

Hetherington, Kregg (ed.). 2019. *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 312 pp. Pb.: \$26.95. ISBN: 9781478001485.

Book review by

Germain Meulemans

University of Grenoble (France)

Since the 1990s, the field of infrastructure studies has been a key site for challenging social theory's constitutive distinctions between humans and non-humans, nature and culture, or subject and object. In the course of ten well-executed chapters, this volume brings a fresh anthropological contribution to this field by drawing on a variety of approaches such as economic and environmental anthropology, ANT (Actor-Network Theory), or decolonial studies. It addresses a series of novel, cross-cutting themes, such as the blurring of the categories of environment and infrastructure, the "infrastructur-ing" of organisms, ecosystems or entire populations (how they are enrolled in various projects as infrastructures that fulfil certain "functions"), or the modes of temporality and "futuring" embedded in different infrastructural projects.

The first part of the book focuses on the blurring of foreground and background in processes of infrastructuring environments. Andrea Ballesterro highlights the practices through which an aquifer is objectified as a resource in Costa Rica and shows how figure-ground inversions are performed in such infrastructural work, to the point that which part of the world is a substrate for which is no longer clear. Shaylih Muehlman's chapter questions the backgrounding/foregrounding dynamics at play in clandestine

infrastructures (such as covert airstrips) set up by drug smugglers on the US-Mexico border, illustrating the situated character of the visibility/invisibility of infrastructures, and how infrastructures in place for a specific economy (fishing, road networks, etc.) can easily double as a different economy. In this part's third chapter, Gastón Gordillo draws the threads of the power logistics of global capitalism from an analysis of the development of new infrastructures of the soy supply chain at the foot of the Argentinian Andes, showing how these link the becoming of these remote regions to the big urban centres across the world.

The book's second part focuses on weeds and other beings that live in, on, or despite infrastructures, highlighting the constant discursive, technical and organisational work that performs the extension or retraction of infrastructure vis-à-vis the environment. While the lawns of the Panama Canal, featured in Ashley Carse's chapter, have long been meticulously manicured, weediness now materialises, for many inhabitants, a sense of growing disconnection brought by infrastructural decay and state disinvestment in the district. Natasha Myers, in turn, focuses on two "garden infrastructures" that arrange or orient life with plants in urban spaces in antagonistic ways. She first examines Singapore's Gardens by the Bay, a 'simulated Eden' (p. 122) that positions itself as a "technofix" for environmental crises while remaining fully involved with capitalism and colonial legacies. She contrasts this with the work of artist-gardener Lois Weinberger, who celebrates ruderal ecologies through porous enclosures that create affordances for other forms of life to take root. In the next chapter, Nikhil Anand examines what happens when urban water pipes – typically modern infrastructures meant to enclose water flows so as to stabilise them and free them from the exigencies of politics and nature – begin to crumble and leak. Drawing on Barad, he argues that neoliberal technologies of water audit that attempt (but fail) to apprehend leaks in Mumbai's urban water network are part of the phenomena they try to grasp: leakage is not an already constituted object but is 'brought into existence with a certain technology of controlling water flows' (p. 155). He compares this auditing work to that of local engineers who, far from the modernist promises of flow control, deploy a local and improvisatory know-how better adapted to the leaky materiality of this city.

The book's third part, entitled *Histories of Progress*, examines how infrastructures are produced alongside specific futures and how these temporalities are transformed in the Anthropocene. In a thought-provoking chapter that links with decolonial perspectives, Austin Zeiderman examines how Afro-Colombian communities living in Buenaventura's seaside settlements resist projects that seek to relocate them on dry land in order to

develop a “world-class port city”, but also in the name of fighting “coastal precarity”. Initiating a strategic discursive struggle, these inhabitants insist that their territory be described not as a “low tide zone” but as “territory reclaimed from the sea”, therefore strongly echoing modernist framings of how humans “reclaim” nature to make a liveable environment for themselves. Challenging the posthumanist tropism of Anthropocene studies, this chapter shows that a continued engagement with humanism remains important for the antiracist politics of those who were (and are still) regarded as less than fully human. Wakefield and Braun’s chapter takes this discussion of coastal precarity to New York City, where oyster reefs are being reimagined as living wave breakers to protect the city from an allegedly hostile Ocean. They show how these projects turn the classical teleological temporality of modern infrastructure on its head: rather than being meant to change the world, they serve the endless management of crisis, leaving us suspended in an eternal present. Contrasting export-oriented hydropower developments in Cambodia with the promises of off-grid solar energy production, Casper Bruun Jensen insists that since infrastructures are both made up of relations and productive of relations, they can be described as ‘ontological sites of experimentation’ (p. 221). Rejecting both functionalist and anti-functionalist discourses, he argues that infrastructures’ functions can never be known in advance, since they will result from such infrastructural experiments. He, therefore, calls social scientists to ‘move outside [their] comfort zone’ (p. 219) by articulating alternative futures through infrastructural analysis, rather than simply using it as critique. Finally, in a more broad-ranging essay, Joseph Masco explains how the neoliberal economies and ideologies that replaced welfare state approaches to crisis management shifted possibilities of addressing futures collectively, thus hampering hopes to tackle climate change effectively.

As a phenomenon at once natural and social, which requires conceptualising without giving absolute primacy to the social, infrastructures raise many fascinating questions for anthropologists. Although it is not an introduction to infrastructure studies, it will be a mine of inspiration for environmental anthropologists interested in understanding how an infrastructural perspective can help them question their field in new ways.