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From a Sensitive Ecology to a Political Ecology of Ambiances

Issues and Challenges?

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Abstract. The interest in ambiances or atmospheres largely contributed to the clarification of the role of sensory phenomena of space, perceptual modalities and affects in the construction of social life. Among the research on ambiance and atmospheres, some of them question the effects of ambiance policies on forms of civility in public, and on ways of being in the world as well as living together. In doing so, they contribute to the politicization of urban ambiances. With a prospective aim, this chapter extends this strand towards the field of urban political ecology. By questioning the modalities and issues involved in opening up this latter field to the sensory, this text aims to indicate what a “political ecology of ambiances” could be and what it could do.

Keywords. Urban Ambiances, Social and Sensory Ecologies, Politics, Living Well Together

Introduction

“For nearly a month, there’s been no honking, no whirr of vehicular engines, no echo of loudspeakers and no clanking of machinery in factories. For nearly a month, since the lockdown was clamped, Delhiites have been waking up to the chirping of birds”³ comments on a recent article in the Times of India, describing the exceptional sound situation that New Delhi, like more than half of the world’s metropolises, experienced during the lockdown linked to the Covid-19 epidemic.

This situation of sonic contrast makes the absence of ordinary urban ambiances particularly obvious. It also reveals their meaningfulness as a descriptive and analytical category of the functioning of urban environments. Indeed, this example shows how a political decision - lockdown - driven by sanitary requirements has, at least, the following consequences:

- Material, by implementing measures to restrict and channel traffic;
- Social, by organizing the restriction of interactions;
- Environmental, as in the temporary improvement of air quality rapidly observed in many metropolises during this lockdown;
- Sensory, as shown in the previous example.

These dimensions, in their multiplicity, are to be thought together and in their interactions, and the notion of ambiance allows this type of articulation (Kazig, Masson, Thomas, 2017).

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3. See at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/covid-19-noise-pollution-falls-as-lockdown-rings-in-sound-of-silence/articleshow/75309318.cms>

Among the existing research on ambiances and atmospheres, certain articulate explicitly these concepts to social and political issues. For example, some questions the atmospheric consequences of urban policies - whether intentional or not (as in the example cited above) - on forms of civility in public and ways of being in the world as well as living together (see part. 1). In doing so, these works think of ambiances as not only a characteristic of urban environments, but also a form of urban life. With a prospective aim, this chapter proposes to extend this strand towards the field of urban political ecology. By questioning the ways and the stakes of an opening up of this latter field to the sensory topic, this text aims to indicate what a “political ecology of ambiances” could be and what it could do.

The chapter is organized in three parts. In the first one, we will show how existing work on ambiances raises political questions, even if these are not necessarily explicit. In the second part, we will set up the theoretical foundations of an articulation between ambiances and politics. To do this, we will develop the argument of “living well together” as one proposal for an explicit politicization of ambiances. From there, we will set up the milestones allowing us to articulate this political approach of ambiances to the field of urban political ecology. In doing so, we will show what questions these fields share, but also what project and what issues their articulation makes possible.

Ambiances: An Inherently Political Topic That Does Not Tells Its Name

Over the last thirty years, the growing interest for ambiances or atmospheres largely contributed to the clarification of the role of sensory phenomena of space, perceptual modalities and affects in the construction of social life. From æsthetic thought to phenomenological, non-representational, pragmatic and ecological approaches, and by describing in-situ forms of experience, research works on ambiances reveal how they operate on the sensory forms of ordinary social life and affect their tonalities. Nevertheless, by giving a certain tonality to the milieus we live in and the situations we experience, ambiances also affect, in a diffuse and discreet way, our sensitivities, our ways of being and of being together in public.

More recently, international empirical works analyse the consequences of the ambiance setting in public spaces - whether it deals with aesthetisation policies, pacification or securing - on the tonalities and forms of social life (Thomas, 2014; Tixier et al., 2012; Fiori and Sanchez, 2014; Masson et al., 2014; Thomas, 2018). They also question the reconfiguration of forms of civility in public⁴. These works show that by transforming in small, often imperceptible steps our movements, our modes of attention, even our “states of body” (Thomas, 2014), the ambiance affects permanently our ways of perceiving and sensitively inhabiting our environments. In doing so, the critical scope of these works is implicitly political. By describing the in-situ forms of experience, these studies reveal how the ambiance settings test the citizen, affect the quality of his or her relationship to the Other and to his or her environment.

4. By “civility,” we intend the ability to live within a society, to adjust our behaviour to context-sensitive normative expectations, to tune our personal pace and to act in synrhythm (i.e. to tune our personal pace to the collective pulse).

Studies on affective atmospheres coming from English-speaking geography⁵ show how the atmospheric properties that surround situations give them a more or less favorable tone to the individuals' engagement (Adey, 2013; Simpson, 2014; Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015; Sumartojo and Pink, 2019), place them in comfortable or destabilizing states, activate or fail their competences (Duncan, 1996; Brennan, 2004). Some of these works question more directly the sociopolitical implications of ambiances, especially as they use the notion of affective atmosphere as an analyzer of problematic contemporary situations at a political level. Others are interested in the ability of ambiances to convey political affects (Anderson, 2015; Closs-Stephens, 2016). Lastly, further works reveal the way atmospheres evolve and participate in the diffusion of affects in situation of conflict (Fregonese, 2017). These works address atmosphere as a medium, as it ensures communication from political to sensitive. In doing so, they produce a critique of the tacit governance of societies.

Whether they come from the field of urban ambiances or that of affective atmospheres, these works recognize their pervasive and diffuse characters. In doing so, they place urban ambiances at the crossroads between body and space, thus recognising their political dimension. Both these fields share the interest - without necessarily making it explicit - in the social scope of all the forms taken by the ambiance setting in urban situations.

Setting Politics Within Ambiances

The works mentioned previously express an implicit approach to politics. How moving to an explicit one? In other words, how to politicize ambiances?

The question of politics has only recently been addressed in the field of urban ambiances, but it is not always precisely named and defined. Furthermore, it is more related to a theoretical reflection on the conditions of production of the sensory framework of daily life than to an empirical investigation of the ways in which forms of life are deployed or constrained. In Bonicco-Donato's work (2016), the question of politics is articulated within a philosophical reflection on the government of conduct and the condition of urban dweller. With a view to contribute to the field of architecture, she extends the reflections on septicization of contemporary urban worlds by examining their effects on bodies and the flowering of the minor rituals of urbanity. On his side, Albertsen (2016) relies on Böhme's works to reflect upon a power of atmospheres that manipulates implicitly our moods and emotions. Lastly Pecqueur (2015) questions the scale of the infra-political within ordinary civilities, assuming an ambient bedrock for the civil link. He invites us to understand how the diffuse qualities of situations of interactions have an influence on their happiness or unhappiness.

These proposals ask us two questions. Firstly, how do these authors conceptualize politics? - with the exception of Albertsen, who clarifies the difference between "political" and "politics," the other lack at defining this term. Secondly, how - or, upon what - do they politicize ambiances?

5. Works on ambiance developed in the field of French architectural and urban research, share a common interest (on the sensory dimension of space) with those developed in English-speaking geography around affective atmospheres. Nevertheless, ambiances describe the material, social and sensitive construction of lived spaces, while affective atmospheres examine rather ontological implications of political, affective and sensitive considerations in social situations. Because our work falls within urban research, we will privilege the use of the notion of "urban ambiance" in this article.

To answer these questions, let's agree first on *politics* term. We understand politics as a "way of life" (Dewey, 1927; Lefort, 1986). In that sense, politics takes place every time individuals are in contact, organize themselves and negotiate between one another, act together to defend the common good from singular positions and perspectives. This conception of politics does not limit the question of politics to the modes of government of individuals. It defines politics as the gaps where, from each individual world, a common one is built. Such a conception of politics allows to pay attention to the ways in which spaces and ambiances sharing is made on a daily basis, and is embodied in gestures, attitudes, forms of attention, and words exchanged between anonymous people.

Secondly, let us specify one of the possible objects of the politicization of ambiances. Considering the politics as a form of life invites us to address the fundamental question of "living well together" (Arendt, 1958) and its conditions of existence. For the philosopher, "living well together" is not only about establishing a legal and institutional framework accepted by all, and that manages the forms of appearing in public. It also means engaging in, participating in, and sharing with others the public space. This "living well together" is also embedded in a material ecology (Cefai, 2011). It falls within architectural or urbanistic forms and ambiance configurations as much as within the interactions between bodies and words. In our case, we understand it more precisely as a form of coexistence between citizens that relies less on the sharing of practices and homogeneous experiences. It relies more on the possible cohabitation of many modes of sensory dwelling the urban world, and on plural ways of being and being together in public. From this point of view, politicizing the work on ambiances consist in examining, explicitly, the way that everyday routines and sensations they produce entwine into atmospheric configurations that enable or hinder them. In doing so, it grasps politics by describing, questioning, but also by affectively appreciating and evaluating the potential of ambiances for urban habitability. Politicizing the work on ambiances would also consist into addressing explicitly the question of stigmatizations in connection with processes of standardization, control and setting of ambiances. This question of inequalities, games of hierarchy or symbolic violence is lacking in the work on ambiances. It is now about questioning the role of ambiances in the implementation of standardization processes regarding urban uses that can create a disruption within the mechanisms of civility, enhance the citizens' vulnerability, replicate forms of exclusion.

Tu sum up, putting the argument of "living well together" on the agenda of the works on ambiances direct them towards a clarification of the moral, ethical and social stakes of their transformations. On a political level, it questions the way forms of cooperation, negotiation and adaption interact once trials (physical, practical, perceptual, affective, evaluative) operate during the experience. Such an approach could resonate with the manner that urban political ecology questions the relationship between urban dwellers and their environment, since, like it, it would assert a concern for what we care about and a willingness to stand up for what we desire.

Political Ambiances, Political Ecology of Ambiances. How and What For?

By introducing this chapter with the contemporary crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, we sought to illustrate the co-dependence of urban, social, political, environmental, health and sensory issues. Then we suggested a politicization of the ambiances through the use of the notion of living well together. This working track allows us to go beyond a measurable, phenomenological or aesthetic apprehension of ambiances, by highlighting

their power to shape social and political relations between individuals. It also allows us to apprehend the upheaval of the frames in and through which these relations and relationships unfold. These upheavals result from fundamental changes, that are not only social and political (cf. parts 1 and 2), but also ecological. To take them into account contributes to the broadening of the thematic spectrum of this politicization of ambiances.

By questioning the nature and transformations of the artificial worlds in which human societies live, the field of Urban Political Ecology (UPE) raises similar questions. The UPE's main challenge is to consider the evolution of "natural" environments (biodiversity, hydrology, etc.) embedded in urban realm, which by definition deals with social, political and cultural problems. In so doing, it enables us to think of the urban as a composition of "socio-natural" (Swyngedouw, 1996) assemblages that are "political worlds" (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014), in which either qualities, and degradations of human and non-human living conditions, are articulated in a systemic way⁶.

Through its conceptual model, UPE provides an interesting breeding ground for the politicization of the ambiances we are considering. Because this field does not directly question the sensitive and ambient dimension of the processes it considers, we formulate the following lines of work:

- To affirm, at the theoretical level, the pivotal role of ambiances in the clarification of the ordinary forms of manifestation of the "socio-natural," or environmental, social and material processes that the UPE has set itself the task of studying;
- To articulate scales considering that the ordinary sensitive experience is a place of crystallization, percolation and filiation of the historical dynamics that contribute to the formation of observable situations;
- To hybridize, methodologically, forms of inquiry and of inquiry narrative, which are grounded on the situated corporal engagement for the understanding of the above-mentioned processes and dynamics.

These tracks are intended to open up the work programme of a political ecology of ambiances. It is now necessary to put it into practice in order to be able to evaluate its consequences.

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6. These works thus consider processes of ruinification, or ecological degradation, by observing in the same movement their urban, environmental, social and political effects.

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