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Eviction as Infrastructure

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Abstract

Eviction might be considered a form of infrastructure: as a process of binding and unbinding people to a world in movement, producing the grounds on which action can take place. Going beyond a causal relationship between infrastructure and displacement, we may posit that eviction can be seen as a distributed, ongoing, system which binds people and creates the grounds for action. So, what might infrastructural theory reveal about evictions? How might we begin to study eviction as infrastructure?

Key Words: Eviction, Housing, Infrastructure, The Commons, Enclosure, Property, Logistics

Binding the World

Eviction and infrastructure are often encountered together. Infrastructure is casually thought of in terms of heavy infrastructure, such as roads, rail, sewers, buttresses and logistical networks, while eviction is defined by most institutions as the unwilling removal of people from their homes and land (UN-HABITAT, 2014). Eviction and infrastructure are often placed in a relation of cause and effect, as infrastructural developments are seen as driving and creating evictions and displacements. This is usually in terms of direct impacts such as the creation of new urban projects like large-scale dams destroying and flooding homes (Porteus and Smith 2001:151; Amin 2014), or indirect effects such as when public transport 'improvements' raise the potential ground rent of a neighbourhood (McElroy, 2019). These events are of course important, as they show us that the promise of 'infrastructure' does not imply nonviolence. But infrastructure is more than a set of objects, it is the grounds on which these objects appear to us, a process of "binding the world in movement and keeping the world bound to itself" (Berlant, 2016) which allows for that world to be held in common and for its enclosure. Yet what does it mean to think of evictions not only as connected to infrastructure, but also as a form of infrastructure in its own right, as a medium through which a city is produced? In its role in determining capacities, making and unmaking homes, property, and land, eviction both *is* and *has* infrastructure in its purest sense: it mediates and binds the relations that produce one kind of space over another, and must be managed, enacted, and created.

The term 'infrastructure' itself has stretched slowly over time, from an initial phase as a term used by development economists to describe fixed capital on which development might occur, to one more generally referring to a set of facilitating social relations (Furlong, 2019). Infrastructures might also be understood as 'objects which create the ground on which other objects operate' (Larkin, 2013). In this framing, infrastructure is a prerequisite, and decidedly about capacity-building in a recognisable sense. Critical infrastructure studies have tended to focus on the identification of sites of exclusion from urban development (Graham and Marvin, 2002), and infrastructures as tools for domination, control and Foucauldian 'surveillance'; managing bodies in space in the service of regimes of power through incapacitation (e.g. Weizman, 2008). Work on infrastructure has since gone beyond the notion of infrastructure as a set of material prerequisites but as a means of knowing and learning, especially in the context of the city (see Trovalla and

Trovalla, 2015; McFarlane, 2011). In this sense infrastructure is a medium in which material and information (or material-as-information) circulates, and the design of this circulation becomes a critical site of power for controlling these flows and their possibilities by limiting movement or patterning delivery (Easterling, 2018). Infrastructure, here, is about the forms of design that create the grounds for the perception and practice of 'Politics'. For the philosopher Lauren Berlant (2016) structure organizes social transformation, but infrastructure binds us within that transformation as it continues. Building on the argument that enclosure and the commons are in a relation of spatial production in which the form of each is shaped by its other (Jeffrey, Vasudevan and McFarlane, 2012), Berlant takes a different approach, and extends her critique to a reconceptualisation of the ideas of 'the commons'. For her, infrastructural analysis demands attention to the work of binding people to the world and the counter-movements these bindings create. To redesign the medium in which change happens is also to determine the grounds of enclosure and common life.

This poses problems for forms of counter-power. Infrastructure and 'society' are wrought together with indistinct boundaries that produce a polyphony of infrastructures, and therefore, variable frames of analysis (Simone 2015). A quasi-heretical version of communist critique offered by Jasper Bernes (2013) suggests that capitalist logistics, as a manifestation of infrastructure, is both the creation of a medium for exploitation which is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, and itself an epistemic regime; a mode of cognitive mapping conducted by capital. It is not enough to merely change what circulates; the medium of circulation itself must be remade. In the language of some contemporary social movements, infrastructure has come to mean a set of fluid resources which organisers can draw on (buildings and meeting space, legal knowledge, emotional labour etc.) outside of the official medium and dominant discourse (Shantz, 2016), prerequisites to an 'infrapolitics' of resistance (Scott 1990). Those of us who wish to defend or reimagine the commons face the challenge of working within and against a medium perpetually defending and reimagining enclosure.

Eviction as Infrastructure

It is in the problem of the commons where eviction-as-infrastructure first intervenes. What is eviction if not the enactment of the boundaries of what can be lived and held in common? As multiple authors argue, Isn't eviction about enforcing property as a kind of territory (Blomley 2019)? Reproducing race through dispossession (Roy, 2018)? Defining the limits of the right to the home and, therefore, Citizenship (Bahn, 2018)? Making land into a commodity to sell internationally (Rolnik, 2019)? What these studies reveal is that evictions are all of these things, and form an integral binding for the enjambement of spatial production, the 'and...and...and...' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:27) that links finance and race and gender and home and security and law and land and territory...etc. etc. Evictions, both *have* infrastructure, such as removals teams or rent collectors, and *are* infrastructure. They create 'ground' and (un)bind people to that ground.

'Eviction' proves hard to describe as a limited phenomenon because it exists at the development and negation of people's capacity to act against their own displacement, and is at work precisely where it is least visible - as a constant

force, acting through its possibility and latent threat. Eviction is an affective and affecting process in the sense that it develops and diminishes differing capacities-to-act (Lancione, 2018). The process of eviction is one in which constant and continual work is being done to produce dispositions in the bodies of those facing eviction, and to manage the movement of people from space. Bureaucrats, officials and enforcement workers all work upon the bodies of the evicted to both justify and create a disposition towards displacement (Baker, 2017). Beyond-human forces are also mobilised into action through digital debt management and threat escalation to govern the unwilling (Fields, 2019), a relation that melds the cybernetic management of capital extraction with the fleshly existence of social reproduction in the home. Historical and social intuitions, such as those which come into play in Cambodian land grabs, mobilise affects of fear, anxiety, and dread to make displacement happen (Schoenberger and Beban, 2018). Evictions are processes that work to undo the staying power of the evicted through the use of surveillance, law, force, threat, and history, to diminish the ability of the evicted to resist.

This means that agency in eviction is distributed across a system with multiple pathways of action. This is sustained by circuits of knowing and unknowing which allows eviction to discriminate by design. A few illustrative vignettes: Legal proceedings in Delhi exploit the ambiguous legal wording around concepts of public interest to create forms of discrimination which facilitate the eviction of minority groups and render millions of people in a state of suspended displacement (Datta, 2016; Bahn, 2018). In the English legal system, intuitive decisions from judges about the 'worthiness' of a case often decide a repossession case in a matter of minutes (Cowan and Hitchings, 2007). In China, the use of private enforcement and 'hired thugs' by state officials creates distance between state and private security, which constructs a degree of deniability from the forms of violence they mete out to rural villagers as punishment for opposition to government policies (Ong, 2018), as forms of 'private indirect government' (Mbembe, 2001) enter in. Differentiation of forms of life and the boundaries of what can be held in common, are not necessarily written and legislated for. They can also be mediated in when they are reproduced through eviction. Where the state does not 'see', in the design of evictions themselves, is where the terms of displacement are made. Eviction shares in what Keller Easterling (2018) identifies as the operation of a medium for objects; it creates loops and binaries which draw our gaze away from the ground on which we are moving, all while shaping it. Present in these conflicts is the idea of a threshold beyond which the enforcement of eviction happens 'after' politics has taken place, where it is a mere technical feature of a wider process.

Of course, this means the design of evictions can also be a site of resistance. Nora Stel (2016) presents a significant demonstration of the relationship between knowledge, plans, and eviction infrastructure and anti-eviction infrapolitics in Palestinian refugee settlements (called 'gatherings') in southern Lebanon. Evictions in the gatherings are governed by a strategy of uncertainty used by Lebanese authorities. Palestinians in these spaces have little to no formal rights and can face swift displacement when the land they live on is targeted for development, depending on the whim of the Lebanese state. By mobilising forms of ignorance and confusion, Palestinian refugees stall the Lebanese authorities by "cherishing loose ends" (Stel, 2016) - leaving the delivery of official notices of eviction untouched or repeatedly asking for

clarifications that may or may not buy time. In this case, the legal process, by which I mean the delivery system of legal notices and the process of knowledge production that legitimates the evictions, rather than the written law, is the site of contestation. Here, the relation between representational systems of law - the site of Politics proper - and the 'innocent' material mechanisms of their delivery is challenged by disruptive ignorance. The infrastructures of eviction are used to create and contest eviction as infrastructure. In doing so they are a space for both enclosure and articulation of the commons. The violence of the written order of property, as the anarchist geographer Simon Springer (2016) is keen to remind us in his historical analysis of displacement in Cambodia, can come into conflict with other unwritten traditions. The unplanned is a site of indeterminacy and potential.

Knowing Infrastructure of Eviction

This indeterminacy, and the distributed and occluded flows of information and material within evictions creates methodological uncertainties. Can we move from a model of research into evictions and housing displacements that moves away from policy design and implementation to understanding the surreptitious and ambiguous sites of politics in the means of eviction? How can we look at evictions as part of regimes of cognitive (un)mapping, or as distributed phenomena that appear everywhere and nowhere?

One strand of Infrastructure scholarship contends that infrastructure makes itself visible in the breakages and glitches in the normative operation of the infrastructural assemblages (Graham, 2010). So we might turn our methodological gaze to the breakages in eviction practice, sites where the threat of force loses its power to resistance, where evictions do not run smoothly or cleanly. The resistance to eviction of sites such as the Ungdomshuset in Copenhagen in 2006 made visible the amassed power of the state against eviction resistance, revealing connections and links in the European policing agenda. As police forces from multiple countries appeared to have a presence, and new technologies were trialled (Vázquez Díaz, 2007). Eviction resistance movements also tend to gain the most attention from urban scholars out of the studies whose methods include focus on eviction as it happens (e.g. Brickell, 2014; Lancione, 2018; Wilde, 2019), rather than those which see eviction as an output of policy that can be quantitatively analysed. Some urban geographers (and welcome disciplinary interlopers) have done work which aims to locate and explore the complex failures and social collapses within large-scale relocation events, (Lees, 2014; Fullilove, 2016: Fernandez, 2017; Zhang, 2017). This methodological approach often entails hyper-local forms of study, a focused presence with a single case study that can miss some of the quotidian affects and effects of eviction in everyday life, where evictions become routine and repetitive, as reported by eviction workers and enforcers themselves as they work across multiple sites (Purser, 2016; Baker, 2017). For every large event there are many more small evictions; 2018 alone saw 33,534 repossessions in the UK (Ministry of Justice, 2019). A focus on disruption can miss the ways eviction appears *normal*; both as a normalized, everyday, yet traumatic phenomenon, and as a normative prescription for social problems.

An alternative would be to follow the pathways of work on eviction production and the logistical chains involved in evictions. Rather than map a whole system from the top down, this epistemic approach works through the channels, pathways and paper trails that make evictions happen. We might focus on eviction labour as a starting point: Gretchen Purser (2016) has looked at the logistical work of eviction removals teams as part of a study of precarious day labour in Baltimore. What is revealed in this study is the fragility and danger of these mechanisms, the risk to life for the workers whose job it is to remove household goods from an apartment when someone is evicted, and the cyclical reproduction of the eviction process by those who have previously been evicted and form the reserve army of day labour in evictions, where staff are hired as-and-when they are needed. In her work focusing on the lethal biopolitical economy of logistics Deborah Cowen (2014) proposes the methodological use of 'nodes'. These are sites of convergence in a distributed system which can be used to track the passage of information and the flow through globalized networks of transaction and circulation. In this approach the locality then becomes a launchpad for data collection, instead of a circumscription of the physical boundaries of research. We might also seek to analyse the protocols which govern flows between agencies, contexts and legal frameworks, seeking out the underlying patterns and logics that determine the ways improvisation plays out within distributed systems (Galloway 2008). As different parts of eviction infrastructure seek to communicate with one another, across borders, industries and regimes of expertise, research needs to find ways of following it.

This perspective might build on the existing knowledge of global assemblages of housing markets and economies (Rogers, 2016), to follow through the pathways of eviction logistics in order to implicate the institutions which sustain and facilitate evictions. This requires a degree of patience and exploring multiple dead-ends. Moreover, identifying nodes or choke-points in contexts where illegal eviction is rife, where the courts facilitate informal or private enforcement, or where evictions are enacted through extra-legal forms of pressure (such as 'renovictions' or arson), might prove difficult. And, unlike the global logistics industry, which has obvious sites such as terminals, ports, and warehouses, evictions occur across multiple locations of different kinds (digital files, courts, homes, landlords' offices, banks) in a given city. Historically, this has led some scholars to focus on the use of court data (Immergluck et. al. 2019), or buying large-scale datasets from private firms, as Matthew Desmond did in his prominent work in the US, and for which he was heavily criticised (for full details, see Aiello et. al. 2018). There remain seemingly intractable ethical and practical confrontations within evictions research that methodologies need to address.

But studying flows might also mean recognising the counter-movements within the flow of eviction. Infrastructures always produce their negation. Eviction produces and manages flows of desire which relate to some of the most intimate social-reproducitve spaces of home, and to recognise the perversity in eviction also demands a certain queer epistemology of these spaces. Cowen's (2014:228) use of queer theory argues that logistics can be read as the creation of social scripts; scripts which are open to subversion and perverse readings. Cowen builds on a wider set of literatures on relations of capacitation and queerness that understand the materialist politics of assemblages via a queer destabilisation of binaries (Puar, 2012). Following Bernes' and Cowens recognition of logistics as the cognitive mapping

or scripting of social relations, a further methodological possibility would be to recognise the instability of the prescribed dualistic relationships between willingness and unwillingness to move, between being 'in place' and being displaced, between the housed and homeless at work in eviction infrastructures. Is the commons, or a concept of the commons, what in fact sustains displacement? Can we locate the existence of a perverse commons *within* eviction? It might take as many forms as there are pathways to eviction, exploiting, rather than succumbing to, the ambiguities of design which allow for enclosure. Knowledge about evictions is also about the fundamental instability of the flows of knowledge in the infrastructures that sustain them.

Eviction is often separated into causes and effects, isolated into a series of events. But eviction is present in both home making and unmaking (Baxter and Brickell, 2014, Fernandez 2017), and in doing so mediates the relation of one body to another, and fragments and remakes the linkages of space and time. The implications of this relation is that this separation and mediation is no unconscious act, but a willfully occluded creation of planning, design and purpose. Eviction is a creation whose aporias, silences, and gaps are part of what makes it function. In this sense eviction is an infrastructure whose failures are a constituent of its functions, and whose absences help constitute its presences. The forms of missing knowledge and oversights in design described above create grounds for further forms of differentiation and enclosure. However, they also show that if enclosure and difference are forged through eviction where power cannot see, or where bugs in the eviction system become features, these sites may also be where the commons is remade. Studying eviction as infrastructure opens up these absences and fragments, and reveals the constant work of eviction in the production of space. Most importantly it can reveal contestation and possibility at every step of displacement.

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