

# Infrastructural violence: Introduction to the special issue

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*Ethnography*

13(4) 401–412

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DOI: 10.1177/1466138111435738

eth.sagepub.com



## Abstract

This introduction lays out some of the theoretical underpinnings of the notion of 'infrastructural violence'. We begin by considering infrastructure as an ethnographically graspable manifestation, before then moving on to highlight how broader processes of marginalization, abjection and disconnection often become operational and sustainable in contemporary cities through infrastructure. We then show how the concept of 'infrastructural violence' can nuance our analyses of the relations between people and things that converge daily in urban life to the detriment of marginalized actors, while also proposing a normative reflexivity that can provide a concrete means through which to talk, imagine and build towards greater regimes of quality and collective benefit. Finally, we conclude with a summary of each of the contributions to this special issue.

## Keywords

infrastructure, violence, social suffering, spatial justice, cities

It is with great pleasure that we introduce this special issue of *Ethnography* on 'Infrastructural Violence'. Its origins lie in a panel organized for the 2009 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association on social suffering and cities.<sup>1</sup> How, the panel asked, might ethnographic research locate new sites of responsibility for the everyday suffering that often characterizes the regular workings of urban life? This seemed a timely question as urban ethnographers increasingly seek to capture the dynamics of cities in all of their complexity, proposing ever more sophisticated analytical apparatuses, from 'entanglements'

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and ‘assemblages’ to ‘circuits’ and ‘flows’. Such lines of inquiry have particularly sought to explain how expressions of social exclusion and marginalization stubbornly remain unwanted facts of life for many residents of cities the world over, given that not all policy outcomes are planned, and nor are their consequences necessarily attributable to a single actor or group of actors.

At the same time, however, such a mode of analysis also works at a scale, pace, and in a conceptual space that make it difficult for the socially conscious researcher to locate blame and responsibility, and make practical recommendations to overcome purposefully planned as well as unplanned injustices alike. Given that ethnographers often write for audiences that operate within liberal frameworks of ethics, responsibility and redress, which are analytically trained upon individual actors and their intents, their work often reaches an all too familiar impasse: how can one raise the question of responsibility for the systematic wrongs that their research uncovers when the identified culprit is neither a person nor a policy but a faceless set of fleeting social connections? Given the limits of liberal ethics, what alternative frameworks are available for urban ethnographers? Where can one turn to ground discussions of responsibility so as to bend the present wrongs of urban life towards accountability and future justice?

Primed with these concerns, and drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in a wide array of cities located in Latin America, India, Africa, Eastern Europe and the United States, the above-mentioned AAA panel converged with an unanticipated coherence on a particular set of sites, namely urban infrastructure writ large – buildings, wires, pipes, roadways and cemeteries, and so on. Infrastructure is a key factor shaping people’s direct relationships both with each other and with their environment in cities. It demarcates both literally and figuratively which points in urban contexts can and should be connected, and which should not, the kinds of people and goods that can and should circulate easily, and which should stay put, and who can and should be integrated within the city, and who should be left outside of it, for example. As James Scott (1998) has powerfully described, infrastructure is one of the major vectors for the organization of society by the state, and a site where state practices converge with the so-called ‘global economy’ and processes of ‘development’ (see Ferguson, 2010).

As such, infrastructure emerges as an ideal ethnographic site for theorizing how broad and abstract social orderings such as the state, citizenship, criminality, ethnicity and class play out concretely at the level of everyday practice, revealing how such relationships of power and hierarchy translate into palpable forms of physical and emotional harm. Infrastructure is observable, its stakeholders identifiable, and its functions variable. At the same time, however, infrastructure is by no means only a site where forms of social control and oppression can be observed, but also a potential place for imagining more positive politics. Infrastructure can be a key means through which social improvement and progress is distributed throughout society. A key conceptual challenge, then, is to understand when it is that infrastructure becomes violent, for whom, under what conditions, and why.

In this respect, the collective project of this special issue has crystallized around the notion of 'infrastructural violence', which Dennis Rodgers first introduced during the panel debate, and which we develop here in greater detail. This term explicitly draws attention to the fact that the workings of infrastructure can be substantially deleterious, and owes a great intellectual debt to both Michael Mann's (1984) concept of 'infrastructural power', which emphasizes how infrastructure – defined broadly – constitutes a privileged institutional channel for social regulation, as well as Stephen Graham's (2004, 2006, 2010) evocative notion of 'infrastructural warfare', which he uses to highlight the dramatic suffering that can occur as a result of the deliberate targeting of infrastructural networks.<sup>2</sup> The remainder of this introduction lays out some of our theoretical underpinnings in greater detail. We begin by considering infrastructure as an ethnographically graspable manifestation, before then moving on to highlight how broader processes of marginalization, abjection and disconnection often become operational and sustainable in contemporary cities through infrastructure. We then show how the concept of 'infrastructural violence' can nuance our analyses of the relations between people and things that can converge daily in urban life to the detriment of marginalized actors, while also proposing a normative reflexivity that can provide a concrete means through which to talk, imagine and build towards greater regimes of equality and collective benefit. Finally, we conclude with a summary of each of the contributions to this special issue.

### **What is infrastructural violence?**

Infrastructure, long considered a technical apparatus to be managed by civil engineers and urban planners, has received growing interest among social scientists (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008). In particular, sociologists, anthropologists and geographers alike are increasingly raising questions about both the cultural and the political assumptions built into the design of infrastructure and the social consequences of its day-to-day (mal)functioning. This makes sense given the deeply embedded nature of infrastructure in everyday life. Infrastructure shapes how people relate to the city and to each other, affecting where and how people and things move across time and space. At the same time, infrastructure is also completely caught up within the workings of social, cultural, economic and political arrangements, structures and technologies. To this extent, as Susan Leigh Star (1999) has highlighted, infrastructure is simultaneously ecological *and* relational.

This duality arguably marks infrastructure as a particularly productive site for exploring questions about the political economy of social suffering in cities from an ethnographic perspective. Certainly, as Paul Rabinow (2003) has pointed out, a history of planning and design decisions and the logic underlying these can easily be read off existing infrastructural grids. At the same time, however, infrastructural networks are also dynamic, and reveal frictions between past decisions about resource allocation against present needs and future aspirations (Graham and

Marvin, 2001; Soja, 2000). Infrastructure also envelops vast distances on the one hand, while neglecting contiguous spaces on the other, making visible over time social conventions and contradictions about how space should fit together and in relation to which priorities (Star, 1999). As such, infrastructure provides an ideal space for reflecting upon the systemic forms of violence that occur through a society's effort to organize and govern itself (Foucault, 2001).

To a certain extent, it could be argued that infrastructure constitutes an often-ignored material channel for what is regularly referred to as 'structural violence', which Paul Farmer (2004: 307) has defined as 'violence exerted systemically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order'. Certainly, at the heart of the notion of structural violence, one can see a desire to override liberal approaches to injury, suffering and responsibility, which frame these discussions at the analytical scale of the individual. A better world, from this liberal perspective, is a matter of individuals becoming better people. The concept of structural violence, on the other hand, maintains that the problems facing society are far more complex and wide reaching, and seeks to challenge liberal visions by re-situating debates about wrongs and redress at the scale of the *social*. Once considered from the vantage of widely constituted social structures, violence becomes thinkable as an effect of what Farmer (2004: 307) calls a 'social machinery of oppression': complex processes of production whose outcomes are objectionable, in which all members of society are implicated and yet whose effects are ostensibly nobody's fault.

Such a social awareness sidesteps the unit of the individual in favor of the societal, considering how the actions of complex institutions and corporations, cultural biases, practices and history as well as formal and informal sets of social relations converge and diverge to regularly harm vulnerable groups of people (Bourgeois, 2003; Green, 1998). Analytically, then, structural violence brings in to view, as Peter Benson, Edward Fischer and Kedron Thomas (2008) point out, three key features of contemporary social life, namely that: 1) forms of domination are often clustered and mutually constitutive; 2) forms of suffering are conditioned by the institutional and political economic organization of a society as are responses to suffering; and 3) in modern societies and capitalist economies, suffering tends to impact poor and marginalized groups adversely because of the uneven distribution of material, social and symbolic capital. The power of structural violence, in the end, is to uncover inhumane social pressures and conditions that otherwise go unnoticed within liberal registers, in the hope of bringing about something larger than individual reform. To this extent, this body of literature can be said to seek social and structural reform 'in the broadest and most collectively transformative sense' (Benson et al., 2008: 51).

At the same time, infrastructure is not just a material embodiment of violence (structural or otherwise), but often its instrumental medium, insofar as the material organization and form of a landscape not only reflect but also reinforce social orders, thereby becoming a contributing factor to reoccurring forms of harm. Geographers, for example, have long shown how class relations get built into

urban plans and architecture, inscribing unjust relations between social classes into the tangible form and mechanical functioning of city streets, fences and walls (Castells, 1979; Harvey, 1985; Smith, 1996). In a similar vein, Achille Mbembé (2004) has demonstrated how histories of racial prejudice materialize in urban architecture and city planning only to reinforce racially driven distinctions and hierarchies. Such works show how the materiality of the city – the presence of barriers, fences, walls and monuments, as well as the planning and spatial relations between suburbs, city centers and squatter settlements – plays a concrete role in the sedimentation and workings of unjust social relations, conventions and practices (see also Caldeira, 2001).

One objective of this special issue, then, is to show how more structural forms of violence often flow through material infrastructural forms, and to remind us that social suffering is often experienced in material terms (Miller, 2005). Certainly, the symptoms and pangs of poverty, for example – which Mahatma Gandhi once described as ‘the worst form of violence’ – are as much a function of impaired or absent access to needed material resources such as potable water, food, health care and schools they are the consequences of unjust barriers or practices. These injustices are very often systemic in nature as a result of the regular workings of space and people’s emplacement within it, more specifically in cities. Central to this objective, therefore, is an interest in material networks, particularly the physical channels through which people and objects flow, and the way in which they flow through and are affected by them.

This special issue also seeks to re-emphasize, over and above this present moment of heightened liberalism that there are larger forces at work in cities beyond individuals and their random interaction. Whether thought of as ‘the social’ (Durkheim, 1982), ‘the population’ (Foucault, 2008) or ‘the community’ (Rose and Miller, 2008), their specific constitution and dynamics affect the lived experience of cities, often with brutal consequences. This is particularly true in contexts of extreme inequality. The notion of infrastructural violence seeks to squarely identify the political economy underlying the socio-spatial production of suffering in contemporary cities by opening a concrete way of discussing society’s responsibility for this harm and to instigate action towards building what geographers alternatively call a ‘socially just city’ (Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 1973, 2003; Marcuse et al., 2009) and a ‘spatially just city’ (Benit and Gervais-Lambony, 2005; Iveson, 2011; Soja, 2010).

Importantly, our interest in developing the term ‘infrastructural violence’ is not to define what ‘justice’ means for the city in any definitive sense. The philosophical basis of ‘justice’ is part of a much broader discussion that is beyond the scope of this special issue. Yet, however particular urban communities define ‘justice’ – whether in a liberal sense such as put forward by Seyla Benhabib (1996, 2008) and John Rawls (1999), or in the Marxist tradition of ‘the right to the city’, as developed by Henri Lefebvre (1996) and David Harvey (1973, 2003) – the notion of ‘infrastructural violence’ can play both a critical and a practical role. This is because infrastructural violence identifies socially produced wrongs that occur

through the workings of what are unambiguously collectively ‘owned’ networks, by virtue of the fact of living within a shared social space. It is the collectively held nature of infrastructure that makes it such a powerful site for not just thinking about society’s responsibility to itself and to each of its members, but also for identifying those who undermine this responsibility and for thinking about how to build more just cities.

To this extent, we hope this special issue will not only highlight the violence of infrastructure, but that it will also provoke a lively debate about what is fair and just relative to each city and the needs of each of its members, as well as – importantly – provide a general sense of how these aspirations might be put into practice. In this respect, the notion of ‘infrastructural violence’ is clearly infused with a certain degree of idealism, insofar as the contributions to this special issue make clear that the kind of redress demanded by infrastructural violence is neither straightforward nor cheap. Ultimately, as Edward Soja has pointed out, ‘spatial justice’ can only be achieved by means of ‘those most negatively affected by the urban condition exert[ing] greater control over the social production of urbanized space’ (Soja, 2010: 6–7), yet historical examples of poor urbanites being given the chance to rework their city not only in terms of access but to ‘change it after our heart’s desire’ are few and far between (Harvey, 2003: 939). What is very promising about the idealism of infrastructural violence, however, is its implicit steer towards practical, material recommendations that have the potential to improve dramatically the lives of those who are pressed upon by the city. Our hope is that by orienting future discussions about social suffering and the just city towards the notion of ‘infrastructural violence’, we will generate not just more talk about social responsibility but directed action towards its realization.

Finally, it should be noted that the contributions to this special issue develop the notion of infrastructural violence in two different ways. The first is one we might designate ‘active’ infrastructural violence, that is to say, articulations of infrastructure that are designed to be violent, whether in their implementation or in their functioning. Informing our understanding of active infrastructural violence are, for example, decisions like those of Baron Haussmann to crisscross 19th-century Paris with wide, straight boulevards in order to securitize the city, as Dennis Rodgers describes in his contribution, or New York City master planner Robert Moses’s inclination to design the automobile bridges over the Grand Central Parkway low in height as a way of preventing poor, public transit dependent city residents from accessing wealthy New York suburbs (Star, 1999). In other words, we mean the appropriation and deployment of infrastructure by elite bodies to police vulnerable populations. This includes using the capacity of infrastructure to record population trends and individual practices for the sake of opening users up to an ever evolving, ever evasive array of targeted and unevenly applied accounting, surveillance and law enforcement practices. Active infrastructural violence therefore focuses upon the conscious development of infrastructure to regulate normative social and territorial relations.

'Active' infrastructural violence implies a clear intent – by an individual or a social group – which does not always exist (or is imperfectly implemented). In response, several contributions to this special issue seek to develop a second form of infrastructural violence, which we label 'passive', insofar as the socially harmful effects derive from infrastructure's limitations and omissions rather than its direct consequences. This is a line of inquiry motivated particularly by the works of James Ferguson (1999) and Mathew Gandy (2006), both of whom have shown us the suffering that results from being disconnected from, or entirely left out of, infrastructural networks. At stake in these passive incidences of infrastructural violence is more than the physical forms of suffering that derive from being excluded from water, sanitation and electrical services (among others), however. This *physical* exclusion from urban infrastructure, and the corporeal suffering that marks the bodies of those affected, only serves to facilitate forms of *social* exclusion that fundamentally question notions of citizenship, rights and membership claims by the poor and otherwise vulnerable (Caldeira and Holston, 1999; Ong, 2000).

Whether active or passive, however, the papers that comprise this special issue on infrastructural violence all focus particularly on its consequences, whether in terms of oppression, pacification, disconnection, or abjection. At the same time, we hope that these discussions about the effects of 'infrastructural violence' will not just illuminate the multifarious sources of regularized suffering that exist for a variety of urban populations the world over. We hope they will also provide a productive means through which to talk about society's responsibility for this suffering and its obligation to work towards concrete changes to urban infrastructure for the sake of producing a more just tomorrow.

## **A summary of contributions**

The opening article of this special issue, 'Haussmannization in the Tropics' by Dennis Rodgers, considers the dynamics of the elite-oriented urban transformation that Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, has undergone during the past decade and a half. It begins by drawing a cross-historical comparison between Managua's metropolitan makeover and a paradigmatic case of planned urban change, that of 19th-century Parisian Haussmannization, to highlight the systemic and purposeful nature of the former's transformation. It then focuses ethnographically on the grassroots consequences of two specific instances of urban infrastructural development that have been affected two poor neighborhoods in the city, showing how these have constituted as 'pacified spaces', to the extent that their inhabitants have internalized a form of 'abject urbanism' that actively contributes to sustaining the unequal spatial order of the city. When seen in this light, Managua's transformation is revealed to be a fundamentally violent act of oppression by an emergent urban elite over an impoverished majority that serves them little purpose, and must therefore be expelled and contained from their lives.

Hannah Appel's article, 'Walls and White Elephants', traces the active forms of infrastructural violence tied to offshore oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea's capital, Malabo. Appel begins with the wall separating the gated community housing Malabo's foreign oil executives from local residents. Noting the implicit brutality of the gated community's private infrastructure sitting cheek-by-jowl with the erratic, decaying public infrastructure of Malabo at large, Appel then goes on to explore how the oil industry's abdication of wider infrastructural responsibility entailed by its enclave living is directly linked to Equatorial Guinea's lagging infrastructural development, both in oil companies' explicit attempts to abdicate responsibility for those outside the walls of their compounds and also their complicity in the building of monumental architecture and vanity projects that constitute the core of the country's contemporary urban development. Building in particular on the work of Michel Callon, Appel suggests that infrastructural violence inevitably operate through a simultaneous dynamic of entanglement and disentanglement that is continuous and never ending.

Bruce O'Neill's article, 'Of Camps, Gulags and Extraordinary Renditions', connects active and passive forms of infrastructural violence in Romania, and hinges on a contrast between Romania's communist era gulags and its contemporary 'secret detention centers' used by the US government's 'extraordinary rendition' program. In particular, it highlights how the material infrastructure of both the gulags and extraordinary rendition was actually often the same, and both can be seen as having been organized around precipitating a sense of 'bare life' among those caught within their grips. At the same time, however, Bruce O'Neill also demonstrates how rendition operates through a very different spatial logic to a gulag, causing survivors of these different spatial iterations to offer qualitatively different accounts of bare life. As such, he extends to Giorgio Agamben's theorization of 'the camp' a spatial specificity that further nuances anthropological understandings of the notion of 'bare life'.

Nikhil Anand's 'Municipal Disconnect', by contrast, develops a more passive notion of infrastructural violence. Anand's article examines a highly differentiated and differentiating system of water distribution in Mumbai, India, in which different kinds of urban citizens are entitled to different quantities of water. One group that is growing increasingly disconnected from Mumbai's municipal water supply are the Muslim settlers of Premnagar slum. In response, Anand examines how disconnection from the city's water system articulates a process through which Muslim residents are rendered abject residents of the city, demonstrating the *precariousness* and *reversibility* of citizenship gains in Mumbai. In the end, Anand highlights the mutability and, indeed, the fragility of forms of social belonging that are often taken for granted.

Kevin O'Neill's article, 'There Is No More Room', focuses on Guatemala City's public cemetery. Transnational street gangs mixed with organized crime and drug cartels have made Guatemala one of the most dangerous countries in the Americas, and its present murder rates match those of its genocidal civil war. The public cemetery simply cannot keep up, and there are not enough burial plots to go

around. In response, the public cemetery must disinter those bodies whose families fail to pay the cemetery its annual dues, stripping the corpse of its right to belong. Kevin O'Neill reflects on the practice of disinterment to unveil a new kind of differentiated citizenship that applies not just to everyone but to every *body*. From the metropolis to the necropolis, Kevin O'Neill examines the ways in which class and capitalism converge to code citizenship such that some bodies belong and some do not – such that some maintain their place in society while others are rendered instances of 'bare death'.

Javier Auyero and Agustín Burbano de Lara's contribution, 'In Harm's Way', is based on 18 months of collaborative fieldwork, and explores how diverse modes of infrastructural deprivation experienced by a marginalized community in Buenos Aires interconnect with different forms of violence. Despite a general decline in poverty levels and an increase in employment rates since the economic collapse in 2001, the urban poor in Argentina continue to be exposed to extreme forms of environmental degradation and crumbling public institutions, and Auyero and Burbano de Lara highlight how these are tightly related to different expressions of daily violence (domestic, interpersonal, criminal), and how this particular political economy has sustained levels of violence in the neighborhood, despite improvements in other areas of local life.

Finally, James Ferguson's 'Afterword' offers some synthetic thoughts, both with regards to the common threads between the contributions to this special issue, as well as more generally situating the concept of 'infrastructural violence' within the history of social scientific theory. In particular, he highlights how infrastructural violence poses a key epistemological challenge, pointing to the need to bring the material and the moral together into a more satisfactory alignment. Such a project, Ferguson argues, requires new ways of thinking about classic analytical categories such as 'the social' and of 'responsibility'.

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank Charlotte Lemanski and Matthias vom Hau for useful comments that helped improve this introduction.

### **Notes**

1. The Panel 'Social Suffering and the City' was a double panel that also included contributions from scholars whose papers have not been included in this special issue due to space considerations, but whom we thank for having significantly shaped our thinking: Pietro Calogero, Mun Young Cho, Eric Pido, Rania Sweis, Kedron Thomas and Peter Benson. We also thank Philippe Bourgois for being such a stimulating commentator for the two panels. James Ferguson, Javier Auyero and Agustín Burbano de Lara enthusiastically joined the project after the AAA session.
2. The notion of 'infrastructural violence' is also a concept that is in conversation with other literatures, including on 'structural violence' (Farmer, 2004; Farmer et al., 2006), 'social suffering' (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourgois, 2003; Kleinman et al., 1997) and 'everyday violence' (Scheper-Hughes, 1993), which also seek to link the human misery felt by marginalized

groups to the violent consequences of institutional practices, social structures and political-economic processes (Benson, 2008).

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