

Infrastructures as the Social in Action: An Interview with Ronen Shamir

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In the following interview, Ronen Shamir discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of researching infrastructure against the background of his own work on electrification in Mandatory Palestine. He draws our attention to the (post-)colonial genealogies of infrastructure and their role in shaping not just the common perceptions of a region called “Middle East,” but also constructing this region by means of material and social (dis-)connections. Throughout the interview, Shamir stresses how infrastructural systems shape people’s everyday experiences with their physical surroundings.

His emphasis points to the understanding of infrastructure as processes of assembling and disassembling people and everyday objects.

We invited Ronen Shamir to this interview in order to put his work into a critical dialogue/exchange with the articles featured in this issue. As a prominent scholar of colonial infrastructures, we are convinced that his work and insights point to issues that are discussed throughout this issue.

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Much of your work directly or indirectly relates to the topic of infrastructure. What fascinates/interests you about this subject? How does infrastructure help us to understand and approach questions of the social and political?

What attracts me most in the study of infrastructures is not so much their “social” and “political” effects but the processes and features involved in their assembly. From a certain point of view every social assemblage is a fantastic achievement, even the construction of a single house is pretty amazing, let alone an airliner with 300 passengers crossing an ocean and bringing you on time to this or that gate at this or that airport. So it’s the complexity and mind blowing coordination involved in creating infrastructures which seems fascinating to me. You walk in the city knowing that underneath the ground lies a whole universe of tunnels, pipes, and cables. If you pay attention, you can see the iron-cast covers of hidden entries to this world, and sometimes on a cold night you can see a group of men in yellow jackets hovering over one of these entries. I find it fascinating to encounter the very graphic experience of this underworld. So I guess, coming back to your question, that I consider infrastructures as exciting manifesta-

tions of the social, rather than just having social origins and impacts.

What theories or theorists have informed or do still inform most of your reflections on infrastructure? Could you maybe name a few key theories and concepts that you think are helpful to approach the concept of infrastructure?

Well we have been experiencing such a surge in the study of infrastructures over the past several years, coming from so many directions – anthropology, science and technology, planning, urban studies, geography, to name a few – that it is impossible to begin singling out the most important. The fact that anthropologists, for example, have taken such an intense interest in infrastructures lately is telling in and of itself. It speaks of a certain urgency to make stronger links between anthropology and the materiality and material specificities of everyday life. Take Gaza for example, where there are grave concerns of an impending humanitarian disaster. And when you try to understand what is a humanitarian disaster, how it is “assembled” – so to speak – who are the actors who participate in constituting, announcing, perceiving, and of course experiencing a humanitarian disaster, infrastructures simply flood the screen: bombing electric

power stations, destroying the sewage system, cutting the pipelines of fuel, all become acutely and painfully tied to taking a shower, cooking, walking at night. And all of this breeds new infrastructures, new sources of oxygen, in the form of a vast network of underground tunnels, a whole world of diggers, and suppliers, and clandestine communications. So you ask about theories and I instead suggest digging up those tremendously important works of social scientists all over the world that explore urban networks of all types. In one way or another they are all guided by what some would call the ‘new materialism’.

One of your books, “Current Flow” (2013), focuses on the electrification of Palestine during British colonial rule. Electricity is becoming one of the key infrastructural systems that is given more and more attention to in sociological and anthropological research. In light of your research findings and analysis, what makes electric grids significant in understanding certain histories and sociopolitical realities in such contentious locations as Palestine? How do electricity infrastructures inform us in theorizing on wider topics like modernity and structures of power?

Current Flow was a kind of an exercise in applying the sociology of infrastructures to a colonial context. Here you had the British Government motivated by obvious political considerations granting an exclusive concession to electrify Palestine to a Jewish entrepreneur backed by Zionist investors and institutions. So it was very tempting to explain away all which followed as simply the result of this blatant politics. My theoretical and of course the empirical challenge was to bracket this fact and to patiently trace the actual construction and expansion of the grid. And the more I looked at the details the less the original politics could explain what was going on. This is not to say that the electrification of Palestine had not been quite an important factor in the growing abyss between Arabs and Jews, but for reasons that had more to do with coincidences, technical matters, community response and so on than with a political design smoothly translated into kilowatts per hour. And I think that both cultural anthropologists and science and technology scholars now share the view that grids have lives of their own, so to speak, creating demand, sparking disputes, reshaping public space, and in general participating in the production of potential inequalities and communal differences. In areas of conflict, or war zones, this is simply less

nuanced than in other places. As we see in Gaza, cutting electricity can become a weapon. But all in all I think that the logic of analysis, treating electric grids at close range, should be similar everywhere.

Your book is methodologically informed by an approach to infrastructure as an assembly or Actor Network. Critics of ANT find this approach less helpful because it stresses “emergence” and “process” over structure and power. What do you think of this critique? And what approach is, according to you, the most fitting to make sense of infrastructure?

There is nothing in infrastructures that makes it particularly fitting for being analyzed by ANT. It is a common mistake to think that because an infrastructure like electricity has a shape of a network, ANT fits it well. A good material account has nothing inherent to do with networks. So if ANT is applied, it is because electric grids are more than poles and wires and power stations connected to each other. It is because it may be valuable, depending on what you want to understand, to trace the heterogeneity of electric systems and the way grids and other components of electrical systems attract, divide, or shape the practices or desires or possibilities of other non-electric entities like consumers.

As to power and structure, this is even more confusing. Power is a product of certain figurations rather than a driving force or a stock waiting to be deployed. I know this all sounds terribly Latourian, and I am not particularly keen to be his spokesperson here, but I think he gets it absolutely right on this point, not unlike Foucault before him and not very far in methodological terms as well. And structure signifies a certain pattern of consistency which of necessity is an evolving process, or recursive and in case not immutable. Anyway, the point here is that infrastructures are no more a matter of assembly than, say, subjectivity. So there is no special relationship between ANT and the sociology and anthropology of infrastructures.

Our META issue deals with infrastructure in the Middle East and North Africa. Even though your work specifically focuses on Palestine, many of the historical and political processes, like colonialism that shaped Palestine today, are also being tackled in other contexts in the MENA region. How does studying infrastructure in Mandatory Palestine help us to understand and research infrastructures in other parts of the region today? What can we learn by studying relations and processes in the Middle East and

between this region and others? Does infrastructure play a role in that?

I take this question as an opportunity to say something about two quite different directions of inquiry. Thinking about the middle-east – and we always have to remember that this designation is fundamentally the British Empire’s geopolitical view of the globe – I think there is still a wide open space for studying the infrastructures left behind by the Ottoman Empire, and then move on to look at how the British reshaped the middle-east also through infrastructural works, for example the oil pipelines from Iraq to Palestine. I mainly think here about railways, like the Hijaz, that is yet an untold story from the perspective of the sociology of infrastructures and may yield fascinating insights. But on an entirely different level, I also want to point out that one future direction of inquiry concerns lesser focus on large-scale infrastructural systems and more attention to ‘small’ ones. For instance how urban environments are created by, or hampered by, those old and new and forever changing networks of public benches, or drinking fountains, and public toilets, and phone booths and mail boxes, or informal taxis, etc. etc. There begin to be very interesting works in this direction, and specifically in relation to the so-called

Global South, and of course it may tell us a lot about the middle-east and North Africa's trajectory of cities as well.

Many scholars that work on infrastructures, including yourself, might agree to the notion that infrastructural systems are rendered visible when they fail or at a moment of dysfunction. However, in contexts like the Middle East and North Africa region that are now heavily militarized, securitized and urbanized, infrastructural networks are more and more becoming visible and noticeable, even becoming the target or means of struggle and resistance against hegemonic powers. How do you account for this hyper-visibility of socio-technical networks that are initially theorized as 'embedded' and 'invisible' (Star) (?)

This is a very good question, you know, which goes beyond infrastructures. This matter of invisibility is true in general in so many contexts. We often only notice the complexity and fragility of things when they break down. This even applies to our own body, a feeling we are all familiar with once we stretch a muscle, let alone a more serious breakdown of health. It is only then that we often realize how easy we take for granted those things around us as long as they function as we expect them to. So

again I'm not sure infrastructures are unique in this sense. And you are right. Not only when they break down or go missing, but also when waterways, or electricity, or roads become weapons in a conflict, or matters of contest and dispute, is when they become more visible. So it seems that theorizing infrastructures as hidden or invisible does not always apply and it may be better to frame it as an open empirical question rather than as a given premise. I think this is what Stephen Graham tries to do in the edited volume on 'disrupted cities', covering a spectrum from bombing Iraqi infrastructures to collapses by negligence, incompetence or earthquakes.

This issue features three articles that are dealing with infrastructure in Israel and/or Palestine. Why, would you say, does this area assume such a prominent position in the research on infrastructure? How does the lens of infrastructure help us to understand processes of domination and resistance?

I haven't read the papers, but I wouldn't hurry to assume the over-representation or special prominence of Palestine. But thinking of Palestine with the lens of the sociology and anthropology of infrastructure may indeed make you dizzy, as so

many historical and contemporary issues immediately appear and are still relatively understudied. We can talk about water resources, past and present, electric grids and where they reach or don't reach and who controls them, the elaborate system of roads, any by-pass roads, and checkpoints and walls creating what Eyal Weizman called the politics of verticality. So a lot in Palestine and Israel is about the politics of infrastructure in a most straightforward way, for example the division of space and its material and symbolic implications, as Amina Nolte shows in her work on Jerusalem's light rail.

Vitality of infrastructures is undoubtedly what drives us social scientists to investigate the intricacies of the role of technological systems in our social lives. C. Wright Mills says in "The Sociological Imagination" that figuring out how people's personal troubles and societies' public issues intersect is the moral task of social science. In a world in which infrastructure speaks directly to individuals' troubles and collective problems, how is social science work going to contribute to social change in terms of social justice, right to resources, equality and freedom of mobility? Can infrastructure be a promise for change?

Ronen Shamir

teaches at Tel-Aviv University. Some of his early works in the sociology of law and the legal profession looked at the history and politics of Palestine and Israel. Later works focus on governance and regulation, specifically with respect to 'corporate social responsibility.' Beginning with the study of 'Globalisation as a Mobility Regime' (2005), Shamir has explored the materialities of infrastructures. "Current Flow" (Stanford U. Press 2013) considers electrification in Palestine and present projects looking at electrical engineers in various colonial settings. **email:** shamirr@post.tau.ac.il

I think part of the answer is already there in your question. It is quite obvious that works on infrastructures that look at issues of access, or denial of access, and variance in connectivity and so on are tremendously important for understanding the politics behind, and the generation or reproduction of inequality, and as such can also point the way towards collective mobilization and social activism. I think for example about the work of Leo Coleman about electric meters as kind of totems generating solidarities and social action. But I must say that I am always a bit hesitant to assign social science with moral tasks because such projects are never far from social engineering. I prefer to think that moral sensitivities should guide us to explore certain issues and places and that these studies may shed further light on social worlds without harnessing our work to this or that cause. I am not talking about political neutrality, rather about some modesty, I guess, in thinking we can and should change the world. There is enough to do and explore as it is. Infrastructures have been for too long treated only as the stage, or background, or context for social action rather than as the social in action.

Works Cited

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