

Structures of responsibility

James Ferguson
Stanford University, USA

Ethnography
13(4) 558–562
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1466138111435755
eth.sagepub.com


Once, before we learned to think differently, things seemed clearer. Structures were things. Things that could be observed and described. There were things called classes, and they had interests. There were things called ethnic groups, and they had cultures. There was a thing called the state that governed another thing called society. And so on. We have spent much of the past few decades learning not to think like this. In place of things, we have learned to see relations, inventions, and performances. Objects, to the extent that they can appear as objects at all, we now see as complex and contingent projects – effects, if not illusions, sustained (or perhaps only temporarily stabilized) by bundles of discursive and other practices that enable them to appear (at least for a while) as simply, obviously, ‘there’. And critical analysis, increasingly, has often come to appear as a work, if not of deconstruction, at least of describing and understanding the social and cultural work that necessarily goes into the making of a world of ‘things’.

It is surprising, and even refreshing, in this context, to see a new generation of scholars – of which I take the authors of these articles to be exemplary – rediscovering the attractions of understandings structures as things. Make no mistake: this is no reactionary return to a naive empirical realism. These authors have mastered and embraced the critical work on the objectivity of objects, and they are fully attentive to the complex and contingent ‘constructed-ness’ of technological systems. But they are determined to pair this knowledge with sustained attention to the brute materiality of the forms of exclusion and deprivation that such systems produce. By looking for structure at the ‘infra’ level – where pipes are disconnected, houses leveled, roads and walls built – the contributors to this special issue seem to be working toward new and more muscular ways of thinking about both materiality and structure. By giving central place to the most material sorts of ‘structure’ – a freeway, prison, a sewage line – they remind us that Durkheim’s (1982) old slogan about social facts being ‘things’ sometimes needs to be taken very literally.

Corresponding author:

James Ferguson, Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, 450 Serra Mall, Main Quadrangle, Building 50, Room 51G, Stanford, CA 94305-2034, USA

Email: jgfergus@stanford.edu

But if this amounts to a return to a certain interest in structure, it is a very different sense of structure that is on offer – one that has absorbed the lessons of the post-structuralist turn and has come out the other side equipped with new conceptual tools. The ‘infra-structure’ that is of interest here is clearly not conceived as infra-structural in the Marxian sense (underlying, causally primary), nor is it imagined as a ‘structure’ in the structuralist sense (a symbolically integrated system awaiting decoding). We are rather closer to the domain of engineering, with infra-structure imagined as a set of (often literally) concrete arrangements that both coexist with and enable or facilitate other such arrangements. It is both a support-system that makes it possible (or impossible) for other things to exist and a way of making up a particular kind of social world. And it is ‘infra’ less in the sense of constituting a ‘base’ than in the sense of swarming omnipresence that is implied in Foucault’s (1980) idea of ‘infra-power’.

But if attention to material structures is one of the distinctive points of focus of this issue, another is undoubtedly the question of responsibility. The ways that infrastructures shape our worlds are so often pernicious, for these authors, precisely because infrastructure does its violence in ways that make it peculiarly hard to ascribe responsibility. If a policeman kills my baby, I know who to blame; if a team of urban planning consultants does it, neither the planners nor I may have any idea of the connection. The violence that is built into the massive inequalities that dominate our societies today is often naturalized, made invisible, or made to seem inevitable, by the walls, pipes, wires, and roads that so profoundly shape our urban environments, even as we take them for granted.

Who, then, is responsible for such violence – violence that assuredly takes lives, but in ways that seem attributable less to specific acts or agents than to (as the editors put it) ‘a faceless set of fleeting social connections’? The answer supplied by the editors in their Introduction to this special issue is one that has long been a touchstone of left politics: responsibility lies with society. The concept of **infra-structural violence**, they say, is useful because it allows ‘a concrete way of discussing society’s responsibility’ for suffering caused by anonymous structural processes; it provides ‘a productive means through which to talk about society’s responsibility for this suffering and its obligation to work toward concrete changes’.

If ‘structure’ makes a kind of return in this special issue, then so, it seems, does ‘society’ – another illusory ‘thing’ we have been told we need to learn to do without. An important body of work has taught us to recognize ‘society’ as a historical creation, the correlate of a specific mode of power. The possibility of ‘society’ taking responsibility for the life of a population, then, depended on what Jacques Donzelot (1984) once termed ‘the invention of the social’ – it is this that made it possible for the nation-state to be figured as a unit of solidarity, just as it was the development of insurance mechanisms that made it possible for suffering to be spread, and thereby in some measure shared, within larger collectivities. Is ‘the social’, in this sense, now ‘dead’ (as Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, 2008, have suggested)? These articles suggest some of the dangers in that proposition. Insofar as ‘society’ provides a vehicle uniquely capable of bearing all the responsibility that

the anonymity of infrastructural violence threatens to make disappear, there are strong reasons to retain the concept of 'society', and even to fight for its continuing relevance. At a minimum, one should hesitate to join Margaret Thatcher and Bruno Latour in asserting that it does not exist.

At the same time, however, the articles in this special issue call our attention in quite vivid ways to the difficulties involved in reckoning 'society's responsibility' without a quite thoroughgoing rethinking of what we mean by 'society'. What is 'the society', after all, that is supposed to take responsibility for the collateral damage of the oil industry in Equatorial Guinea, brilliantly analyzed here by Hannah Appel. Her account shows with great clarity how infrastructural arrangements conspire with other kinds of social and cultural work to allow responsibility for oil's injuries to be evaded, walled off, and moved around. Technical and infrastructural arrangements, themselves enormously complicated and entangled, are deployed to create a deceptive sense of a 'clean', disentangled, 'offshore' industry that is neither contaminated by nor responsible for the disorderly and dangerous circumstances of life on the other side of the compound fences. But how, in a case like this, do we re-establish the links between suffering and injury and the forces that are responsible for it? Someone must be held responsible, but who, exactly? 'Society' seems a peculiarly unhelpful answer in this case. Is it 'Equatorial Guinea' that should take responsibility? The key actors are largely foreigners, and the stream of profit that the industry generates largely exits the country quite quickly. And does it even make sense to speak of an Equato-Guinean national society, in a tiny micro-state whose extreme and atypical history provides scant support for either a national public sphere or a national political community? Should we, then, treat the Equatorial Guinean state as the responsible party? Surely that involves letting the corporations off the hook far too easily. Indeed, if 'society' is conceived (as it so often is) as a *national* society represented by a nation-state apparatus, the idea of societal responsibility would quickly degenerate into yet another form of responsibility-evading 'disentanglement'. Alternatively, it would be easy to say that the foreign corporations bear the primary responsibility. But, in a world of complex and diffuse arrangements of ownership, subcontracting, and banking, that responsibility too is hard to locate with any precision. What responsibility accrues to corporate management? Stockholders? What about the nation-states that host the corporations? The banks that take their deposits? How to identify a unit of responsibility, in a fiendishly complex, multiply-layered and decidedly trans-national apparatus of harm-production?

Similar questions of transnational (or trans-societal) responsibility appear in the other articles. Bruce O'Neill's penetrating analysis of two forms of extra-legal imprisonment shows how specific infrastructures enable and naturalize the violence that occurs in different instantiations of what is too readily glossed as 'the camp'. Yet the question of responsibility is again not easily devolved to 'society'. For what 'society' is it that is responsible for the violence of extraordinary rendition, in a case where Romanian state officials work in secret complicity with a range of others that includes the CIA, the NATO alliance, many European and other national states

that provided air bases, and so on. Kevin Lewis O'Neill, meanwhile, gives us an extraordinarily poignant portrait of a Guatemalan world where an epidemic of crime is creating corpses at a rate that exceeds that even of the horrific civil war, and where the most vulnerable continue to be victimized even after death, via the disinterment of the remains of those whose families cannot pay the cemetery 'rent'. But note that the criminal gangs, the proximate cause of all those corpses, are, as O'Neill notes, 'transnational' – as he has shown elsewhere, they are the product of the gang system that flourishes in the immigrant neighborhoods of southern California, the violence of the US prison system, and the US practice of deporting the worst criminals to their 'home country', where they have no prospects for employment and ample opportunities for re-entering criminal life. Again, the nation-state does not look like a suitable container for the attribution of responsibility that such an appalling situation seems to demand. Similarly, the vivid and detailed accounts by Dennis Rodgers and Javier Auyero of the victims of economic deterioration and urban segregation respectively in Managua (Nicaragua) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) make clear that those who planned and profited from the infrastructural transformations the authors (rightly) understand as involving a form of violence included foreign banks, fast food restaurants and retail chains. Here it is not so much 'society' that one would wish to hold responsible as a complex and globally distributed set of actors and organizations that would include corporations, states, shareholders, and many others.

Nikhil Anand's innovative contribution raises yet another question – the municipal as a site of citizenship and responsibility. Belonging at the level of the municipality, he demonstrates, amounts to a powerful kind of membership, bringing with it concrete entitlements such as the ability to access municipal water services. Like all sorts of belonging, this municipal citizenship entails exclusions as well as inclusions, and he sensitively details the way that Muslims are denied full urban citizenship in Mumbai, in what he terms a 'municipal disconnect'. Yet the very existence of municipal membership as a ground for service provision reminds us that the nation-state is not the only level at which meaningful sorts of citizenship claims can be made. Indeed, municipal membership (based as it often is on residence rather than national citizenship) can sometimes be a more inclusive basis for claims of membership and moral responsibility than the nation, especially where poor urban communities are largely composed of immigrants who lack nation-state recognition. The issue of municipal citizenship here can serve as a reminder that attributions of responsibility (and thus, imperatives for action or redress) can rest at many different levels – the metropolis itself, but also the neighborhood, the kinship group, the region, and so on.

This points to a formidable set of challenges. For reasons the contributions to this special issue make very clear, we cannot do without some idea of social causality that would allow responsibility for anonymous or infrastructural processes of harm-doing to be attributed. A neoliberal view of the world, for instance, that can see only individuals linked by markets and governed by states, cannot identify the processes of structural violence and exclusion that these articles describe so well,

and therefore cannot provide mechanism and strategies to redress them. But the articles also show, with equal clarity, that an unreconstructed notion of the social that remains captive to the nation-state will not do either. Seen in this light, the toughest challenge that these articles open up for us, then, is the challenge to develop new ways of linking sociality and responsibility.

As the editors point out, infrastructure does not only divide rich from poor and haves from have-nots. It also provides a common bond, since 'the collectively held nature of infrastructure' makes it a powerful site for thinking about the responsibilities that come with 'living within a shared social space'. What these articles ultimately ask us to accept – and it is both an intellectual and a political task – is the necessity to move from the de facto connectedness that is unmistakable at the level of urban infrastructure toward forms of ethical and political recognition, responsibility, and inclusion that would be able to operate at the same level. The insistence on materiality, in other words, is at the same time an insistence on morality. And the challenge these papers pose to us – that of bringing the material and the moral into a more satisfactory alignment – is not only an academic one; indeed, it must be confronted, in one way or another, by all of us who make our lives within the violent infrastructures of unequal cities the world over.

References

- Donzelot J (1984) *L'invention du social*. Paris: Vrin.
- Durkheim E (1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Free Press.
- Foucault M (1980) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Rose N and Miller P (2008) *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life*. New York: Polity Press.

James Ferguson is Susan S. and William H. Hindle Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences and Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, USA. He also holds an appointment as Honorary Professor in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, and as Professor Extraordinaire in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Stellenbosch University.