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Building a park, immunising life: Environmental management and radical asymmetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages in a critical assessment of environmental management as a way of rethinking our co-habitation with earthly powers. Focusing on the post-disaster reconstruction of Constitución, a Chilean coastal city severely damaged by the 2010 tsunami, we argue that environmental management theory has not fully recognised that, sometimes, we humans confront excessive forces that cannot be not diplomatically managed or assumed as manageable objects that will readily accept our invitation to compose a common world.

Thinking with Sloterdijk's notions of atmosphere and immunisation, this paper proposes a theoretical programme to re-frame post-disaster environmental management as the creation of life-enabling membranes to contain, isolate and immunise human existence from indifferent forces such as tsunamis. More specifically, we follow the technopolitical controversies around the design of an anti-tsunami park in Constitución to draw attention towards two crucial moments of this process: the definition of the park's composition and the debate around the park's fallibility. We argue that these moments point to a type of environmental management engaged in the articulation of an immunising atmosphere to secure an interior for human dwelling. Moreover, these two moments specify empirical challenges not fully developed in Sloterdijk's atmospheric philosophy: the *rearrangement* of science, politics and materials that is brought along in the process of erecting an immunological membrane; and the *bioeconomy* of life (and death) that emerges upon the possibility of an immunitary breakdown. In the concluding section we turn to the ecological and ethical challenges opened up by an atmospheric approach to environmental management.

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1. Introduction

Making thoughtful decisions about environmental challenges that involve wide-ranging and potentially irreversible consequences is of profound importance for current and future human wellbeing.

[Polansky and Binder, 2012]

As economists Stephen Polansky and Seth Binder remind us, nature, far from keeping a peaceful distance from our political life, has been increasingly challenging it. The augmentation of technological disasters, the geological uncertainty regarding new energy solutions such as fracking, and the almost inevitable consequences of climate change delineate a future in which nature, an adamant

force not ready to be tamed, disrupts the project of the moderns (Latour, 1993).

In the face of this 'revenge of Gaia' (Lovelock, 2006) a renewed interest on environmental management (EM) has emerged in diverse domains. EM can be defined as a set of knowledges and practices oriented towards the purposeful mediation in human-natural relations (Barrow, 2005). And as such, EM has gained a central place in the governance of social life. "Environmental threats", indicates the United Nations Environment Programme, "will require new global, regional, national and local responses", namely "rules, practices, policies and institutions" capable to re-shape "how humans interact with the environment" (2009). The assembling of new market devices for emission trading, the organisation of better and faster post-disaster humanitarian help, or the development of novel geoengineering solutions such as carbon capture and storage, is just but a few examples of the importance of EM practices to ensure the long-term ecological balance of the planet. These practices, in turn, confirm the entanglement of politics and

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nature. EM, put differently, has emerged as a way of establishing new arrangements between the human species on the one hand, and uncontrollable and threatening geological/meteorological forces on the other.

In this paper we want to engage in a critical assessment of EM as a way of rethinking our co-habitation with earthly powers. The crucial role of EM in the current state of affairs offers an opportunity to reflect upon the human/natural divide and the ontological assumptions sustaining such a demarcation. To this end, we connect with the literature inspired in actor–network theory and other strand of material semiotics that has called for the recognition of the relational and hybrid nature of both the environment and its management. But while this work has thoroughly described the many ways nature and technosciences are enmeshed, it has not fully recognised that, sometimes, we humans confront situations of radical asymmetry: occasions in which nature does not behave as an entity ready to be hybridised in our articulations but, on the contrary, acts as a recalcitrant and even inhuman force. Geological, biological, meteorological and chemical eruptions stubbornly remind us that we, humans, live in and are dependent on “earth and cosmic processes that have gone on since long before our species made its appearance, look likely to go on long after us, and continue to happen all around us”, as put by Clark (2011: xiv). The terrestrial excess upon which our existence depends often proves to be unmanageable, indeed violent and deathly in the case of earthquakes, tsunamis and other disasters. Here we confront the limits of collective human action vis-à-vis nature's exuberance, and thus a paradox when thinking about EM practices: to what extent the increasing recognition of nature's agency via all sorts of material relationalities brings along, at the same time, the expansion of the (imagined) dominion over which humans have purchase. The critical point here is the implication – distilled from both EM and relational theories – that “‘being’ or ‘reality’ or the ‘cosmos’ is thereby renegotiable *without remainder*” (Clark, 2011: 51. Emphasis in the original).

In this paper we utilise Sloterdijk's (2011) notion of atmospheres to think about EM as an immunising practice in the context of disasters. As extreme natural events in which humans are withdrawn from, disasters reveal the limits of the grammar of hybridity: EM appears as a form of relationality sustained on the logics of containment and human-ambient building. Through disasters, EM emerges as a practice not so much oriented towards the articulation of a diplomatic and balanced co-existence between the geological and the social, but involved in protecting, separating and preserving human life from inhuman environmental powers. Sloterdijk's emphasis on atmospheric forms of conviviality can be useful for enhancing our imagination about the type of human/inhuman relationality put forward in post-disaster EM practices.

More concretely, in this paper we describe the efforts done by heterogeneous environmental managers (Krause, 2014) to design an anti-tsunami park after the 29-m wave that devastated Constitución (Fritz et al., 2011), a coastal city in south-central Chile, during the 2010 earthquake and tsunami. Specifically, we draw attention to two moments in the making of the park: the definition of the park's composition and the debate around the park's fallibility. Each of these moments points to the empirical particularities – the challenges, questions and controversies – of a type of environmental management that engages in the articulation of an immunising atmosphere. In doing so, moreover, our account also brings to the fore two considerations about the situated practice of atmosphere building not fully developed in Sloterdijk's accounts: the *rearrangement* of science, politics and materials that is brought along in the process of erecting an immunological membrane to keep violent earthly forces away from human habitats; and the *bioeconomy* of life (and death) that emerges upon the possibility of an immunitary breakdown.

Our account is organised as follows. In the next section we briefly delineate the literature on EM and summarise the critiques EM theory and practice has encountered – mostly coming from ANT-inspired scholars. Then we turn to Sloterdijk's concepts of immunisation and atmospheres as a way to rethink EM. In the third section we introduce our case and describe how the tsunami mitigation park came to matter. In the fourth section we zoom-in and turn to our empirical material. Finally, in the fifth section some concluding remarks are rehearsed.

2. Environmental management: from hybrids to immunology

2.1. The ontological turn in EM theory

The definition of EM is diverse as the terms ‘environment’ and ‘management’ themselves.¹ But one key assumption marks the practice and theory of EM since its emergence in the 1960s: the expectation of an intervention with the capacity to *mediate* between human activities and natural forces. If anthropogenic development has already altered the Earth's equilibrium then human capacity, seems to be the assumption sustaining EM's expectation, can be equally mobilised to manage, enhance or rearrange the co-implications between the human and the natural. In the face of the ecological degradation of the planet, the deployment of technologies, practices and institutions to repair rapid, irrevocable and deathly human-induced bio-physical alterations is urgent, and thus the salience of EM in the last decades.

But the renewed importance of EM has not gone without criticism. Broadly speaking, EM practices and theories have encountered three main zones of contestation. First, critical scholars have questioned the conflictive relation between EM and the legitimisation of industrial corporate stewardship – deflecting, therefore, the possibility of more radical change to economic and social systems (Levy, 1997). In addition, EM has been criticised for its positivist assumptions and its self-definition as a practice done by state agents, utilising quantitative data and mobilising expert knowledge (Bryant and Wilson, 1998).

Finally, scholars inspired in actor–network theory and other material semiotic approaches have called for an ontological turn in EM, particularly when it comes to the concepts of ‘environment’ and ‘management’ (Lippert et al., 2015). It has been stressed that EM, as a situated practice, is not about an environment external to the manager but about the always-precarious assemblage of disparate elements – from data recollection to administrative practices to financial devices. The environment is hence a relational entity in which the social and the natural cannot be demarcated. So, as argued by Lippert, “environmental management studies would better recognise the ultimately hybrid character of the objects deemed to be managed as well as their managers and their instruments” (Lippert, 2014: 96).

This understanding is embedded in a long tradition within science and technology studies that has questioned the ontological fixity of concepts such as the ‘social’ or the ‘natural’ – and that has recognised the ontological inventiveness at work in laboratories, experiments and other forms of technoscientific labour (cf. Latour, 1988). Any entity populating our world, the argument goes, is a precarious and processual achievement, an effect that is made into being through the work of multifarious elements. And EM is not outside this ontological politics. Nature only exists via the mediation of heterogeneous devices, institutions and actions. As Lippert brightly summarises, “[natural] entities are not simply pre-existing, waiting for environmental management practice, but have to be somehow brought into existence, [then] we can

¹ See Barrow (2005) and Colby (1991) for some typological and definitional efforts.

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