

# Jeff Diamanti

## Afterword

It is mid-afternoon on a cloudy Thursday in Amsterdam, and I'm trying to think about what it means for humanists like those of us in cultural analysis to take infrastructure seriously. The Singel canal is full of cranes and barges, temporarily assembled in front of the P.C. Hoofthuis to repair this or that, shaping a scene which appears charming from my office window because the annual release of a billion floating seeds from the city's most populous tree, the Elm, collects like snow (or more idiomatically, the *lentesneeuw*) around the edges of the barges, locking them into a kind of embrace that is both cute and curious. Curious because this landscape concentrates into focus a multitude of infrastructures that cross paths and purposes but is a rather minor moment in the planetary scale of infrastructure — a barge with a crane floating in a canal built in the seventeenth century, embraced by the botanical promise of trees seeking out new grounds for growth, on a road full of tourists, blocking students from getting to class on

time to study cultural analysis (so they say, fifteen minutes late). Minor, but not without its vistas onto the shape of things.

The scene is calm and colloquial. But then there is the familiar (though not calm) sound of drums and chants coming up from the street, and I look back down to see what it is all about. Hundreds of bodies move gradually up the opposite bank of the Singel chanting for “climate justice” holding all number of placards coloured by the phrases that have come to coordinate environmental politics in the twenty-first century. Infrastructure is designed to recede into the fabric of everyday life — in fact it takes its definition from the in-betweenness that provides everyday life with its *everydayness* — but that does not mean that it is far off. It is, in fact, ubiquitous, and that ubiquity is important for the kinds of concepts, concerns, and critiques that cultural analysis can bring to the study of infrastructure. A lot happens in and through infrastructure — economic trade; interconnectivity; physical capacity; social reproduction; feelings of freedom and mobility; experiences of impasse and stuckness; carbon emissions; unequal access; the global; planetarity — which is another way of saying that abstractions weighing on the present are at their most concrete and material in and as infrastructure.

I am caught a little off guard by one sign in particular, held out like a banner across multiple bodies,

written in the imperative: “S.O.S – Save Our Species.” Calling out into the void, the S.O.S. is a plea for help and a warning of imminent catastrophe: someone is about to die, or something is about to get destroyed. The S.O.S. is also a plea *to an addressee or listener*, in this case the same collective subject as the addressor. The language is not immediately new, of course. With climate change comes a whole cascade of extinctions, threatening not just to nonhumans but humans too; there is a “we” that can be put in both biophysical and historical terms, a species that speaks recursively to itself in its own voice: save our species. But it is nevertheless striking, since for all the promise of transition on the horizon sketched by climate strategies, long-term scenarios, and ecological tipping points, there is also an equally audible imperative unnerving the coherence of the us and the *we*. Save the human species? Well yes, of course; but, to be frank, not the human figured in the imperative to regard itself in the future tense of a present buckling under the nightmare of four hundred years of colonialism, carbonization, and capitalization. That is the same human simultaneously promised and weighed down by the energy infrastructures drawn into focus by so many climate marches, policies, and discourses. Save the species under what conditions? The historical and material terms that laid down these canals in the first place, with wealth wrestled from an imagined elsewhere and otherwise to the originary structures of capitalism

— the slave trade, the conditions of colonialism, and the incision these make into the fabric of modernity — what concept and costs of the species figure in the S.O.S.? Or the ethno-nationalists draping 1933 social politics with the reactionary fabric of 2019 boreal pride? Does the *we are all in this together* of climate discourse also mean that the future for which we are compelled to fight includes the given of what we are as a historically conditioned “we”?

The S.O.S. seems right — there is an enormous need for help and care in the growing shadow of catastrophe — but the very conditions for climate change are the impossible conditions under which something like a universal plea to save the human species simply cannot make sense: there is no such thing as the human species as such. The Anthropos supposedly responsible for global warming is a figure recursive to a certain relation to infrastructure, while the position most in need of resources for protection is not the species as such, but the part of the whole most exposed to the costs of modernity’s infrastructural asymmetries. The collision of infrastructures both colonial and modern with the politicization of streets for climate justice is a beautiful disarticulation of the given from the collective struggle for an otherwise. But what else needs to happen to uproot the given from the very ground upon which we walk and march, from the Anthropos nominated in the collective pronoun “we” and the possessive “our”?

What would it mean to take infrastructure seriously in the demand to “save our species”?

Doxa dictates that infrastructure remain inoculated against social contest because it is only plotted into the landscape when it goes under the banner of the common interest, of a civil engineering of the technical and the necessary. Every pipeline blocked and every freeway called into question blocks and questions more than that pipeline and that freeway. Infrastructure is invariably necessary, but we know in the humanities and social sciences painfully well that the realization and naturalization of the necessary is always the expression of a strained and traumatic duration to social politics — a duration discursively forgotten once the ground is broken for construction. Fossil fuels are certainly not going anywhere anytime soon, because in truth they are both socially and materially intertwined with the most basic forms of freedom, mobility, and care that we take as necessary, as the given. So the point is not to turn off the switch in order to prevent the delivery of plastic prosthesis, the functioning of coal-powered hospitals, and the diesel-fueled containers from reaching port in places hungry for its contents (which is not that same as saying that the rhetoric of “keep it in the ground” is unimportant or ineffectual). Critical theory is about generating a *longview of the given*, so that the soft and quiet violences (and the loud and hard ones as well) that its infrastructures lace through landscape — the

displacements, genocides, and environmental racisms that it both historically and presently reproduces — dent what we understand as the given.<sup>(1)</sup> If we are serious about transition, it will be a transition to an otherwise of the given.

The turn to infrastructure in the social sciences and humanities has been a long time in the making, first going under the rubric of the sociology of technology in the work of Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey C. Bowker in the 1990s and 2000s, coinciding more recently with what Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer term the rise of the “energy humanities” in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Anthropology has itself been long interested in studying the material and discursive infrastructures for their capacities to generate cultural practises, while the formative work of Bruno Latour in science and technology studies has for decades provided the terms of reference to study networks of actors that move through, but also include, the materiality of infrastructure. In the humanities, both historical materialism and new materialism find something like a common cause in the forces and relations embedded in infrastructure, so that, for someone like Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, the grid evidences the vibrancy of nonhuman actors like “electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields,” while the motif of infrastructure

has served a variety of Marxisms for the purpose of digging down beneath the surface appearance of social relations (for instance, Louis Althusser in *For Marx*). Media and communications studies, too, have from their formative moments in the 1960s provided an analytic framework for studying information and communication technologies as infrastructure and energy systems, including works such as Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* and Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. What brings all of these threads together, Dominic Boyer suggests, is a shared sense of the need to index the material substrata of experience, an “anti-anthropocentric turn ... in the deepening shadow of the Anthropocene, an era in which one species — for the first time since cyanobacteria oxygenated the earth’s atmosphere some 2.3 billion years ago — has proven itself capable of transforming the lifeworld of all species” (225). A turn to infrastructure puts pressure on what we mean by the species responsible for the ecological catastrophes of the present, at the same time that it perhaps paradoxically pulls the historicity of the human into clearer view. These canals didn’t build themselves. And the coal plant I see from my window is not the work of seals. A specific version of the human built these infrastructures at different times, and these infrastructures in turn reproduce the conditions for that version of the human to flourish.

(1)

I’m leaning on the language of the given and the givenness of infrastructure provided by Lauren Berlant in “The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times.”

If we are serious about transitioning to a renewable and equitable relation to energy, and by extension, serious, too, about reshaping the social relations recursive to the forms of extraction, circulation, and consumption that underwrite that relation to the grid's energy, we have no choice but to focalize our critiques, attachments, and desires through the infrastructural. This is the opposite of saying that base trumps superstructure, of saying that so many cultural and ideological expressions (or delusions) amount to a veil draped over the real material conditions that *condition* our continued pull through the otherwise obfuscated and obstinate logic of fossil-fueled capitalism.

No doubt there is more than enough ideological and cultural delusion to go around. But unveiling is not what making infrastructure primary to a praxis of social and ecological justice makes available. Unveiling presupposes that seeing things for what they are, as opposed to what they appear to be, disposes with the sedimentation of material and discursive histories in bodies and landscape: a debunking, rather than a sifting through. A critical theory attentive to the historicity and materiality of energy sifts through infrastructure because it is there that one encounters the dusty, bloody, and sedimented archive of capitalism's long *durée* over the bodies and resources of the planet. The cultural analysis of infrastructure makes available a presentism that refuses the terms of the present. Epochal shifts have been dug

into the depths of the earth on the back of capitalism's drives and liberalism's attendant forms of reason. Entire geographies, cultures, and relations to the earth have been upended, eviscerated, or shackled to the tides of a history written in the language of infrastructure. Plainly we ought to be deeply critical of the ongoing violence that grids infrastructure in the present and future, but a critique of infrastructure also needs to be an *infrastructuralization* of critique: not more of the same — self-satisfying claims regarding the civil engineer's racism or investors who talk like Descartes — but a materialism both new and historical, intimate to what makes infrastructure dizzying and dazzling.

If infrastructure emplots a story in the language of capacity and circulation, flow and futurity, then whose story does it emplot? And under what conditions of erasure, amnesia, and memory? And what is the materiality of that discursive and narratological piping through landscape? Kathryn Yusoff argues that colonialism was always a geosocial formation dependent on pressing certain kinds of bodies up against the threshold of life and nonlife otherwise sorted according to the rationale of geology, pressed against the raw stuff of the earth in order to buffer what she calls, in the Black studies tradition of Saidiya Hartman, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter, the racial displacements coded by the nomenclature of the present (today, the Anthropocene).

These displacements,

pertain to the question of how matter is understood and organized, as both extractable resource and energy, mobilized through dehumanizing modes of subjection and conjoining the property and properties of matter in such a way that it collapses the body politic of Blackness into the inhuman — wherein a codification in law and labor becomes an epidemiological signature, as Blackness is marked as property and Whiteness is marked as freedom (political and geographical). (Yusoff 67)

The afterlives of slavery and colonialism reverberate in the eardrums of what Elizabeth Povinelli has named the “carbon imaginary” of late liberal reason, which is both incipient to the urgency of climate change and utterly incapable of recognizing the violence it unleashes legally, socially, and materially under its predicates of a white, propertied self. Which is to say: ontologically incapable of being troubled by the inhuman knotting of the nonhuman properties of Indigeneity and Blackness with the category of nonlife, which has been taking place every day for centuries.

That “we are all in this together now” is a calming kind of abuse. The material and discursive constitution of the “we” at this threshold of life and

nonlife is more than a little anxious to calm its abuse into the necessary, the universal, the all-together-now attitude of transition jargon. Aimé Césaire was long ago clear as day about the costs of colonialism’s incessant efforts to calm itself via the delusion of historical progress: liberalism’s colonial needs bleed the bodies of others in order to plump up the self-certainty of the property bearing “I,” and when the integrity of liberalism’s pronouns feels the pressure of its constitution, another Hitler is just around the corner:

I have talked a good deal about Hitler. Because he deserves it: he makes it possible to see things on a large scale and to grasp the fact that capitalist society, at its present stage, is incapable of establishing a concept of the rights of all men, just as it has proved incapable of establishing a system of individual ethics. Whether one likes it or not, at the end of the blind alley that is Europe, I mean the Europe of Adenauer, Schuman, Bidault, and a few others, there is Hitler. At the end of capitalism, which is eager to outlive its day, there is Hitler. At the end of formal humanism and philosophic renunciation, there is Hitler. (Césaire 37)

The infrastructures of this colonial mediation of bodies are layered, material, and policed, even if it is incumbent

upon us to follow the lead of Black and Indigenous studies in abolishing the geosocial taxonomy of late liberal reason at a discursive level.

I have been arguing here that a critical theory of infrastructure, like a critical theory of anything, is *critical* in the measure that it labours in the service of emancipation from that which we may not even fully recognize our desire or need to be emancipated from. But the conceptual scaling of infrastructure from the historical to the experiential, from the geological to the ecological, and from the aesthesis of everyday life to the aesthetics of capital's reason and rampage over the earth's human and nonhuman resources, means that what is at stake in a critical theory attuned to it is effervescent. This is a critical theory fundamental to the Venn diagramming of concerns animating so much radical thought today. These conjoin in the turn to infrastructure in the humanities and social sciences around three critical concerns that matter deeply to the shape of things to come: decarbonization, decapitalization, and decolonization. Making infrastructure primary means taking seriously the forms of experience, extension, and enmity that knot bodies past and present (and future too) to the habits and habitats formalized by cables, ports, pipelines, grids, roads, and refineries. Taking these forms seriously means tracking them, looking at them with bifocals, and eventually finding pressure points that allow us and those to whom we ally ourselves strategic points of

theoretical and material intervention. It means listening to those that know first-hand what infrastructural expansion means when the very grounds for a life lived get chewed up and fenced off, but also learning what pains and perturbs those that want to dig deeper into the earth.

Demystifying the spatial and temporal entanglements of infrastructure with a sharper attunement to carbon, colonial, and capitalist imaginaries is a good reason to gather collective resources for a critical theory of infrastructure. This issue of *Soapbox* is an impressive step in that direction.

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