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Mini Lecture: A short introduction into thinking about breathing

Dr Marijn Nieuwenhuis (Geography Department, Durham University)

Hello everyone, I hope you enjoyed listening to my conversation with Dr Tomas Martin from the Danish Institute against Torture. I have known Martin for a number of years. At the time of our first contact, when I was still working as a Teaching Fellow in International Relations, there were very few people in the social sciences and humanities*fr* working on air and breathing. Of course, I have to say, there were earth scientists working on climate change, atmospherists on airborne pollution, political scientists on police repression, even anthropologists writing on perfume and other smells, both good and bad smells. Many of these academics, hailing from a variety of different disciplines, however, either addressed the issue of air as subordinate to their own specific research topics, or ignored it all together. This has changed in the last few years.

There are both theoretical and contemporary reasons for that change. Among the contemporary factors are: climate change and the changing weather patterns that result from it, including the increasingly felt effects of dust storms in Asia and elsewhere; the ever increasingly explicit implications of air pollution, which kills millions of humans and non-humans every year; the murdering of Eric Garner and his final words “I Can’t Breath”, echoed last year tragically by George Floyd, the teargassing of protestors around the world, the use of gas in the killing of civilians in Syria and Iraq and many other events that have brought air to public and academic attention.

Another second important factor why “we”, and by that I mean to refer to geographers and social scientists, have come to think about air more seriously as a medium, a materiality, but also an abstraction, results from the work of Luce Irigaray (1999), whose work is quite close to me. In her book, *Forgetting of Air*, which I briefly mention in my interview with Tomas, she describes how European thinkers failed to recognise the importance of that ephemeral nothingness that constitutes everything. Her feminists reading critiques the emphasis that is given to solidity, the ground, the foundational, gravity and gravitas of soil and surface. The weightlessness of air is said to be no match for a ponderous earth. The two appear divided as if air resides in a world above separate from the real world rests below. We imagine ourselves as earthling, although most of our body is in the air. The air, which Irigaray feminises, is underexplored, underappreciated, polluted, abused and, at the same time, strangely forgotten. This particular methodology of finding or searching for wonder in the mundane, the invisible, the barely existent is something that I share with Irigaray. I write about air, about breathing through mouth, nose and skin, about dust, about sand, about holes, gaps, crevices and pores. I am interested how air

sometimes is forgotten and, at other times, used, engineered, dreamt about, painted and, of course, exercised.

One image that I often use to exemplify the diverse affects, emotions, feelings that air can evoke is Joseph Wright of Derby's *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, a British painting from 1768. Painted on the eve of Britain's industrial revolution which married the extraction of resources from the earth, in the form of coal, with skies that turned grey and black, foreboding today's climate predicament, the painting depicts a scene of a natural philosopher demonstrating the working of the recently invented air pump that sucks the oxygen from the air in a glass bulb. The drama that unfolds, which centers around the slow suffocation of a small bird, is witnessed by a group of people that can be seen experiencing a large of different emotions, including fear, curiosity, meditation etc. The natural scientist looks straight at the viewer of the painting as if asking us to reflect on the discovery of oxygen. I don't think the ramifications and implications of the question that the scientist in the painting poses to his audience have been addressed or even appreciated in academic literature or even outside of it. Climate change, but also the other events I briefly mentioned earlier, means that we no longer can afford to forget the air as easily as might have been the case previously.

An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump by Joseph Wright of Derby, 1768 (Public domain)

At the same time of Irigaray's writing in France, towards the closing years of the last century, another way of thinking about the air found its way into academic thinking. In Germany, the phenomenological German philosopher Gernot Böhme introduced the notion of "atmosphere" to academic audiences. His work, driven by an interest in the moods that particular places or spheres evoke, a *stimmung*, if you remember your German, conceptualises atmospheres as ambiguously located or situated, as if coated onto the materiality of the world, while also being inherently difficult to bring into words. The atmosphere example I use in my lectures last year were the empty streets of London during the lockdown. Empty streets, with memories and expectations of noise, bodies, light and smell, translate into an uncanny atmosphere, the body reacts by feeling eerie, something off, something in the air, something about the atmosphere. Working at and beyond the limits of language is something specific to air. Air is both always more and always something less than what we can put into words. As an academic, of course, this is good, because it means that there is always more to say, more to write about. I will never be out of work.

My own work, and I will add a few links to articles accessible without paid subscription, revolves around a large variety of issues and concerns about relationships, cultural, philosophical, political and medical to this peculiar medium of air. As I wrote elsewhere, "by focusing on the air as a *material* foundation of politics, arguing that its material composition and movement have a real effect on social relations, compels me to take the air seriously from both a socially critical and, most certainly, a material point of view. I mean to argue that it is not enough to "simply" take the air figuratively as empty or abstractly as being "up there" but that there is a need to confront its materiality and, perhaps most challenging of all, to analyse what it means when our bodies connect to it through the ephemeral act of breathing that connects [embodied living with dying]" (Nieuwenhuis 2016: 501). On this peculiar nothingness, everything rests, and every body depends.

By turning the table, the concept of air and the practice of breathing are my lenses through which I study the world around me, in fact they make the worlds around me. For instance, I have written extensively about histories of gassing in warfare, linking the colonial atrocities of European powers to the Shoah, the Holocaust. Gassing is a specific kind of environmental violence that turns what is originally a practice that enables life, namely breathing, against the body. The body is unable to move because every body depends on breath. It is this dependency, or rather this co-existence with the outside, that is exploited for a political purpose. There is something, I argue, something dehumanising about this process of killing that is specific to gassing. The German thinker, Peter Sloterdijk, who I also briefly mention in the interview, argues that the target in the case of gassing is not the body but the environment in which the body exists, through which it can exist. I borrow that line

of thinking by asking difficult questions about whose body we are talking about. This is a political question and takes us back to questions around race and colonialism. The BLM's "I can't breathe" slogan is set in a different context but, I think, addresses similar questions around who has the right to breathe air, and, in terms of pollution and climate change, clean air.

In other work, I have looked at similar questions, but then through the prism of language and poetics. Historically, of course, there has been a lot of emphasis on language and semiotics. In my work, however, I am interested in the physiological, corporal processes that enable speech to occur at all. When we read, silently or aloud, we inhale the imprinted breathing of authors on paper or screen. Our bodies follow the rhythms of author respirator as if in an orchestra playing a composition. What happens, however, if the language you use is not yours but has been imposed upon you, violently and oppressively? I am thinking here of British colonial poets such as the great but recently deceased Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite, who, in his work the *History of the Voice* and elsewhere, finds ways to resists the master language English from within the text. My own favourite poet, Paul Celan, who I love dearly, did something similar when he decided to write in the language of his family's murderers, German.

In all of this work, breathing stands central, breathing not only through the mouth and nose, but also through the skin. Inhalation no longer as simply technical respiration but as something more fundamental, perhaps more akin to *Qi* in China, *pneuma* in ancient Greece or *Prana* in Hindu cosmology. In a recent paper, I uncover and trace a cultural history of skin pores, by analysing philosophies of ancient humoural and miasmic thinking. By doing so, I follow in the footsteps of feminist theorists who, for much longer than I have, argue that the human body is not sealed but always open and mediated by relationships to the outside. If the skin is porous, the borders of the human body, the supposed sovereign and contained self and lone individual,myth of masculine imaginations, require challenging. Breath, I think, helps us do that, flowing from mouth to mouth, we share.

So, to finish off, my objective is not to provide you with a comprehensive overview of academic work on breath and breathing, but to provide you with an idea, words and, of course, breaths of how air features in some of my work. Inspiration, after all, starts with a breath that inspirits or inspires; a breath that animates. Breathe as animation, in biology, thought, language, resistance, and, of course, as you already know, art.

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Like fish in water- "We organise air and air organises us":

In Conversation with Tomas Martin

Marijn Nieuwenhuis (Durham University)
Tomas Martin (Danish Institute Against Torture)

Dr Marijn Nieuwenhuis: I am an Assistant Professor in Human Geography at Durham University. My trans-disciplinary research is at the intersection of Geography and International Relations. My current research focuses on the 'politics of the air' and deals with questions of technology, pollution, security, territory, governance, but also with artistic and poetic relations with the air. The research I work on is primarily, but not only, situated in the Chinese context.

Dr Tomas Martin: Max Martin is a trained anthropologist with a PhD in Development Studies (2013) specialized in prison sociology and the anthropology of the state with a focus on the localization of human rights and reform processes and the appropriation of new technologies and penal architectures. Martin is currently a senior researcher at DIGNITY - Danish Institute Against Torture.

Marijn Nieuwenhuis (MN):

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It's great that you take some time to go to have this conversation about what we could broadly call the "politics of air." You work in Denmark, I believe, for the Danish Institute against Torture.

Tomas Martin (TM):

That's right. That's right. Yeah.

It's a place called "Dignity", the Institute of Torture, which is actually an NGO, but also is a knowledge hub for issues around torture and violence. We work on different tracks very broadly on the rehabilitation of torture victims, and also on prevention of torture, both with legal and medical and social scientific approaches. We have a small research unit that dives into both the dynamics of violence and the more sort of normative framework around the legal prevention of torture, but we also do a lot of research on rehabilitation and trauma.

So, yes, that's where I am based.

MDN:

That is interesting in and of itself, but maybe it's worthwhile before going into the finer details of what the politics of air entails for the both of us, I'm curious and I'm sure the other listeners are as well. How did you end up there? How did you end up in that specific NGO?

TM:

Well, it is quite a long story, but it has a lot to do with my interaction with the prison as a place of study as part of my life. I accidentally ended up doing fieldwork in a massive Indian prison in New Delhi in the late 1990s. I was actually trying to work

with new dimensions of conflict in anthropology. I am trained as an anthropologist. So, I was interested in finding the very intense environments where people try to knit together the social fabric against all odds. I stumbled on the prison as a place where I could pursue that empirically through fieldwork. And after doing that, I was super interested in the prison as an institution because it's such a powerful institution, it's such a universal institution. It's often quite ill-understood.
I worked for many years at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, but not with prison issues. But along this work, I had a very close companionship with a fellow researcher called Andrew Jefferson, who is also a prison ethnographer. We have worked together and written together, and he has worked with Dignity for quite a number of years. So, I've been falling in and out of research and practise work on human rights, but always in close conversation with Andrew and when there was an opportunity in connection with a large research grant on prison research in Myanmar, I was able to shift and start working in the institute.

MDN:

The reason I am asking these questions, of course, is an interest in how you got into or interested in the politics of air. How does air relate to prison? How did you get involved thinking about, I suppose, “the politics of the air”?

TM:

Yeah, I think that's, in my case, a very sort of ethnographic story as air came to me as rather than the other way around. So, there was a very specific incident that I can tell you about that sort of made me suddenly realise that that air is a very sort of intense and fruitful area of research, and I think that's where this headline "Politics of Air" sort of dawned on me.
I realised that that air has materiality, it has sociality. We organise air and organises us. So air is very much about relations of power. There's a lot to be said about distribution, manipulation, conceptualisation, institutionalisation of air, and all that then animates these issues about “who accesses air”, “how is air accessed”, “who is exposed to air”, “how is it distributed “and also “how do different people aspire for air?”
So, I began to look into that. I came to your work quite quickly because when you Google “politics of air” you, you, end up with Marijn Nieuwenhuis' excellent work and thank you for that. So, I have one specific incident but maybe as a start, I suppose, you have one as well so we could maybe share? You want me to start? You do want to give it a go?

MDN:

No, no, I mean please go ahead and start! I have many, probably.

TM:

You have many?! OK, yes. OK so, my, my air incident so to speak is quite recent, but it was part of the early stages of my research in Myanmar on prisons, together with

Andrew, as I mentioned, and another excellent colleague, Cleve Gabry, who was doing a PhD at that time.
We were working on trying to understand state formation through the prison, we had sort of a slogan for a project: "The Prison as Prism". So we looked at the prison to see how life unfolds in terms of state subject relations, violence and power, and we had two, three tracks in the research project. One was on politics, one was on experiences and one was on technologies.
I was looking at technologies as an entry point to understand prison life and understand prison history. I was interested in finding out how do prisons respond to technologies, to new things that are important in prisons, often invested with many intentions around change. And, then, as we often see with these things in institutions or in communities, something else happens when people appropriate them locally.
So, I was I was looking at this particular line of enquiry with a focus on prison architecture. I was trying to find out who in Myanmar had built prisons and why, and who was involved in that. As an ethnographer, I want to talk to people. I was sort of scanning the environment, the network for Myanmar engineers who had worked on prisons and architects.
A good colleague mentioned a story that really, really caught my attention. [As you know], Myanmar has a very violent history of repression and military dictatorship where prisons have played a key role, which also was one of the reasons why an institution like Dignity was interested in studying that. During the 1990s, one political prisoner had been sentenced to death by the military dictatorship, and he was actually part of one of the early uprisings in 1988 in Myanmar, which in one of the epicentres of that was the Rangoon Institute of Technology, which is the School for Engineers. This student protester, he was an engineer. He was imprisoned. He started to, after a few years, his death sentence was commuted to life, begin to move around the prison. He also began to help the prison with their maintenance work and they got the whiff of his engineering skills, and therefore they also began to employ him as an engineer, as a prison engineer.
So, he began to design prisons from a role of imprisonment. He was a prisoner, but he got a small office, a few staff, and then he began to make designs of prisons according to two different models that were needed in the particular region. I interviewed this guy, who, I thought was extremely interesting. I tracked him down in a small village. He was now at a small engineering company, was an old man. I interviewed him about this experience of being part of the prison, but also producing prisons.
I asked him how could he in any way affect the designs that he did. And he said, “no, no, I can't. I couldn't. It was totally controlled environment”. And then he said, “but I did one thing”. One small subversive thing he had done and what he had done, he

had raised the roof of some of the prisons wards with just two feet, and he had done that to increase the quality of air.
And I think that was the first time I really thought about air in prisons, and it came to me in this sort of ethnographic experience of seeing someone in this extreme situation of powerlessness and pressure, an engineer struggling to make a difference against all odds, and what he did was to try to improve the air quality of the prison, and that for me, that was very important for the ethnographic experience in my research and my analysis.
It also propelled me into an enquiry, into air in prisons. And I understood how important, how important air is for prisoners and how important it is for the life of prisoners and staff. How power is conceptualised in prisons, both in terms of how it connotes freedom, but also suffocation, very literally, but also ideally.
That was my air incident. And from then on, I began to study in prisons how air is regulated, how is experienced, and began to write about it, not least for inspiration from your work. So it was for your Marijn? What started you off on air?
MN:
Well, I mean I mean, you are describing a very interesting event.
We will speak and talk about in more detail about that specific experience. Because that as well, of course, was the inspiration, I think, or one of the sources of inspiration, for the article that you recently published in an academic journal with the title, I believe, "The Politics of Prison Air".
I mean, well, about my own personal experiences with air is. Well, first, I mean air is very complicated, as you already described. It is, a paradoxical complexity, because there is nothing as simple and as complicated and layered as air. One the one hand is considered and perceived as trivial as something aerial, ephemeral, non-existent and subordinate to the supposed concrete factual realities of life.
And, when somebody tells you “aerial things” then normally ears shut down and closed off and these are supposedly, oftentimes as well gendered, aspects and topics, that we don't actually have much importance to in the “concrete reality of life”. But that starts to change, as you already hinted at, when the air breaks down and air makes you aware of the mortality of your own life, of your own body.
I am allergic, I have dust allergies. I grew up in a large European city, in the inner city, and I believe that somehow, genetically or biologically, I became allergic to dust. I notice moving around that there are different airs around me. Airs that I feel well in and airs that suffocate me that I have difficulties to breathe in. Airs that have physiological but also psychological effects on me. I start to get headaches quite, quite quickly, depending on the area that I live in or the air inhale, depending on the place that I inhabit.
So, I grew up already with a sensitivity towards the air and the importance of air, so that is being one of the reasons why I start thinking about political issues through the prism and through the lenses of air. This only became more so after having lived

in China for some time in large cities in China where the air oftentimes is very, very bad.
I started to, initially, that was during my PhD project, which focussed on the historical come into existence of China as a state, because I am a geographer, or rather, I became geographer. However, in approaching my PhD, there was always the need to somehow provide concrete foundations for any form of analysis. So, for a geographer traditionally the "geo" in geography refers to the soil, it refers to the hard materiality of the world.
So, my PhD started initially with architecture, with landscapes, urban planning and what have you. Things that happen on the surface of the Earth. But, while living in China, I increasingly became aware that there's also a politics of the air in that the air is polluted as a result and as a consequence of economic and political decision making, and that some people breathe good air and some people breathe bad air, and that air includes and excludes and so forth. I think that that was a second experiencing of the necessity of thinking and thinking about air more seriously.
But air also, of course, as you know, a complicated because it's not something that we can actually escape. Right. It is something that if there's one universalism amongst the human species and many other species, not all but many other species, is the fact that we all breathe, we all depend on it. It's one of the very few universalisms that actually has some concrete truth to it, but hardly ever do we think about air.
So, I started to think about it, not only through the prism of academia, but started looking into other disciplines. I think that is also something that interests you. What do poets have to say? What do artists have to say about air? And perhaps they have been historically better thinkers of air than we, or, at least I, our sort in academia, as for us geographers. the "geo" traditionally refers to the soil.
So, there have been a number of different experiences, if you like, I believe that led me to become inspired to write about air.

TM:

I think it really relates also to what you say about that it's foundational, all encompassing, and also some somehow unnoticed. But there are also, I mean, it seems that it has been with you for quite some time, more recently with me. But I also sense, as you say, that it becomes prominent as it becomes a scarce resource, or sort of challenges our breathing, our smell or our ability to move. It seems to be increasing doing so, of course, with the rallying cries of "I can't breathe" in Black Lives Matter, or a climate situations that we all sort of facing.
So, I think that there is very, very much to be gained from moving into this more social-scientific approach to air, which is, as you say, it is not it's not so easy, and in that sphere, where we try to sense and understand practice, rather than just stabilising air and inspecting it as a natural sciences is, I think you're very right, this

sort of reaching out to poetry, art, as a resource, as an inspiration and so some thinkers and practitioners are maybe one step ahead.
In this article I wrote also, I mean, there are a lot of references there, for instance, to Chekhov, who was actually a medical doctor in practice in his youth. What he has written about prison air and a visit to a camp in Sakhalin is really intense. So, there is something there, definitely. This interest in what it means to be a breathing, smelling, freezing, overheating, human or non-human being is such a profound and pressing question.
I think that's definitely an important conversation to dive into and, I think, especially also in my case, when we had our brief is to understand dynamics of violence and here air is potentially so intense, although, as you say, ephemeral or unnoticed or indirect, but also very direct. When we talk about “weaponization of air” from everything from pepper sprays to cold cells and different forms of strangulation, torture and whatnot. But this whole issue about access and distribution and governance that I think your work really sort of pinpoints to is, of course, also interesting to inspect through the lens of violence or slow violence, or indirect violence that air is part of, definitely.

MDN:

Yes. I mean I mean, as I said, I mean, breathing is something that unites us as beings, as organic, biological beings. But it is equally important to recognise and realise that every body breathes differently. And that pertains, as you mentioned or alluded to, to the "I Can't Breathe" movement in which literally breath is being taken away by specific parts of the population in the United States, but also in Britain and many other European countries.
Interestingly enough, I mean, keep in mind that pollution also has an unequal and uneven geography, that it is precisely those part of the population that are in the lower socioeconomic strata that oftentimes are forced to breathe polluted air in. And, therefore, one could draw a correlation between breathing air and class and race, of course.
So, on the one hand, breathing is something that we all do, something that unites us, one of the very few things that we share in common, literally share in common. My exhalation is your inhalation and vice versa, across time and space. But every body, every physical corporal body breathes very differently, depending on oftentimes socioeconomic or other strata, statuses in societal orders. This is also the case in your article, the article that you wrote on prison air in Myanmar.
Now, interestingly enough before that as well, I mean, this is important, I think, as well, to realise that, again, going back to the fact that the air is invisible, supposed as immaterial, well, in fact, actually it is not, it has materiality to it is just invisible to the eye. This says a lot about, I guess, about the hegemony of the eye vis-à-vis of the breath. The eye is considered to be more important than the actual breath. But you can well be blind and still breathe, but you can do the opposite.

And so, breath almost seems in many aspects depoliticised, unthought. There is a constitution of universal rights, the constitution that trails a liberal order, in that constitution there is a right to food, to sustenance, to accommodation, but there is no not, nowhere in the constitution the right to breathe, actually, which is interesting because if at all, because we all share that common, it would be the first thing, I think, which you would imagine to be in the constitution, the right to breathe clean air. And that is, of course, as well, pertains, I think, to your research into the prison air in Myanmar, because it seems to me almost as if that the issue is completely relegated to unimportance or insignificance, not even thought about in the designing of prison. Although, the first thing that one notices upon entering a prison is, of course, the smell of the prison. It's the air of the prison. It's the claustrophobic affect, emotion which one feels when entering a prison. So, I was wondering in your article, how did you think through the politics of the air [in prisons]? I believe in your article you mentioned smell, wind and breath. Could you maybe elaborate a little bit on each of these components of the air?

TM:

Yes, I think that right that there is no sort of explicit and normative framework around the right to have the right to breathe, yet, but it is in discussion, there is nevertheless a strong focus on the right to health. And also how the right to health encompasses breathing and also how, you could say, sort of a healthy environment in this case in an institution like the prison. The state is obliged to provide that. So, there is quite a lot of a focus on air, actually, in the regulations around prisons from a human rights point of view in terms of securing enough space for fresh air to be accessible to people who are confined but air is also linked to light and to movement.

So, there is an intense regulatory fault line between, on the one hand, human rights observers, especially with the focus on health, to ensure clean air and prisons and at the same time, a prison institution, which often sees and an ever-present contradiction towards the security imperative of keeping the prison tight and closed and keeping people isolated.

So, you often see that you would want to have open areas in the prison to allow air and light to flow, but you will see an urge, desire even, a reflex of the prison institution to try to control this, and that, of course, sort of also [applies] when we talk more broadly about politics and ideologies about what goes on in the prison. This tension between freedom and confinement, between autonomy and control, that that is somehow animated quite literally through this battle over air.

But, in terms of breath, smell and wind, it was sort of my way to try to break down an analysis of air, offering some interlocking tracks and some of this was to a great extent, inspired by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who has worked with air exactly in the line of thought that you mentioned, that air is something we actually move in like fish in water. We have to consider ourselves as being-in-air. He emphasises these

different qualities of air as something that relates to breath, to respiration, to being, as we talked about, but also smell which relates more to our perceptions, our knowing the world, we are sniffing the world, and then there is wind, which is related to locomotion to moving the materiality of air.
These three tracks relate to the body, to identity, and also to match reality and governance. So for me, looking at breath, smell and wind, how they manifests itself in this peculiar charged environment of the prison is one way to begin to understand how air plays out, so to speak, locally and in context, because, I think, you are you're very right in pointing out that it's universal, but we all breathe individually.
When you talk about something as universal and all encompassing, ever- present as air, it is also super important to become too enthused by this universality that you forget to stop and think about what goes on with air here in this particular environment, in this particular time. Therefore, it is also a very empirical endeavour. That's also why in this particular article, I try to, sort of, through these three tracks, to encourage two ways of thinking about air.
First, by what I call "sensing air" simply as a researcher or as a person interested in air, you have to start smelling. You have to start feeling the wind. You have to understand and breathe in a particular environment. Sensing air is simply a sort of a more empirical project of breathing, smelling and feeling.
And then there's also this other aspect of "sensing with air" a researcher, following the airflows, and like you mentioned in your work in China to sort of see how air is folded into politics, to social practices, to understandings of identities and history. So, I think, it's that kind of framework that I try to map out.
And then then in the article, I dive into the prisons in Myanmar and also a little bit in prisons in general to begin to consider. For instance, we talked about these challenges between a regulatory framework based on human rights that seeks to ensure a healthy prison environment and the sort of security imperative of the prison and how this is a particular kind of story in prisons and also in Myanmar and also as a little bit of a meditation about when we think about the prison as an institution where sort of the very classical approach to imprisonment in terms of deprivations, like you are deprived of your liberty, you're deprived of, at least traditionally, and, in many jurisdictions still, of heterosexual encounters, you are deprived of opportunities to engage. However, the fact that you can actually be deprived of air seems so provocative and fundamental that if that is done in the bureaucratised setting, there's something there about breath that is particular for the prison.
Smell, in the article, I spend some time on what you could call the "economy of smell" in prisons and how prisoners, especially in institutions changed by poverty, really struggle to control, smell and how smell is a very significant indicator of power. Both in the sense that the prisoners are either by default or design exposed to bad smell and have their ability to control their own smell taken away.

Also that sort of even the physical infrastructure of the prison that people organise themselves around smell, you can very easily see who is important in the prison in the sense of who sleeps close to the toilet, who is most exposed to the smell of shit, so to speak, and how people are organised around that and how smell both can be a way to become increasingly dehumanised, but also be a way to reach out for a particular kind of autonomy and identity. For instance, when prisoners receive food packages from home there is a particular smell of home or of certain food stuff that brings you back to the self you have lost in prison.

Then, finally, there's wind and wind is a bit more sort of obvious and technical. There's a lot of attention to ventilation, too, to weaponization. We talked about before how wind plays out in prison and anything from the right to air conditioning, which is a debate in the US, and to how prisoners are exposed to, for instance, toxic or pepper spray or, in the case, as I described in the article, around protection against TB in international efforts to set up safe clinics for TB patients in Myanmar. So, so in that way, I try to use these three strands, breath, smell and wind as both very concrete areas of research, but also, as you say, almost heuristic devices to understand the politics of air, to understand air in context, both in Myanmar but also in institutional contexts of prisons.

MDN:

There seems to be this constant tension when it comes to air between forgetting air and weaponization air. A constant tension, the fact that we don't have a universal declaration of a right to air which doesn't mean, of course, that we don't use the air to discipline bodies.

This tension is quite useful to think about, but it's quite a complicated tension. I mean, the *Forgetting of Air* is, as you know, a book by the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, which talks about the omission of air in European continental thought, as I say, as a central entity of what it means to be. I mean, we talk about language a lot in philosophy, but the medium that enables language through which language can communicate is, of course, speech, it's the breath, the respiration in exhalation of words. But that doesn't seem to have any importance in modern European philosophical traditions. This is, of course, different in other traditions, philosophical traditions.

But this neglect is matched by a complete overload of the use of air in terms of warfare. An obvious example would be the recent work of Peter Sloterdijk, the German thinker, who explains how the events in Ypres in the First World War in 1914, meant the first use of gas warfare and how that affected the evolution that we are still going through, of air warfare, in contemporary Syria, for instance.

The last century has been one of climatological warfare, air warfare. So, this tension of complete neglect, unthought, on the one hand, at least in the European tradition, and, on the other hand, the complete over-engineering of air. I think this is also quite, quite true in your piece in that it seems, just like in the shopping mall, air is

constantly engineered in order to enforce a particular kind of practice. That seems to also ring true in the prison in Myanmar.

I'm interested in, maybe before continuing discussion on breath, smell and wind, maybe historicising this relationship somewhat, in particular postcolonial context of Myanmar. Prisons, of course, are a colonial institute, but I'm more interested if you could say something about how air [engineering] came to inform historically the prisons in Myanmar.

TM:

There's actually an interesting piece of research on colonial prison management that maybe goes a little bit against the grain of this sort of grand story of colonial neglect and extraction, because there was actually quite an intense interest in prison health and maybe a little bit by accident because many colonial prison managers were sort of demobilised prison army doctors who became superintendent in prison. So, according to work of Brown, there was actually quite an investment in in trying to improve, for instance, health related to TB and other contagious diseases, which also included this kind of civililatory story and desire to combat the miasmic sort of tropic environment through modern Westernised airy architecture.

It's super ambiguous, of course, in the sense that that you find stories. I ran into a British architect who was doing a renovation of the central hospital in Yangon, which was an old colonial style building, which was actually built quite fit for purpose in this particular environment in terms of ventilation and air flows, but through this new renovation, there was a keen interest by the medical superintendent. Now, the managers of the hospital, according to this architect, needed to get it all glazed and air-conditioned because it should be modern etc. And that was actually not super smart in terms of air.

So, there is definitely a sort of ambiguous colonial history of air also in Myanmar prisons. What I think is probably most prominent is, is the way that the prisoners themselves, through their oral histories and testimonies, express experiences of neglect and suffocation.

I think that there is also something about air, at least potentially, it's not just forgetting and then weaponising, I think there's also quite a significant element of aspiration that air is also connoting freedom. I think in prisons, the ability to access air and the ways that people try to Frankenstein different situations to get a whiff of fresh air and to protect themselves from stale air and dirty air are also quite important elements of the politics of air, at least in everyday life.

And so, in that sense, I think there is definitely an intense colonial history to tell the story of prison and also state-sanctioned air more broadly, where the prison is just one example of a bureaucratised institution that is supposed to manifest sovereign practises in colonial, post-colonial and post-colonial times.

MDN:

This story of the forgetting affair and then the weaponizing of air speaks to a specific Western specific relationship to air. Could you maybe elaborate and I know you not necessarily do that in the article, but maybe you could speculate on indigenous relationships to air. What status does air have actually in Myanmar outside of the Western story?

TM:

It's not something that I go much into the article, I am in that sense a little bit the traditional prisoner ethnographers, but it's a super important question. I think that that the way air is conceptualised locally or through different knowledge regimes, is something that would definitely be super fruitful avenue of research.

I think there's lots to consider and to learn about air and institutions, air and infrastructure, air and buildings by looking at homes. In the case of Myanmar, also, we talk about a more sort of sovereign or institutionalised manifestation of how air is supposed to be organised, looking at monasteries and pagodas and the whole and the story about purity and danger related to air in these environments. Of course, there's a lot about sort of smoke and spirits and sort of the ephemeral realm where air is a medium and a conduit, but I am a little bit more of a pedestrian scholar interested in bureaucratic practises, at least for now.

However, I think you're very right in pointing out that that sort of the next level of a full understanding of air is to take on exactly that, that line of enquiry in place like Myanmar, but probably everywhere. To ask serious questions about what air in practise and in different environments and across different knowledge regimes, and try to understand a particular case or a particular institution, in this case, the prison with that particular backdrop. You're right to point out, this is not what I've have done so far in the article. This is also, I think, my first stab at this. And it's also a call for prison scholars, more generally, to take on this agenda and to begin to sense prison air but also sense with prison air.

MDN:

Yes, about sensing, and the more phenomenology of some of your findings in the article, one particular part that struck me, amongst others, I must admit, was the phenomenology of the toilet and the role that smell plays therein, the politics of punishment, but also the distancing that takes place in which air becomes almost a means to create hierarchy, spatial hierarchies etc. Could you maybe elaborate a little bit to talk to listeners as to how that plays out? Because that part was particularly striking to me as a reader.

TM:

Yes, I think it's a very sort of vivid and also quite concrete example of how a smell is falling into politics and practices on an everyday level, but also how attention to that is a way into understanding exactly sort of hierarchies or power relations and dynamics.

What I write about in the article, but which something that is also quite significant in the work I've done in Uganda, is this fact that when you have these communal prison wards where sort of like dormitory style arrangements that are challenged by extreme overcrowding, the places to sleep become a scarce resource, but it's not just overcrowded, also sort of formally understaffed. That means that in many of these jurisdictions, including Myanmar, power gets outsourced to privileged prisoners who then take on responsibilities of managing prisoners on an everyday basis. That is everything from cleaning, cleaning duties, food distribution, discipline, which is formally illegal, and maintenance and general, sort of like domestic organisation.

That also includes a real estate market, because this privilege system, once you sort of, have diluted power to strong prisoners they are then also mandated to distribute privileges and also to seek rent from prisoners, they take out something for themselves, which allows them to buy stuff and to pay other soldiers or administrators to help them out, but also, of course, to channel some of this funding up to staff. So, there is a privilege system and market based system where you as a newcomer to a prison ward will often have to pay your way into a particular place to sleep, and it's quite clear that if you have some money or other forms of power, but there could be connections or it could also be that you are an able bodied soldier in this enforcement environment, but if you have something to sell, then you can buy yourself a sleeping place that is sort of attractive.

One of the key indicators in this real estate economy is smell. In the sense that you often find in these wards that you have these veterans in one end of the war or sometimes bucket systems and often due to overcrowding and bad maintenance in old structures, they are not so well functioning. I mean, you have to keep in mind that there's a lot of prisoners in this place and they really struggle to keep clean the best they can, so it's not sort of like a sort of filthy in necessarily a crude way, but it's just people are just struggling so hard with so, so few resources, trying really to keep clean, but still even in that environment, the toilets are often very smelly over running and therefore to sleep close to a toilet is quite intense in such a ward.

I have a quote in the article from women prisoners from Myanmar sort of didn't have money to find a sleeping place at the other end of the ward away from the toilet. They talk about how they simply vomited and was also scolded for that. But in that sense, just by looking at air and how people organise themselves around smell and how smell is something that you buy yourself out or something that you are either punitively forced into or fall into through your powerlessness in the system that is sort of crudely oriented around inequality and discrimination and privileges, undercutting any kinds of rights.

You can see that played out sort of and you can you can detect it, so to speak, as a researcher through your nose rather than through your ears or eyes. You can get an understanding of how important this is for people when they are exposed to this and

also how there is there's a compounding effect of being exposed to this smell and being increasingly dehumanised and falling further through the cracks of this prison system and the other way around, if you're on the other end of the ward, you can catch the upward spin of this privilege system, begin to trade yourself, or you can you can behave in a hygienic matter and become an important player in the prison hierarchy.
So, this is this is just one example of how smell is, is both a way in to understanding prison governance and also a very sort of empirical experience for researcher and interlocutor alike.
MDN:
That is very rich material. A sensitivity that, of course, not only applies to the prison, but also to many places outside of it. Think about that, as we mentioned and briefly discussed, inequalities around pollution, ad how that affects real estate and what is a valuable property and what isn't, I mean, how far are you removed from an important motorway, for instance, and so forth, or an industrial terrain and what have you.
If listeners are interested in reading some of your work, because I know that this particular article that we discussed, of course, is behind a paywall, is there any website that they consult or any writing of yourself that is publicly available for people to access?
TM:
I think there must be some lying around on academia research gate, but otherwise, please call on me. I mean, most of my development as a as an academic has been through generous colleagues who have responded to my crazy emails, including you, Marijn, so, reaching out and getting generous feedback is something that I have really thrived on.
So, if what I've written is not available, I'll gladly help anybody who wants to climb the paywalls and also as a means to start conversations, because I think, like what has been going on here is very enriching for me.
We are at Dignity building up a new website, but it's not there yet, so I can't reference that as a source yet, but there should be something out there or at least send me an email.
MN:
Okay, I mean, that's great.
I will simply, you know, have the website, make sure that the website is online and contact details for people to contact you are available.
MDN:
One final question before we close, equally so important, perhaps, or interesting, at least for listeners, if you were to recommend one particular book that inspired you which book would you want to advertise to listeners?
TM:

On air or just in general?

MD:

No, no on air. On the air.

TM:

I don't know one specifically. I like to read this super dark stuff, actually, to be honest, and I have also published something that maybe out there, where I try to understand my own role as an ethnographer through the reading of Kafka's penal colony, In “The Penal Colony”. I think as a prison researcher, that that has had profound impact on me also as an anthropologist. This article is called "The ethnographer as accomplice".

What I'm reading right now, I'm reading "The Notebook" by Agatha Kristof, which is very heavy dissection of war, but also of some experience of deprivation and suffocation and how people are somehow, against all odds, managed to strike, strike back and how it is also very hurtful.

I'm afraid it's those kind of things that I can share in terms of inspiration, and I think maybe that when it comes to air, it is that that line of literature like Kafka or Kristof, that keeps me on my toes in terms of questioning both my own involvement in violence and also to understand how violence is deep and ephemeral.

MDN:

On that Kafkaesque note, I would like to thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me and discuss your thoughts on air and your article. It has been a great pleasure.

TM:

Thank you very much, Marijn. It's been a pleasure talking to you and also to read your work. And this conversation has taken me one step further into air. So thanks for that.