THE EFFECT OF PRIMORDIAL TEMPERATURE FLUCTUATIONS ON THE QCD TRANSITION$^a$

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We analyse a new mechanism for the cosmological QCD first-order phase transition: inhomogeneous nucleation. The primordial temperature fluctuations are larger than the tiny temperature interval, in which bubbles would form in the standard picture of homogeneous nucleation. Thus the bubbles nucleate at cold spots. We find the typical distance between bubble centers to be a few meters. This exceeds the estimates from homogeneous nucleation by two orders of magnitude. The resulting baryon inhomogeneities may affect primordial nucleosynthesis.

$^a$ To appear in the Proceedings of Strong and Electroweak Matter 2000 (SEWM2000), Marseilles, France, 14–17 June 2000.
First-order phase transitions normally proceed via nucleation of bubbles of the new phase. When the temperature is spatially uniform and no impurities are present, the mechanism is homogeneous nucleation. We denote by $v_{\text{heat}}$ the effective speed by which released latent heat propagates in sufficient amounts to shut down nucleations. The mean distance between nucleation centers, measured immediately after the transition completed, is

$$d_{\text{nuc, hom}} = 2v_{\text{heat}}\Delta t_{\text{nuc}},$$

where $\Delta t_{\text{nuc}}$ is the duration of the nucleation period.

Surface tension and latent heat are provided by lattice simulations with quenched QCD only, giving the values $\sigma = 0.015T_c^3$, $l = 1.4T_c^2$. Scaling the latent heat for the physical QCD leads us to take $l = 3T_c^4$. Using these values the amount of supercooling is $\Delta_e = 2.3 \times 10^{-4}$, with large error bars. Due to rapid change of energy density near $T_c$, the microscopic sound speed in the quark phase has a small value, $c_{\text{s}}(T_c) < 1$ (for references see 1).

In the real Universe the local temperature of the radiation fluid fluctuates. The temperature contrast is denoted by $\Delta \equiv \delta T/\bar{T}$. On subhorizon scales in the radiation dominated epoch, each Fourier coefficient $\Delta(t, k)$ oscillates with constant amplitude $\Delta T(k)$. Inflation predicts a Gaussian distribution,

$$p(\Delta)d\Delta = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}\Delta_{\text{rms}}} \exp \left( -\frac{1}{2} \frac{\Delta^2}{(\Delta_{\text{rms}})^2} \right) d\Delta.$$

We find the COBE normalized rms temperature fluctuation of the radiation fluid (not of cold dark matter) $\Delta_{T_{\text{rms}}} = 1.0 \times 10^{-4}$ for a primordial Harrison-Zel’довich spectrum. The change of the equation of state prior to the QCD transition modifies the temperature-energy density relation, $\Delta = c_s^2\delta\varepsilon/(\varepsilon + p)$. We may neglect the pressure $p$ near the critical temperature since $p \ll \varepsilon_\text{n}$ at $T_c$. On the other hand the drop of the sound speed enhances the amplitude of the density fluctuations proportional to $c_s^{-1/2}$. Putting all those effects together and allowing for a tilt in the power spectrum, the COBE normalized rms temperature fluctuation reads

$$\Delta_{T_{\text{rms}}} \approx 10^{-4}(3c_s^2)^{3/4} \left( \frac{k}{k_0} \right)^{(n-1)/2}.$$

For a Harrison-Zel’ordova spectrum and $3c_s^2 = 0.1$, we find $\Delta_{T_{\text{rms}}} \approx 2 \times 10^{-5}$.

A small scale cut-off in the spectrum of primordial temperature fluctuations comes from collisional damping by neutrinos. For $l_{\text{smooth}}$, the length over which temperature is constant, we take the value $10^{-8}d_{\text{nuc}}$. The temperature fluctuations are frozen with respect to the time scale of nucleations.
Let us now investigate bubble nucleation in a Universe with spatially inhomogeneous temperature distribution. Nucleation effectively takes place while the temperature drops by the tiny amount $\Delta_{\text{nuc}}$. To determine the mechanism of nucleation, we compare $\Delta_{\text{nuc}}$ with the rms temperature fluctuation $\Delta_T^{\text{rms}}$:

1. If $\Delta_T^{\text{rms}} < \Delta_{\text{nuc}}$, the probability to nucleate a bubble at a given time is \textit{homogeneous} in space. This is the case of homogeneous nucleation.

2. If $\Delta_T^{\text{rms}} > \Delta_{\text{nuc}}$, the probability to nucleate a bubble at a given time is \textit{inhomogeneous} in space. We call this inhomogeneous nucleation.

The quenched lattice QCD data and a COBE normalized flat spectrum lead to the values $\Delta_{\text{nuc}} \sim 10^{-6}$ and $\Delta_T^{\text{rms}} \sim 10^{-5}$. We conclude that the cosmological QCD transition may proceed via inhomogeneous nucleation. A sketch of inhomogeneous nucleation is shown in Fig. 1. The basic idea is that temperature inhomogeneities determine the location of bubble nucleation. Bubbles nucleate first in the cold regions.

For the fastest fluctuations, with angular frequency $c_s/l_{\text{smooth}}$, we find

$$\frac{dT(t, x)}{dt} = \frac{T}{t_H} \left[ -3c_s^2 + \mathcal{O} \left( \Delta_T t_H^{\delta t} \right) \right]. \quad (4)$$

The Hubble expansion is the dominant contribution, as typical values are $3c_s^2 = 0.1$ from quenched lattice QCD and $\Delta_T^{\text{rms}} t_H/\delta t \approx 0.01$. This means that the local temperature does never increase, except by the released latent heat during bubble growth.

To gain some insight in the physics of inhomogeneous nucleation, let us first inspect a simplified case. We have some randomly distributed cold spheres of...
diameter \( l_{\text{smooth}} \) with equal and uniform temperature, which is by the amount \( \Delta_T^{\text{rms}}/T_c \) smaller than the again uniform temperature in the rest of the Universe. When the temperature in the cold spots has dropped to \( T_f \), homogeneous nucleation takes place in them. Due to the Hubble expansion the rest of the Universe would need the time \( \Delta t_{\text{cool}} = t_H \Delta T_{\text{rms}}/3c_s^2 \) to cool down to \( T_f \). The cold spots have fully been transformed into the hadron phase while the rest of the Universe still is in the quark phase. The latent heat released in a cold spot propagates in all directions, which provides the length scale

\[
l_{\text{heat}} = 2v_{\text{heat}} \Delta t_{\text{cool}}.
\]

If the typical distance from the boundary of a cold spot to the boundary of a neighboring cold spot is less than \( l_{\text{heat}} \), then no hadronic bubbles can nucleate in the intervening space.

The real Universe consists of smooth patches of typical linear size \( l_{\text{smooth}} \), their temperatures given by the distribution \( \mathcal{B} \). At time \( t \) heat, coming from a cold spot which was transformed into hadron phase at time \( t' \), occupies the volume \( V(t, t') = (4\pi/3)(l_{\text{smooth}}/2 + v_{\text{heat}}(t - t'))^3 \). The fraction of space that is not reheated by the released latent heat (and not transformed to hadron phase), is given at time \( t \) by

\[
f(t) \approx 1 - \int_0^t \Gamma_{\text{ihn}}(t')V(t, t')dt',
\]

where we neglect overlap and merging of heat fronts. \( \Gamma_{\text{ihn}} \) is the volume fraction converted into the new phase, per physical time and volume as a function of the mean temperature \( T = \bar{T}(t) \). We find

\[
\Gamma_{\text{ihn}} = 3c_s^2T_f T \frac{1}{t_H V_{\text{smooth}}} p(\Delta = T_f \bar{T} - 1),
\]

where the relevant physical volume is \( V_{\text{smooth}} = (4\pi/3)(l_{\text{smooth}}/2)^3 \).

The end of the nucleation period, \( t_{\text{ihn}} \), is defined through the condition \( f(t_{\text{ihn}}) = 0 \). We introduce the variables \( N \equiv (1 - T_f/T)/\Delta T_{\text{rms}} \) and \( N' \equiv N(t_{\text{ihn}}) \). Putting everything together we determine \( N \) from

\[
\frac{l_{\text{heat}}^3}{l_{\text{smooth}}^3} \int_N^\infty dN \frac{e^{-\frac{1}{2}N^2}}{\sqrt{2\pi}} \left( \frac{l_{\text{smooth}}}{l_{\text{heat}}} + N - N' \right)^3 = 1.
\]

For \( l_{\text{heat}}/l_{\text{smooth}} = 1, 2, 5, 10 \) we find \( N \approx 0.8, 1.4, 2.1, 2.6 \), respectively.

The effective nucleation distance in inhomogeneous nucleation is defined from the number density of those cold spots that acted as nucleation centers,
\[ d_{\text{nuc,ihn}} = n^{-1/3}. \] We find
\[
d_{\text{nuc,ihn}} \approx \left[ \int_0^{t_{\text{ihn}}} \Gamma_{\text{ihn}}(t) dt \right]^{-1/3} \]
\[ = \frac{3}{\pi} \left( 1 - \text{erf}(N/\sqrt{2}) \right)^{-1/3} l_{\text{smooth}}. \]

With the above values \( l_{\text{heat}}/l_{\text{smooth}} = 1, 2, 5, 10 \) we get \( d_{\text{nuc,ihn}} = 1.4, 1.8, 3.0, 4.8 \times l_{\text{smooth}}, \) where \( l_{\text{smooth}} \approx 1 \text{ m}. \)

For a COBE normalized spectrum without any tilt and with a tilt of \( n - 1 = 0.2, \) together with \( 3c_s^2 = 0.1 \) and \( v_{\text{heat}} = 0.1, \) we find the estimate \( l_{\text{heat}}/l_{\text{smooth}} \approx 0.4 \) and \( 9, \) correspondingly. Notice that the values of \( v_{\text{heat}} \) and \( 3c_s^2 \) are in principle unknown. Anyway, we can conclude that the case \( l_{\text{heat}} > l_{\text{smooth}} \) is a realistic possibility.

With \( 2v_{\text{heat}}(3c_s^2)^{-1/4}(10^{-4}d_{\text{H}}/l_{\text{smooth}}) < 1 \) and without positive tilt we are in the region \( l_{\text{heat}} < l_{\text{smooth}} \), where the geometry is more complicated and the above quantitative analysis does not apply. In this situation nucleations take place in the most common cold spots \( (N \sim 1) \), which are very close to each other. We expect a structure of interconnected baryon-depleted and baryon-enriched layers with typical surface \( l_{\text{smooth}}^2 \) and thickness \( l_{\text{def}} \equiv v_{\text{def}} \Delta t_{\text{cool}}. \)

We emphasize that inhomogeneous and heterogeneous nucleation are genuinely different mechanisms, although they give the same typical scale of a few meters by chance. If latent heat and surface tension of QCD would turn out to reduce \( \Delta_{\text{sc}} \) to, e.g., \( 10^{-6}, \) instead of \( 10^{-4}, \) the maximal heterogeneous nucleation distance would fall to the centimeter scale, whereas on the distance in inhomogeneous nucleation this would have no effect.

We have shown that inhomogeneous nucleation during the QCD transition can give rise to an inhomogeneity scale exceeding the proton diffusion scale \( (2 \text{ m at } 150 \text{ MeV}). \) The resulting baryon inhomogeneities could provide inhomogeneous initial conditions for nucleosynthesis. Observable deviations from the element abundances predicted by homogeneous nucleosynthesis seem to be possible in that case.

In conclusion, we found that inhomogeneous nucleation leads to nucleation distances that exceed by two orders of magnitude estimates based on homogeneous nucleation. We point out that this new effect appears for the (today) most probable range of cosmological and QCD parameters.

**Acknowledgments**

We acknowledge Willy the Cowboy for valuable encouragement. We thank K. Rummukainen for crucial help, K. Jedamzik for discussions, and J. Madsen...
for correspondence. J.I. would like to thank the Academy of Finland and D.J.S. the Austrian Academy of Sciences for financial support. We are grateful to the organizers of the Strong and Electroweak Matter meetings; the research presented here was initiated at SEWM-97 in Eger, Hungary.

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