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# Book reviews

**Jon Silver (2023)**

**The Infrastructural South**

FOS (Flow/ Overflow/ Shortage) Research Collective\*, Sophia Abbas, Alex Baker, Suyash Barve, Moritz Kasper, Demetra Kourri, James Christopher Mizes, Andrea Pollio, Laura Silva, Noura Wahby

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Overflows, shortages, and other extremes increasingly dominate the urban-infrastructural realities of the 21st century. Cities across the world but especially in the South regularly experience hard-to-manage infrastructural events and conditions: floods, heat waves, power outages, stampedes, data leaks. Jon Silver's recent book, *The Infrastructural South: Techno-Environments of the Third Wave of Urbanization* provides us with a provisional set of coordinates to examine the conditions under which such urban extremes become infrastructural problems: it offers a dense compilation of political, material, and geographical processes that define contemporary urban-infrastructural life-worlds. Focusing largely on Africa, the book's main goal is to "develop a postcolonial urban theory of infrastructure" (p. 17) that shall politicize and address infrastructural injustices. In particular, Silver proposes a non-comprehensive vocabulary to help understand how infrastructure investment affects the everyday struggles of urban residents. More broadly, the book is concerned with the fraught relationship between urbanization and infrastructural modernity. Thus, in the opening chapters, Silver outlines a critique of linear, teleological, and Eurocentric notions of urban modernity like the networked city model. Moving from critique to conceptual proposition, the book combines insights from urban political ecology and the growing work on infrastructural heterogeneity to provide "counterhegemonic notions of [urban] modernity" (p. 48). The book's vocabulary is anchored in what Silver has dubbed "techno-environments" – enclave, incremental, corridor, digital, etc. – that constitute both the empirics and epistemics of *The Infrastructural South*.

Most chapters discuss cases of specific techno-environments. Following *Splintering Urbanism*, chapter 3 focuses on "enclave techno-environments" planned *from above* and their role in reinforcing urban inequality by providing exclusive infrastructural security for elites through quasi-independent municipalities or high-density luxury housing.

Conversely, chapter 4 considers the incremental nature of infrastructures *from below*. In the absence of networked systems, these infrastructures – according to Silver – can be forms of both survival and prefiguration. Drawing on energy infrastructures and practices in Kampala and Accra, Silver argues for the recognition of ambiguous and heterogeneous infrastructures as part of an agenda for southern urban development. Recognizing the *above* and the *below*, chapter 8 then offers a sweeping glance of the digitization of urban Africa, from government Internet shutdowns to mobile money and indigenously developed transportation apps. Digital mediation and its infrastructures, the chapter argues, are powerful tools to "configure, enhance, and potentially contest the city" (p. 186). In contrast to such an optimistic outlook, chapter 6's observations on transport corridors paint a more grim future. Silver argues that the residential demolitions required to make way for these corridors are the "imminent trauma" of "infrastructure-led, authoritarian neoliberalism" (p. 157).

Silver often underscores the multiple nature of *The Infrastructural South* and the new vocabulary he proposes to describe it. Chapter 5 frames a hydroelectric dam and a (post-) colonial bucket sanitation system as the urban beyond city limits and beyond the present. Infrastructural relations across space and time are "constitutive of the making of infrastructure" in African cities (p. 111) and their analysis helps to unravel the injustices of racial capitalism and (post-) colonial segregation. However, Silver later challenges the reader to think beyond Africa. Examples from the US and the UK illustrate the global breakdown of the networked city model and the shifting dynamics of infrastructural power. By highlighting similarities between struggles for basic infrastructure rights in post-industrial cities and African cities, *The Infrastructural South* is intended to help rethink infrastructure in different urban contexts. Yet, as chapter 7's "secondary techno-environments" remind us, places that are often considered "off the map" provide rich insights into the rifts, tensions, pressures, and – to use Anna Tsing's term – "frictions" that are part of an infrastructural catch-up currently unfolding in southern geographies.

In keeping with the book's ambition to move from critique to propositional futures, the final chapter attempts to conceptualize a

move "towards a popular infrastructure." Reiterating *The Infrastructural South* "not just as a condition or geography, but also as an epistemological position" (p. 241), Silver proposes the notion of "mutating modernity" (p. 247) – a non-linear descriptor of contemporary urban-infrastructural experiences across the planet – before delving into his set of infrastructural propositions. Drawing on a wide range of debates and scales, he invites reflection on heterogeneity, public work schemes, commoning, platform urbanism, reparations, and pan-Africanism as principles for infrastructural futures. Yet, at this point in the book, its initial coordinates and ambitions are stretched thin. Even with its impressive catalog of cases, *The Infrastructural South* struggles to bridge the gap between empirical material and analytical claims. Its vocabulary offers readers an eclectic abundance of coordinates that are left almost too provisional, often leaving the reader with more questions than answers. How does the idea of "mutating modernity" compare to existing critiques of Eurocentric notions of the urban modern? In what ways can African cases speak to a larger South, infrastructurally and epistemologically? How can practitioners, scholars, and activists actually use this new vocabulary for propositional and radical approaches to just infrastructural futures?

These questions and others are productive echoes of reading *The Infrastructural South*, a book that offers many openings for scholars, practitioners, and students. Even though this book may have offered a few too many openings, we recommend *The Infrastructural South* for its ambition to synthesize and advance recent debates on southern/African urban infrastructures. Silver's fascination with and expertise on Africa's infrastructural transformations shine through on every page, providing those new to southern urbanism with a dense map of starting points for further investigations. As an international collective of researchers interested in urban extremes across geographies and beyond orthodox narratives, we share many of the sentiments and epistemological positions of the *The Infrastructural South*, and the book was a compelling addition to our reading group on infrastructural overflows and shortages, their measurement and management. It informed our debates about how to understand infrastructural problems today and will continue to shape our thinking about extreme urban conditions in *The Infrastructural South* and elsewhere.