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Popitz's Imaginative Variation on Power as Model for Critical Phenomenology

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Abstract   Heinrich Popitz's *Phenomena of Power* aims to uncover power as "a universal component in the genesis and operation of human societies". In order to uncover this "universal" concept of power, Popitz employs Husserl's method of the "imaginative variation" [*Phantasievariation*]. Yet, contrary to phenomenology's traditionally descriptive posture, *Phenomena of Power*'s project is at once descriptive *and normative*—seeking not only to describe power, but to also describe the way in which power can be remade. In the present paper it is argued that this normative component of Popitz's project offers the burgeoning field of critical phenomenology an illustration of the way in which Husserl's "imaginative variation" might be employed not only as a descriptive tool of pure essences, but also as an instrument in the refashioning of social reality.

Keywords   Heinrich Popitz · Phenomenology · Critical phenomenology · Imaginative variation · Utopia · Edmund Husserl

In recent years, critical phenomenology has arisen as an increasingly important branch of phenomenological research.[1] Birthed from interdisciplinary work of phenomenologists engaging with critical theory, queer theory, postcolonial studies, and other politically engaged traditions, critical phenomenology has sought to push the

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[1] The increasing interest in this field is marked, for example, by the recent development of *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, the first journal exclusively devoted to critical phenomenology. See also: Marder (2014).

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boundaries of phenomenology beyond its merely descriptive task. Such investigations are certainly not entirely new; one could, for example, seek precedence for this work in Husserl's cultural criticism in the *Crisis*, Sartre's attempted synthesis of existentialism and dialectical materialism in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Merleau-Ponty's political interventions in *Adventures of the Dialectic* and *Humanism and Terror*, or Michel Henry's engagements with cultural theory in *Barbarism*. Nevertheless, recent discussions have sparked serious debate regarding the proper methodology of critical phenomenology. In what way can a descriptive science such as phenomenology engage in the normative work of critical theory? Is phenomenology not, as Habermas suggests, restricted to grasping "transcendental norms in accordance with which consciousness necessarily operates … but not norms of a universal legislation derived from practical reason, which a free will could obey" (Habermas 1971: 305)?[2]

While a sociological investigation into the nature of power, might seem an unexpected contribution to this debate, I will here nonetheless suggest that Heinrich Popitz's *Phenomena of Power* offers a timely model for the burgeoning field of critical phenomenology. Indeed, by employing phenomenological methods in project at once descriptive *and normative*, Popitz offers critical phenomenology an illustration of the way in which Husserl's imaginative variation might be employed not only as a descriptive tool of pure essences, but also as an instrument in the refashioning of social reality.

The Universal Concept of Power

Phenomena of Power opens with an account of the concept "Power" understood as a *universal* concept. "We can assume," he writes in the opening page of the document, "that power constitutes a universal element of the human condition, fundamentally affecting the very essence of human sociability" (Popitz 2017: 1). This gesture of universality provokes two questions. First, what precisely does Popitz mean by his assertion that he has uncovered a universal concept of power? Second, is it still possible today, in the twenty first century, to speak of a "universal" concept? Is not all universal thinking authoritarian or totalitarian? Must we not rather, in the wake of post-structuralism, critical theory, deconstruction, and hermeneutics—those discourses all too hastily designated "postmodernism"—cringe in the face of such an assertion? That there could be a "universal" concept of power—how outdated!

In regard to the first question, Popitz offers two response. On the one hand he gives an empirical response, one marked by a certain epistemological humility: a universal feature, he writes, is one which appears "in all societies *we know*" (Popitz 2017: 100; emphasis added). For this formulation, universality is not an ontological absolute, but is rather the product of sociological and anthropological research; it is subject to the revisability of further investigation—it is an a posteriori universality. Popitz's second formulation, on the other hand, is considerably stronger:

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[2] For commentary, see: Mohr (2016); and Matheson (2011).

> These premises are the outcome of a historical process, but are not limited to a particular historical constellation. Their inherent claim to universal validity is obvious. Power has come to be understood as *a universal component in the genesis and operation of human societies*. It is universally the case that power is a product; its effects are also universal, not connected with any specific social context. (Popitz 2017: 8; emphasis added)

To be universal, is to stand outside of any social context, precisely insofar as the concept is always already present within *every* social context—not as a contingent fact (a posteriori), but as a fundamental structure. The universal, on this account, *is the structural*. It is not an effect of human society, but rather is itself a "component in the genesis" of society. This is an a priori account of universality, and it is this formulation, not the epistemologically weaker a posteriori formulation, that must contend with "postmodern" critiques of universality. For, as Judith Butler argues, for example, poststructuralism "refutes the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification" (Butler 1990: 54).

In order to engage with this critique, it is necessary to uncover the specific means by which Popitz arrives at his notion of a *universal* concept of power. The answer lies in his specific philosophical pedigree: *philosophical anthropology*. As Andreas Göttlich and Jochen Dreher note in their introduction, "it is specifically the influence of cultural anthropology … and *philosophical anthropology* … that strongly determines Popitz's research program, which can be labeled 'anthropological sociology'" (Popitz 2017: xiii; emphasis added). Philosophical anthropology, perhaps epitomized best by the work of Max Scheler, seeks to uncover, as Göttlich and Dreher note, "the cross-cultural fundamental structures of human sociation" (Popitz 2017: xiii). As Max Scheler describes the project: "whether I am investigating the innermost essence of an individual, a historical era, a family, a people, a nation, or any other sociohistorical group, I will know and understand it most profoundly when I have discerned the system of its concrete value-assessments and value-preference, whatever organization this system has" (Scheler 1973: 98).

But, these fundamental value-structures are not reducible to the observations of empirical anthropology. Rather, philosophical anthropology draws upon the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Edmund Husserl, in order to develop a methodology of "essential seeing," whereby the phenomena of human sociation are manifest in their own unique phenomenality. To again cite Göttlich and Dreher, Popitz's "profound training in philosophical anthropology as well as his precise observational skill enabled him to break through the empirical appearances of power and to discover its bare structure, its phenomenality" (Popitz 2017: xviii). If we are to understand power's universal significance then, we must see the precise way that Popitz is employing the specific methodology of phenomenological philosophy.

Eidetic Seeing and Imaginative Variation

The notion of "eidetic insight" or "essential intuition" [*Wesenserschauung*] stands at the foundation of Husserl's phenomenological project, already playing a prominent role in his critique of psychologism in the *Logical Investigations* of 1900 and 1901. Yet, Husserl is perhaps no clearer regarding the methodology of eidetic insight, than in his later *Experience and Judgment*. In this text, Husserl seeks to defend the thesis that logical principles find their genesis in basic human experience: "even at its most abstract, logic demands a theory of experience" (Churchill et al. 1973). At the heart of this argument is an account of the direct (i.e. experiential) intuition of "pure essences"—a priori concepts that stand as the condition of possibility for the thinking of objects within their genus. As Husserl writes:

> The essence proves to be that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought, i.e., without which the object cannot be intuitively imagined as such. This general essence is the eidos, the idea in the platonic sense, but apprehended in its purity and free from all metaphysical interpretations. (Husserl 1999: 293)

While Husserl's account of pure essences is often derided as a retreat to the platonic *eidos* in the derogatory sense, something like a notion of mystical insight, Husserl seeks to defend his thesis through the imposition of a strict methodological practice as the means of attaining eidetic insight.

The method by which Husserl instructs his reader to gain access to such essences he names "imaginative variation" [*Phantasievariation*] or "free variation" [*freie Variation*]. The acquisition of these pure concepts, he writes:

> is based, therefore, on a variation. In other words, for its modification in pure imagination, we let ourselves be guided by the fact taken as a model. For this it is necessary that ever new similar images be obtained as copies, as images of the imagination, which are all concretely similar to the original image. Thus, by an act of volition we produce free variants … It then becomes evident that a unity runs through this multiplicity of successive figures. (Husserl 1999: 292f.)

That is to say, one begins with a particular, contingent case of the essence being sought—I might perhaps take a table as a particular example of the essence "physical object". This particular case is then varied by a free act of the imagination—I imagine the table to be metal, or wood, or plastic; I imagine it to be red, blue, or green; I imagine its shape changing in innumerable novel manners. While this variation is understood to be "pure"—that is, "unconstrained by reference to actual existence and by assumptions concerning the real features of actually existing objects or processes" (Moran and Cohen 2012: 160)—it is nevertheless the case that this free imaginative variation strikes concrete limits, certain points that can't be violated without producing something that is no longer the essence under investigation. If I imagine an object that can't be touched, that my hand passes straight through, then it no longer seems to qualify as the essence "physical object." Thus, there emerges, intuitively, certain essential features of the essence under investigation, certain

features that cannot be varied, an "invariable what". I cannot intuitively imagine a table with a front but no back, a table without a visual presence, without tactile relations; these are essential to the physical object *as* physical object. Husserl calls this "invariable what, according to which all the variants coincide: *a general essence*" (Husserl 1999: 293; emphasis added).

Popitz's writing little resembles Husserl's turgid prose. Rather, his straightforward writing style, as Göttlich and Dreher suggest, "leads the reader directly in media res, to the analysis of the phenomenon itself," (perhaps, in this manner exemplifying Husserl's demand, *die Sachen selbst*!, "back to the things themselves!"). Yet, one can nevertheless see precisely this methodology of imaginative variation, albeit stripped of its technical vocabulary, throughout both smaller and larger analyses of *Phenomena of Power*.

To take only one example, Popitz's third chapter seeks to examine the phenomenon of the "threat." Taking a basic example of the threat as a model—"your money or your life" (Popitz 2017: 53)—he strips away everything that is not *essential* to the threat as such, in order to uncover the "structure of the threat" (one might say, the essence of the threat). As he writes:

> The components of the threat are easily identified. One person, one group, one country—the threatener—informs the other—the threatened—or presupposes as a known fact that the other is aware of the following: If you do not do (noncompliant conduct) what I want (the conduct demanded), I will inflict harm on you or arrange for someone to do so (threatened sanction). If you do what I want (compliant conduct), you spare yourself the harm (the sanction refrained from). (Popitz 2017: 53)

Beginning with a particular case of the threat—"your money or your life"—Popitz is nevertheless able to extract the fundamental "structure of the threat" through an imaginative variation that reveals certain necessary features of the threat: threatener, threatened, noncompliant conduct, the conduct demanded, threatened sanction, etc.

Noting this consistent method, Göttlich and Dreher suggest that, "Popitz seeks the answer by means of fictional episodes, albeit with a realistic background" (Popitz 2017: xvii). What we have—in this movement from fictional (but realistic) episodes, to a universal concept—is, in Husserlian language, nothing other than the "pure essence" discovered through an act of imaginative variation.

Popitz on Imagination

This reading of *Phenomena of Power*—as implicitly dependent upon the methodology of the imaginative variation—is evidenced by the prominent role that Popitz retains for the imagination throughout *Phenomena of Power*. For Popitz, the imagination plays a central role in human sociation and the various phenomena of power.

Imagination, Popitz suggests for example, determines the unbounded capacity for human violence: "the boundlessness of violent relations," he writes, "is the capacity of the human imagination, with its own lack of boundaries" (Popitz 2017: 31). It is there, in the imagination, that "violence springs up in all manner of daydreams

and nightmares" (Popitz 2017: 31), in a manner that is "particularly obsessive and compelling" (Popitz 2017: 31). "Apparently," he suggests, "there is no free space in human consciousness that the imagination of violence cannot penetrate" (Popitz 2017: 31)

The imagination, in the case of violence, is therefore marked, as it is in Husserl, by its extreme, even boundless capacity to generate novel variations. The imagination is precisely the capacity of the human subject to think that which is not, to think the unreal without limit. But, as Popitz insists, the "imaginative transgression of what is the case naturally does not hold only for the theme of violence" (Popitz 2017: 31).

Rather, imagination appears throughout *Phenomena of Power*. "Within authority relations," he writes, "the effectiveness of the power of imagination also acquires outstanding significance" (Popitz 2017: 86). In his analysis of authority relations, the imagination plays the role of projecting and enhancing the influence of authority figures: "the bonding is complete if the imaginary projection of recognitions and denials of recognition can replace, entirely or partially, their realization as matters of fact" (Popitz 2017: 87). Through this act of bonding, the subject's own imagination binds them to the very authority to which they are subject. Reality is "replaced by imaginations" (Popitz 2017: 87) with the result that conduct is regulated, control is increased, and ultimately, "the dependency is recognized as inescapable" (Popitz 2017: 89). So strong is the role of imagination in Popitz, that it is the imagination rather than physical coercion, that plays the primary role in the determination of the strength of authority: "the bolder and more productive the force of imagination," he writes, "the more obvious the effect, direct or remote, of experiences of…authority" (Popitz 2017: 89).

Similar examples could likewise be drawn from his chapter on technology, where technical developments are marked as the objectification of "intents, faculties, [and] imaginations" (Popitz 2017: 122).

Even given these varied examples—violence, authority, technology—something like a consistent theory of the imagination can be discerned. The imagination holds a unique power over human existence, because it is the power which is marked by a "lack of boundaries" (Popitz 2017: 31); it "can go beyond what is the case" (Popitz 2017: 39). In the imagination the human being finds an, at least regional, escape from their finitude, both temporal and physical: "the workings of the imaginations," Popitz writes, "are particularly boundless because they are not exclusively connected with past experience, and what is merely imagined can overcome existent inhibitions even more than our actual doings can" (Popitz 2017: 31).

These reflections on the important role of the imagination in political reality are by no means disconnected from Popitz's use of the imaginative variation in his establishment of a universal concept of power. Rather, these briefer analyses of power, authority, and technology serve to highlight the political potential already implicit in the imaginative variation. That is to say, just as the imagination can serve as a conduit for power in social and political situations, so too can the imagination, when employed in a rigorous manner in imaginative variation, serve in the project of refashioning political reality.

Thinking Utopia

It is here that Popitz opens up a surprising possibility for a radical political thinking within a phenomenological context. For, Popitz's discussion of the political power of imagination—in violence, authority, technology, etc.—and his employment of the imaginative variation in his uncovering of certain "fundamental structures" of human sociation are by no means unconnected. Rather, Popitz intuitively recognizes the deep potential of imaginative thinking not only to uncover the structures of power (philosophical anthropology), but also to shape or change power, or at least direct a thinking towards the possibility of such change (critical phenomenology).

This potential is reflected in the guiding intuitions of *Phenomena of Power*. For, despite its phenomenological credentials, *Phenomena of Power* is not neutral; it is not pure description. Rather, from the very beginning Popitz insists upon a political orientation: "The first and fundamental premise," Popitz writes:

> is the belief in the power-based orders as humanly produced realities. These are not divinely ordained, predetermined by myths, imposed by nature, or derived from sacrosanct tradition. Rather, they are the product of human activity. *In the same way as they have been brought into being, they can also be refashioned*. (Popitz 2017: 8; emphasis added)

The heart of *Phenomena of Power* is an implicit rallying cry against quietism. Power is not permanent, it can be, to cite Göttlich and Dreher one final time, "constructed, reshaped, and destructed" (Popitz 2017: xxii), precisely because it has first been *constructed*. Like his contemporaries—Foucault and Derrida, and countless others—Popitz recognizes the liberative potential of constitution. That which is built by human hands, that which is not "natural" or divinely ordained, can in the same manner be made otherwise, can be made better, can be deconstructed by these same human hands, or perhaps more precisely, *by the same human imagination*.

Just as it is the power of the imagination that fuels violence, authority, and technical development, so too does human imagination stand as the ground for political reorganization. "The idea of the political," Popitz argues, "renders the overarching political ordering of collective human existence something open to fashioning and modifying. In this manner, the status quo is experienced from the distance suggested by the fact that it can be *imagined differently*" (Popitz 2017: 2; emphasis added). What opens the possibility for a refashioning of the status quo, is the fact that the imagination, as we have seen above, is not bound to reality. The imagination, is open to free, limitless variation. For one who finds themselves disappointed by political reality, this can only strike as a great relief. The different, the better, is always in principle thinkable, and therefore, always in principle buildable.

The method of such a political imagination is only hinted at by Popitz, who writes, for example, "the status quo can be imagined differently when *contrasting it with the imagination of something better*" (Popitz 2017: 2). Contrasting: political reality stands before the judgment of the unrealized or the merely imagined "something better"—to borrow an image from the prophet Amos—"the plumb line" (Amos 7.7–9) has been stretched before political reality.

Therefore, what can be drawn from Popitz is a theory of political transformation modeled on the Husserlian imaginative variation. For Husserl, the universality of the conclusions derived from the imaginative variation comes from its total disconnection from reality, its subsumption under the rule of the *epoché*—the bracketing of the general thesis of existence. "The specific freedom of essential seeing," Husserl argues, is that "in the progress from variant to variant, we are not bound by the conditions of unanimity in the same way as in the progress of experience from one individual object to another on the ground of unity of experience" (Husserl 1999: 295). That is to say, this bracketing of mundane existence opens up the imagination to its specific boundless freedom, to imagine all that is thinkable, rather than only that which merely exists—the status quo. Through this imaginative freedom, we "find ourselves, so to speak, in a pure world of imagination, a world of absolute possibility" (Husserl 1999: 298).

While Husserl thinks the world of absolute possibility in largely a-political terms, Popitz reveals its political potential. It is when the imagination breaks free from its enclosure or colonization by authority, that it is able to produce an image of a better political organization. What word better captures this alternate reality, this world of pure imagination and possibility, better than the no-where of *utopia*?

Unsurprisingly, given Popitz's realist aesthetic, his straightforward approach to political reality, and his recognition of the intractability of domination, he speaks little of utopian thinking. In fact, the word utopia appears only once in *Phenomena of Power*, in a passage that, while enigmatic, is also affirming: "utopia … appears as the realistic method for rendering justice" (Popitz 2017: 138).

By utopia, is hardly to be understood something like a perfect world, as colloquial usage often suggests. Rather, as Foucault argues, "utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these *utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces*" (Foucault 1984: 3). Utopia is not a perfected place wherein political conflicts have ceased, but rather a tool by which the present reality is thought anew. Utopia need not strictly speaking mark the end (*telos*) of the political project, but rather provides a necessary point of comparison, the "something better" of which Popitz speaks.

While such utopian comparisons—political reality versus a merely imagined "something better"—are often denigrated as *mere* "thought experiments," the phenomenologist Walter Hopp has shown that "thought experiments, at their best, are in fact founded on acts of fulfillment in which we intuit universals and the relations among them, and that the actual instantiation of those universals and relations is immaterial" (Hopp 2014: 247). Simply put, thought experiments open us up to genuinely new knowledge, even if they are built on the relation—or comparison—of unrealized entities (e.g., our "better world"). To cite one of Hopp's examples:

Suppose that I am faced with the task of moving a rather bulky couch out of a cramped apartment and through a narrow doorway. I know it won't be easy, but I also know it can be done. After all, I got it in here. As I survey the scene before me, something remarkable happens: the couch begins to float through

the air of its own accord, makes a surprisingly simple sequence of twists and turns, and exits through the doorway and down the stairs. In disbelief, I rub my eyes, and upon opening them again find the magical couch sitting in its original position, stubbornly unmoved. (Hopp 2014: 248)

Even in the mere "thought experiment" of moving the couch, I see *real possibilities*, presently unrealized, but potentially realizable. In the same manner, the utopian comparison is not a meaningless thought exercise, but a tool or method for thinking the political otherwise. While, like the imagined couch, the utopian ideal is not real, it may nevertheless provide a grounding for actualization—I must twist the couch in this manner to get it out, I must push for these specific policy changes to build a more just society.

Thus Popitz instructs the critical phenomenologist that via the enactment of something like an imaginative variation, the present political circumstance can be varied, changed, and transformed. It is through these acts of variation, of utopian thinking, that it is possible to intuitively uncover real political possibilities. And, as Popitz insists, if the world can be imagined differently, it can likewise be built differently; it can be refashioned. Thus, ironically, it is precisely by his project of establishing "universality"—a project that might open Popitz to accusations of authoritarianism—which provides an illustration of a methodology for the disruption of political authoritarianism. As Popitz writes: "one can do things differently, and can do them better. One of the taken-for-granted premises of our understanding of power is the conviction that *power is 'made' and can be remade otherwise* than is now the case" (Popitz 2017: 4). This is the lesson that Popitz offers to the critical phenomenologist.

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