

Foreword

Towards an infrastructural imaginary of the political

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Infrastructure surrounds us, conditioning our lives in fundamental ways, yet we often take it for granted. In many ways, however, the history of human evolution can be conceived as a history of infrastructural development. Certainly, a widespread measure of our species' economic and political "progress" is the spread of cities from around 8,000 BC onwards, which of course could not have happened without the development of diverse infrastructure to enable unprecedentedly large, dense, and heterogeneous groups of individuals to live together within contained spaces, through, for example, the organised (re)distribution of people, goods, services, and waste. Indeed, seen from this perspective, infrastructure can arguably be said to be a precondition for social life itself. This means that infrastructure is very obviously not just a technical issue, yet despite the past few years having seen what might be termed as "infrastructural turn", there is still a predominant tendency within the social sciences to conceive of infrastructure in rather narrow, technological terms. This volume is an attempt to go beyond such perspectives and to bridge the gap to a more sociological approach, proposing the innovative theoretical lens of "infrastructural citizenship" as a means for doing so.

Like all good ideas, linking infrastructure with citizenship is obvious in hindsight, whether from a historical or a conceptual perspective. Just as infrastructure is intimately linked to the history of urbanization, so is citizenship – as the etymology of the word inherently highlights – and the former has often been a vector through which the latter is either enacted or laid claim to in cities worldwide across both time and space. Access to urban services is, for example, often a hallmark of belonging to a particular group or polity, and can therefore become an issue around which conflicts about belonging can be articulated. Conceptually, the notion of infrastructural citizenship draws attention to the fundamental connections that exist between the material and the political in the constitution of society. While not necessarily a new insight – much of 19th century social science was arguably precisely about this dialectic, albeit perhaps in a broader sense – what it allows for is a much needed opening up of the black boxes of both "infrastructure" and "citizenship" at a juncture when much theorising about these phenomena has

perhaps become rather abstract in nature. In particular, the notion of infrastructural citizenship highlights how infrastructure is not a “neutral” phenomenon, but both shapes and is shaped by the political, and also points directly to the fact that articulations of citizenship are not abstract processes, but have very concrete material bases.

The contributions to this volume all explore different iterations of the nexus between infrastructure and citizenship, but it is striking that a common insight running through all of them is the practical primacy of the infrastructural over citizenship. At its most basic, citizenship is a fundamentally binary concept, one which posits that individuals either have or do not have certain rights associated with belonging to a particular group or polity, yet such an abstract categorisation needs to be concretely actualised in the real world. In other words, citizenship is fundamentally determined by specific modalities of inclusion and exclusion, and infrastructure is one of the key means through which these unfold, particularly in cities. The contributions to this volume highlight the diversity of ways in which infrastructure and citizenship can connect to each other, but also the way that “infrastructure” is something of a “fuzzy” phenomenon, one that can take on a range of very distinct material and non-material forms that are often fungible. Perhaps the most striking example to emerge from the contributions to this volume is the way that individual social agents can themselves become forms of infrastructure for others, particularly in contexts with deficient or only partial material infrastructural coverage. This suggests that certain types of mobilization against infrastructural non-citizenship might themselves be conceived as non-material forms of infrastructure, an almost “do-it-yourself” form of infrastructural citizenship.

This raises the obvious question of whether certain forms of infrastructure are more important or more effective than others in materially actualising citizenship. One aspect with regard to which the contributions to this volume are particularly thought-provoking is the issue of the extent to which – or not – materiality itself is critical to infrastructure’s power. This is particularly important to consider because one aspect of infrastructure’s connection to citizenship that is not explicitly considered in this volume, but which constitutes an inherent flipside to its central insights, is that the power of infrastructure is such that it can also become “anti-political” in nature, and be a means through which to actively deny or undermine citizenship rights by closing off the possibility for contestation via excluding the very notion of citizenship and belonging from the everyday political imaginary. Some of the protests recorded in the contributions to this volume could be read less as claims for “infrastructural citizenship” than objections to instances of “infrastructural anti-citizenship”, and the obvious question to ask is to what extent such mobilizations are effective in challenging anti-political forms of “infrastructural violence”.

This is important because while the contributions to this volume highlight how infrastructure can potentially be deployed and challenged in different ways, their exegeses of the notion of citizenship show it to be clearly less

malleable. As such, they implicitly point to the universal normativity underpinning the concept, and more specifically to its assumed indivisibility. Numerous studies have highlighted the existence of “bifurcated”, “second class”, or “partial” citizenship, yet these are more often than not conceived in terms of an absence or incompleteness relative to a holistic notion of citizenship which remains the primary conceptual reference point for thinking about the political organisation of human society. In this regard, the conceptual binary of “infrastructural citizenship” highlights how there is potentially another way to conceive of the latter, one where the infrastructural constitutes a starting point, insofar as the infrastructural citizen is first and foremost infrastructural before they are a citizen. Seen from this perspective, the notion of infrastructural citizenship clearly points to fundamental issues of political economy that underpin the organisation of human society, and what this volume can be said to call for first and foremost is the spread of an “infrastructural imaginary” within our thinking about the political. Such an epistemological lens is arguably potentially much better suited to getting to grips with the dynamics of a contemporary world insofar as it is now claimed that this is characterised by processes of “planetary urbanization”, and historical experience suggests that these will necessarily and fundamentally be underpinned by infrastructural processes.