BOOK REVIEWS

Bille, M. and **Schwabe, S.** 2023, *The Atmospheric City*: *Ambiances, Atmospheres, and Sensory Experiences of Spaces*. London: Routledge.

The study of atmospheres and ambiances is a growing area of interest in urban studies. Bille and Schwabe's slim but impressively rich volume, *The Atmospheric City* (2023), contributes to this growing literature by tracing transformations in the feel of urban life across several Nordic cities. Drawing from ethnographic research in Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm, the authors illuminate the embodied experience of the city through the compelling lens of "atmosphere".

The study of urban atmospheres typically draws from Gernot Böhme's influential conceptualization of the term. For Böhme, "[a]tmosphere is what relates objective factors and constellations of the environment with my bodily feeling in that environment. This means that atmosphere is what is in between, what mediates the two sides" (Böhme & Thibaud 2016: 1). Bille has written elsewhere on the relational quality of this idea of atmosphere, and how it necessarily attunes the researcher to the "*in-betweenness*" of the contact zone where the felt body meets the environment (Bille 2015: 269). The ethnographic case studies in *The Atmospheric City* deepen our understanding of the interplay at the heart of urban atmospherics, provoking the reader to consider how the body and the city come to animate one another.

Bille and Schwabe (2023) begin by introducing the reader to hints of change that can be not only seen but heard, smelt and felt in the urban environment — from the way the sensations of industry have largely been moved to the margins of the city, to the campaigns of night-time illumination that transform the erstwhile shadowy spaces of the urban into theatrical stages for action. Gradual though it may have been, the authors turn our attention to the way this urban metamorphosis has transformed the *felt* spaces of the city. Cities, they argue, are fundamentally atmospheric (p. 5), and attuning ourselves to atmosphere is a vital component of urban meaning-making (both for citizens and scholars). Furthermore, the authors position atmosphere as both relational and porous (p. 22); as Bille and Schwabe evocatively put it, in the production of urban atmospheres, the environment and humans "seep affectively in and out of each other" (p. 13).

Four central themes organize the chapters that follow: "*social relations*, the *environment*, *movement*, and *care*" (p. 22). The overarching context of the Covid-19 pandemic is woven through the ethnographic work in the book (since field research for the text took place from 2018 to 2021) — a move which further emphasizes both the porosity of urban life and how atmospheres can be at once intimate and collective. For example, Chapter 2 begins with a reflection on how social distancing measures rapidly altered the sociality and feel of cities around the world, the jarring nature of this shift drawing our attention to importance of atmosphere in urban social life. Through pandemic life and beyond, the authors use twinned notions of resonance and dissonance, presence and absence to explore how we relate to the people and places around us. From the pleasures and perils of being alone to the "atmospheric intensity" of a crowd, the ethnographic snapshots herein point to urban atmospheres as a "deeply social phenomenon" (p. 48).

Given how the allure of "designing atmospheres" has shaped urban (re)development in recent years, Bille and Schwabe also explore how atmospheric design and non-human factors impact the way the city feels. Chapter 3 considers how material changes to the urban environment seem to invite particular affective responses and ways of being in the city. Everything from the qualities of lighting to the slant of a bench have atmospheric power here — urban design is meant to make some people feel comfortable in a given space, while rendering it distinctly *un*comfortable for those designated "others".

Chapters 4 and 5 take on questions of movement and care, respectively. The former demonstrates how we commonly make sense of urban atmospheres in motion. For example, Bille and Schwabe consider how Copenhagen's cycling culture shapes both the shared atmosphere of the city and individuals' affective relations to and within it. Chapter 5 explores feelings of safety and protection in the city and attempts to delineate what a "city of care" might feel like. The authors conclude the book by looking towards the future of the atmospheric city as both a phenomenon and area for further inquiry.

By grounding its study of atmospheres in urban ethnographic research, *The Atmospheric City* makes a valuable contribution to the growing study of how atmospheres are imagined, designed, and — perhaps most crucially — experienced (see further Böhme 2014, Bille 2015, Bille and Simonsen 2021, Degen and Rose 2022, Edensor and Sumartojo 2015, Lynch 2023, Sumartojo and Pink 2019, among others). While the authors focus their study on the Nordic context — which has some particularity — the book offers broader insights into the embodied experience of cities as lived/living environments and underscores the value of an ethnographic approach for understanding how the urban *feels*. This book will be of particular interest to scholars looking to (literally) "make sense" of the city and the assorted atmospheres that bring it to life — however ephemeral or difficult to capture they may be.

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Jones, P. 2023. *Corrupt Britain: Public Ethics in Practice and Thought since the Magna Carta*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peter Jones, a historian affiliated most recently with the Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester, has earned a reputation as an authority on modern urban governance and its discontents, especially through his book, *From Virtue to Venality: Corruption and the City* (2016). He has been a helpful presence in a transnational network of scholars of these issues. Reflective of that background, the author begins this accessible, broad-ranging book with a point that researchers treat as axiomatic: corruption is a muddled topic. A metaphor derived from the ancient notion of the body politic, *corruption* can signify anything from specific actions by identifiable people to a whole condition of society. The current textbook definition — use of a “public role for private advantage” — sounds “simple enough”. But this precision hinges on a “rational legal” understanding of governance, in Max Weber’s sense. The ideal of disinterested public service remains an aspiration even in those countries that approximate the model most closely (pp. 1-4).

Further, as Jones notes, systems of governance generate a “tension between legality and legitimacy” (p. 1). To sustain fractious coalitions and push measures through, politicians trade favours and distribute benefits. The extent to which segments of the public perceive such practices as corrupt depends on what else is happening. Charges of corruption fly about when disaffection is widespread and conflict rancorous for other reasons. Waves of accusation might or might not track with underlying levels of bribery, embezzlement, or influence peddling. In any period, a range of standards co-exist that only approximate the legal code. Legality is an imperfect measure, anyway, since political systems can seem corrupt to the disaffected precisely because law and custom entrench status and sanction exploitation.

Like most of Europe, medieval and early modern England tolerated and even encouraged classic venality, in which offices were “considered to be private property to be bought, sold, inherited and deployed to acquire wealth” (p. 51). As Henry VIII’s distributions of church lands spectacularly illustrated, little constrained the monarchy’s manipulation of property and patronage to elevate protégés and reward allies. People counted on needing to bestow gifts on officials or judges. Even so, groups beyond the barons seized on the principle, enunciated in the Magna Carta of 1215, that the king had to obey his own law. Lawlessness became a lever for vilifying and even — in the case of Edward II — deposing kings. From Hugh Despenser in

1326 to Thomas Cromwell in 1540, enemies used corruption to bring despised royal associates to the gallows. The notion that the monarchy had degraded into a "canker of corruption" became central to the Stuart legitimacy crisis (p. 59). Jones cites the 1621 impeachment of Sir Francis Bacon, the Attorney General, for accepting gifts from litigants as a sign of tentative change. By the 1620s, parliaments displayed increased concern with legislating against corruption, perhaps a reflection of a post-Reformation moralism that continued into the Commonwealth.

The so-called Old Corruption after the Revolution of 1688 would shape British understanding in enduring ways. Guided by leaders such as Robert Walpole and the Duke of Newcastle, the Whig oligarchy used a "byzantine" system of "rewards, patronage, inducements and coercion" to consolidate its regime (pp. 72, 82). Given Britain's success in establishing the fiscal, military and administrative apparatus needed to operate as a far-flung empire, supporters plausibly argued that sinecures, rotten boroughs and bought electorates were an acceptable price for stability and prosperity. Huge segments of the British and Irish population experienced the system as unaccountable, burdensome and frequently brutal.

And then there was the imperial mismanagement aired during the American Revolution and detailed during the impeachments of the East India Company's Robert Clive and Warren Hastings. Eighteenth-century critics such as Edmund Burke along with nineteenth-century reformers such as Sir Charles Trevelyan imagined that "a more efficient, professional and modernised state bureaucracy" could replace nabob values with civilizing government in India and Britain itself (p. 88). Thomas Carlyle, a proponent of civil service reform, nevertheless shrewdly worried that merit would rationalize privilege and connections anew, with meretricious products of "our Oxfords and Etons" still "advantaged" (p. 112). Jones remarks that the Whig interpretation of British history as gradualist progress was not entirely fiction. There were "significant steps to root out corrupt practices" and "open up the political state" starting with the Reform Act of 1832 (p. 117). The price was a conceit that the country's governing classes were above behaviour that they were clearly not above, neither within Britain nor across the empire.

As the book proceeds, Jones devotes increased attention to urban manifestations of corruption. Drawing on his previous research, he explicates the systematic racketeering that arose in Belfast, Glasgow and Liverpool. All three were port cities in flux, characterized by "migratory flows; and of course sectarian conflict" (p. 133). Belfast's Protestant establishment worried about corruption mainly when benefits went to Catholics. Once cited by US reformers as a model of "civic probity", Glasgow after 1918 "came to be regarded as a British Chicago". The Scottish city's critics now drew on the American vocabulary of bosses, machines and graft to denounce the "inventory of failed governance" that they documented (pp. 134, 138). As in the United States, comprehensive critiques of machine methods tended to come from leftleaning analysts, who deplored the "graft and boodle" of Labour-controlled Glasgow and the "Tammany practices" of Conservative Liverpool as obstacles to creative working-class politics (pp. 142, 159).

This was drafted as Britons voted in the 2024 general election, in which dismay over political self-dealing and conceit formed a backdrop. Jones's final chapter supports Transparency International's rueful conclusion that UK political elites persist "rather complacently" in regarding corruption as "something that happens elsewhere" (p. 213). The Whiggish story of Britain outgrowing the unsavoury aspects of its past is history that lulls and deceives. This learned, sensible book calls attention to that self-deception and its cost.

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Williams, R. A. 2021, *Garrison State Hegemony in U.S. Politics. A Critical Ethnohistory of Corruption and Power in the World's Oldest 'Democracy'*, New York: Peter Lang

One would have thought that there are a few domains of anthropological inquiry still remaining underexplored. Williams' work on U.S. Politics is one of them. In the four parts of the book, he sets out to give us an account of how U.S. politics works through the extensive analysis of the Libertarian Party structure and function along with its place in the American political system. Coming originally from the state of Ohio, Williams' aim is to explore the social construction of Libertarian Party politics and describe the social animation of cultural logics by recent party migrants in that State during the Libertarian Party transformation. The analysis is situated within America's duopoly polarization, giving an account of the role the Libertarian Party plays in it both as "alternative" and as reproducer of traditional and historically informed American political values.

Williams uses the anthropological notion of culture in order to analyse — from an "insider" point of view — the social processes by which diverse individuals and segments unite to animate Libertarian electioneering. The party emerged after World War II, importing Tory conservatism via the coalition of three Old Right segments, thus producing a "libertarian wing". By 1972, three dominant and distinct segments of the right-libertarian movement — classical market liberals advocating small government, supporters of limited-government and a minimal state, and individuals advocating for noncoercive, voluntary government — coalesced, giving birth to the Libertarian Party.

Williams notes that, apart from sporadic and uneven surveys, both anthropology and sociology have largely overlooked the Libertarian Party, despite it being, by 1976, the United States' largest third party. This study offers one of the most thorough and systematic insights into a political phenomenon that draws from traditional cultural logics and practices in order to formulate a seemingly paradoxical condition: although the Party supports, in a non-homogenous way, the idea that the ever-growing government at all levels of administration is a threat to the economic and social freedoms of all Americans, in the final analysis it reproduces the U.S.' rightward authoritarian trajectory by becoming more in line with mainstream opinion.

Williams has successfully studied the way in which this "third" party has been growing in America and in Ohio, and its persistent and unsuccessful efforts to unfix one of the two major parties, especially the Republican one. He manages a difficult process of participant observation because, as a member of the Party, he had to cope with the difficult problem of "objectivity". By analysing the party's structure, administration, political rallying, electioneering campaigns, and the way members-to-be are volunteering to serve, Williams gives the reader a well-rounded account of the Party's internal and external image, and of the way ideology and values are constructed through daily political and cultural interaction. Thus, in my view, he addresses the question of how different dimensions of membership might be affected by new or renewed modes of local representations of governance and politics. In addition, based on local ethnohistorical data, he investigates the shifting relation between the State and its citizens. Finally, Williams examines the impact of the social construction of ideas about political participation on specific social groups and how they are turned into hegemonic discourses, thus becoming the cornerstones of an encompassing and monitored power structure. In so doing, he finds analytical recourse to anthropology, sociology and history in order to show that the political phenomenon of the Libertarian Party is not just a lightning bolt but the fruit of a deeply rooted conservative political and cultural context as a way of life.

In Part I, Williams clarifies his conceptual approach by exploring meanings in the social constructions of the Libertarian Party. In Part II, he presents the ethnography of this case study. Part III addresses the wider questions generated by hegemony and, finally, in Part IV he reviews the ethnographic and historical data. In these pages, the reader finds the necessary preconditions for an understanding of U.S. politics imbued with rigour of argument, rigour of logic and rigour of theory — all mediated by the rigour of empirical research. This work essentially bridges empirical data and their translation into theory. It is exactly in this connection that the researcher manages to match his frame of reference with the empirical soundness of the data, effectively grounding his analysis and explanation of the reality under study. Here, the rigour of the research brings into play two dimensions: first, the relation between the argument and the data produced by the fieldwork; second, the relationship between the fieldwork data and the frame of reference.

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