Edge infrastructures

Suzanne M. Hall
London School of Economics

Placing infrastructure

Within the vast complex of dehumanisation that has come to comprise the European border complex, streets in the far-flung parts of cities are perhaps the most banal of all its infrastructures. Neither the camp, nor the detention centre, nor the Mediterranean, streets remain attached through everyday formations to the ethos of discrimination and "illegality"1 integral to contemporary migration systems. Streets in the edge territories are one component in a multi-scalar geography of centres and margins; a commonplace stretch from which to understand migration as part of much longer histories of violent social sorting.

My research on street economies forged by migrant proprietors in UK cities such as Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester, London and Manchester surfaces how a heterogeneous range of individuals had become seemingly homogenised in terms of work prospects and urban locality. Despite significant differences in origins, journeys, occupations and education, these migrant proprietors had all become traders in parts of cities where jobs are hard to come by and the impacts of state-underinvestment are hard felt. How does race map on to place in terms of how certain migrant groups become positioned in the city? When Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002) asks us to comprehend the racialisation of space endemic to capitalist economies and sovereign structures, she prompts us to consider how multiple scales - always spatial and temporal – locate the long solicitation of racial violence core to state and city-building. Infrastructure allows us to place processes of social sorting in space and time; to locate global displacements in relation to urban emplacements. To think about the violence of here and now through infrastructure, is to specify more acutely where violence locates and who violence locates.

Relating infrastructure

While cities may have multiple centres and margins, the margin is not always a physical periphery, but it is always a structural and psychological edge territory. bell hooks proposes that, 'To be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body', evoking how margins form outside of but in sight of the centre. hooks asserts the simultaneous limitations and possibilities of this human and territorial position through the struggle over the relative meanings of centres and margins. The current brutal intersection of global migration and urban marginalisation brings into play wider political economies of centrality and marginality in which the hierarchies of race are core to citizenship status. In the economic and cultural compact of what counts and who matters, centrality is constituted not simply as a locality but as a relation of power. Centrality and marginality are always in-the-making with respect to one another. Central infrastructures require their own forms of segregation secured through tacit and explicit codes that secure privilege as much as enforce exclusion.

In our milieu of populism and profit, centres - whether invoked at the scale of nation or city - command a pre-eminent status measured against a globally extensive infrastructure of centrality and claims for advantage. Hierarchy is used to sustain the illusion that margins are subsidiary to centres; that informality is distinctive from informality, that provision is without provisionality. Entanglements of centres and margins suggest that infrastructure emerges as relations of politics and culture, physicality and perception, regulation and atmosphere (Glissant, 1989) In conceptualising the connections between 'race, place and violence' and the lively formations of 'a black sense of place', Katherine McKittrick (2011)   57

keeps sight of centre and margin. McKittrick engages with the enduring architecture of subordination has shaped an economy of racial servitude, keeping black life "in place", while rendering black life as "placeless" through the dispossession of self and land. She underscores how the contours of a black sense of place are conditioned but not circumscribed by subjugation.

Politicising infrastructure

In thinking about the subjugation-and-subversion of edge territories I explicitly veer off centre, to ask what we learn about the city and citizenship from the margins. The margins, pushed to the periphery by multiple forces of discrimination potentially offer a place from which to be at risk and to take risk, to oppose and to reconfigure, what hooks names 'a profound edge' (hooks, 1990) I engage with the structural and psychological life of edge territories to explore the promise and limitations of occupying this outcast position. Structures of inequality and street racism feature prominently in the proprietors' accounts of where certain individuals and groups are consigned to settle and the limited forms of work available in the urban margins. Yet expressions of cross-cultural agility and exchange were deeply significant to proprietors' accounts of transactions. Many proprietors described the multiple border crossings they had taken before arriving on the street, tracing their fragmented journeys over extended time periods. With each crossing the ne'er-to-be citizens acquire a cosmopolitan repertoire of global edges - more languages, more skills, more upgrades -which perversely grows alongside their accumulated experiences of perpetual redundancy (Baumann, 2004).

To suggest that there are different possibilities of citizenship within the realm of being outcast is to work within an extremely delicate conceptual position. The brutality of bordering across contemporary Europe is so extreme, the fatalities and casualties so appalling, that it leaves little room to consider anything other than profound, systematic wreckage. I tread cautiously down the street, aware that I need to keep centre and margin in sight to understand marginalisation without it obscuring the view of meaning-making in the margins. In evoking a citizenship of the edge I seek to open out the tight, highly localised conception of the ghetto to explore the more expansive infrastructure of edge territories. Our understanding of edge territories must therefore pursue the specificities of violence, the details of struggle, and the varied convolutions of everyday transaction.

References

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