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Jonathan Silver, *The Infrastructural South: Techno-Environments of the Third Wave of Urbanization*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780262546874 (paper); ISBN: 9780262376730 (ebook)[1]

Grammars of Urban Extremes: Reading Jonathan Silver's *The Infrastructural South*

Jon Silver's *The Infrastructural South* treads on the heels of what is sometimes referred to as the "infrastructural turn" in the social sciences. This field of critical inquiry was started, at least in anglophone urban scholarship, by Graham and Marvin's *Splintering Urbanism* (2001), a book that centered "boring things" (Star 2002)—pipes, electromagnetic waves, technical standards, and the likes—to study the triumph of neoliberalism and its effect on the fabric of cities and their spatial politics (see also Graham and Marvin 2022). *The Infrastructural South*, however, takes stock of some of the critiques that have been since waged against the blind spots of Graham and Marvin's landmark volume, with the goal of unsettling the received notions of modernity that often manifest in the study of the relationship between infrastructure and urbanization. Specifically, Silver searches into the experience of urban Africa (with a brief and compelling detour into Camden, USA, and Manchester, UK), a new set of empirical and conceptual orientations for charting how technicity defines the contemporary urban condition beyond the few paradigmatic examples through which it is usually understood.

At the core of *The Infrastructural South* is the need to move beyond notions of modernity that centre the "networked city model"—the city of centralized and universal service distribution—as a hegemonic and teleological stage in the development of urbanization. As an idea, Silver writes, the Western "networked city" was the Janus face of an imagined, totalizing otherness; as a project, it was contingent on colonial plunder and racialized dispossession. Meanwhile, multiple forms of urban modernity coexisted and still exist alongside the powerful grammar of the networked city. To make these arguments, Silver brings together the contributions of "urban political ecology" (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003)—and related interest in how colonial/racial capitalism produces the urban as a technology for the domination of nature and people—with a growing scholarship on

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[1] The open access edition of the book is available at https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262546874/the-infrastructural-south/ (last accessed 6 June 2024).

infrastructural "heterogeneity" (Cirolia and Pollio 2024; Coutard and Florentin 2024), which has mapped the actual technological configurations of service delivery in contexts where the networked city is but a pipedream of planners and experts. What to do with urban modernity, then?

Silver's answer turns to a new, "provisional set of coordinates" (p.51) to produce a "counterhegemonic" (p.46), "mutating" (p. 247) episteme of infrastructural urbanization and modernity. This is a "loose glossary" (p.242) of what he terms "techno-environments": seven conditions of contemporary cityness that can be observed by "learning anew" from the African urban experience: "enclave, incremental, imposition, corridor, digital, secondary, and predicament" (p.26). Both empirical situations and conceptual categories, these techno-environments guide the readers of *The Infrastructural South* through a kaleidoscope of narratives, examples, anecdotes, and personal encounters with the many modes of existence of urban technicity in Africa.[2] Moving across large metropoles and small cities—just like *Splintering Urbanism* more than two decades ago—Silver's book is an enjoyable, thoughtful *tour de force* that ultimately charts a story of urban modernity that, accordingly, "has yet to be fully told" (p. 36). In doing so, the author argues, this new grammar of techno-environments also posits imperatives and propositional openings for the various forms of unevenness that are beholden to infrastructural development in urban Africa (p.253).

Ultimately, we would argue, the "infrastructural South" is not just a *condition* and an *epistemology* (what Silver terms techno-environments), but also a geography of *relations* among researchers of infrastructure in and from the South(s) (perhaps unsettling this distinction; p.217). While this third dimension of the *Infrastructural South* is not explicitly mentioned in the book, Silver does explain how his writing is indebted to the many scholars and activists with whom he collaborated and whose work permeates the pages of his own. Likewise, the writing of this review builds on an infrastructure of collaboration, mentorship, and sharing, one which makes critical reading possible in the first place.

In our case, we write as a collective of early-career researchers (of urban infrastructure, in some way or another) whose diverse research interests and biographies were brought together, quite literally, by the intellectual trail that Silver's book follows and

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[2] For more details on the structure and contents of all chapters, see our book review in the journal *TRIALOG* (FOS Research Collective et al. 2024).

advances. We first met at a 2022 workshop that marked 20 years from the publication of *Splintering Urbanism*, and celebrated its lasting impact on how we understand the relationship between infrastructure and cities. In other words, both Silver's book and this review build on the infrastructure of the "infrastructure turn", on the generous, capacious networks of academics and institutions which, at some point, allowed this group of early-career scholars to meet and become collaborators—and friends.

It is on the back of this collaboration that we want to think critically and sympathetically about Silver's goal of decentring the "Western-dominated narrative of urban modernity" (p.26). Ultimately, techno-environments outline a "theory" of infrastructural urbanization, a mode of knowledge production based on Silver's "unlearning/learning anew" ethnography (p.24). But as anthropologist Carole McGranahan (2022) has recently written about ethnographic practice, theory is always a claim *in* and *about* the world. Producing theory requires an acknowledgement of whose conceptual worlds are brought into life. John Law (2004: 14) famously reminds us that research is not only a "reality detector" but also a "reality amplifier". So whose realities are being amplified by a theory of "enclave", "imposition", "incremental", "corridor", "secondary", "digital", "predicament" (p.243) infrastructures? A scholar's? Or their interlocutors', colleagues', et cetera? This is a question that Silver's book only partially addresses. To acknowledge one's positionality, as the author does, is of course necessary, but positionality is just one of the many normative leaps and stakes that scholarly analysis entails.

Is it possible that some of these "techno-environments", when placed into their real worlds, lose some of their critical edge? After all, state planners love logistics "corridors". Despite surveillance and control, citizens embrace "digital" processes that make their life more convenient. Middle-class dwellers cherish their securitized "enclaves". Many commuters relish the "imposed"-from-above highway bypasses that connect the ever-expanding suburbia to places of work and leisure. And so forth. Much as we agree with the need to form, think, explore, and experiment with new conceptual grammars of infrastructural modernity, we wonder whose claims about urbanization the *Infrastructural South* is ultimately bringing forth. Without rehashing here the emic/etic debate from the last century, or Bruno Latour's (2004) warning about critical theory simply "subtracting" from, rather than "adding" to, the realities it portrays, we ask what other vocabularies might exist—

as ethnographic facts and not just as categories of analysis—alongside the grammar proposed by Silver.

In a fast-warming world, scarred by colonial and racial inequalities, cities are racked by physical and infrastructural extremes—floods, droughts, heat islands, frozen pipes, lockdowns, stampedes, rolling blackouts, electrical overloads, data leaks. Urban life teems with overflows and shortages that are increasingly less predictable. But overflows and shortages are not just empirical events: they are already the vocabulary of urban extremes through which planners, bureaucrats, investors, engineers, activists, and city dwellers negotiate infrastructural conditions across the North and South of the world. As a collective of researchers interested in the same questions posed by Silver's volume, our tentative suggestion is that overflow and shortage are already grammars of the *Infrastructural South*, and beyond. The techno-political practices that emerge in response can be violent and regressive or reparative and progressive, mundane or speculative, grassroots or illiberal. Most importantly, they centre questions of containment, adjustment, and resilience to the extreme technicities and temporalities of urban life in Southern cities in a way that, in our reading, complements Silver's project of finding new "concept metaphors" to define urbanization and infrastructure *from* the majority world (Moore 2004: 75).

Urban overflows and shortages are not, of course, neutral. They should be interrogated for what they make thinkable and for the blind spots that they enact. In other words, we are cognizant that conditions of extremity and normalcy are relative—under what conditions, for example, does one place's normal experience come to be publicly named as an "extreme"? Established scholarship on slow violence (Nixon 2011), pollution (Liboiron 2021), waste (Gidwani and Reddy 2011), and disposability (Tadiar 2022) teaches us how "normalcy" for some bodies has always been extreme for other bodies. Acute inequalities, for example, are constantly normalized to nurture the marketization of social life (Lazzarato 2009). Containment is never a neutral matter (Jenss 2024). And notions of utmost scarcity and incompleteness have been weaponized in the colonial project of making urban Africa "unmodern", as Silver acknowledges.

Notwithstanding these caveats, we think that a complementary grammar for the *Infrastructural South* already shapes the work of planners, bureaucrats, and activists in Southern cities—collectives and individuals dealing with all manner of disorderly, non-

homeostatic, infrastructural processes, from waste to flooding, from toxicity to scarcity. Just as a "mutating modernity" (p.247) is important for Silver to move beyond the knowledges, practices, and assumptions predominantly based on the technological experiences of the Western metropolis, can we imagine "the extreme" as a concept-metaphor whose purpose is to facilitate comparison between distributed data forms, contexts, and domains? Infrastructural extremes shift our attention to how technical experts and ordinary citizens, political coalitions and grassroots organizations, make sense of the overflows and shortages that form the imaginations and experiences of the majority world. Extremes too, however, are just one of the many competing grammars of the *Infrastructural South*.

This is our collective project. We are keen to think about the opportunities presented by the *Infrastructural South* for building comparative urban research emerging from different contexts while "being respectful of the limits of always located insights" (Robinson 2016: 187). As engaged readers and fellow travelers on this intellectual journey, we look forward to seeing how Silver's provocations will be taken up, challenged, and extended by scholars and practitioners alike. The *Infrastructural South* is not a fixed destination, but rather an invitation to think anew about the uneven geographies of our extreme-ridden urban present and its possible futures.

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