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Atmospheric Border Politics: The Morphology of Migration and Solidarity Practices in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to expand recent interest in the material practices, policy techniques and technopolitics of borders, migration and solidarity initiatives in Europe by connecting this debate to Sloterdijk's spherological philosophy. With his thematization of enclosures, atmospheres, foams and life support Sloterdijk helps us to give a more morphological account of borders. We illustrate the benefits of this move by reflecting on the recent questions of hostile environment and the criminalization of migrant solidarity practices and movements. The paper also highlights certain limitations in Sloterdijk's thoughts, which appear when it is brought into migration research. Arguing that Sloterdijk remains somewhat sedentary in his approach to atmosphere we introduce a concept of the envelope as a way to foster a more dynamic, agonistic and mobility-focused conception of enclosure.

Introduction

There can be little doubt that a growing recognition for the constitutive role of the materiality of migration practices and border control technologies represents a key development in the area of borders and migration research. A large literature has come to highlight themes of technological borders, technopolitics, and assemblages; many studies examine the work of particular technologies – from drones to scanners, from humble devices like the file to the architecture of crossing areas – in the ambitions of political authorities to identify, follow, sort, welcome, and shun with regard to human flows of population (Dijstelbloem and Broeders 2014; Fisher 2018; Jeandesboz 2016; Scheel 2013). While respecting the important accomplishments of this work this paper argues for bringing a concern with atmosphere into this debate. In highlighting atmosphere we have in mind the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Although his work has received some attention in political and environmental geography his name is virtually absent from migration debates. Various studies focus either on

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specific technologies (fingerprinting, detention centres, “jungles” (Calais), camps) or technological networks (Eurosur) or the ways they are connected (routes, hiding places, smuggling, human trafficking). Or they study border control technologies in relation to the formation of the EU (Walters 2017) and/or as infrastructure (Larkin 2013; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). While migration and borders research has long taken space and materiality seriously, it has often been a somewhat two-dimensional account (but see Boyce 2018; Elden 2013; Gielis and van Houtum 2012; Mountz 2015; Ryan 2015; Slesinger 2018; Weizmann 2007). With his concern for spheres, enclosures, insulation, and atmosphere, we look to Sloterdijk to push migration studies towards a more volumetric and morphological account of borders and movements. Given the growing interest of migration scholars in humanitarianism (Burridge 2009; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Squire 2014) and the ambiguities of a power that combines protection and control, we think the time is ripe for a conversation between Sloterdijk and migration.

Sloterdijk’s philosophy is founded on a shift from Heidegger’s famous concern with being in the world to being in spheres. It is a philosophy that departs from the point that for human, and all other forms of life, existence is only possible if nurtured, enclosed, and supported by various life support systems, which he expresses as spheres. In the third volume of his *Spheres* trilogy, he presents us with the figure of foam (Sloterdijk 2016a). Whereas Sloterdijk’s focus on atmospheres expresses a general interest in the spatial, material, and morphological conditions of life-systems, foam has several notable features. The notion of foam introduces a conceptual repertoire to analyse the technopolitics of borders and migration in terms of “co-isolation.” The notion of foam and co-isolation allows for a study of the various associations between migrants, bordering practices, and policy tools and techniques via which connections are established, humanitarian aid is provided, and solidarity is expressed, but also for scrutinizing the movements that prevent the extension of relations and that put limits to mobility. We argue that this theme of atmosphere, and in particular the concept of foam, is a powerful tool that can advance thinking about technology, power, and politics in the world of migration and borders for the following reasons:

- There is a growing awareness that saving life, survival, protection, and aid are crucial issues and activities in migration policy. This is reflected in the explosion of interest in the humanitarian. A concern with foam allows us to capture this movement. At the same time, it obviates an exceptionalist or reified view. Foam is a condition for all life; not just migrant life. The question thus becomes developing an appreciation for the forms that foam takes in migration situations.
- Foam, like other spheres, is technological. In border studies, there is a masculinist bias which often equates “technology” with the hi-tech.

The figure of foam directs us to consider technology not only as instruments which surveil, exclude, record, sift, intercept, but as life support mechanisms.

- A concern with foam offers a way to better theorize a key development in migration politics: the rise of hostile environment, as well as the criminalization of support systems, infrastructures, and rescue activities. These are a crucial move that governments are pursuing, all the more so when they deem that deportation and border controls are not sufficient to police boundaries. We argue these measures represent a *weaponization of foam*.
- A concern with atmosphere and foam bridges across (a) life support systems, and (b) affect. Atmospheres are both environments populated by air, climate, and life, but also affective worlds in which particular feelings predominate. Spaces can be engineered to foster particular feelings. This is a task of architecture and planning. But it is also a feature of migration politics in which mood has become a stake in struggles. The atmosphere allows us to theorize affect and infrastructure, emotions, and biopolitics together.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, we set out a fuller discussion of atmospheric politics, exploring its ontological and morphological dimensions in the context of border and migration research. Second, we aim to conceive Sloterdijk's spherology of bubbles, globes, and foams not just as the building blocks of expanding material infrastructures but regard them as signs of disruption that provoke tensions and frictions as well. Third, we play the themes of atmosphere and foam through a very contemporary debate. We show how they bring new light and significance to what is called "crimes of solidarity." This move is important not just for advancing migration studies; it also brings a critical inflexion to debates on atmosphere and interpretations of Sloterdijk. To conceptualize the opportunities and the limitations that come along with the notion of foam and co-isolation in the context of borders and migration, and to orient Sloterdijk's thought more fully towards mobile situations, we introduce the notion of the "envelope." In the concluding section, we conceive a plural spherology of borders as a way to consider other ways in which atmospheric politics might advance research in borders, migration, and technological politics.

Atmospheric Politics

Research on borders and migration has strenuously integrated a variety of concepts and methods that explore the sociotechnical dimensions of politics. The material and techno-scientific dimension of borders and migration

has been highlighted in a variety of studies that emphasize for instance the physical and violent presence of walls (Jones 2016, 2012), the calculative and algorithmic data-policies and visualizations of mobility and security (Amoore 2018, 2013), the visualization of migrant crossings in patrolling and reporting (van Reekum 2018), or the way daily devices and things intermingle with medical and voluntary practices in humanitarian border-work (Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Darling 2014). In particular, the hybrid social, technological, and political theories of Bruno Latour have contributed to the understanding of the techno-material politics that is at stake in migration and border control. As a result, border and migration research acknowledges security politics is “grounded in a hard labour of association, translation and enrolment” and therefore will have to account for “the non-human component of border control policymaking” as concludes Jeandesboz (2016, 304–306) in the context of studying the European Surveillance Program, Eurosur.

Similar ideas as developed in Sloterdijk’s trilogy *Spheres* (2011, 2014, 2016a) have also received attention (e.g. Elden and Mendieta 2009; Gielis and van Houtum 2012; Ryan 2015; Schinkel 2017; Shaw 2016) but remain largely underdeveloped as a tool to discuss technopolitical frictions, ruptures, and tensions. Arguably, Sloterdijk’s *Spheres* trilogy engages with the material and spatial associations of humans and non-humans and with the technological ways people in urban spaces, territories, and borderlands connect and disconnect. As a crucial argument in his long-standing debate with the heritage of Heidegger’s philosophy outlined by Sloterdijk in *Spheres*, the heterogeneity and multiplicity of emerging human as well as non-human configurations in border and migration practices ought to be understood in material and spatialized terms. One of the reasons Sloterdijk’s thought has received less attention in the study of borders and migration may be the confusing obscurity and metaphorical complexity of his work. Yet another is probably that Sloterdijk himself is a controversial thinker. His arguments with the heirs of the Frankfurt School and critical theory have granted him an air of conservatism. Moreover, as Sutherland (2017, 146) has argued:

“The frustrating aspect of Sloterdijk’s project is that, while he regards the ecstatic state of ‘a life-in-the-midst-of-lives’ ... to be the authentic spatial horizon of human existence, in constantly judging the originary belonging of gestational enclosure as superior to the openness of our everyday existence, he ends up venerating a particular social ideal: specifically, that of the sphere as a space closed off as far as possible to the alterity of the outside world, fostering an immediacy of communication grounded in a shared identity.”

We do not aim to deny this aspect of “closing off” in Sloterdijk’s work, but we will argue that by conceiving the *Spheres* trilogy as an exploration in ontological and morphological thinking, it becomes possible to develop

Sloterdijk's conceptual and terminological repertoire towards a tool that not only takes the status quo of bubbles, foams, immune-systems, and walls for granted or even favours it, but allows them to become sensitizing concepts that are able to detect particular frictions and tensions in the spatial and material configurations of border networks and migration infrastructures. In other words, we seek to demonstrate that Sloterdijk's spherology does not have to be held captive in his own bubble, but can be developed and applied further.

Sloterdijk can be characterized as a "morphological thinker" (Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011, 7). His *Spheres* project centres on the spaciousness of "being": thinking, living, but above all building and housing, with the work of Heidegger frequently playing the role of whipping boy. According to Sloterdijk, "being" should not be thought of in relation to time, but in relation to *space*. Sloterdijk situates it in the architecture of existence. He is interested in the locations of "being" and in the spatial circumstances in which it comes into existence. It is, as he puts it, "a theory of humans as beings living in homes, and a theory of agglomeration of those beings in their diverse forms of living and gathering together" (Sloterdijk 2016b, 107). He calls the resulting product "spheres" – environments of thinking and living – which form "climate zones" within which the temperature, and human comfort more generally, can be regulated. The meanings that are commonly attached to the notion of a sphere, such as the cosmological notion of the physical sphere of the universe, the ecological notion of a biosphere, the political notion of a public sphere, and the social-psychological notion of a certain collective mental feeling, are all apparent in Sloterdijk's analysis. These spheres are located not only in the subject's consciousness or in inter-subjective social interaction but are also expressed in the buildings, infrastructure, means of transport, media, and other technologies that we construct. Anyone who wants to understand "being" not only has to investigate the thinking "I" – consciousness or *Dasein* – but also has to make the link with the ecological and material world.

The particularities of Sloterdijk's morphological political theory come to the foreground when they are understood as a form of "cosmopolitics" (Stengers 2005), a concept that has been explored as an alternative for the idealistic tradition of "cosmopolitanism." Like cosmopolitics, Sloterdijk's foams and atmospheric politics aim to unpack politics "not in terms of the history of an idea or the emergence of a social movement, but as the assembling of machines" (Mitchell 2011, 109). Although there are differences between Sloterdijk's morphological project and most notably Latour's (2005) interpretation of "cosmopolitics," there are also important similarities and continuities in these lines of thought. As Morin (2009, 12) argues:

For Sloterdijk ... the passage from cosmos to 'global foam' follows the shattering of the global unisphere into a global multiplicity without totalisation. Likewise, for Latour, we no longer dwell in one single cosmos. We no longer possess the conception of a unified metaphysical sphere.

Sloterdijk's image of this "shattering of the global unisphere into a global multiplicity" is that of a worldwide bubble bath. The bubbles symbolize a specific form of modern pluralism. To Sloterdijk's great dissatisfaction, twentieth-century philosophy was only able to think of pluralism in terms of individualism. This began with Leibniz's monadology, as how can there be a connection between atoms, cells and people – in short, between all the individual "bubbles" in the cosmos – if these are all sealed off, windowless and separate? Sloterdijk's take here is the notion of co-isolation. Not unlike an ontology in which humans and non-humans can be associated in chains of translation, as Latour's (2005) actor-network theory would have it, the idea of spheres sketches a pluriverse in which things can be connected and related but will not necessarily lead to symbiosis. As Borch (2008, 552) argues, "Sloterdijk develops a theory of social foams. As a social form, foam is defined by Sloterdijk as 'co-isolated associations.'" The notion of co-isolation, based on Leibniz monadology of windowless entities, is exemplified in Sloterdijk's analysis of the house. On the basis of this notion, it becomes clear that the house is an immune system as well as a vehicle; a walled place as well as a mobile vector. "The house" in this case can be taken in a concrete as well as a metaphorical sense, denoting various forms of 'domopolitics' (Walters 2004). According to Gielis and Van Houtum (2012, 813), this has striking consequences because:

"when we experience the house as a bubble, we also have to take into account that it is also a foamed place. Sloterdijk takes the walls of apartments as a metaphor to prove his point. These walls on the one hand isolate the occupants of the dwelling from their neighbours and others and give them a bubble-like privacy and security. But at the same time the occupants have to realise that they share these walls with their neighbours; hence the apartment walls also indicate that people dwell in relation with others (outsiders). So, occupants of apartments live in connected isolations, in a co-immunity as it were."

The politics resulting from this specific version of ontological politics is *atmospheric*. This goes against Heidegger's philosophy of being (see Heidegger 1977). As Wendy Brown argues, according to Heidegger, walls create "reassuring world pictures" because "shelter is provided by the horizon's ability to turn the threatening world of the 'outside' into a reassuring picture" (Brown 2011, 26, 118). Sloterdijk reinterprets walls as creating immune systems. They separate the outer from the inner and, as with the air conditioning in a car; they create an agreeable climate while we race along the motorway. This hyperbolic metaphor brings Sloterdijk to his understanding of politics. According to him, politics consists of the formalized

struggle for the redistribution of opportunities for comfort and for psychological and physical well-being. It is a battle for access to the most favourable immune technology. From questions about the equitable distribution of goods, we must move on to questions about the distribution of risks and opportunities for comfort and life chances.

The notion of “immune systems” is quite telling in the context of migration politics and seems applicable beyond the comparison with walled states. Specific policies the European Union conducts in emergency situations – such as the instalment of “hot spots” to register migrants and combat crime, terrorism, smuggling, and human trafficking (Tazzioli and Garelli 2018) – can be regarded as introducing moveable immune systems. This does not imply that hot spots offer shelter and comfort, and thus are created to welcome migrants. Instead, to a certain extent hot spots treat the migrant as an external threat to the body, so the immune system is its defence mechanism. Likewise, the externalization of EU border control policies to Third Countries, most notably in Africa, can be read as a neocolonial attempt to regain sovereignty over the control over international mobility by introducing highly technological “partnerships” that displace the EU’s “house walls” southwards of the Mediterranean – and increasingly southwards of the Sahara as well. Not without reason Bialasiewicz (2011, 4) compares this externalization of borders with what Sloterdijk (1994) has referred to as an example of Europe’s “*translatio imperii*,” i.e. “transfer of rule.”

Sloterdijk’s philosophy of spheres acknowledges the material and spatial characteristics of politics. He underlines the extensiveness of political projects, and the way they proceed by taking the form of technological projects. The reason we think this image is productive to explore current border and migration politics is twofold. The spheres philosophy directs attention to the material and spatiality of policies and practices and the architecture of contemporary politics. The emphasis on morphology and extensiveness also underlines the tensions and frictions in geopolitical and humanitarian political programs that are often executed by deploying “container policies,” i.e. suggesting specific formats such as detention centres and deportation regimes so as to give shape to the political goal of managing migration. For instance, the asylum quota the EU member states agreed upon to divide migrants over Europe when the influx of migrants started to peak in 2015 as a result of the war in Syria was a typical technocratic attempt to find a solution based on distribution and quota mechanisms – an approach to governance the EU has used ever since the creation of the common market. The policy instrument that was adopted (and which did not work out in the end because several member states refused to commit to it) was not just “technocratic” or “instrumental” because it was treating humans as mere numbers. It can be regarded as an ontological move in that it portrayed a kind of deep “technological thinking” and turned a problem into

a machinery of policies, instruments, tools, incentives, counting, monitoring, and provisions of all sorts.

Deploying policies and strategies as “tool-being” (Harman 2002) is not something that is restricted to governments. In a different way, NGOs have responded to the dangerous situations for migrants at sea, the lack of rescue, and the criminalization of support provided by rescue organizations by deploying fundamental rights as an instrument. A telling example is the Declaration for the Dignified Treatment of all Missing and Deceased Persons and their Families as a Consequence of Migrant Journeys, the so-called Mytilini declaration¹ of 11 May 2018. Whereas in the cosmopolitan tradition, a declaration would serve as a proclamation of certain principles, rights and goals, the Mytilini declaration breathes the air of atmosphere. According to the NGO Last Rights, one of the subscribers of the declaration, it is “intended to be a *tool* [our emphasis].” The declaration aims to be an instrument of action, something that provokes change and allows interventions by engaging with all kinds of practices and problematic situations. Last Rights states that:

“The Mytilini Declaration ... will be, above all, a practical *tool* [our emphasis] that will enable all actors to perform their tasks in ways that meet best practice and deliver respect for substantive rights to the missing, the dead and their bereaved families, assisting the bereaved to continue with their lives, at the same time enabling respectful and appropriate treatments of local populations.”²

The reference to the word tool is not just mere coincidence; a matter of speech, so to say. Instead, the word tool here displays sensitivity for the world of objects, actions, and things. But it can also be understood as a kind of capsule, the declaration as a kind of vehicle able to circulate and navigate through problematic situations. As such, the declaration is a particular technique to act under the material, spatial, and morphological circumstances that declaration mentions.³

Other NGOs and academics have started initiatives that relate to these goals, such as the Deaths at the Border Database⁴ and the Missing Migrant Cemetery.⁵ These examples already clarify that monitoring deaths, contacting families, and arranging funerals require all kinds of data, information, and knowledge infrastructures, as well as practical arrangements (Last et al. 2017; M’charek *In press*). The “tools” in these cases are not just instruments to realize something in practice or in principle (prevent border deaths and violations of fundamental rights or even “last rights”), but are containers of action and repertoires of “agentic capacities” (Coole 2013).

What has Sloterdijk’s conceptual repertoire to offer here, other than a rephrasing of the above in poetic philosophy? Sloterdijk’s view on politics often is a metaphorical rephrase of what politics is about. His rich use of metaphors and his unbreakable irony make it sometimes hard to distinguish

playful provocations from a rigorous philosophical analysis (e.g., Gray 2017). Nonetheless, his reformulation of “politics” is in accordance with the emphasis on material, non-human, or even posthuman conditions under which politics takes place and the hybrid “gatherings” where politics is performed that many scholars have underlined.

We grant that on first inspection Sloterdijk might seem no more promising an intellectual ally for a progressive technopolitics of migration than Heidegger. After all, does his talk of home conjuring up as it does images of protection, nurturing and familiarity not lead us directly into the discourse of *state as home*; the very same discourse that so often rationalizes a politics of excluding migrants and borders as locks and walls to the home (Bulley 2016; Walters 2004)? Does talk of life support systems, atmospheres, and so on not lend itself too readily to arguments that borders are there to protect “us,” the insiders, against those who appear as invaders, pests, or at best guests in “our” homes? According to Ryan (2015, 575) “an ensemble of heterogeneous bubbles coagulating to form ungovernable ‘foam’, Sloterdijk’s philosophy of space describes routinized enclosures floating together in the midst of a hostile externality.” Sloterdijk indeed describes humans as “self-fencing, self-shepherding creatures.” “Wherever they live, they create parks around themselves. In city parks, national parks, provincial or state parks, eco-parks – everywhere people must create from themselves rules according to which their comportment is to be governed” (Sloterdijk 2009, 25). Ryan concludes that “inhabiting these security bubbles are humans who have lost touch with what really surrounds them – the material world” (Sloterdijk 2013; Ryan 2015, 575).

We are the first to concede that Sloterdijk’s philosophical anthropology is a risky one, especially when read alongside some of the author’s intemperate and provocative remarks on migration (see Müller 2016). Nonetheless, we insist it is also tremendously rich in potential. For one thing, the thematization of atmosphere and life support offers an important antidote to the presentism of so much writing about technology. How often do we see the claim that “today” borders have “become technological”? As though earlier demarcations of land, earlier productions of territory were accomplished without resort to technology? Sloterdijk offers a powerful counterweight to the view that the mixing of the human and the technology is somehow recent.

But more than just offering a corrective to problematic presentisms, and bearing in mind the caution we noted about home and anti-migrationism, we stress here that an atmospheric politics is not reducible to a focus on home. As Latour and Weibel emphasized in their collection of essays *Making Things Public* (2005) with the subtitle “Atmospheres of Democracy,” spheres are plural and profoundly heterogeneous. *Foam* (the object of the third volume of the Spheres trilogy) rather than *home* is the most useful figure to analyse the

movements that create socio-technical migration networks and the emergence of assemblages that function as borders. To speak of foam is to consider bubbles from an aggregate perspective, yet bubbles not as fixed or permanent enclosures so much as temporary – sometimes *very* temporary and fragile – volumes. Foams are not fixed, rigid, or symmetrical architectures. Foam is certainly not an august rhetoric of power – a fact we find appealing. Instead, foam is multiform, adaptable, versatile, and as such brings important considerations of time and duration into any discussion of the ordering of space. Lastly, it is worth emphasizing that foam is a technology. Too often discussions of technopolitics assume a rather “hi-tech” (and we might add, masculine) image of technology: metallic, electronic, data-based, etc. (but see Darling 2014). Yet insulation foam, to take one example, is no less technological than a network of computers. Indeed, one might say they are co-constitutive of one another, not least since many new foams are engineered with computers, while data systems would be unworkable without various foams that provision their infrastructure. In sum, the figure of foam is highly promising and suggestive of an atmospheric approach for it recognizes that borders are but one of the countless ways in which life acquires protection, cushioning, and atmosphere. A foamy border is very different from a wall-border, just as a bubble state is not a walled state. To a certain extent, foam is a figure for our times, a figure for the atmospheric politics of migration.

But foam is not the only form of container that interests us in this paper. We do not believe that all the concepts necessary to study the atmospheric politics of migration and borders are already present in Sloterdijk’s work. It may be necessary to add others. This is especially the case since, despite the interest, he shows in ships and arks as systems of enclosure (Sloterdijk 2014, 237–250), Sloterdijk seems more interested in theorizing settled places – the habitat, the city, the apartment, and so on – than mobile worlds. In this paper, we are especially interested in the role which enclosures and foam play in contexts where peoples are on the move. Hence, we will also speak of *envelopes* as a way to push morphological thought towards a reckoning with systems in motion. There at least two ways in which the figure of the envelope can be helpful for migration studies. First, think of the paper envelope. This seemingly simple device helps to create a protected, private interior while allowing its contents to move smoothly through infrastructural space. Understood in this way the envelope helps us think about the role which vehicles play not just moving migrants but, at the same time, containing, protecting, channelling and limiting movements. For example, when states and NGOs set up bus routes or charter trains (Kasperek 2016; Pallister-Wilkins 2017) to manage excessive or unruly mobilities during refugee crises then the vehicle as envelope becomes a key site of power.

Second, we can also think of envelopes as thresholds.⁶ Think back to the originary myth of human flight: Ovid’s tale of Daedalus and Icarus. What is

well known is that Icarus ignored his father's warning and flew too close to the sun: the wax holding his feathers softened, and he plunged into the sea. Often the story is told as a proverb: always heed your parents' advice! What is less noted are two other points. First, that Daedalus took to the skies not just to escape his exile in Crete but because of the nature of King Minos's power over space. As Daedalus puts it: King Minos might dominate the land and sea but he does not control the sky. In other words, it is a story that is very much about borders, environments, and volumes, prompting us to think about our own time and the irony that the skies are perhaps better controlled than any other space, forcing people to take to the sea. The second point we make is that Daedalus did not just warn his son about flying too high. He also cautioned against flying too low lest the spray of the sea should dampen his artificial wings. In other words, what Daedalus outlined in fact is an envelope. He did not envisage the sky as a wide open plenitude; he saw zones and limits that had to be respected. Of course, this second sense of envelope exists today within aviation and aeronautical discourse. There, the flight envelope describes the upper and lower limits of speed, altitude, etc., at which it is safe for a given plane to fly. To push the envelope is to move outside these parameters and to increase considerably the risk of an accident.

Turning to contexts of migration we argue that the envelope can refer to the combination of factors which condition the safety of particular mobility routes. For example, when local communities provide assistance to travellers en route, or when migrants share knowledge about safer versus riskier routes then these interventions serve a kind of enveloping function. Understood in this sense the envelope is not so much a container with hard boundaries – as it definitely is in its paper version – as a band which knowledge/experience reveals, which the actor exploits, and which experimentation and invention can stretch. It is a zone where the atmosphere is adequate or even supportive to a given task, but where limits to that atmosphere must be observed. It has its edges; its threshold. Cross them at your peril! But the envelope is not fixed. New inventions can shift its limits just as can the acquisition of skills and experience.

Bubbles, Foams and Spheres as Signs of Disruption

Despite Sloterdijk's dangerous liaisons with domopolitics, there is an onto-political side (Cf. Latour and Weibel 2005) to his *Spheres* trilogy, in particular, the third volume *Foam*, that deserves to be further developed in the context of borders and migration. Surprisingly perhaps, in some respects, this onto-political side resonates with various feminists, material, and postcolonial geopolitical approaches (e.g., Dixon 2015; Lisle and Johnson 2018). Instead of being a well-defined school or a clear and coherent body of theories, concepts, and methods, these approaches primarily situate themselves in issues

concerning geophilosophy, the “more-than-human,” the Anthropocene, the physicality of life forms, and the materiality of politics and states. The possible contribution of concepts such as “foam” and “atmospheric politics” to such a perspective is that issues related to border control and mobility management may be articulated as a matter of morphological and ontological politics.

In the following, we aim to explore the possibility of applying the morphological and ontological notions of politics that are apparent in Sloterdijk’s work to situations and configurations in which the formation of publics or the constitution of solidarity are at stake. How can Sloterdijk’s concepts of bubbles, foams and spheres become detectors of tensions and frictions that affect the creation of publics and solidarity? To begin with, such an approach should acknowledge that, as Shaw (2017) has emphasized when elaborating on Sloterdijk’s work with regard to robot warfare, “modernist barriers between people, things, and places are dissolving into swarms, waves, and foams” (Shaw 2017, 461). This implies, as Adey (2013) has stressed with regard to the security concerns of megacities, that “Sloterdijk’s thesis should be taken a little more critically in these contexts. We should err on the side of caution in taking the processes he describes as “an accomplished fact” (Thrift 2009) and rather see them as trajectories of possibility” (Adey 2013, 304). Sloterdijk can also be read as anticipating the critical aspects of bubbling because, as Ryan (2015) explains with regard to the maritime protection zones (MPZ) which are being created in the territorial waters of a number of European states. According to him, “attempts to purify space, spheres are sterilized zones of socially constructed security. Referring to them in terms of being immunized (atmo)spheres, his ensembles of security are occupied by the self-quarantined” (Ryan 2015, 575).

A possible way to develop Sloterdijk’s spherology into a more critical tool is to add to the attention for the materiality, spatiality, and extensiveness of all kinds of foamy infrastructures a focus on how, simultaneously, publics emerge or are disrupted and how notions of solidarity are affected. Such a situation can be found in all its intensity at the Greek and Italian islands that have received many migrants over the last years (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015).

The relationship between the emergence of publics and material politics has been addressed by Latour extensively in the catalogue *Making Things Publics* (Latour and Weibel 2005). Latour’s view is grounded on Dewey’s (1927) idea that publics come into where techno-political frictions appear and new devices and techniques shape or disconnect groups of people. Faithful to his previous work, Latour describes the coming into being of such publics in actor-network vocabulary, using terms like ‘translation’, ‘mediation’ and ‘association’ to indicate the assembling of things and people and the transformations their relationships undergo. At this point, a similarity can be indicated between Latour’s analysis and Sloterdijk’s

conceptualizations. This relationship between Sloterdijk's theory of co-isolation and Latour's emphasis on processes of mediation and translation can be explored by engaging with the "island politics" of the EU. In her work on migration and detention Mountz (2015, 184) has emphasized the border is changing into a kind of archipelago that is "transnational, fragmented, biometric, intimate, and contracted out with proliferating spaces of confinement." The topological notion of an archipelago underlines that "migrants are moved and contained farther offshore on remote islands" and are "both geographically distanced and discursively othered" (Mountz 2015, 185). This "distancing" has been explored by various scholars by opening up the politics of detention at the islands and the processual character of registration processes that instead of acting as a gateway have been deployed as mechanisms of retardation and containment (Tazzioli and Garelli 2018). From a spheres perspective, the relationship between "islands" and "isolations" starts with their etymological connection. The Latin verb "isolare" literally means "to make into an island" (Sloterdijk 2016a, 290–291). The reason the Aegean islands in Greece and Sicily and Lampedusa in Italy became stage floors of Europe's migration politics is not just their geographical position at the edge of continental Europe not far from the coast with Turkey (Aegean Islands) or in the direction of Libya (Lampedusa and Sicily). Sloterdijk refers to the mythological battle between the Olympians and the Giants that ended in "rock-throwing with island-creating consequences" (Sloterdijk 2016a, 292). Such rock-throwing may also have political origins. The isolation of the Greek and Italian islands results not from geographical or mythological forces solely but mainly from the definition of the EU's external borders, the Schengen treaty, and the Dublin regulation that have turned the islands at the frontiers of Europe into first reception and registration centres. For that reason, the creation of islands is not to be understood in terms of separation only but in terms of a reciprocal relationship, a mutual conditioning through a process of co-isolation in which distinct spheres are co-created. Like Latour, we are interested in the mediating moments at which dichotomies are created such as between the islands and the mainland, between external and internal borders. So instead of focusing solely on the resulting configurations of co-isolation (the moment of purification, as Latour (1993) would have it), we aim to highlight the moments of hybridization and to trace and detect the mediating mechanisms that create or dissolve publics.

The possible emergence and dissolution of publics can be further explored by engaging with a meeting-point where the legacies of Heidegger in Sloterdijk's and Latour's oeuvre gather together, namely the idea of Dingpolitik (Latour 2005). An important feature of Dingpolitik is the focus on the mechanisms and effects by which a public's attention is generated. Often public debate about migration involves not just words, speech, or even images, but complex entanglements with very material sites, objects, and

issues, such as tunnels, boats, and marriages wherein public passions are excited and senses stimulated. The onto-political manoeuvres expressed by Latour's motto's of "following the actors" and "making things public" were underpinned by him with reference to Heidegger's idea of *Gatherings* "the translation that Heidegger used, to talk about those Things, those sites able to assemble mortals and gods, humans and nonhumans" (Latour 2005, 13).

Although Sloterdijk as well as Latour have refrained from embracing Heidegger's heritage, both are suspicious of "human, all too human" political constellations and of methodological individualism (e.g., Kochan 2010; Riis 2008; Sayes 2014). The difference with the approach Heidegger set out is the switch from a focus on "Being" to the material extension and sociotechnical configuration. If we consider border and migration infrastructures as such "gatherings" they can be conceived as moments, places, situations, or configurations whereas Sloterdijk (2016a, 193) argues immune systems become "explicit." The critical moment of this line of thinking arises when certain configurations express themselves, take shape, are exposed, come to the foreground, and become visible and tangible. This notion of explication comes close to Latour's concept of articulation:

"A world in which articulations or explications are possible is neither the totality of mute things nor the epitome of ascertained or non-ascertained facts; rather, it is the moving horizon of all 'propositions' in which possible and actually existent things offer themselves to human attention in propositional or provocative fashion." (Sloterdijk 2016a, 203)

The articulation and explication of publics and things – *gatherings* – as a form of Dingpolitics has received some attention in the study of borders, migration, and security. In the study of security Walters (2014) has examined how the articulation or explication of "matters of concern" via a form of Dingpolitik takes place in the way that properties of things are identified and mobilized within a political field, as evidence in claims-making forums. By "following actors and things" it becomes possible to identify the emergence of "publics" and "nonpublics" (Dijstelbloem and Broeders 2014) or even portable publics (Dijstelbloem 2015).

Dewey's (1927) theory of "publics" emphasized the "creative" or "world making" capacities of humans and non-humans by focusing on the coming into being of publics that are closely related to emerging problems (Latour 2005; Marres 2007; Brown 2011; Dijstelbloem and Broeders 2014; Walters and D'Aoust 2015). By taking the emerging as well as the disruptive nature of publics into account it becomes possible to critically follow the foamy constitution of human and non-human entities and associations. Instead of being unified yet temporal configurations, these associations remain co-isolated in the sense that they are never tension free. This offers us a perspective on the emergent and disruptive capacities of the composition

and dissolution of publics that might relate different forms of onto-politics at different locations at different moments in time. Examples in the scholarly literature are usages of Latour's that identify various ways actors, networks, representations, and visualizations bring about different concepts of security and surveillance by offering different possibilities, calculations, speculations, and "lines of sight" (Amoore 2009) that affect temporal as well as spatial dimensions (De Goede 2008; Little 2015; Walters 2017). These studies anticipate projects and actions that use technologies and objects as forums – where reimagining, re-enactment, and making visible happens. The argument we develop in the following section holds that we might also note the resonance between this aspect of technological politics and the Arendtian theme of publics as making visible to others of things held in common (Arendt 1958, 50–8). As such, it becomes possible to understand the notion of "atmospheric politics" in a more critical and sensitive way than it was set out originally in the *Spheres* trilogy.

Crimes of Solidarity, Hostile Environments, and Envelopes

In November 2017 the UK's Institute for Race Relations (IRR) released a report examining the legal and political suppression of support for migrants. *Humanitarianism: The Unacceptable Face of Solidarity* (IRR 2017) presents the findings of a six-month research project documenting the rise of an increasingly hostile political and legal environment which now confronts NGOs, voluntary groups, and private citizens who offer assistance to refugees and migrants who are in the process of crossing Europe's land and sea borders, or residing on the territories of the EU states. The report paints an alarming picture in which acts of assisting, hosting, aiding, and saving the life of people in desperate and dangerous circumstances have been met with drastic and threatening punishment and sanction. In many cases volunteers find themselves accused of "facilitating" illegal entry or stay and subject to criminal prosecution and threatened with the prospect of fines and imprisonment. In cases where the actors are themselves non-citizens, they may face deportation.

Let us consider a few of the cases which IRR documents:

- An elderly couple, one of them a prominent Danish children's author, at the ferry in Rodhavn, offer some migrants a lift to Copenhagen. When quizzed by the police, the police at the time professed uncertainty about whether this act was legal. The couple posted their action on Facebook, inspiring hundreds of others to do the same. Now they are prosecuted for the lifts. Note how this example involves both our senses of

atmosphere: shelter but also the act of shelter mediated in the public sphere, the climate of opinion.

- Jugend Retten is one of many NGOs to undertake search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean, close to Libyan territorial waters. These NGOs are in part prompted by the retreat from such activities by EU states. In August 2017 its rescue ship, *Iuventa*, was seized and impounded in Lampedusa. Its crew are accused of facilitating the smuggling of people. The charges come on the back of Frontex and Italian efforts to train Libyan navies to police their waters more effectively, and accusations that the NGOs are operating as a ‘magnet’ for migrant vessels.
- In Calais, March 2017, the mayor bans volunteers from distributing food on the grounds it is a ‘security risk’ and possible incitement to establish a new camp for the itinerant people. The incident followed the destruction of ‘the jungle’. The case went to the highest court in France which ruled this was unlawful, and ordered the installation in Calais of showers and toilets. But in other parts of France volunteers face harassment for helping migrants get showers.
- The story of thousands of refugees, many from Sudan, who arrived at Norway’s arctic border with Russia. They travelled on bicycles to circumvent the Russian ban on walking and the Norwegian ban on driving to the border. They were housed in former barracks near the airport, just outside Kirkenes. A former nurse formed a support group and they were given shelter in a Lutheran church. A legal controversy ensued as to whether their supporters were acting from humanitarian logic or as facilitators.

This report is not an isolated work but joins a chorus of unease. IRR reverberates with a much wider body of work associated with the theme of crimes of solidarity. This is the term activists and human rights campaigners have for some time used to describe a widespread political and legal movement that is targeting civil society groups and actors who provide support for migrants. For many observers, including the IRR, it is nothing less than the principle of humanitarianism which is at stake in these struggles. It is an humanitarian principle which groups cite as their motivation and justification for, say, saving life at sea. On the other hand, police and prosecutors challenge this interpretation, deeming acts as basic as the offer of food, shelter, and transport as forms of complicity with illegal entry and smuggling. Nothing less than a ‘shrinking’ of the space for humanitarian action (IRR 2017).

In this final section, we propose to read this phenomenon of crimes of solidarity from the angle not so much of the politics of humanitarianism but the debate about atmosphere and spherology that Sloterdijk’s work has set off. The IRR report offers us a valuable focus because of its particular methodology, and the field of action it brings into view. What the IRR did

was to take twenty-six case studies of individuals and groups across Europe who had been prosecuted under anti-smuggling or immigration laws between 2015–17. Aparna and Schapendonk ([in press](#)) have recently called for a more processual and dispersed account of geographies of hospitality, one not confined to pre-determined groups and places (e.g., churches) but capable of capturing fleeting, relational, dynamic scenes and scenarios as well. A focus on the cases IRR has identified moves us in just this direction. It registers both organized forms of support but also citizens engaged in spontaneous acts with uncertain outcomes.

Atmosphere is a central stake in crimes of solidarity in a double sense. The various civil society initiatives and individual acts which the IRR report documents have arisen not simply because of the good intentions and generosity of these actors but in response to a concerted retreat from provision, rescue, and protection activities on the part of EU states. In the eyes of many politicians and policymakers the rescue of people, the provision of reception, school places for asylum seekers, dental checks, an apartment – these and countless other modes of support – have become so many “pull factors.” Either these foams are destroyed entirely, or they are being weaponized: offered in such a toxic form they are expressly conceived to deter migrants from seeking them.⁷ Civil society action is in part about plugging these gaps, establishing life support in situations where the state has consciously removed or polluted it. In turn, governments are seeking to contain and suppress these foams. A hostile environment is not simply one in which state agencies and public provisions are weaponized; it is a scenario in which hospitality itself, whatever its source – public or voluntary, planned or spontaneous – exists under potential attack. It is as though the very elements, capsules, and foams which Sloterdijk identifies as essential to life and association are now identified from a different angle as risks, pull factors, incitements, and weak points.

In the context of borders and migration, the aforementioned foams and enclosures are particularly bound up with questions of mobility. Now, we do not suggest the Sloterdijk overlooks the theme of mobility. Indeed, in a number of places, he reflects on the figure of the ship: the Ark as an ontology of enclosure; a floating endosphere; the only space of survival for threatened species (see also Barthes [2012](#), 86–88) and Höhler [2008](#)). However, we feel that his analyses often reflect what mobility scholars have called a sedentary bias. Overwhelmingly he focuses on buildings, apartments, cities, and the architecture of settled spaces; life inside settled habitats. What about life on the road, in motion, en route? It is certainly the case that vehicles serve functions of enclosing and encapsulating. Yet to analyse their relationship to atmosphere only in that register would be to miss something. Earlier we proposed a concept of envelope which is especially pertinent to these situations of dynamic and improvised mobility. But how so?

Migration today involves the materialization of envelopes in multiple forms. For example, when experienced alpine guides advise migrants and their supporters on ways to navigate mountain crossings between Italy and France, they contribute to the formation of envelopes pertaining to rugged terrain (Euronomade 2018). Or when MSF charts buses to help migrants traverse the island of Lesbos, they exploit the enveloping properties of vehicles (Pallister-Wilkins 2017). Movement unfolds within the envelope. Recognition of the envelope contributes to a more spherological and morphological account of migration, routes, and borders; these now appear in 3D. It also moves us beyond a reductive focus on vehicles and infrastructures, revealing less tangible and visible factors.

Crimes of solidarity and hostile environments are telling examples of the precarious morphology of the publics involved. Criminalization, legal actions, public indignation: Sloterdijk's vocabulary of spheres and foams indicates as much the materiality of migrants-as-publics as the vulnerability of that materiality and those publics. Whereas we applied Latour's actor-network language previously to the emergence of publics, this section demonstrated a similar language is applicable to describe the disillusion, degradations and dissolution of publics. The notion of the envelope emphasized the material character of migration and the publics involved as well as the limits and risks of crossing borders. As we described earlier, an envelope defines the limits at which it is safe to travel. Pushing the envelope means moving outside these parameters and increasing the risk of an accident. Recognition of the envelope not only contributes to a more spherological and morphological account of migration, routes, and borders; it also points to the fragility, disintegration and vulnerability of atmospheric borders.

Conclusion

Atmosphere and foam allow us to think about borders, migration, and solidarity initiatives in three dimensions and multiple scales and textures, and according to the non-linear, dispersed logics of emergence. Bringing in such "morphological modalities" supports the move in current literatures towards a more complex account of spatiality, materiality and territoriality. In their quest to move beyond the limited and two-dimensional figure of the line with its inside and outside, scholars have looked to a range of thought figures including the network, the firewall, the banopticon, the camp, topography, and infrastructure. The notions of atmosphere, foam, and co-isolation allow for an appreciation of the very heterogeneous ways in which migratory processes are mediated by all sorts of containers, envelopes, enclosures, bubbles, including rooms, tents, vehicles, airports, roads, churches, showers, etc., each of which fosters and shapes atmospheres. But it does not predetermine these as spaces of confinement, or even note how, say, a hotel or stadium can

be turned into a camp. Instead, it allows for indeterminacy in forms and functions. Like in the shift from a cosmopolitical point of view to a more material cosmopolitics, it is more a question of identifying the ways in which these different enclosures, bubbles, and life support systems become sites of struggle. It is not about the way spaces control and contain people, as such, so much as the fact that life requires and utilizes all manner of spaces, bubbles, envelopes, all of which can become sites of struggle.

To conclude our analysis, we aim to bring in three specific points that may serve further discussions to develop the notions of atmospheres and foam in the context of borders and international mobility. We will do so by sketching the opportunities of an approach that emphasizes the spatial, material, and – most notably – morphological aspects of borders and mobility, and the limitations of such a view.

First, foam is a powerful metaphor for the way it captures the morphology and temporality of this play of hostilization, and its dynamics of solidarity and counter-solidarity. Foam mushrooms, expands, spreads but at other times thins, deflates, contracts, and dissolves. Its rhythm partly reflects competing forces of hospitality and hostility, solidarity and alienation. It has no fixed centre and certainly no symmetry. The cases which IRR documents are very diverse and rather unpredictable.

Second, in many of these cases, one is not talking about advanced technological foams. These are humble technologies that people on the move need to patch, maintain, and repair. Here we are not necessarily speaking of cutting-edge technologies of the kind authorities look to as fixes to control mobility. Instead, little technologies and techniques woven into the fabric of existence: showers, phones, tents, rooms, fire, wind, and water. On the one hand, the state is seizing them, turning them against migrants. On the other, they are being offered from voluntary actors. These struggles do involve technology but often old, humble, ordinary, everyday – not unlike Tom Joad's jalopy in Steinbeck's (2002 [1939]) novel *Grapes of Wrath*. We should avoid the image of a high technology game that plays into a kind of arms race mentality and a masculinist view of technology. But the technologies are not just devices but also knowledges that bear a relationship to place and atmosphere and envelope. You can travel this mountain pass but not this time of year. Foam is not just developing tools to manipulate the environment but knowledge how to work with its forces, whether winds, water, currents, rocks, paths, or an asylumscape of institutions and which are more amenable.

Thirdly, we explored the relation between atmosphere and public sphere. The battles to provide and suppress assistance involve a complex visibility and materiality. Even declarations and claims to rights can be considered as tools and techniques to open up disclosures, as the example of the Mytilini declaration showed. Other actions are undertaken discretely. But when prosecutions occur these can become flashpoints and media haloes.

Hostility measures are about more than denying services and life support to migrants. They are also a form of political communication which is aimed at present and potential migrants as signals and deterrents. They can also embolden vigilantes and far-right groups who see their cause vindicated by the state (IRR 2017). They not only shut down spaces of help but poison the public sphere, fostering antipathy and animosity. But the prosecutions of solidarity actors often have other, contrary effects. The fact that some of the acts being suppressed and prosecuted are so human and banal is counter-productive for the state. Publics may ask: What kind of society are we that denies a shower or some food to these children? There is also the fact that prosecutions can create figures of conscience and morality out of the actors, like the French farmer Cedric Herrou, who insist on the necessity of offering support and who refuse to back down.⁸ In sum, we highlight that atmosphere is not reducible to a climate understood as breathable air. It is also the force of feelings that is generated and which accompanies these attempts to destroy foam or create new foam.

Notes

1. See <https://refugees.gr/the-mytilini-declaration-declaration-for-the-dignified-treatment-of-all-missing-and-deceased-persons-and-their-families-as-a-consequence-of-migrant-journeys>.
2. See <http://lastrights.net/mytilini/4592828704>.
3. See <http://lastrights.net/mytilini/4592828704>.
4. See <http://www.borderdeaths.org/>.
5. See <https://www.stichting-dmc.nl/en>.
6. In a classic work of early actor-network theory John Law (1986) offers a socio-technical reflection on the envelope. He studies the assemblage of new vessels such as the Portuguese *Carreira*. When combined with new navigational methods and other social arrangements these 'extended the envelope of mobility and durability' enabling the Portuguese to effect 'long distance control' over the spice trade of the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century. Here the envelope is intimately tied to imperial domination and proto-capitalist accumulation.
7. Consider the case of Cedars House, a place specifically designated for accommodating families just prior to their forced removal. Cedars has become notorious in UK public debates for its poor conditions and over time the refusal of all charities and NGOs to become partners in its administration. But according to one inspection report, this situation was tactical. 'Home Office senior managers claimed that Cedars had an important strategic function in that the fact of its existence motivated families to cooperate with the families return process at an earlier stage and to depart the UK voluntarily. They claimed that the rise in voluntary departures was in part attributable to the deterrent effect of Cedars' (Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration 2016, 6).
8. Reporting on police crackdowns on migrants, as well as the counter-conduct of certain solidarity actors, can bring counter-memories into particular public spheres. See, for example, the story which the New York Times (2016) ran about Herrou. His and

similar migrant support movements are characterized as a form of ‘underground railroad’ moving ‘African migrants’ whose seizure from certain trains by the authorities bears ‘ugly echoes of the French persecution of Jews during World War II’.

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