinsformen, 334.

20 Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 173, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

21 Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 072, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

22 This norm was often codified in house rules as one of the basic premises of communal living. See, for example, Mietvertrag von Herr Arie Peetoom aus dem Jahr 1917, Nachlass Rauh/Barche, in: Stadtarchiv Solingen, NA 5–172.

23 Cf. Sebastian Kurtenbach, Soziologie der Nachbarschaft. Befunde zu einer komplexen Selbstverständlichkeit, Frankfurt am Main 2024, 86.

24 Cf. Ipsen, Daseinsformen, 140.

25 Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 163, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

26 Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 134, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

27 Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 159, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

28 Radio had developed into a defining medium of everyday culture by the 1920s. See Carolyn Birdsall, Radio, in: Morat/Ziemer, Handbuch Sound, 353-539, here 353 and 355.

It remains uncertain to what extend listening actually provided information about neighbors. Yet when specific noises recurred, respondents were able to draw conclusions about the lives of others. A woman from Haydenstraße explained that the apartments were not soundproof and that this was especially disturbing at night: "At first I thought we had mice in the apartment, until I later realized that it was not mice but the bedsprings of the family above us squeaking."[29] Such statements reveal knowledge of neighbors' housing and living conditions, though not yet judgments about their social status.

Persistent noise, however, could trigger more sweeping assumptions. This was especially true in relation to alcohol consumption, which often became the basis for moral judgments.[30] A couple from Schüchtermannstraße reported that a neighbor was "drunk at least once a week" and "when he comes home, he turns the radio [on RG] at full volume, and on top of that he either sings loudly or shouts insults." From these impressions they drew conclusions not only about the neighbor himself but also about his family and their flawed behavior: "He does it exactly like his father. He could never leave it alone either."[31] The everyday accounts of noise show that acoustic perceptions were not passive impressions but active practices through which residents structured their environment — marking the boundaries between social harmony and disorder, and continuously remaking the space they inhabited.

3. Children and Adolescents as a Source of Noise

For children, as for elderly people, the immediate surroundings of the home were central spaces in which to build social relationships and participate in everyday life.[32] Their activities in the neighborhood became acoustic reference points within the residential environment. Many respondents named children's noise as a source of disturbance, yet it was usually received with tolerance. One resident explained: "I rejoice with the children (...) they should make as much noise as they like. I like it when there are more kids than chickens in the courtyard."[33] Others emphasized that the shouting from the schoolyard or the court-

[29] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 167, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[30] Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 187, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[31] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 062, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[32] Cf. Elisabeth Pfeil, Großstadtforschung. Entwicklung und gegenwärtiger Stand, Hannover 1972, 244.

[33] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 162, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

yards soon became familiar.[34]

Adolescents were judged far less kindly. In the questionnaires they were often referred to as *Halbstarke* (rowdies or toughs). Their presence in public space was linked with motorized mobility and marked by the rattling of motorcycles. (...) Around half past four in the morning the motorcycles are already rattling (...) when they are started up, you jump out of bed," as one resident of Schüchtermannstraße reported.[35] ‚Mopeds', motorcycles with small engines, which could be driven from the age of sixteen, became a widespread object of youth culture in the Federal Republic in the early 1950s. As Bodo Mrozek has shown, this culture provoked fears among the older generation, stirred by both the alternative clothing styles and the mechanical sounds of the motorcycles.[36]

The contrast in the perception of children's and adolescents' noise reflects broader power relations. The noises of the powerful are not considered noise at all, as Sieglinde Geisel has emphasized, noise is always attributed to those assumed to be lower in the social hierarchy. Children, still dependent, played no role in distributional logics. Adolescents, by contrast, were placed—together with other marginalized groups—at the lower end of the social order.[37]

The contrasting judgments passed on children and adolescents show how social order was negotiated through acoustic perception. Children's play was tolerated and often interpreted as a sign of vitality of normal neighborhood life, while adolescents and their motorcycles provoked irritation and moral condemnation. This distinction was itself a form of social hierarchy, produced through the everyday act of listening.

4. Work-related Noise

Sounds from craft and industrial production sites shaped the acoustic experience of the Nordstadt. One resident described the nightly operation of a road construction company that began as early as two o'clock in the morning:

[34] Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 141, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[35] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 048, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[36] Cf. Bodo Mrozek, Jugend Pop – Kultur. Eine transnationale Geschichte, Frankfurt am Main 2019, 105-14.

[37] Cf. Geisel, Lärm, 202. This phenomenon can be observed across different times and social groups in urban space. One example are the so-called Instandbesetzer, squatters of the late 1970s and 1980s, who were regarded as socially marginal and criticized, among other things, for their loudness. See Reinhild Kreis, Heimwerken als Protest. Instandbesetzer und Wohnungsbaupolitik in West-Berlin während der 1980er-Jahre, Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History 14, 2017, 41-67, here 57.

"Chopping wood, banging open the tar barrels (...) and the tar machines running. I have already gone over there a few times and bawled them out. It didn't help."[38] Complaints like this reveal not only emotional reactions to recurring noise but also a sense that the Nordstadt bore the acoustic burden of the entire city. Inequalities between districts were made explicit through feelings that ranged from frustration to powerlessness. Other respondents reported constant work-related noise, such as the screeching of saws that "nearly drove them mad,"[39] or the nightly street-cleaning machines that robbed them of sleep and left them exhausted.[40] Some accepted these disturbances as a necessary evil, while others described irritation and resignation. Industrial plants were also acoustically omnipresent. Their constant noise reinforced perceptions of the Nordstadt as an inferior place.

In some streets, work-related noise even provoked collective activism against the Westfalenhütte, which was said to produce an "infernal noise" that ruined people's nerves.[41] The fight against such industrial noise played only a minor role in the early Federal Republic. As historian Hans-Joachim Braun has shown, in-plant noise protection measures were limited, while broad exemptions remained possible.[42] In the Ruhr area, the principle of *Ortsüblichkeit* (local customary practice) made it especially difficult to challenge excessive industrial noise.[43] This was evident on Stahlwerkstraße, east of the Social Research Center's study area, where about 40 residents joined together to protest against the Westfalenhütte. Once again, the screeching of saws was the central grievance: "Because of this infernal noise one gets no rest, and is it not understandable that residents are already breaking down nervously? Is this the fight against noise? Does this not apply to works such as the Hoesch company?"[44]

38 Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 196, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

39 Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 121, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

40 Cf. Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 045, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

41 A letter of complaint concerning the Westfalenhütte was signed by nearly 40 residents of Stahlwerkstraße. See Heinrich Wilke an die Polizeibehörde, 12. Mai 1954, in: Stadtarchiv Dortmund, Trägerlager Stahlwerkstraße, Westfalenhütte, Bestand 132, Sign. 774.

42 Cf. Hans-Joachim Braun, Turning a Deaf Ear? Industrial Noise and Noise Control in Germany since the 1920s, in: Trevor Pinch/Karin Bijsterveld (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies, Oxford 2012, 58-78, here 73-4.

43 Cf. Uta C. Schmidt, Fabrik, in: Morat/Ziemer, Handbuch Sound, 254-57, here 254.

44 Heinrich Wilke an die Polizeibehrde, 12. Mai 1954, in: Stadtarchiv Dortmund, Trägerlager Stahlwerkstraße, Westfalenhütte, Bestand 132, Sign. 774.

The presence of industry made itself felt in other ways too. Payday at Hoesch or the mines had direct acoustic consequences in the surrounding streets. In the 1950s, it was still common for employees to receive their wages in cash (in a paper bag called *Lohntüte*), and this had direct acoustic consequences in Dortmund's streets. "When Hoesch and the mines have paid out, you don't need to be told—you can hear it," as one respondent from Mallinckrodtstraße succinctly put it.[45] Around paydays and on weekends, certain places in the neighborhood, especially taverns frequented by workers and youths, developed a pronounced soundscape. "Until 3:00 a.m. the drunks make noise," reported a couple from Schüchtermannstraße, "and afterwards the landlord lets his big dog out onto the street, which barks continuously."[46] As alcohol consumption rose, so did interpersonal conflicts, which often escalated into violence around the taverns. "Brawls followed by cries for help are not uncommon. It's a great neighborhood here, and yes, it has always had a bad reputation," was the laconic summary of another couple.[47]

The complaints about and occasional protests against work-related noise underline that industrial soundscapes were not simply endured but actively contested. Residents interpreted the constant noise of factories, saws, and street-cleaning machines as signs of structural inequality, and sometimes joined forces to articulate collective demands. Even when these efforts came to nothing, they demonstrate that city-making was also a matter of resistance and negotiation. Residents were engaged, through perception, emotion, and action, in an ongoing reckoning with industrial society's claim on their lives – including their periods of rest.

5. Traffic Noise

Traffic noise is a general feature of modern cities. In Dortmund's northern district of the 1950s, this likewise shaped the acoustic experience of everyday life. The district's location between the industrial harbor to the west and the mining and steel plants to the north and east brought heavy truck traffic. This increased in the early morning hours and weighed heavily on the residents of the feeder roads to the motorway.[48] The result was body-borne noise and vibrations

[45] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 072, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[46] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 005, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[47] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 135, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[48] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 097, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

in the apartments: "The house shakes enormously with every truck that passes by" recalled one resident of Nordstraße.[49]

Respondents also repeatedly pointed to the condition and modernization of the traffic routes, which in turn brought about altered soundscapes. New road surfaces shifted the quality of noise. On cobblestones people had long suffered from vibrations. Smooth asphalt eliminated these, but turned the street into a "racetrack" and created a perception of greater speed. In the same account, the interpretation of everyday noise became an explanation of broader social conditions: "The increase in noise is alarming (...) after all, we are all slaves of industry," remarked a respondent from Oesterholzstraße.[50] Such observations tied changing transport infrastructures to a more fundamental transformation of urban space. Areas once described as "almost rural," were increasingly dominated by industrial infrastructure. This was "clearly evident from the racket of the trucks," as one respondent from Scheffelstraße noted with reference to Dortmund's harbor and its feeder roads.[51]

The evaluation of industrial transport noise may have changed in later decades. The complaints cited here belong to a moment when West German industry had just surpassed prewar levels and entered another phase of growth that continued until the mid-1960s.[52] With the development of shipping logistics and containerization, harbor operations became increasingly detached from the rhythms of the city. As Lars Amenda has shown for Hamburg, this led to a nostalgic remembrance of the harbor by the 1980s.[53] A similar process is conceivable for Dortmund.[54]

[49] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 100, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[50] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 191, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[51] Erhebungsbogen Dortmund-Nordstadt, Nr. 140, in: Archiv der Technischen Universität Dortmund, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Bestand V, Nr. 6.

[52] Cf. Werner Abelshauser, Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte seit 1945, Munich 2004, 305.

[53] Cf. Lars Amenda, Hafenkonzert. Geräusche und Gesellschaft in Hamburg im 20. Jahrhundert, Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History 8, 2011, 198-216, here 208.

[54] Structural change and deindustrialization in the Ruhr region strengthened this tendency by making the industrial past central to the city's identity. In Dortmund-Eving, for example, an acoustic memorial was installed in 2003 at the former Minister Stein colliery. The shaft bell plays signal sequences from the mining era, thus recalling the region's industrial past. Cf. Akustisches Denkmal Schachtglocke der Zeche Minister Stein, in Stadt Dortmund. Der Oberbürgermeister (ed.), Kunst im öffentlichen Raum, https://www.dortmund.de/dortmund-erleben/freizeit-und-kultur/museen/kunst-im-oeffentlichen-raum/kunst-im-oeffentlichen-raum/akustisches-denkmal-schachtglocke-der-zeche-minister-stein.html [26.8.25]; see also Schmidt, Fabrik, 255.

Perceptions of traffic noise reveal the interplay of infrastructure, technology, and everyday experience in shaping urban space. Through their sensory responses to trucks and harbor traffic – and through the act of interpreting these sounds as signs of economic transformation – residents continuously redefined what it meant to live in Dortmund's North and in a larger urban environment that was undergoing rapid change. These acts of perception and interpretation were themselves practices of "doing city."

6. Conclusion

In Dortmund's Nordstadt in the 1950s, sounds were far more than incidental accompaniments to urban life. They functioned as markers through which residents drew social boundaries in relation to spaces, individuals, and collective actors. In doing so, they constituted the Nordstadt as a degraded space, or to follow Bourdieu, a space of "negative exclusivity."

Respondents regarded quiet as a sign of social harmony and good neighborliness. Sounds, by contrast, were almost always associated with disturbance, conflict, and social distance, and were therefore described as noise. The negative feelings triggered by noise were not merely annoying; they formed the basis of social categorization. Those who were (too) loud were quickly labeled as immoral or abnormal. In this sense, sounds played a dual role in activating social boundaries in everyday life. On the one hand, individuals could be construed as different and excluded from the imagined collective because of their audible behavior. On the other hand, disturbing sounds—such as work-related noise—could create a sense of collective belonging, a community of suffering subjected to particular disturbances. The same was true of specific sites within the city. Places marked by traffic noise, for example, played a major role in shaping mental maps and reinforcing boundary perceptions. The intrusion of motor sounds into bedrooms was not only a physical burden but also an audible expression of the industrial expansion that was transforming Dortmund's North.

Noise could also foster belonging and was thus closely linked to perceptions of social inequality. This was particularly true of sounds associated with commercial and industrial areas. Many residents felt like second-class citizens whose quality of life was sacrificed to the rhythms of industrial labor. Such experiences sometimes prompted collective action when neighbors joined forces to protest against noise sources. Yet these efforts often ended in frustration, as protective measures were rarely introduced. Respondents frequently interpreted this sense of powerlessness as a symbol of an unequal urban order in which the Nordstadt, as a working-class district, was structurally disadvantaged. At the same time, the willingness to voice such complaints reflected a shifting ho-

rizon of expectation in postwar West Germany when governmental institutions had started to commit themselves to equalizing living conditions across the country.

Acoustic attributions were also expressions of social hierarchies, but they did not merely reflect pre-existing status differences; they actively participated in producing them. This is most evident in the differing perceptions of children's and adolescents noise. Children's play in courtyards, stairwells, or on the street was often noisy and sometimes irritating, but most respondents expressed acceptance or at least tolerance. Adults could exercise direct authority over children in the neighborhood by calling them to order, threatening to report them to their parents, or in extreme cases by disciplining them physically. Adolescents, by contrast, occupied a transitional social phase in which they had to prove their status through socially accepted behavior. Yet their mobility, their visibility in public space, and the mechanical sounds of their motorcycles marked them as resistant to precisely this expectation. The acoustic attribution of loudness and unruliness was not simply a neutral observation; instead it was shaped by the anticipation of deviance. Adolescents were heard as loud in part because they were expected to be loud, and these expectations, in turn, reinforced their categorization as a disruptive group. In this way, the sensory experience of noise and the discursive construction of the *Halbstarken* as a social problem were mutually constitutive. Acoustic perception did not just register a given social hierarchy but contributed to bringing it into being. The *Halbstarken* were thus marked as a marginal group within the urban order – marginalized, yet precisely because of their perceived uncontrollability, also experienced as threatening.

Taken together, the evidence shows that sounds did not operate in isolated moments but rhythmically. They structured everyday life, overlapped domestic routines with industrial rhythms, and provoked emotions such as frustration, anger, or resignation in relation to living conditions. The repeated experience of these impressions and feelings consolidated a social ordering of urban space. In this process, Dortmund's northern district became durably stigmatized by many of its own residents. This demonstrates how urban space was not simply a backdrop for social life but the product of everyday practices of perception and interpretation. Acoustic experience and the emotions it carried were, in this sense, not merely evidence of social life in the Nordstadt, they were among its very conditions.

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