Condensation of Helium in Aerogel and Athermal Dynamics of the Random-Field Ising Model

Geoffroy J. Aubry,1 Fabien Bonnet,1 Mathieu Melich,1 Laurent Guyon,1 Panayotis Spathis,1 Florence Despetis,2 and Pierre-Etienne Wolf3,4

1Université Grenoble Alpes, Institut Néel, F-38042 Grenoble, France and CNRS, Institut Néel, F-38042 Grenoble, France
2Université Montpellier 2, Laboratoire Charles Coulomb UMR 5221, F-34095 Montpellier, France and CNRS, Laboratoire Charles Coulomb UMR 5221, F-34095 Montpellier, France

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High resolution measurements reveal that condensation isotherms of 4He in high porosity silica aerogel become discontinuous below a critical temperature. We show that this behavior does not correspond to an equilibrium phase transition modified by the disorder induced by the aerogel structure, but to the disorder-driven critical point predicted for the athermal out-of-equilibrium dynamics of the random-field Ising model. Our results evidence the key role of nonequilibrium effects in the phase transitions of disordered systems.

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The Ising model has a central role in statistical physics. At the root of the critical scaling concept in clean systems, it is also a prototype to study the effect of disorder on phase transitions. In the random-field Ising model (RFIM), the key question is whether a random local magnetic field acting on the Ising spins destroys the order induced by the spin coupling. After years of fierce theoretical debate, it is now accepted that, in three dimensions and at low temperature, an ordered phase should exist below a critical disorder strength [1]. The experimental situation is not that clear cut. In magnetic systems, the mixing of random-field and random exchange effects makes the situation complex. As proposed thirty years ago [2,3], the condensation (or the demixion) of (binary) fluids in disordered porous media should offer an alternative testing ground for the theory. Indeed, the pure Ising model and the liquid-vapor (or demixing) transition fall in the same universality class, and the preferential attraction of the substrate for one vapor (or demixing) transition fall in the same universality class. As proposed thirty years ago [2,3], the condensation (or the demixion) of (binary) fluids in disordered porous media should offer an alternative testing ground for the theory. Indeed, the pure Ising model and the liquid-vapor (or demixing) transition fall in the same universality class, and the preferential attraction of the substrate for one vapor (or demixing) transition fall in the same universality class. As proposed thirty years ago [2,3], the condensation (or the demixion) of (binary) fluids in disordered porous media should offer an alternative testing ground for the theory. 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A Sethna et al.-like transition has been predicted for condensation of fluids confined in random disordered porous materials by Kierlik et al. [18]. Using a local mean-field approach, these authors show that the analog of the magnetization curve, the condensation isotherm \( \Phi(P) \) (where \( \Phi \) is the liquid fraction and \( P \) the pressure), presents a change of shape similar to the one predicted within the athermal RFIM for decreasing disorder [23]. It takes place when increasing the porosity [23] or decreasing the temperature at constant, large enough, porosity [24]. In this Letter, we observe such a disorder-driven transition for the condensation of helium into a high porosity aerogel (95% porosity, density 102 g/L) synthesized by a one-step process at \( pH = 9 \) [25,26]. We obtain four major results: (i) using optical means to resolve on a local scale the condensation process, we evidence the predicted transition from discontinuous (vertical) to smooth isotherms; (ii) we demonstrate unambiguously the nonequilibrium nature of this transition; (iii) in agreement with theory, the occurrence of the transition depends on the pressure history; (iv) in contrast to simple expectation, the macroscopic avalanche does not follow from some purely geometric capillary instability [3].

Our aerogel was grown as a 3.7 mm thick, 13 mm diameter cylinder between Teflon plates to obtain surfaces of good optical quality, and moved to a copper cell closed by two sapphire windows. Condensation of \(^4\)He is studied in an optical cryostat between 4.4 K and the bulk critical temperature, \( T_c \approx 5.2 \) K. The cell temperature is regulated within 10 \( \mu \)K. The temperature heterogeneity within the aerogel resulting from the absorption of the 300 K infrared radiation transmitted through the cryostat windows is estimated smaller than 1 \( \mu \)K [27]. Blocking this IR radiation using shutters thermalized at 4 K has no influence on the isotherms, nor on our optical measurements [27]. Condensation is performed at a fixed flow rate by heating between 80 and 180 K an external reservoir connected to the cell [28]. The typical condensation time is 10 to 20 h, long enough for the isotherm shape to be independent of the flow rate. \( P \) is measured at room temperature by a pressure gauge connected to the cell by a separate capillary, with a resolution of 10 \( \mu \)bar. The amount of \(^4\)He inside the aerogel, computed by subtracting the contents of the external reservoir and of the dead volumes from the total known amount in the system, is converted to a global liquid fraction \( \Phi \) as described elsewhere [15].

Figures 1(a) and 1(b) show the full hysteresis loop at 4.40 and 4.95 K, and details of its condensation branch for \( T \) decreasing from 5.06 to 4.40 K. The isotherms become steeper as the temperature decreases, but their slope saturates at low temperature: at 4.40 K, the aerogel fills over a range of 500 \( \mu \)bar. As shown by optical measurements, this finite width results from the macroscopic heterogeneity of our sample, which masks a disorder-driven transition occurring close to 4.7 K.

Figure 2(a) shows our optical setup. The sample is illuminated with a 50 \( \mu \)m thick HeNe laser sheet at a 45° angle with respect to the cylinder axis, and the thus defined slice is imaged at 45° and 135° from the incident direction. Figure 2(b) shows the same slice for increasing values of \( \Phi \) for two temperatures [29]. In both cases, at low liquid fraction, or for the fully filled sample, the small and uniform brightness is due to the silica background scattering. When approaching the steep part of the condensation isotherm, the scattered signal starts to grow, showing that the fluid density becomes heterogeneous at the scale of the optical wavelength [15]. At 4.40 K, above \( \Phi \approx 0.3 \), the pictures become macroscopically heterogeneous: the central bright region is surrounded by a darker region corresponding to the fully filled state of the aerogel. This shows that the aerogel does not fill uniformly. As more \(^4\)He is added to the cell, the bright region recesses. Scanning the aerogel with the laser sheet evidences that the bright region always collapses in the same outer part of the aerogel when \( \Phi \rightarrow 1 \) [Fig. 2(c)]. This implies that the nonuniform condensation does not result from fluid transport from the surface to the center of the sample, but from some heterogeneity of the sample.

(i) Transition from vertical to smooth isotherms.—We locally study the condensation process by measuring, as a function of \( P, I_{135} \), the signal scattered at 135° from a region corresponding to one CCD pixel [30]. Taking into account the pixel size and the laser sheet thickness, this corresponds to a parallelepipedic region about 50 \( \mu \)m wide and high, and 70 \( \mu \)m deep. This is much smaller than the sample size, but much larger than the aerogel microscopic.
scales (the silica correlation length is estimated around 10 nm [15]). In practice, because the probed region is locally homogeneous in the vertical direction, we improve the signal-to-noise ratio by averaging \( I_{135} \) in a vertical rectangle about 1 mm high. \( I_{135} \) depends on both the local liquid fraction \( \phi \) in the volume thus defined, and the spatial fluid configuration. Qualitatively, as condensation locally proceeds, one expects liquid microdomains to appear and increase in size, up to a point where the situation is better described in terms of vapor microdomains decreasing in size and number. We thus expect \( I_{135} \) to present a maximum as a function of pressure as \( \phi \) increases from 0 to 1.

The pressure dependence of \( I_{135} \), shown in Fig. 3, evidences two different regimes of condensation as a function of temperature. For \( T \geq 4.80 \) K, \( I_{135} \) increases as a function of pressure up to \( P_0(T) \), the pressure of its maximum, then decreases continuously, as expected for a continuous condensation process. In contrast, for \( T \leq 4.70 \) K, the continuous increase of \( I_{135} \) up to \( P_0 \) is followed by a sharp decrease down to the filled state value [31]. The same behavior is observed at any position in the illuminated slice, except that \( P_0 \) varies by about 500 \( \mu \)bar across the sample. Convoluting this spatial variation with the size of the optically probed region accounts for the finite width (30–40 \( \mu \)bar) over which \( I_{135} \) drops in Fig. 3. Our observations are therefore consistent with abrupt local condensation isotherms below a temperature \( T^* \) (4.70 K \( \leq T^* < 4.80 \) K). Measurements for intermediate temperatures show that 4.700 K \( \leq T^* \leq 4.725 \) K (data not shown).

(ii) Nonequilibrium nature of the transition.—In the spirit of Ref. [8], this change of shape, together with the coexistence of bright and dark regions in Fig. 2, could be interpreted in terms of a first order equilibrium phase transition between a gaslike phase (inside the bright region) and the liquid phase. In this interpretation, \( T^* \) would be the transition critical temperature, shifted below \( T_c \) due to disorder, while the observed hysteresis would be explained by the pinning of the macroscopic interface between the two presumed phases. Hysteresis should then be absent above \( T^* \), where the concept of interface has no meaning. This is not the case as hysteresis is observed up to 5.16 K, well above \( T^* \) [13]. Moreover, optical measurements show that the fluid distribution in the gaslike region is not the same on condensation and evaporation, directly showing that this region does not correspond to a true thermodynamic phase. This is illustrated by Fig. 4(a) which shows pictures taken at 4.60 K (\( < T^* \)) when reverting from condensation to evaporation before the aerogel is fully filled. Starting from the empty state, we condense up to the pressure \( P_B \), where the dot in Fig. 4(a) is just filled (picture B), then evaporate by decreasing the pressure. In the interpretation of a pinned interface, one would expect, once the pressure reaches the pressure \( P_D \) of the evaporation branch of the full hysteresis loop, the interface to move backwards, retracing in reverted order the same states than during filling. This is not observed. At \( P_D \), when the dot starts to empty, its state differs from the state upon filling, as indicated by the increased local brightness [picture D and Fig. 4(b)]. This set of results excludes that the abrupt condensation below \( T^* \) corresponds to an equilibrium phase transition.
(iii) History dependence.—We now identify this phenomenon to the out-of-equilibrium transition predicted by Sethna et al. by studying its dependence on history. From results on the athermal RFIM on a random graph [32], one expects that, starting from an empty aerogel, a macroscopic jump of $\phi$ follows from a reentrance of the outer envelope of the distribution of metastable states in the $(P, \phi)$ plane, as, for this initial condition, condensation proceeds along this envelope. For such a distribution, illustrated in Fig. 4(c), filling from an only partly emptied initial state should suppress the jump. As shown by Fig. 4(b), this is indeed the behavior observed for the dot of Fig. 4(a): when starting from $P_D$, where it was only partly emptied, the dot continuously fills (its scattered signal continuously decreases to the liquid state value, unlike what is observed when filling from the fully emptied state).

(iv) Microscopic origin of the abrupt condensation.—At 4.7 K, liquid and gas can be discriminated on the scale of the aerogel correlation length. One could then interpret the abrupt condensation below $T^*$ as a capillary instability of the microscopic liquid-vapor menisci connecting neighboring silica strands, a scenario first introduced by de Gennes [3]. The abrupt condensation event should then take place for a given menisci configuration, independently on temperature, hence, for a given average size of the liquid microdomains. This size depends on temperature. To show it, we have measured the scattering anisotropy, as given by the ratio of the intensities scattered at 45° and 135°, after subtraction of the silica background [33]. This ratio increases from 2 at 4.40 K up to 5 at 4.70 K, implying that the size of the liquid microdomains at the avalanche threshold increases with temperature. This behavior is in qualitative agreement with preliminary simulations within the Kierlik et al.’s model [34].

Conclusion.—Our measurements demonstrate that, despite the finite temperature, the concept of athermal, out-of-equilibrium, dynamics accounts for the process of fluid condensation into our 95% porosity aerogel. We confirmed the universal character of this concept by measurements on a lighter (98.5%) aerogel (see Supplemental Material [35]). The larger value of $T^*$ measured in this case agrees with the theoretical expectation that $T^*$ increases when disorder decreases [36]. Our results lead us to revisit earlier experiments [8–10] where a change of the isotherms shape has been interpreted in terms of a disorder-shifted equilibrium critical point. Similarly to our case, it could rather result from an out-of-equilibrium critical point. As hysteresis occurs on both sides of $T^*$ in the out-of-equilibrium scenario, this would naturally explain the slow dynamics reported above $T^*$ in these experiments. While our results thus suggest that observing a true equilibrium behavior in RFIM-like disordered systems could be challenging, they also show the pertinence of nonequilibrium concepts to describe the properties of first-order phase transitions in the presence of disorder.

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* pierre-etienne.wolf@neel.cnrs.fr


[26] Aerogels grown in basic pH are an experimental realization of the numerical gels studied in Refs. [23,24].
[29] Note that the pictures only evolve when $\Phi$ increases and not if condensation is paused. This is similar to the spin flips of the athermal RFIM which only take place when the field is swept.
[30] The choice of 135° rather than 45° minimizes the attenuation of the scattered light due to propagation through the bright region.
[31] More precisely, the signal drops to a slightly larger value than the filled state value. This is a second-order scattering effect, due to the illumination of the filled aerogel by the recessing bright region.
[33] This quantity is measured, without any error due to attenuation, at the last pressure where the bright region intersects the illuminated section.