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Atmospheres and Crowds

Techno-ambiental interventions and affective spaces of protest

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Abstract. *The paper discusses the materialities of crowds in distinction to crowd semantics. It contributes to an understanding of the relation between atmospheres/ambiances and the spaces of protesting crowds. It will be argued that the relation has two sides. First, techno-ambiental interventions represent a form of crowd engineering and manipulation. Second, affective atmospheres play an important role within the political spaces of the crowd and facilitate the emergence, diffusion, and stabilisation of protest movements. By drawing on historical and contemporary accounts of crowds, the phenomenologies of Canetti and Schmitz will be combined and meaningful implications for crowd-related research will be addressed.*

Keywords: *crowds, crowded spaces, atmospheres, Canetti, Schmitz*

Crowd semantics

Crowds matter as they are vital parts of our social lives. The presence of many people in one place – whether assembled for festive, religious or political purposes – raise various questions. This paper focusses on the relation between atmospheres and the spaces of protesting crowds.

The decentering of crowd research in social science

The social phenomena of crowds constituted a crucial field of interest for social theorists one century ago but became more and more marginalised in social science over the course of the 20th century. The reasons for the marginalisation of the crowd in mainstream social sciences after its heyday associated with early French crowd sociology in the late 19th century (especially Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde) is first and foremost linked to Durkheim (Borch 2012, 64 ff.). His effort to formulate a positivist sociology shifted the focus away from crowd behavior, which he regarded as irrelevant. However, crowd theory was developed further in German sociology and influenced the developments of American sociology as well, especially the Chicago school of sociology. In German sociology during the Weimar Republic, the focus on groups and social structures pushed the crowd as the object of studies into the background (Borch 2012, 123). American sociology took on a more individualistic notion of the crowd and eventually paved the ground for a sociology and social psychology that was more concerned with groups (e.g. Lewin 1947) and collective behavior (e.g. Turner/Killian 1972). After the epoch of totalitarianism in the first half of the 20th century, two strands of reactions within the social sciences regarding

crowds can be identified. First, the term 'mass' became a substitute for critical efforts to understand crowds under totalitarian conditions. Second, the social psychological angle of group behavior led to an increasing interest in social movement research. Both strands subsequently led to a 'dissolution of sociological crowd theory' (Borch 2012, 266 ff.). Attention to the phenomena of crowds waned within social theories.

The renaissance of crowd research since the 1980s

Since the 1980s crowds resurfaced in various disciplinary contexts like sociology (Lofland 1985; McClelland 1989; Borch 2012), psychology (McPhail 1991; Drury / Reicher 1999; van Stekelenburg / Klandermans 2013), and even mathematics (Still 2014). The reappearance was driven by social and political theorists questioning the conditions of society in the light of a postulated shift from modernity to postmodernity. Borch (2012, 295) remarks that 'the postmodern revival of crowds and mass semantics' did not happen within the centre of current sociology. First, crowds stayed in the focus of interest within social movement research (e.g. Goodwin / Jasper 2014). This was mainly fuelled by the recurring appearances of crowded geographies of protest of the so-called 'colour revolutions' that span the globe after the end of the Cold War and its effect on nation and state building movements since the 1990s until today. In recent years, this has been supplemented with protest movements expressing their unease with forms of neoliberal politics and / or repressive regimes in general. However, a second area of scientific interest, which is easily overlooked due to its more applied character, is concerned with practical questions regarding the management of crowds on large-scale events. The literature on health, welfare, safety, and policing crowds has increased over the last decades. Especially driven by the reprocessing and evaluation of crowd disasters, this body of literature eclectically draws on concepts of risk and hazard management (Tarlow 2002), environmental and crowd psychology (Reicher 2001), and event and facility management (Westerbeek et al. 2006). In these applied conceptualisation of crowds, the phenomena tend to be regarded as apolitical. The gradual processes of securitisation mostly remain hidden. Further, most of this literature takes on an individualist-rationalist perspective on crowds and objectifies crowds for the purpose of management and control (Borch 2013).

Crowd materialities

Addressing the reality of crowds and crowding as well as subsequently taking the materiality of crowds for granted is problematic. From a poststructuralist point of view, Borch's (2012) seminal book on crowd semantics in the history of sociology is a consequent endeavor problematising crowds. He avoids becoming involved in an analysis of 'real crowds and their actual behavior' (ibid., 10) and remains quite vague investigating the question 'whether crowds and masses actually exist as real, tangible phenomena' (ibid., 13). The idea behind this perspective is that a discussion of the ontological status of the crowd is not needed and a radical performative stance of crowd semantics reveals the fact that 'crowd terminology is not innocent' (ibid.). I am not arguing against this, but my engagement with crowds is different and once more operates on the assumption that there is such a thing as a crowd. The reason for this is that a poststructuralist perspective on crowds may grasp at

nothing while trying to make itself understandable for the practices of protest on the one hand and the practices of governing and policing crowds on the other. The management of crowds in terms of health and safety on the one side and the political, legal and moral control of crowds on the other side intersect throughout history. In the current age of post-panoptic control, new forms of crowd monitoring, sensing, and simulation (Vehlken/Pias 2014) increasingly blur the boundaries of managing, governing, and policing crowds (Tran 2013, 184). Social sciences even have been complicit in these tasks (Canter et al. 1989). However, there is a need to address the very reality of crowds besides its embeddedness in political movements and beyond the poststructuralist focus on crowd semantics in politics and social sciences. A semantic analysis of crowds and masses may miss the opportunity to tackle these forms of manipulation, policing, and the politics of disruption that originate from the reality of protesting crowds. Two components of the material assemblage of crowd management stand out and may interfere with a strict semantic problematization of crowds. First, the techno-ambiental engineering of crowds with its specific materialities and second the atmospheric spaces of protesting crowds.

Techno-ambiental engineering of crowds

The engineering of crowds has two sides. First, it provides legal frameworks and expert networks for a technocratic and even post-political governing of crowds. The field of crowd management is essentially supported by documents such as reports, guidelines, white papers, design principles and supportive material for the training of personnel in the field of crowd management. Ferraris (2012) addresses these social objects by introducing the term 'documentality', but we may even push this further and include the various software and algorithms that have been developed and used for modelling and simulating crowd phenomena based on sensors in recent years (Vehlken/Pias 2014). Second, this documentality of crowd engineering is accompanied by techno-ambiental approaches to govern, control and manage crowds. This involves not only tonfas, anti-riot water cannons, barriers, CCTV, and other 'smart' technologies of crowd control, but also communication techniques that shape the architectures and landscapes of crowded geographies. Such techno-ambiental interventions not only aim at keeping flow rates high and density rates low, but also focus on the 'emotional management' of crowds. Thus, the context of using these technologies is not limited to safety purposes and hazard management in joyful crowds at large-scale events such as football matches and concerts but become more and more applied for protesting crowds. There is a trend towards an engineering approach of policing an objectified crowd (Borch 2013), which is accompanied by the development of communication and mediation strategies that, for instance – like in the case of EU-funded project GODIAC ('Good practice for dialogue and communication as strategic principles for policing political manifestations in Europe') – aim at 'de-escalating conflict, preventing solidarity with disruptive individuals, increasing police action transparency, and improving police image' (Bruns 2013, 80). The nexus of policing and communication strategies, micro-spatial interventions in form of barriers, exclusion zones and other forms of spatial design as well as technologies such as crowd sensing, monitoring and simulation can be considered as techno-ambiental forms of crowd engineering.

Atmospherical spaces of crowds

Space matters for the gathering of crowds. The conceptualisation of the spaces of crowds may take on three perspectives. First of all, space matters in regard to the material manifestations of crowd containers. Throughout all epochs, the material realities of crowds have always needed architectural expressions. Sloterdijk (2004) provided a deep analysis of the 'macro-interieurs' within the 'era of the crowds' as it was postulated by Le Bon. Sloterdijk's analysis inter alia revealed that all these spatial manifestations are intrinsically linked to political regimes of governing and manipulating crowds. Ultimately, crowds shape the spaces and scenes of their appearances and its most expressive manifestations can be noticed in evolving forms of mass architectures in urban environments. Second, another spatial dimension of crowds is represented by their practices, closely linked to the appropriation of symbolic space (Wahlström 2010). This is of course not exclusively limited to protesting crowds but of most importance for their political geographies. The territorial practices of protesters often aim to disrupt public life or are an occupation of space despite hegemonic powers within cities. In his analysis of Occupy crowds, Ossewaarde (2013) argues with the Heraclitean dialectic opposites of Apollonian and Dionysian that Nietzsche developed in 'The birth of Tragedy' in 1872 and which was promoted in the sociological writings of Maffesoli: Crowds are Dionysian and hence fluid and ecstatic. Thus, crowds are in opposite to the Apollonian forms of social existence, which are fixed, intellectual, reasonable, and moderate. Ossewaarde points to the positive notion of crowds in Canetti's phenomenology: Crowds 'escape Apollonian distinctions' and are 'periodic bursts of Dionysian energy or impulses, emerging relatively spontaneously during festivals, revolts, protests, or uprisings' (Ossewaarde 2013, 138). The symbolic dimension of protest- and riotscape produce crowded geographies as an iconic Dionysian form of political participation. The occupation of symbolic places plays an important role for the territorial practices of protest and direct action and furthermore shape the geographical imagination of the moralities of public uprising through the mediatized staging of protest and resistance. The symbolic dimension of the spatial politics of crowds respective the staging of protest is linked to what I name the affective dimension of crowds. It is well understood that the atmospheric staging of mass events within the society of the spectacle is an intrinsic part experienced by the spectator and thus a key factor for economic success in event management. The technique of amusing the crowd through lustful atmospheres exists as long as crowds have gathered. However, when it comes to protesting crowds, the affective dimension seems to be rather poorly understood. Protests are bodily experienced and sometimes even physically threatening, but most of all they are accompanied by feelings of solidarity and companionship. Accounts of protests by participants tell stories about the atmospheres of togetherness within such crowded geographies. These collectively shared situations and atmospheres matter. They are of importance for the social cohesion of crowds and subsequently for the lasting effect of protest movements. Crowds form themselves through peers 'acting in concert' (Arendt 1970, 82) and thereby open up a new space. It is the 'space of appearance that is a shared situation created through collective action and speech (Arendt 1998, 199), in which people lose their fear. Losing the fear of touch is at heart of Canetti's (1984) phenomenology of crowds. His notion of crowds, which has been discussed elsewhere (Runkel/Pohl 2012), is based on the idea that crowds can be classified

based on their prevailing emotions ('tragender Affekt'). In connection with his extensive typology of crowds, Canetti's phenomenology allows a connection between the emotional characteristics of crowds and their spatial form. With Schmitz' (2014), we understand that the spatial form of moods are atmospheres. Phenomenologically, crowds can be distinguished by their atmospheres. Further, crowds root in collectively shared situations (Schmitz 2014, 54) that necessarily become overarched by atmospheres. Such collective atmospheres rely on corporeal communication ('leibliche Kommunikation') and more specifically on encorporation ('Einleibung'). Schmitz' idea of solidary encorporation ('solidarische Einleibung') resonates with Tarde's (1903) notions of contagion and imitation. The rhythmic appearance of imitative waves of political sentiments and ideas manifests itself in an atmosphere overarching protesting crowds. Following Schmitz' differentiation between collectively shared situations and atmospheres, we gain understanding of how atmospheres stabilise protest and facilitate socio-affective cohesion within protesting crowds. This provides a useful understanding of the link between emotional crowd dynamics, collective action and the emergence of communal atmospheres of protest.³

Concluding remarks

My argument in this paper is two-fold. Taking the materiality of crowds for granted, means at first to examine the techno-ambiental engineering and even manipulation of crowds. The question that emerges here is rather political as Bille et al. (2015, 34) contend: 'the deliberate staging, orchestration, or manipulation of atmosphere, also becomes a way of performing what the world both *is*, and *should* be. A space may for example potentially feel safe, comfortable, or exciting, but it *should* also feel that way.' Future research needs to address this subliminal politics of crowd engineering. Second, the atmospheres of protesting crowds also need to be understood as a vital part of the political. The combination of these phenomenological approaches help us to better understand the spatial emergence, diffusion, and dynamics of protesting crowds. Through this we can grasp the role atmospheres play within prefigurative political spaces of crowds.

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1. For a more extensive elaboration of these links see Runkel, forthcoming.

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