

Charivari 2.0: The Striking Resurgence of an Old Contentious Tactic

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In recent years, an old contentious tactic in which protesters besiege and harass public officials in their private homes has resurged. Discontented sectors of all stripes have employed what is most commonly called charivari or “rough music.” To elucidate this surprising reappearance, this reflection highlights the rise of conflict over cultural and moral values, affective polarization, and the personalization of politics. Moreover, the proliferation of social media has eroded the boundary between the public and private sphere and thus propelled the resurgence of privacy-breaching direct action. This interpretive essay compares the special features of revived charivari with its earlier incarnations in premodern times and in the revolutions of the long nineteenth century, and with the internet harassment of the twenty-first century. By analyzing the reappearance of a contentious tactic with premodern roots, this essay seeks to shed light on broader trends of sociopolitical development in the postmodern age.

This reflection examines the renewed flourishing of a premodern form of crowd contention that had faded with the secular advance of political liberalism and democracy, but has proliferated during the postmodern malaise of liberal democracy. Centuries ago, common citizens used to take the enforcement of traditional community norms into their own hands by shaming and harassing perceived violators, such as sexual predators or adulterers. During the revolutions of the long nineteenth century, this popular tactic was frequently used for political purposes and turned against oppressive and corrupt state officials: upset multitudes besieged their private homes at night with shrill, cacophonous noise—hence the English term “rough music” (Thompson 1992) and

the German *Katzenmusik* (“caterwauling music”) for what is best known as “charivari” (derived from the Latin *caribaria*, meaning “noisy mess” or “commotion,” produced primarily by pot banging).

But with the rise of political liberalism, which insisted on the separation of public and private spheres, these communitarian practices lost legitimacy and increasingly fell into disuse, especially in Europe.¹ Indeed, democratization during the nineteenth century opened up institutional avenues for expressing popular grievances and making political demands, ranging from petitions and public demonstrations to party formation and electoral participation. Therefore, pestering political leaders and state officials in their private homes came to be regarded as an improper transgression of boundaries. Even in the United States, where the veneration of freedom of speech guaranteed more room for what the legal profession calls “residential picketing,” the political usage of charivari was infrequent, confined to periods of “creedal passion” (Huntington 1981), such as the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s (Eglit 1966, 106–7; Kamin 1966, 177–82).

Strikingly, however, after more than a century when respect for the integrity of the private sphere largely prevailed, charivari-style tactics have proliferated in the third millennium, especially in the US, yet also in Europe (emblematic incidents are described in the appendix):² in recent years, various groupings from across the ideological spectrum have employed *Katzenmusik* again, though unaware of the premodern precedents.³ To express their

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doi:10.1017/S1537592724001762

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indignation and exert direct pressure, diverse groupings of protesters, with causes ranging from Black Lives Matter (BLM) and abortion rights to opposition against COVID-19 mandates and Trumpian claims of electoral fraud, have marched to the private homes of politicians or public officials, condemned them with placards, disturbed them with mockery and noise, and sometimes employed intimidation, including the display of firearms in the US.

Whereas the older generation of activists who came of age in the 1960s and 70s did not have charivari-style tactics in their regular repertoire,⁴ nowadays “the new way to protest in DC [and far beyond] is: Go to a politico’s home. Bring a Crowd. Party” (Recker 2021). In this way, energetic demonstrators are “bringing direct action back into the fore for our generation” (Khan-Cullors and Bandede 2018, 167; see also 201–2, 221, 230–32). As an advocate declared, “Today, protests at elected leaders’ homes aren’t just normalized—they’re typical. ... Protesters are gathering outside the homes of local officials in cities across the country. ... To watch these protests is to watch a norm shifting in real time: Standing outside elected officials’ houses and waving signs or painting on the street was a phenomenon that wasn’t all that common—until now, when it very much is” (Barnett 2020).

This unexpected norm shift, with its infringement on public officials’ private lives and harassment of their families, has drawn concern and criticism (Hess 2022). Indeed, the surprising reappearance of an old form of crowd contention that had largely fallen from use is puzzling for prominent arguments in the social movements literature, which postulate a secular, unidirectional transformation of the “repertoires of contention,” from traditional to modern forms (Tarrow 2022, 26–36, 40; Tilly 1995, 44–48, 362–64, 376–77; 2008, 41–45). Why have premodern tactics made a striking comeback—contrary to the linear developments driving this earlier metamorphosis (Della Porta 2017)? What new forces, or reversals of earlier trends, have propelled this unexpected resurgence? Interestingly, answers to these questions help to elucidate broader trends and sociopolitical developments in the early third millennium.

As a root cause for charivari’s reappearance, this reflection highlights the erosion of liberalism’s separation of public and private spheres: in recent decades, political conflict has increasingly shifted from material, distributive issues to cultural-value conflict; affective polarization has inflamed political struggle and fomented interpersonal enmity; and electoral campaigns have focused on politicians’ personalities. All these tendencies have been aggravated by the proliferation of social media: as people publicize their personal preferences and viewpoints, they expose their private choices to public criticism and attack. This “networked harassment” (Marwick 2021), especially internet doxing, paves the way for in-person protests

before public officials’ private homes—the striking resumption of charivari-style tactics.

Considering its different versions across history, what are charivari’s fundamental features? In these contentious episodes, popular crowds engage in a specific type of direct action: they harass and besiege presumed offenders of moral or political norms in the sanctuary of their private sphere, especially their home; denounce their personal transgressions in public; and employ shame and sanctions to push for renewed compliance with moral standards or morally framed political mandates. Because past infractions are seen as remediable, this raucous breaching of the private–public boundary relies on demonstrative, performative, even theatrical means, rather than using brute violence to expel or physically eliminate the targeted individuals. Thus, charivari’s goal is the offender’s reintegration into the local or political community: enforced inclusion, not permanent exclusion.

The Historical Roots, Revolutionary Upsurge, and Subsequent Fading of Charivari

A Communitarian Mechanism of Moral Control

Charivari originated in the communitarian lifeways of the premodern age. To complement the “moral economy,” common people sought to maintain a moral society. For this purpose, local crowds took it upon themselves to shame evildoers, especially transgressors of sexual norms such as adulterers or lecherous widowers. Charivari thus had a “socially conservative” goal (Thompson 1992, 18–19): to uphold and reassert the community’s traditional customs and rules of propriety (Davis 1971, 45, 52–55, 65; Favretto 2017, 1–2; Kerry 2024, 256–57, 264; Palmer 1978, 24–26, 30–32). It was a firmly collectivist mechanism (Weber 1976, 399–400), designed to punish and deter individual deviance and guarantee the community’s integrity: offenders were pushed to conform to local norms again (Alford 1959, 506, 516). Overpowering individual desire and private interest, public morality reimposed and consolidated its unchallengeable predominance (Thompson 1992, 6–10, 18–20).

While constituting direct action by communities, charivari differed from sheer mob justice by following traditional, albeit informal, procedures. Fraternities of young, unmarried males (in France called “youth abbeys”) served as protagonists and enforcers and often followed some process of adjudication, such as a mock trial (Davis 1971, 43–44, 58–59). While some scholars highlight these aspects of direct participation and popular problem solving (Thompson 1992, 20), the downside of this communitarian approach was the absence of reliable due process with effective rights of defense.

As a ritualized instrument of social control, charivari was usually bounded in the severity of its sanctioning,

confined mainly to shaming; the occasional use of violence was not designed to turn lethal and end in a lynching. But as community members took justice into their own hands, restraint was not guaranteed. Indeed, not all targets submitted to this moralistic disciplining; some defended their honor and personal integrity and fought back. Consequently, charivari risked escalating to bloody, even deadly, confrontations (Alford 1959, 510–11; Davis 1984). Rather than reliably enforcing conformism and restoring the community's moral unity, this contentious mechanism had the potential of causing serious internal rifts.

Political Usage of Charivari in the Long Nineteenth Century

Interestingly, the age of revolution brought increased political usage of this age-old social control mechanism, repurposed it for promoting transformative change, and redirected it from the local community to target national-level, central-state officials. As contentious multitudes rose up against British colonialism in North America and on numerous occasions against autocratic princes in Europe, they demonstrated their intense discontent and confronted their adversaries with frequent *Katzenmusik* (Itçaina 2017, 186–88; Tilly 1983, 471–72). By noisily harassing public officeholders through ritualized intimidation in their private homes, local crowds expressed their moral indignation at oppressive political rule and tried to shame the “tyrants” into conceding to demands for popular empowerment, such as the arming of upstanding citizens (then a progressive goal), or resigning from their positions, as British Stamp Act agents indeed did (Middlekauff 1982, 88–96; Tilly 2008, 116–18; see also Palmer 1978, 32–34; Schlesinger 1955; Tarrow 2022, 33).

Especially in the revolutionary wave of 1848, which rapidly swept across Europe, charivari was employed on many occasions (e.g., Sperber 1991, 86–88, 180, 220–22, 243, 326, 330, 335, 358, 440, 442). During some surges of contention, there was a veritable “fever,” with six to eight *Katzenmusiken* every night in Berlin (Gailus 2001, 786; Hachtmann 1997, 258, 337, 468), and daily performances in Vienna (Clark 2023, 487–89; Häusler 2013, 53–58, 64–67). Thus, what had been a conservative mechanism of social control now turned into a progressive political instrument. Revolutionary crowds pushed for institutional and constitutional change. While they often understood their demands as the recovery of presumably old, traditional customs that absolutism had suppressed, they effectively tried to force substantial innovations and qualitative improvements. Moreover, whereas in premodern times local communities had enforced moral norms “downward” against individual offenders, now, in the age of revolution, contentious crowds articulated their moral revulsion and political demands “upward,” against

powerful, high-status—often noble—public officials seen as unfairly abridging citizen rights (Häusler 2013, 57, 67; Wagner 2015, 221–23).

The political usage of charivari thus adapted a traditional communitarian mechanism for different, transformative purposes. In this way, it greatly broadened the scope of popular contention, targeting not particular, parochial problems, but broad national issues. This repurposing was possible because rough music delivered moralistic symbolic condemnation—unlike other performances in the traditional repertoire, such as grain seizures during famine, which forced a concrete outcome (Tarrow 2022, 27–29; Tilly 1995, 364, 376; 2008, 42–43). Therefore, charivari was by nature adaptable, applicable to nonparochial issues, and potentially modular. Not inherently confined to premodern settings, it could reappear with different goals and meanings during various periods in history—as this reflection documents.

During the revolutionary upsurge of early 1848, when outbursts of popular discontent threatened to sweep away mighty monarchies like the Habsburgs and Hohenzollern, the political usage of *Katzenmusik* indeed had a string of successes. Klemens Fürst von Metternich, for instance, the stodgy mainstay of Europe's post-1815 restoration order, resigned as contentious crowds clamored for change near his Vienna house (Clark 2023, 303–4).

But charivari was purely oppositional and had primarily a punitive effect: while it could humiliate and reprimand reactionaries and try to force them from office, it was a clumsy instrument for promoting forward-looking change. After all, rough music was inarticulate and lacked a programmatic character; and in its episodic outbursts, it was incapable of marshaling sustained pressure for pushing through institutional transformations. Moreover, as in premodern times, harassment and intimidation were not firmly bounded and could get out of hand. This risk of mob violence undermined the legitimacy of *Katzenmusik* in the course of the 1848 revolutions and induced upstanding citizens to withdraw from contentious street action. Over time, progressive groupings of educated middle-class burghers distanced themselves from the “archaic-backward and crude” crowd protest spearheaded ever more disproportionately by popular sectors (Gailus 2001, 787; similar Clark 2023, 487; Hachtmann 1997, 258, 467; Wagner 2015, 226–27). This diminishing participation enabled governments to suppress such “disruptions of public order” and contain and eventually defeat the revolutionary upsurges.

The Fading of Charivari after the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The high point of charivari's political usage in 1848 demonstrated not only the potential but also the limitations and risks of the progressive adaptation of this old

contentious tactic. Indeed, the longer-term repercussions of these popular rebellions ended up constraining the further usage of direct crowd pressure. After all, despite their short-term failures, the 1848 revolutions constituted another step forward for political liberalism. Throughout the nineteenth century, liberal principles found increasing adherence and inspired a secular trend of political-institutional progress, with the spread of constitutionalism and parliamentarism, firmer guarantees of human rights, and the gradual enfranchisement of the citizenry (Weyland 2024).

A basic liberal maxim mandates the strict separation of public and private spheres, including the realm of the state versus the individual's home (Held 2006, chap. 3). Just as governmental authorities must not encroach on private rights, citizens must channel their political demands into public institutions—and respect the private integrity of public officials. Whereas premodern communities found it just and normatively imperative to discipline people in their most private affairs, now individuals claimed the right to lead their private lives at will and keep the community at bay. With liberalism's rise, *Katzenmusik* therefore turned from an important mechanism for reaffirming public morality into an illegitimate violation of the private sphere (Kerry 2024, 259–61, 267).

The advance of political liberalism and democracy also seemed to make the political usage of charivari dispensable by opening up ample avenues and institutional channels for popular demand making (Tilly 2008, 43–45, 73, 78, 123–26, 156–57; also Davis 1971, 67; Favretto 2017, 10–11; Kerry 2024, 267, 280). After all, *Katzenmusik* is primarily reactive by censuring public officials for perceived misdeeds; it expresses indignation and outrage about perceived failings, but is not very articulate and useful for advocating improvements and reforms. As soon as political liberalism created more space for public opinion and the formation of associations, and as gradual democratization expanded electoral rights and stimulated party creation, citizens obtained a wide range of opportunities for advancing their needs and interests in proactive, systematic, and comprehensive ways. Instead of relying on an atavistic mechanism of ex-post accountability, they could propose transformations, promote solutions to serious problems, and thus preclude the “need” for retroactive punishment in the first place. Therefore, not only liberals and conservatives, but even progressive mass parties such as social democratic parties disapproved of direct crowd protest and sought to channel participatory energies into programmatic transformative action (Herzig 1988, 110–14).⁵

Last but not least, charivari lost its political rationale and usefulness because modern state building brought the centralization of political rule and the slow replacement of personal authority by “impersonal” office holders (Tarrow 2022, 26–27, 32–33, 40; Tilly 1995,

49, 365–66; 2008, 149–55). The constantly growing public bureaucracy operated by universalistic rules and standard operating procedures and thus left officeholders with ever less discretion. Why then harass a specific bureaucrat in person if every other cog in the political-administrative machine would operate in the same way? Why put community pressure on local officials if they merely executed national laws and regulations? Instead, efforts to achieve redress had to proceed via public demands for overall institutional change, not via the raucous shaming and intimidation of political authorities in their private sphere.

For these reasons, as part of the broader transformation of the social movement repertoire resulting from institutionalization and state building (Tarrow 2022, 26–36, 40; Tilly 1995, 364–68), charivari increasingly fell into disuse from the mid-nineteenth century onward, especially in Europe with its reliance on governmental regulation. Indeed, to safeguard public order and consolidate the rule of law, modern states prohibited the disruptive tactics involved in *Katzenmusik*, such as deafening noise, intimidation, and especially mob violence (Palmer 1978, 9, 38–39, 52–54; Weber 1976, 399, 404–5). State builders used their growing infrastructural power to prevent unaccountable crowds from resorting to “popular justice.” Tightening regulations against direct street action and their coercive enforcement by the police contributed to the gradual suppression of rough music (İtçaina 2017, 198–99). For about 150 years, charivari became ever more sporadic, surfacing as community self-justice only occasionally in remote rural areas and the traditionalist hinterland (Favretto and İtçaina 2017; İtçaina 2017, 186, 190–95, 199–201; Kerry 2024, 257–67; Thompson 1992, 19–20).

Moreover, charivari virtually disappeared as a political tactic. Even highly transgressive, extremist movements like the Nazi paramilitaries of the 1920s and 1930s proceeded with their violent manifestations in public spaces, especially via street fighting against communists, rather than pestering and harassing public officials in their private homes. Moreover, they diverged from the goal of rough music by not seeking their targets' reintegration into the community, but rather their brutal exclusion and sheer annihilation.

Charivari-style tactics reappeared only episodically, especially with the participatory upsurge of the 1960s, which turned away from established channels of political interest articulation and instead privileged direct action. This bottom-up struggle against discrimination and push for normative progress evoked some of the old characteristics of charivari (Walsham 2017, 247, 255). The US civil rights movement, for instance, employed *Katzenmusik* on several occasions for political demand making; in a high-profile case, protesters marched to the private house of Chicago mayor Richard Daley to confront him over school

desegregation.⁶ Based on very different convictions, yet driven by moral fervor as well, fundamentalist right-wingers from the 1980s onward tried to shame and sanction individual “evildoers” by protesting at the homes of abortion doctors (Arizmendi 1994, 514–15, 540–41, 560–61, 564–69; Cohen and Connon 2015, chaps. 2–3; Landwehr 1993, 148–49, 159). This effort to enforce “traditional norms” directly on perceived violators was reminiscent of premodern communitarian practices—though with the reactionary edge of trying to stem societal value change.

In general, the ample protections for freedom of speech kept more room open for charivari-style tactics in the US compared to Europe. But legal prohibitions against invasions of privacy and efforts to maintain “public order” hindered such direct action and long forestalled its proliferation. As codified in the “public forum” doctrine, according to which “private property is excluded from the right of public protest,” there was “a strong relationship [between] the target of protest [and] the location of protest” (McCarthy and McPhail 2006, 231, 240): demonstrators confronted public officials in public arenas, not their private homes.

In the twenty-first century, however, charivari-style tactics have experienced a surprising upsurge (see the appendix; limited data in BDI 2022; Lewien and Hiller 2021). A variety of progressive segments, such as BLM protesters, abortion rights advocates, and critics of the Israeli military operation in Gaza, have voiced their moral outrage and made urgent demands for redress at the private residences of politicians, mayors, police chiefs, and Supreme Court justices. As is typical in the history of contentious politics, conservative sectors soon employed such privacy-breaching direct action as well. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination sectors manifested their discontent outside the houses of governors, mayors, and public health officials. Moreover, die-hard Trump supporters besieged the homes of intra- and extraparty opponents with their fierce claims of fraud in the 2020 presidential election (Chappell 2020; Wingett Sanchez 2022). Sometimes, even governments borrowed from this repertoire: for instance, when Texas governor Greg Abbott transferred asylum seekers to “sanctuary cities” in the Northeast, he deliberately dropped off numerous busloads at the residence of Vice President Kamala Harris, even at night on Christmas Eve, to exacerbate the commotion and dramatize the photo op (Heyward 2022).

Thus, after 150 years of dormancy in Europe and limited usage in the US, public officials have in recent years faced a wave of direct pressure that has punctured the integrity of their private sphere. This return of a premodern tactic of community accountability and contentious politics, which started years before the closing of public

space during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued after its reopening, has caused considerable controversy and debate. Across the world, the resurgence of *Katzenmusik* has reflected the growing intensity of political polarization, moral conflicts, and “culture wars.” Far from constituting a historical curiosity, this surprising revival after a long lull has considerable political significance and therefore deserves theoretical explanation and interpretation. What are the main factors that account for this unexpected proliferation?

Political Developments Paving the Ground for Charivari’s Resurgence

The Rise of Cultural and Moral Conflict and Deepening Affective Polarization

As the moral fervor driving “rough musicians” suggests, one of the fundamental developments that contributed to charivari’s reappearance is deepening political-ideological polarization, especially in the US (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). With the secular advance of postmaterial values, political conflict in affluent nations has revolved less around material, socioeconomic issues, which lend themselves to negotiation and compromise. Instead, cultural and moral issues have assumed growing salience. And contrary to initial predictions about the emergence of tolerant societies where diverse groupings would respect and appreciate each other’s “self-expression values” (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), the rise of “identity politics” has ended up provoking profound conflicts and fierce resentments (Fukuyama 2018, chaps. 11, 14; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020), as even scholars of postmaterialism came to recognize (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

After all, whereas socioeconomic distribution and redistribution “merely” involve material gains and losses, value conflicts cut to the core of personal dignity and touch individuals’ fundamental ethical commitments. When people act out of “righteous rage” and wage a “militant crusade” (Garza 2020, 110, 118, 248; Rickford 2016, 35–36), would compromise not mean the betrayal of noble principles? Given that the sanctity of personhood—or God’s mandates—are ultimately at stake, the different sides in these conflicts push for categorical compliance with the values they unconditionally embrace. Disagreements need to be fought out to the end, until the adversaries, increasingly seen as forces of evil, are defeated and full victory is achieved (Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

Value changes at the individual level have gone hand in hand with deepening party polarization. Whereas US Democrats and Republicans used to be internally quite heterogeneous in ideological, educational, and residential terms, there has been increasing sorting in recent decades. One of the first steps in this partisan realignment arose from the civil rights movement and was thus propelled in

part by moral concerns. As cultural progressives gravitated toward the Democratic Party while conservatives moved to the Republicans, affective polarization deepened between two increasingly distant subcultures. Adherents of the two main formations increasingly disliked each other on a personal level, culminating after Trump's victory in 2016, when many educated and progressive young people could not stand facing their reactionary parents over Thanksgiving (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

The Personalization of Politics

Another impulse for charivari's resurgence is the gradual personalization of politics in recent decades. Whereas political liberalism had worked hard to depersonalize politics by reining in the arbitrary authority of royal autocrats and imposing the rule of law, modern democracies have seen a renewed focus on personal leaders. As the enormous variety of substantive issues has made politics incomprehensibly complex and party programs have become too difficult for citizens to digest, electoral competition has increasingly foregrounded candidates and their personalities (Pedersen and Rahat 2021). While US presidentialism has long focused political attention on one outstanding individual, parliamentary systems have increasingly revolved around prime-ministerial leadership as well, as the dominant role of Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom shows. Of course, radio, TV, and now social media, which enable political leaders to have a (quasi-)direct presence in citizens' lives, have greatly fostered this personalization of politics.

This focus on politicians over programs has attenuated the separation between the public and private sphere that political liberalism drew. If candidates campaign by advertising their personal character traits, then personal failings become politically relevant, investigative journalists can report on personal affairs, and partisan opponents as well as intraparty rivals will exploit personal misdeeds for political purposes. In the US, the scandals over Richard Nixon's shady dealings boosted this "politics by other means" (Ginsberg and Shefter 2002, 36–43, 160–63, 213–14, 223–24), which has proliferated in recent decades (see also Tormey 2015, 61–63).

Conversely, to prove their personal decency, US politicians have pulled their families into the public limelight. By having adoring wives, supportive husbands, and cute, innocent children join them on the electoral stage or at congressional hearings, they try to demonstrate that they have the requisite personal virtues for public office holding. Yet if the family serves as a public credential, it can also become the victim of attack, as often happens in charivari-style protests at private residences.

There has also been a personalization of politics at the level of common citizens (Bennett 2012; Tormey 2015, 81, 93–96, 139–40). As politics has increasingly centered around cultural and moral issues, people have come to feel that "the personal is political" (Hanisch [1969] 2000; Heberle 2015; Marwick 2023). Because previously marginalized groupings are eager to celebrate their long-suppressed personal identities in public (e.g., through pride marches), they expose themselves to public backlash and political criticism. Consequently, the boundary between public and private that is foundational for political liberalism has eroded.

Challenges to Political Liberalism and the Rise of Populism

All these developments have debilitated commitment to political liberalism. The "liberal tradition in America" (Hartz 1955; contested by Smith 1999) has lost adherence and support in recent decades, as progressive moralism and identity politics have advanced among left-wingers (Fukuyama 2018, chaps. 11, 14), while religious fundamentalism and, more recently, nationalist, reactionary populism have spread among right-wingers (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). This erosion of US liberalism is evident in the contraction of the label "liberal," which now designates only one wing of the Democratic Party.

Liberalism's fading prevalence has opened the doors for populism, which revolves around personalistic plebiscitarian leadership and has an inherent anti-institutional bent (Weyland 2017, 50). Whether hailing from left or right, headstrong, domineering populists use their charisma to mobilize their followers through quasi-direct appeals, face-to-face—via mass rallies, television, or social media. Whereas political liberalism seeks to depersonalize politics, induce citizens to focus on programs, and hold politicians to institutional rules, populism has the opposite thrust of stripping away constraints on personal leadership and forging unmediated connections between common citizens and their extraordinary hero (Urbinati 2019; Weyland 2017, 55–59).

Besides placing personal factors in the center of politics, populism has exacerbated and boosted the above-mentioned developments and thus helped to propel the resurgence of charivari (Favretto 2017, 13). In particular, right-wing populism politicizes the cultural backlash to postmaterial value change and inflames identity politics (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In Trump's America, many whites now see themselves as a disadvantaged, discriminated segment that needs to reassert its personal dignity and promote its fundamental group rights (Hochschild 2016; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 87–90). This resentful upsurge, in turn, has scared progressives and induced them to advocate their diverse causes with even

greater moral fervor. Consequently, affective polarization has deepened further, fueling political and personal hostility (Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

Major Impulse: The Rise of Social Media

Reinforcing the repercussions of these political developments, the phenomenal spread of social media has powerfully propelled the resurgence of charivari in political contention. One fundamental effect of Facebook, Twitter, and so forth has been the erosion, if not erasure, of the public–private boundary (Marwick 2023, 2–9, 27, 44–46). People’s longing for personal attention, social approval, and public impact has driven many internauts, including users of supposedly private networks, to extend their circles of “friends” ever more broadly. Growth-seeking network operators have energetically induced and even engineered this expansion (Marwick 2023, 44–49, 61–63). Consequently, many people have stretched and even surpassed the boundaries of their personal sphere (Hatuka 2023, 382–83); they now reveal their thoughts, feelings, and inner selves to wide-ranging audiences. This “oversharing on social media [has] lowered the standards of privacy” (Wu 2016, 323).

While driven by the quest for approval (“likes”), this public presentation and self-celebration have exposed individuals to the risk of disapproval; and on the internet with its low-cost, quick-fire, and faceless interactions, such disapproval can spread like wildfire, quickly turn nasty, and descend to abuse. Small missteps, including misunderstood jokes, risk triggering a torrent of high-pitched criticism, strident condemnation, and blatant attacks, including death threats. Such a storm of reprobation can ruin the called-out “evildoer’s” professional career or personal relationships (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020; Klonick 2016; Marwick 2023; Trottier 2020).

Indeed, internet harassment can shatter supposed wrongdoers’ private spheres if self-appointed censors post their targets’ names, addresses, and phone numbers on the web. This “forced publicity” via doxing (Marwick 2023, 101–2, 118–19) seeks to inflict deliberate damage by getting the stigmatized offenders fired from jobs or “canceled” by friends and family (Dutton and Dawson 2022; Snyder et al. 2017; Trottier 2020, 206–7). Doxing also facilitates and encourages direct, in-person harassment—that is, charivari 2.0.

Internauts who use these types of “morally motivated networked harassment” see them as powerful mechanisms of “normative reinforcement” (Marwick 2021) that enable righteous community members to discipline individual deviants and uphold the moral order (Klonick 2016, 1029–35, 1051–55; Snyder et al. 2017, 438; Trottier 2020, 199–200). Surprisingly, then, this ultramodern form of normative control has fundamental similarities to premodern *Katzenmusik*. By breaching the boundaries of the personal sphere, viral internet reprobation and

doxing have paved the way for charivari’s return in real-life political contention.

As in premodern times, community members now take the initiative to sanction individuals for their personal behavior, for instance by denouncing “exotic” clothing as cultural appropriation or racist mockery. Because such a private choice is judged as a norm violation, anybody has the right to discipline the supposed offender. Internet sanctioning thus shares the participatory, bottom-up spirit driving historical rough music (cf. Thompson 1992, 20): common people shame deviant individuals and enforce rules of proper conviviality. The egalitarian spirit of the internet resembles the communitarian ethos of charivari: rather than enlisting hierarchical authorities and state coercion, upstanding, concerned commoners take justice into their own hands and restore the moral order through direct action.⁷

Both in the premodern and postmodern age, however, this reliance on participatory energy and voluntary collaboration for disciplining offenders is not purely spontaneous, but often receives authorization and guidance. Whereas in historical charivari local communities relied on traditional mechanisms like informal courts or corporate “youth abbeys” to adjudicate guilt and execute sanctions (Davis 1971, 43–44, 58–59), nowadays this task of judging violations and initiating sanctioning often falls to “influencers”: in the fluid, faceless pseudo-community of the internet, some central nodes draw huge followings. Ranging from celebrities to political leaders (Marwick 2023, 120, 123–24; Tufekci 2013), these informal authorities serve as “amplifiers”: their widely visible criticism of an inappropriate action often induces their admirers to follow suit. Influencers can thus unleash and informally coordinate a torrent of reprobation and harassment (Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2021, 735–37, 743–46; Marwick 2021, 2, 7, 10).

Of course, however, the twenty-first century’s networked harassment also has crucial differences from premodern charivari. In earlier eras, normative disciplining was the task of preconstituted communities and took place before a local audience. The watchful eyes of an assembled crowd usually constrained the severity of sanctions; excessive punishment would have provoked disapproval or intercession (Davis 1984, 42–43, 47–48). By contrast, the internet consists of open, fluid, ill-defined, distant, and anonymous audiences, where compassion and the human tendency to shield people from vicious abuse are weaker (Crockett 2017; Klonick 2016, 1031–32, 1045, 1051–55). What Good Samaritan can and will effectively protect the target of an avalanche of internet harassment? How does one stop such a tsunami of accusations and insults?

Because quick-fire expression often beats prudent reflection and self-restraint, lopsided self-selection drives the flood of postings. Even a limited proportion of internauts who choose to participate in sanctioning can unleash

a striking crescendo of criticism and abuse, while most of the audience remains silent, fearing a hostile outburst if they defended the target of harassment. The aggregate result is highly skewed: an uncontained upsurge of reprobation (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020, 980–83, 993–1001). Through this self-selection, social media facilitates the artificial formation of ideologically defined and surprisingly uniform pseudo-communities, which may represent only a narrow slice of the highly diverse internet (Tormey 2015, 97–100); but this limited segment effectively turns into the relevant “public” that powerfully sanctions a defenseless individual (Marwick 2021).

Consequently, the principles and values that activist internauts seek to enforce are not traditional, broadly shared, and consensual norms that a preconstituted community has long embraced, as in premodern charivari. Instead, in our age of affective polarization and ideological fragmentation (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020, 987–89), self-selected groupings push their distinctive ideational and normative preferences—from “across the ideological spectrum” (Marwick 2021, 2, 5; see also Crockett 2017; Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2021, 738–39, 743–46). Accordingly, conservatives attack progressive individuals with novel lifestyles for violating allegedly long-standing customs and values. In this vein, adherents of male patriarchy relentlessly harass feminists and LGBT groupings (Marwick 2023, chap. 4). Whereas premodern charivari sought to uphold age-old norms during times of moral stability, reactionary internet enforcers try to stem and reverse the postmaterial value change of recent decades. By pushing this traditionalist backlash, they want to turn the clock back.

Conversely, progressives employ internet enforcement to combat these retrograde segments and push value change even further. They forcefully promote their own innovative ideational and normative preferences while trying to eradicate traditional, supposedly obsolete, notions of morality. Interestingly, they employ similar mechanisms as their conservative adversaries and the rough musicians of premodern times, namely the public shaming of private individuals for their alleged moral wrongdoing and infringement of community norms (Crockett 2017; Marwick 2021; Trottier 2020, 197–99). But there is a striking difference in the rules they seek to enforce: whereas original charivari upheld old and consensual norms, and reactionary harassment seeks to uphold old but no longer consensual norms, progressive shaming tries to install new but not yet consensual norms.

Thus, in contrast to the efforts to reaffirm the real standards of the past in historical charivari, or the embalmed standards of an ever more obsolete past through reactionary harassment, progressives seek to usher in an oppression- and discrimination-free future by promoting new standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In sociopolitical reality, however, this vanguard vision draws

substantial debate and controversy and thus lacks a consensual basis, giving progressive moral shaming a tenuous and contested foundation as well (Marwick 2021, 5–8; see also Trottier 2020, 199, 202).

Given these counteracting tendencies, networked harassment does not suppress individual deviance, restore consensual moral order, and end disagreement. On the contrary, as reactionaries and progressives push opposite normative projects with great conviction and fervently fight each other, internet shaming does not promote social pacification but instead inflames value conflict (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020, 1002; Crockett 2017, 771; Marwick 2023, 120–27). Ideological and affective polarization has unleashed cycles of mutual attack and ferocious backlash. As traditional communities have long dissolved and contemporary societies have splintered into a multitude of diverse, often identity-defined, groupings (Fukuyama 2018), the renewed use of old tactics now has a fundamentally different meaning and impact.

In conclusion, the morally motivated networked harassment of recent years has several parallels with premodern charivari, powerfully propelling the reappearance of this old contentious practice. The single most important repercussion of social media is to attenuate, if not erase, the public–private boundary that is foundational for political liberalism. As individuals fall prey to the temptation of publicizing their personal affairs, self-selected and self-constituted communities obtain the capacity and legitimacy to sanction them publicly on the internet for their private behavior and supposed personal failings. From there, it is a small step to confront public officials in their private homes.

Charivari’s Resurgence in Contentious Politics

A Surprising Upsurge

After the above-mentioned developments paved the ground, social media provided the most direct impulse for the unexpected proliferation of rough music in contemporary politics. The internet induces politicians to depict themselves as regular people, almost like Facebook friends, yet this overstepping of the public–private divide exposes them to moralistic condemnation. The web’s open, low-cost communication facilitates surges of indignation and allows for the organization of real-life protests and the targeting of specific people, especially via doxing. In these ways, “networked harassment [has] bled through to ... offline life” (Marwick 2023, 118–19; see also Trottier 2020, 199). In turn, the shaming of public officials in their private residences is commonly live-streamed on social media. These synergies have favored the rise of charivari 2.0.

In recent years, morally driven protesters of widely diverse persuasions have frequently demonstrated outside

political decision makers' private residences, created commotion, hurled loud insults, and sometimes conducted rituals like displaying shocking symbols or hanging effigies (e.g., Hess 2022; Recker 2021; Suppe 2021). For the press and for their sympathetic internet audiences, they often stage elaborate, sometimes theatrical, performances that evoke the ritualistic aspects of premodern charivari.

Yet whereas historically, politically targeted *Katzenmusik* had been particularly common in Europe (during the revolutionary waves of the nineteenth century), the recent resort to charivari has been especially widespread in the US, where generous free speech protections provide ample room for demonstrations, even in residential neighborhoods. Consequently, groupings from across the ideological spectrum now employ direct-action tactics that resemble the old rough music. While the “lack of national, longitudinal, and event-based data [which] are not systematically made public or tracked by law enforcement” (BDI 2022, 8–9) precludes a quantitative timeline,⁸ the appendix lists numerous high-profile incidents.⁹

From the mid-2010s onward, with particular energy in mid-2020, BLM protesters marched to the houses of mayors and police chiefs in many US cities to push for an end to police brutality against African Americans (see the appendix, 1–4). Similarly, during the debates over the Supreme Court's abortion ruling, activists from 2021 to 2023 frequently demonstrated at conservative justices' residences (appendix, 4–5). And from late 2023 onward, critics of the Israeli military operation in Gaza loudly advanced their demands outside the homes of politicians and university presidents (appendix, 9–10).

With similar tactics, though often inspired by conservative attitudes, fervent critics of COVID-19 restrictions voiced their indignation outside the houses of public health officials and political authorities across the US, blasting them with noise and sometimes carrying arms (appendix, 5–7). And from late 2020 onward, right-wing groupings harassed public officials from both parties who refused to cede to President Trump's persistent claims of electoral fraud (appendix, 7–9).

Outside the US, charivari has resurged as well, though less frequently. After all, other countries have been less affected by developments such as deepening affective polarization (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020, 47–49, 64, 71). Moreover, weaker free speech rights and stronger insistence on public order create limitations. Nevertheless, BLM activists in Canada followed the US example and took their protests to public officials' homes (Atluri 2018, 154–56, 160). In France, the police killing of an immigrant-descended teenager prompted residential picketing in mid-2023 (e.g., BBC News 2023). Moreover, the accommodation of foreign asylum seekers drew private-home demonstrations in several European countries, as did COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., Kornmeier 2022; Seanad Éireann 2023). In a particularly sinister episode, right-

wing demonstrators held a torchlit gathering at the house of Saxony's health minister, evoking memories of Nazism (Geiler 2021). Further afar, Israelis outraged by their government's effort to subdue the judiciary spearheaded weekly demonstrations near top officials' private homes and disturbed them with “noise, noise, noise” (Peleg 2023).

A Focus on Body Politics

Interestingly, emblematic incidents suggest that resurgent charivari has focused primarily on political decisions and enforcement actions that directly affect people's bodies and violate their physical integrity. BLM demands accountability for police killings of African Americans (Abrams 2023, chaps. 9–10; Clayton 2018, 457–62; Johnson and Edgar 2024, 39, 42–45; Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2018, 5–8, 166–67, 197–202; Woodly 2022, 90–92, 96–97, 121–25); pro-Palestinian demonstrators urge politicians, sometimes denounced as “baby killers,” to push Israel to stop its massive bombing (“genocide”) in Gaza; abortion rights activists reject state interference in women's wombs—whereas antiabortion protesters seek to protect unborn “life”; opponents of COVID vaccination mandates claimed sovereignty over their bodies. Thus, highly diverse groupings object to state actions that touch the human body.¹⁰ Because they see public authorities intrude into their personal sphere, they find it legitimate to fight back with equal means and confront these officials in *their* personal sphere (similarly, see Lewien and Hiller 2021, 2).

The resulting demonstrations in front of private homes stand in noteworthy contrast to the immediately preceding wave of high-profile direct action, which focused on material issues, especially socioeconomic inequality: “Occupy” sought to take over Wall Street—that is, the public space of the principal US financial district (Abrams 2023, 108–21; Tormey 2015, 33–35; in general Tarrow 2022, 93, 107–10, 199). But Occupy did not besiege bankers' private homes.

Thus, after secular trends had promoted the personalization of politics (Bennett 2012) and eroded the liberal distinction between public and private spheres, state decisions in which “the political” directly touched “the personal” induced citizens to engage in retaliatory boundary crossing and express their moral indignation at public authorities' private homes. Because activists perceived political actors as disrespecting their personal bodily integrity, they claimed the right to payback by pestering public officials in the sanctuary of their private residences. After all, “would you say a uterus is more, or less, private than a house,” asked [a sympathetic] journalist” (Quay 2022) during the abortion rights protests prompted by the *Dobbs* Supreme Court decision in 2022. Whereas in their offices, state authorities are shielded by security procedures and

can keep upset constituents at bay, a march to their family residence allows for a direct manifestation of discontent. Hoping that at home, public officials are a captive audience (Arizmendi 1994, 551–52; Eglit 1966, 123–24; Landwehr 1993, 159–60), outraged citizens try to ensure that their personal, often body-focused, grievances will not go unheard.

In the global wave of populism, people's attachment to charismatic politicians such as Donald Trump can also assume an intense personal significance and therefore motivate the use of charivari tactics. After all, populism revolves around distinctly personalistic leadership (Urbinati 2019; Weyland 2017, 50, 55–59), and charisma entails a fervent emotional connection to this “extraordinary” personality (Andrews-Lee 2021). Accordingly, populist politicians establish and reinforce direct, quasi-personal connections to their followers. Hugo Chávez, for instance, invited himself into people's living rooms with hours and hours of his entertaining and performative talk show *Aló Presidente*, and Trump had tens of millions glued to his Twitter feed, day in, day out. This ardent linkage creates a firm personal identification between the leader and core followers. As the slogan went, “Chávez is the people, and the people is Chávez” (Weyland 2017, 58).

Because populist followers see their leader as the incarnation of “the people” (Urbinati 2019), they view slights to their hero almost like cuts in their own flesh. When Chávez died, many Venezuelans burst into tears as if he were a close relative. Consequently, any harm to the populist embodying “the people” provokes outrage and prompts counterattacks in kind. Fervent followers confront presumed “enemies of the people” up close and personal by pestering and intimidating the leader's political adversaries in their personal homes. Crowds stirred up by Trump's accusations and lies therefore conducted charivari-style protests at the private houses of politicians and public officials who resisted their hero's desperate efforts to overturn the 2020 election (Chappell 2020; Wingett Sanchez 2022).

Thus, for direct personal concerns or for reasons of populist personalism, self-selected groups of citizens feel the urge to resort to privacy-breaching direct action, rather than relying on official, institutional channels of interest articulation and demand making (Tormey 2015, 75–81, 91–96, 144–46). Indeed, both progressive activists and the committed followers of populist leaders express distrust of established political parties and elections (Favretto 2017, 12–13; Johnson and Edgar 2024, 122–25; Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2018, 230–32; Rickford 2016, 35; Woodly 2022, 192–93, 200). They are dissatisfied with the institutional procedures and mechanisms that democratization historically opened up and that, by providing regular avenues for interest articulation and demand

making, had contributed to the fading of *Katzenmusik* from the nineteenth century onward.

In bypassing conventional modes of citizen participation, resurgent charivari has a transgressive edge. Although demonstrators could confine their protests to public spaces, rough musicians deliberately trespass the public–private boundary and disturb public officials in their family residences. Indeed, on several occasions in the US, participants have carried firearms or engaged in vandalism, trying to intimidate their targets (e.g., Chappell 2020; Holmes 2020; Suppe 2021). Thus, activists are determined to exert maximum pressure by confronting political decision makers where they are most vulnerable, namely the sanctuary of their home (Fithian 2019, 63, 66; Goodman and Sanders 2011, 138, 145–51; see also Landwehr 1993, 179–80).

Another interesting observation emerges from the emblematic incidents listed in the appendix.¹¹ Like the gendered patterns of internet-based harassment (Marwick 2023, 128–33), contemporary activists of all stripes seem to use charivari disproportionately against public officials who are women (see also Dewitt 2020; limited data in BDI 2022, 5, 14, 22).¹² Perhaps the old stereotype that the family home is primarily the domain of women contributes to this apparent selectivity. Female decision makers may be seen as more sensitive to public pressure on their “nests,” turning them into particularly attractive targets for residential picketing. But of course, lingering cultural notions of female vulnerability also enable targeted women to fight back with particular effect: their denunciations of disruption or intimidation at their private sanctuary find special resonance. For instance, after noisy, armed protesters drove the young sons of a female public health official in Idaho to tears and induced the anguished mother to rush home to protect her children (Holmes 2020; Suppe 2021; similar Chappell 2020), public condemnations and expressions of solidarity proliferated; indeed, the police tracked down the demonstrators and courts imposed punishments.

Similarities and Differences with Historical Charivari

Charivari's renewed use for political purposes has fundamental similarities with earlier versions, especially the frequent *Katzenmusik* performed during the 1848 revolutions. Whereas the traditional rough music of premodern communities pursued the conservative goal of enforcing long-standing moral rules and cementing the normative status quo, this political utilization—both in the mid-nineteenth and the twenty-first century—pushes for change, often in a progressive direction, yet nowadays in a reactionary direction as well. Current left-wing groupings try hard to drive history forward, while right-wing groupings seek to reverse progressive advances that have

already gathered steam, attempting to “make America great again.”

With this goal of propelling transformations, politically motivated charivari—both in 1848 and in the third millennium—features a different alignment of forces than the premodern version, in which a long-established local community sought to reintegrate a deviant individual into its firm normative consensus. This original rough music constituted social sanctioning, rather than political conflict; if disagreements arose, they concerned not the validity of the community’s norms, but only the adjudication of the specific transgression.

By contrast, the very push for change, both in 1848 and nowadays, arises from profound normative discord and involves open political conflict. While charivari participants invoke noble principles to legitimate their contention and depict the target as an obvious wrongdoer, they do not promote and enforce an established normative agreement, but one side in an acute political disagreement; and the targeted public official, though accused of blatantly improper behavior, simply anchors the other side in this conflict. Thus, rough musicians do not represent a popular consensus or even a strong majority, but give voice to one of two opposed positions. Broader population segments may well stay on the sidelines, without supporting or even condoning the contentious display in front of public officials’ houses. The actual participants constitute self-selected groupings of activists committed to their special cause and sometimes fairly militant minorities with particularly intense preferences—but not a cross-section of the people.

This self-selection is even more pronounced in the contemporary era, when participants in resurgent charivari often do not hail from the local community but come together from afar, especially when national-level issues are at stake. Easy mobility enables small groupings of today’s highly diverse, pluralistic, and polarized societies to conduct protests in front of public officials’ homes. This narrow self-selection is effective because rough music can be spearheaded by numerically small crowds. After all, a few people are sufficient for demonstrating and causing a commotion at a private house. Moreover, due to the contested legitimacy and questionable legality of residential picketing (Landwehr 1993), participation can be risky and potentially costly. In several instances, participants have been arrested, indicted, and sometimes convicted.

For all these reasons, modern-day charivari seems to be used primarily by people who stand out in the high intensity of their normative preferences or the extremism of their ideological positions. Even if they have affinities with the substantive views and sentiments of broader population segments, their determination to engage in direct action makes them quite unrepresentative; average citizens would never go that far in breaching liberal privacy rules. Rather than speaking for the whole community

(as in the premodern era), or being broad-based, if not majoritarian (as in 1848), contemporary rough music is mostly performed by limited groupings from outside the mainstream who diverge from median-voter preferences, especially in their fervor. Often spearheaded by forces that see themselves as vanguards of profound change, charivari 2.0 can have a radical character, as in animal rights protests (Goodman and Sanders 2011) or demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions (Suppe 2021).

The frequent noninvolvement of the broader citizenry, which contrasts with the communitarian nature of historical charivari and which gives the contemporary version its distinctive skew, has another interesting side. Nowadays, unrepresentative, even extremist, groupings enjoy great latitude to voice their grievances outside the private homes of politicians and public officials. Most often, *Katzenmusik* has not faced local community pushback. Whereas in this age of affective polarization demonstrations in public places often provoke counterprotests and acrimonious, even physical, conflict, area residents rarely try to shield their targeted neighbors from rough musicians or stop the noise and disruption on their local street;¹³ a St. Louis couple’s ostentatious defense of their gated community by brandishing firearms has remained a notorious exception (Rawlins 2022).

In all these ways, twenty-first-century *Katzenmusik* no longer has the communitarian or majoritarian foundation on which it rested through the nineteenth century. Instead, it is mainly used by self-selected, narrow groupings that promote minoritarian views, especially in the intensity, fervor, and radicalism of their preferences. While these protagonists claim to be courageous trailblazers who promote the needs and (latent) interests of broad population segments, they go much farther in taking transgressive direct action than the presumed beneficiaries would ever do. To mobilize support, present-day rough musicians often advertise their heroic deeds by live-streaming their attention-seeking activities on social media. This urge to perform before a likeminded audience and achieve resonance in this ideological echo chamber (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020, 987–89) probably increases the temptation to engage in defiant contention. This demonstrative, even theatrical, side of charivari 2.0 resembles the ritualistic aspects of its historical antecedents.

Driven by the intense preferences of self-proclaimed vanguards, contemporary charivari is not simple political protest, but shares with the premodern version a strong moralistic charge. Present-day performers of *Katzenmusik* do not advance their interests and values in a pluralistic spirit, as part of a diverse society whose members “live and let live.” Instead, what propels this resurgence of direct action is the categorical insistence on one’s own unquestionably valid, unchallengeable norms and values. Going substantially beyond conventional forms of demand making, rough music is motivated by powerful indignation,

moral outrage, and a crusading quest for purification (Atluri 2018; Garza 2020, 110, 118, 248; Rickford 2016; Tormey 2015, 81, 134).

The pronounced self-selection of participants and the possibility of sectarian usage have broader consequences for the politics of rough music in this era of affective polarization. Above all, present-day charivari has been employed not only for progressive causes, as in 1848, but for a great variety of goals from across the diverse ideological spectrum, including reactionary purposes. Rather than restoring and cementing communal order, as in premodern times, or propelling the secular advance of liberalism and democracy, as in 1848, the recent proliferation of *Katzenmusik* tends to exacerbate the manifold political conflicts, moral controversies, and “culture wars” of the twenty-first century (cf. Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

Conclusion

This reflection highlights the surprising flowering of an old tactic of popular contention in the contemporary era. As in premodern charivari and its political variant during the nineteenth-century revolutions, groups of citizens nowadays take it upon themselves to hold perceived wrongdoers accountable by demonstrating outside the private homes of public officials whose decisions they condemn as outrageous. This direct action, which raucously breaches the public–private divide foundational to political liberalism, intends to enforce morality by condemning supposed violations of basic norms through symbolic shaming. These protests range from theatrical performances to (sometimes armed) intimidation, and are often posted to or live-streamed on the internet. Fighting back with special fervor against what they regard as improper state impositions on citizens’ bodies and violations of personal integrity (e.g., police brutality, abortion restrictions, or vaccination mandates), participants feel entitled to intrude in public officials’ private spheres by besieging them in their residential sanctuaries.

This resurgence of rough music was unexpected, running counter to prominent writings on secular change in the repertoire of contention (Tarrow 2022, 26–36, 40; Tilly 1995, 44–48, 362–64, 376–77; 2008, 41–45). As explained above, charivari’s reappearance reflects several important developments that have reshaped liberal democracies in recent decades. Consequently, these controversial direct-action tactics, which resolutely trespass the public–private boundary, are not only interesting in their own right, but also as a crystallization of broader changes, especially the growing troubles afflicting political liberalism.

After all, during its gradual advance in the nineteenth century, liberalism had sought to protect the private sphere, suppress “popular justice,” and establish the rule of law. Suspected wrongdoing would be adjudicated via fair, evenhanded procedures (“due process”) under the

guidance of well-trained experts (judges, lawyers), with firm guarantees for the rights of the accused. Moreover, the forward march of democratization had opened up regular, less contentious avenues of popular interest articulation and demand making that sought to replace the inarticulate expression of outrage by more constructive mechanisms: political parties could formulate proposals and programs, and elections allowed the citizenry to shape authoritative decision making and governance. As liberal democrats hoped, these well-designed, effective mechanisms predominated from the nineteenth century onward, forestalling “crude” surges of popular indignation in Europe and keeping them episodic in the less state-dominated polity of the US.

For adherents to this notion of liberal democratic progress, the rise of charivari 2.0 risks a problematic relapse into incivility. As this reflection argues, several contributing factors have indeed weakened political liberalism. The move from a politics centered on material, socioeconomic interests to the postmaterialist assertion of diverse identities has not brought the predicted reign of universal toleration (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), but ended up fueling morality-driven disagreement and resentful backlash as theorists of the initial, more benign vision now recognize (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Partly as a result, political polarization has deepened, inflamed not only by partisan and ideological divergences, but also by affective aversion and increasing hostility in the US (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). Rather than following the liberal maxim of agreeing to disagree, different groupings have felt growing antipathy and animosity.

This simmering cauldron has been heated up further through the technical affordances of the internet, which has enabled vast numbers of previously inaudible people to voice their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and resentments, openly and without much restraint. Indeed, social media systematically amplifies eye-catching, shocking content and can turn expressions of outrage viral, which may disregard norms of civility with virtual impunity. As social media websites have also encouraged and even tricked people into opening up their private sphere to the public eye, they have exposed individuals to accusations from a wide range of self-appointed enforcers of diverse norms. Consequently, “morally motivated networked harassment” has proliferated in the cybersphere (Marwick 2023)—with some fundamental similarities (but also differences) to historical charivari, as explained above.

This new form of privacy-breaching direct action on the internet, including doxing, also propelled the resurgence of *Katzenmusik* in real-life politics. Given the erosion of the public–private boundary, widely diverse groupings nowadays regard it as legitimate to resort to charivari 2.0: they promote their intense moral values and denounce public officials as wrongdoers through

performative protests at the targets' private homes. Contemporary rough musicians use these transgressive tactics especially to fight back against what they perceive as immoral state intrusions or impositions on human bodies. To contest the illegitimate—in their eyes—interference of public decision makers in their private sphere, they feel entitled to retaliate by confronting the supposed offenders in their own private sphere. Therefore, they voice their indignation and outrage outside public officials' family homes.

Progressives who lack trust in the conventional procedures of liberal democracy embrace this upsurge of direct action as a promising way of articulating long-marginalized grievances and demands (Atluri 2018; Garza 2020; Rickford 2016, 35). Reactionaries resort to similar privacy-encroaching performances to push their own grievances and demands—but in the opposite direction. Facing fire from both sides, political liberals try to navigate these turbulences and conflicts while staying true to their own principles: how does one weigh free speech rights against the importance of safeguarding political civility, without which the fragile flower of democracy has difficulty blooming? After all, liberal checks-and-balances systems require a willingness to compromise, and conflict regulation through elections depends on losers' acquiescence in their defeat—the opposite of the moral absolutism that often drives charivari 2.0.

Considering these conflicting concerns and principles, it will be interesting to see how advanced democracies cope with the recent proliferation of rough music. Does this privacy-breaching contentious tactic open up alternative forms of popular participation that allow for citizen engagement concerning vital political and moral issues (cf. Thompson 1992, 20; Tormey 2015, 137–40)? Or will postmodern politics privilege the protection of public officials in their private sphere, try to rein in this boundary-crossing direct action, and reassert the centrality of liberal democratic norms and procedures? As the return of *Katzenmusik* has been prepared by the erosion of political liberalism over the last few decades, the decisions that societies take on this controversial issue may foreshadow liberalism's prospects for many years to come.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001762>.

Acknowledgments

For their encouragement and many excellent comments on earlier versions of this essay, I thank Dan Brinks, Zach Elkins, John Gerring, Ken Greene, Wendy Hunter, Raul

Madrid, Bartholomew Sparrow, Nikolas Weyland, and three anonymous reviewers for *Perspectives on Politics*.

Notes

- 1 With political liberalism, this reflection means the classical tradition originating in Locke and Montesquieu (Held 2006, chap. 3).
- 2 This reflection can only examine the Global North. A huge research effort would be required for (un)covering the rich histories of popular contention in the diverse regions of the Global South.
- 3 Dubey (2015), Gerbaudo (2020), and Keane (2015) have also noticed charivari's recent resurgence, yet without designing an explanation and systematizing the similarities and differences to its premodern variant. Della Porta (2017), Favretto (2017), and Favretto and Fincardi (2017) examine instances of direct historical continuities, which do not characterize charivari 2.0. Kerry (2024) documents an interesting case of discontinuity.
- 4 Sharp's (1973, 151–52) nonviolent-action manual does not capture charivari's distinctive features, but describes it merely as “political protest music”; and in decades of high-profile direct action, Fithian (2019, 63, 66, 200) has only exceptionally spearheaded protests at private homes.
- 5 Accordingly, leftist parties and unions were averse to the occasional surges of carnivalesque direct action in the twentieth century—e.g., by Italian workers in the late 1960s (Della Porta 2017, 254; Favretto and Fincardi 2017, 158–59).
- 6 Kamin (1966, 177–82); see also Arizmendi (1994, 534–37); Eglit (1966, 106–7). Another case was the Italian protest movement of the late 1960s (see Favretto and Itçaina 2017, 149–83).
- 7 The “virtue signaling” that can fuel avalanches of internet criticism also recreates the performative, ritualistic element common in premodern charivari.
- 8 Lewien and Hiller (2021) provide only a snapshot for “May–December 2020.”
- 9 In recent years, numerous public officials have also been accosted by hostile crowds during private events in semipublic settings, especially in restaurants (Lurie 2018; Sidman 2022).
- 10 Similarly, Latin America saw earlier surges of rough music, when relatives of victims of human rights abuses under the dictatorships of the 1970s sought to overcome the political blockage of transitional justice under restored democracies and tracked down perpetrators in their private lives, publicized their past misdeeds, and shamed them before their neighbors (Cominiello 2004; Guthrey 2020; Kerry 2024, 279–80). These *escraches*, first employed in Argentina in the 1990s, then diffused to other South American countries and targeted less severe transgressions.

- 11 The following observation “controls for” the fact that national top officials—whose enormous clout makes them priority targets for charivari 2.0, as senators Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer, for example, have discovered (appendix, 11–12)—are predominantly men. Also, abortion rights protesters for obvious reasons target mostly the conservative men on the Supreme Court.
- 12 Possibly, however, long-standing gender notions have shaped journalistic reporting, generating a disproportionate, unrepresentative number of news items that focus on women as targets of residential picketing.
- 13 A rare exception in Lotmore (2020); for a much earlier instance, see Kamin (1966, 179–81).

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