Atmosphere: Power, Critique, Politics. A conceptual analysis

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Abstract. *This paper has three interrelated parts. First, atmosphere is approached through the concept of power. Atmospheres 'grip' us directly or mediate power indirectly by manipulating moods and evoking emotions. How does atmosphere relate to different conceptions of power? Second, atmospheric powers may be critiqued. Which conception of critique can be involved? Third, critiquing atmospheric powers can generate political conflict. How does atmospheric disputes relate to conceptions of politics and the political?*

Keywords: atmosphere, power, critique, politics, Böhme, Lukes, Spinoza, Foucault, Rancière

Introduction

Atmospheres are powerful. They are powers of feeling that 'grip' us ('ergreifende Gefühlsmächte') (Herman Schmitz quoted in Böhme, 2006, p. 19). Gernot Böhme emphasizes that makers of atmosphere possess significant powers to manipulate moods and evoke emotions (Böhme, 2013, p. 39). Atmospheres, then, are directly powerful and mediate power indirectly. Which conceptions of power may be involved here? The paper's first part explores this question.

Atmospheric power can be criticized. For Böhme the new aesthetics of atmosphere contributes to critical theory by focalising on capitalism's new tendency to exploit desires (Böhme, 2003, 2016). Which conception of critique is involved here? Does the concept of atmosphere itself have potential to criticise atmospheric constellations? Such questions are discussed in the second part.

Atmospheric 'disturbances' may evoke strong contradictory feelings and generate political conflict. How does atmosphere relate to conceptions of politics and the political? The third part examines this question.

Power and atmosphere

Power: potentia & potestas

What follows is about power as *types of relations* between entities. The precise features of the entities are not the issue, they may be atmospheric or not. The point of departure is the second edition of Steven Lukes' classic (2005 [1974]). Also Baruch Spinoza and Michel Foucault show up.

For Lukes power is about change and 'power' is 'being able to make or receive any change, or to resist it'. Hence power includes *power to* as well as *power over*. This

resonates well with Spinoza's distinction between *potentia* as power to exist and *potestas* as power over others. Potentia is the general concept since potestas cannot be exercised without it (Lukes, 2005, pp. 69, 73, 74).

Potestas exercised by A *directly* over and against B's interest Lukes calls *the first face of power*. Power with a *second face* works *indirectly* by A limiting the scope of issues B can bring to the fore (Lukes, 2005, p. 20). There is also a *third face*: A limiting the range of what B at all can imagine as interests. Such power 'works against people's interests by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgement' through concealing the '"real interests" by "false consciousness"' (Lukes, 2005, p. 13). Let's call this *hidden potestas*. Hence we get three 'faces' of power as *domination*: *direct, indirect and hidden*.

In recent decades Foucault's conception of power has been highly influential. How does it fit into this conceptual context? Relying heavily on Flohr (2016) I shall emphasize the following. Foucault is very reluctant towards power as direct domination or repression. We only need (the concept of) power if there is resistance. Resistance 'comes first' since relations of power are (conceptualised as) relations among subjects that somehow are free to act. Power always meet the (resistant) actions of others, hence it is always 'acting upon actions', it does 'not act directly and immediately on others'. Power then, is a concept for *indirect* relations. To persist, power will always face the uncertainty of resistance. Irreducible to repression, power is *productive*. Meeting resistance 'a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible interventions may open up' (Foucault quoted in Flohr, 2016, pp. 46, 42).

Comparing Foucault to the faces of power and the potentia|potestas distinction the following emerges. First, in Foucault there is no power as direct domination or repression. He would not subscribe to Max Weber's restrictive conception of power as the probability of individuals realising their will *despite* the resistance of others (Lukes, 2005, p. 26). Second, there is no hidden domination in Foucault. Third, Foucault generalises *indirect power*, separating it from the confinement to potestas. In Foucault potentia shows up as productive power. Both potentia and potestas, one can say, are subsumed under the concept of power as 'acting upon actions'. According to Sue Ruddick potentia concerns *empowerment*: the 'impulse to increase powers to act'. Potestas is the *power to dominate*, to 'separate something from what it can do, from its capacity to act in its own interest' (Ruddick, 2008, p. 2589). For Foucault, such separation would never be complete. There is always some resistant action.

In what follows the full repertoire of the above types of power is taken into consideration. *Pace* Foucault power may be hidden, direct and dominatiing. But relations of power can also be empowering, productively increasing the powers and joy of all, as Spinoza would say (Ruddick, 2010, p. 27).

Atmospheric powers

According to Schmitz and Böhme atmospheres, as we have seen, can be defined as 'ergreifende Gefühlsmächte' (Böhme, 2006, p. 19), i. e. as powers that grab us by our feelings. In the grip of atmospheres we don't, Böhme says, feel any distance between subject and object. We are in a situation 'before any subject-object cleavage'; atmosphere is not a relation between already existing entities but the

'relation itself' where subject and object are 'melted together' in a common state (Böhme, 2001, pp. 45-46, 54-56).
Here atmospheric power is conceptualised as direct potestas. No resistace is overcome, we are 'affected' (Böhme, 2001, p. 46) directly in our feelings. We are far from Weber and Foucault's concepts of power; even Lukes' first face of power seems too resistance-oriented to grasp such immediacy.
But how dominating is atmospheric potestas after all? Could the grip (potestas) of atmospheres not be empowering (potentia)? According to Böhme we are not 'helplessly exposed' to atmospheric powers. We can engage with them or 'let them go', withdraw from them (Böhme, 2006, p. 26). Here we encounter Foucault's power where resistance comes first. Furthermore, subjecting onself to some atmospheric 'grip' (potestas) may be something we prepare for (potentia), just like artlovers actively prepare to be subjected to artworks' joyful sweeping them away (Gomart & Hennion, 1999, p. 227).
Much discussion about power and atmosphere is, however, about potestas as indirect or even hidden domination. According to Böhme atmospheric power does not proceed by physical force [Gewalt] or the language of command; it takes hold of our 'Befindlichkeit', manipulates moods and evokes emotions. Such power 'does not appear as such, it acts [greift an] on the unconscious'. It operates in the realm of the sensible but is 'more invisible and more difficult to understand than other forms of violence [Gewalt]' (Böhme, 2013, p. 39). Jürgen Hasse has it this way: 'atmospher-ological power' does not work according to Weber's concept of power as will enforced against resistance. Rather, the power of atmospheres must be understood as the ability to influence someone or something (Hasse, 2014, p. 259). Here we approach foucauldian 'acting upon actions', power as 'conduct of conducts' and governance as a 'way to structure the possible field of action of others' (Foucault quoted in Borch, 2014, p. 85; Hasse, 2015, p. 260).
The conduct of conducts through atmospheres is well known from seductive shopping atmospheres aiming to enhance peoples' propensity to buy (Kotler, 1973; Borch, 2014). Such conduct may even work on the unconscious: 'quasi-objective feelings are being produced that people need not recognise consciously, but which nevertheless affect their behaviour' (Borch, 2014, p. 85). If so, then we have potestas as *hidden power*.

Critique and atmosphere

Critique, a classical model

Just like power critique has many aspects. A classical model of the concept is the following, which has Marx's critique of political economy as background paradigm. First, critique is *explanatory*. Exploitation and surplus value explains the existence of profit. Second, critique is *de-fetishising*. It shows how social relations *hide behind* relations between things and necessarily *appears* fetishised as things relating to each other (Sayer, 2009, p. 770). Third, critique is *emancipatory* aiming at freeing actors from the constraints limiting their lives, constraints detected by explanatory cum de-fetishising critique. Fourth, critique is empty if what is criticised cannot be changed. Without a *crisis*-prone, *contradictory* reality, critique is helpless. Fifth, such reality is critically grasped as *totality*. The totality rather than partialities dominates actors

(Koddenbrock, 2015). Sixth, critique has *adressees* supposed to want emancipation (in Marx the working class). And finally, emancipation is more than (negative) freedom, it points towards some *normative conception* of 'what is right and good' (Carleheden, 2015, pp. 45, 37) or 'what enables free actors to flourish' (Sayer 2009: 774).

Critiquing atmosphere

For Gernot Böhme the aesthetics of atmosphere has critical potential. It reformulates Frankfurt School Critical Theory as critique of the 'aesthetizisation of reality' and the capitalist economy (Böhme, 2013, pp. 38-45, 49; Böhme, 2003, pp. 73-74). Large parts of societal labour in Western capitalist economies are preoccupied with staging atmospheres rather than producing values for use. Hence the concept of commodity value triples into use value, exchange value and stage value (or aesthetic value). The latter has a double character. On the one hand it may be empowering. 'The atmospheric belongs to life and staging serves the enhancement of life (Steigerung des Lebens)'. On the other hand stage value can be just 'appearance value (Scheinwert)' that serves manipulation, suggestion and alienation (Böhme, 2013, p. 46). It can turn the desire for the enhancement and 'intensification' of life into a process of 'exploitation' that captures people in dependency on limitless 'escalation of desires' (Böhme, 2001, 183-184).

This critical theory of aesthetic capitalism is *explanatory* and *totalizing*. The satiation of basic needs explains the rise of the aesthetic economy, and the aesthetizisation covers the economy *as a whole* and 'everyone' (Böhme, 2006, p. 48). The critique can be said to be *de-fetishising* by detecting life-enhancement hidden behind the exploitation of desires, and it highlights the *contradiction* between 'free and playful' life enhancing atmospheres and the powers of atmospheric dependency. But *crisis* is not in focus. On the contrary aesthetizisation seems to have saved capitalism from breakdown. The emancipatory perspective is *freedom* from atmospheric domination, and the *normative goal* is the just mentioned free life enhancing atmospheres.

The *addressee* seems to be everyone, but with some help from aesthetic education to acquire *atmospheric competencies* in being touched by atmospheres (Böhme, 2006, p. 51). Further, if we know about atmospheres and how they are made we can criticise them. This will 'sharpen the critical potential and hence also the resilience (Widerstandskraft) against economic and also political manipulation' (Böhme, 2001, p. 52). So, one *basis for the critique of atmosphere is atmospheric experience*. Or in terms of power: criticising atmosphere as hidden and dominating *potestas* must rely on the experience of life enhancing *potentia* of atmosphere and strive towards its joyful expansion.

Atmosphere and politics

Politics and the political

Much political theory operates with an onto-political difference (Marchart, 2010) between politics and the political. *Politics* mostly refers to institutionalized processes of political ordering of organised interests. *The political* can refer to 'the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations' which can 'take many forms and

emerge in different types of social relations'. Antagonism is rooted in collective *passions* and the ineradicable plurality of values (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 101-103).
Jacques Rancière proposes another version of the onto-political difference. *The political* takes the form of emancipatory practices of radical equality 'guided by the presupposition of the equality of anyone with anyone'. *Politics* on the one hand shows up as 'police', i.e. the governance of humans based on the hierarchical distribution of places and functions, on the other as the confrontation of 'police' with the egalitarian political (Rancière, 2004, pp. 112-113, Marchart, 2010, pp. 178-180). This confrontation concerns what Rancière calls the 'le partage du sensible' where the 'sensible' refers to what we perceive by the senses, and partage to the double meaning of participating and partition, i.e. being included into a communality of sensibilities and excluded from such communality (Rancière, 2000, p. 12; 2004, p. 240). The political then, opposes the 'policed' partitions of the sensible in the name of emancipatory politics of radical equality and participation.

Atmosphere, politics and the political

Atmospheric politics occurs in many forms. One small Danish example was the dispute about a black modernist bus terminal erected in the 1990s at the town hall square in Copenhagen. After being built, the terminal was highly contested most probably because the building interfered with the atmosphere of the square and the surrounding older buildings. Passionate popular pressures emerging in the political required politics to tear down the building, which actually happened (Albertsen 1999, pp. 21-22). Quite another example of atmospheric politics was the political strategy of Nazism to create an atmosphere of 'Volkgemeinschaft' through the use of comprehensive measures of 'impression engineering' (Böhme 2006, pp. 164-166; Borch 2014, pp. 72-75) thus 'policing' the political into a communality of sensibilities excluding others.
Atmospheres 'policing' others occur where the *spherics* of atmosphere (Anderson 2009, p. 80) are particularly strong and excluding. Measures of security and more or less hermetically enclosed spheres of togetherness offer such situations in gated communities, enclosed financial districts, shopping malls and fan zones at sport mega-events (Klauser, 2010). By identifying atmosphere with such hermetic enclosures – atmospheric glasshouses – Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2016) warns that atmospheres *as such* are politically suspicious. Hence he calls for a politics of withdrawal from atmosphere.
From the point of view of Rancière's radical egalitarianism much can be said in favour of pushing against such hierarchical partitions of the sensible. However, ontologizing atmosphere in this way forgets the plurality of other types of atmosphere and the participatory aspect of the partition of the sensible, i.e. the empowering potentia of atmosphere to assemble bodies in joyful participation.

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