

“ONLY AS SELF-RELATING NEGATIVITY”: INFRASTRUCTURE AND CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

Five years ago, in a volume charting a ‘formerness’ for the Global West, I proposed a shift from institutional critique to infrastructural critique. This was described as a shift from a critique of the enabling container for a certain discourse or performativity of citizenship (institution) to an embodied critique that necessarily owed more to praxis. Thus the direction was towards a critique based on contingent ruptures, with the interpretation and activation of these ruptures the source of political meaning. The immanence of such an approach registers in the sense that it works with desires that are latent in the infrastructure, thus broadly conceived. It is the notion of infrastructure as a mode of thinking that favours the concrete over the abstract - a concrete that is immanent to real abstraction – that I would like to develop in this article, concentrating on the epistemic and political relations between infrastructure and critique.

Keywords: Infrastructure; Critique; Negativity; Race; Institution; Transversality.

The story is told that, when Leibniz propounded the maxim of Variety, the cavaliers and ladies of the court, as they walked round the garden, made efforts to discover two leaves indistinguishable from each other, in order to confute the law stated by the philosopher. (Hegel, 1904, p. 218)

a field that is not only immense but also full of cracks. (Adorno, 2019, p. 18)

Five years ago, in a volume dedicated to charting the critical consequences of the geopolitical shifts that have eventuated in a ‘formerness’ for the global West, I tentatively posited a shift that could either already be observed underway in certain political and artistic approaches, or should be attempted in more of them.¹ Although dogged by the usual descriptive-prescriptive aporetic amoebas that attend many essays that are written too quickly, the co-ordinates of this shift were described as going from institutional critique to infrastructural critique. This proposed a shift from a critique that called on a certain discourse or performativity of citizenship – institutional - to a critique that took an immanent view on the means of production or conditions of possibility of both the institution and its critique - infrastructural. An institution can be a type of infrastructure, but the shift needs to be understood as moving from a standpoint which takes the institution as its horizon, thus accepting the moralised premises that perpetuate it, to one which takes the institution as a historical and contingent nexus of material conditions amenable to re-arrangement through struggle and different forms of inhabitation and dispersal. There is here of course a reference to the distinction between theory and critical theory, but it falls short to the degree that both approaches would roughly fall into the ambit of ‘critical theory’, which is to say, reflexivity as a key element of its practice. The between the trajectories of critique sketched here, already noted, should be seen as one of horizon, but also, crucially, as one of identification: identification with the target of critique, but even prior to that, identification with its own position, that is, in its position in the relations of production.

The pandemic has offered a prism for art institutions to reckon with the necessity of this shift, along with escalating forms of social antagonism and ecological crisis that they both try to programmatically represent and which manifests in their own functions. As all institutions of social reproduction in capital that draw on the speculative premise of cultural autonomy for their legitimation (Vishmidt, 2018), art institutions can choose to blindly perpetuate themselves akin to the cancerous methods of the form of value in capitalism, with staff cuts, defence of corrupt boards, and trolling of moderate social justice demands (Tate, MoMA, British Museum, Science Museum would be some examples). The ones that have pivoted to putting their resources at the disposal of hard-pressed communities instead and thinking about what it would mean to become ‘social infrastructure’ are far harder to summon to mind, and they are often organisations that operate on a much smaller scale. The broad, if not

1 The global West here taken to refer to the atavistic fantasies of progress animating a recent – and renewed? – Cold War schema of bi-polarity rather than to global capital and its fast-fixed colonialities.

universal, correlation of scale with operational ethics is not by any means surprising, and the demands for social justice performativity echo more loudly from large institutions of all types due to the size of their platforms as much as to the emptiness of these claims.

This notion of the ‘infrastructure’ or the ‘infrastructural’, however, should not be reduced to the gestural emphasis put by more or less progressive art institutions on those aspects of their mission statements that speak to a ‘usefulness’ for the production, display and contextualisation of art (Abse Gogarty, 2018). This would be within the understanding of the institution as a neutral enabler of culture, a notion that aligns, unsurprisingly, with the customer-facing neutrality structurally embraced, if performatively denied, by all large profitmaking entities. Rather, infrastructural critique needs to deepen the immanent critique that is not agential so much as transversal to the institution of art. Or, as I noted recently with regard to the role of labour politics as infrastructural critique in that institution, “an organisational rather than thematic appropriation of the labour in art is possibly the only way that a negative critique of [...] autonomy can be initiated both using the institutional and infrastructural resources of that autonomy, allow[ing] it to transversally connect with and through movements elsewhere, and to materialise those movements within the space of art as a concrete rather than gestural politics.” (Petrossiants and Vishmidt, 2020) With this attention to immanence – the example in the citation is labour politics in the art institutions - we can glimpse operating in the background the two sides of the concept of the ‘transcendental’. Specifically, the two sides are that which transcends the empirical and the contingent to form a horizon for it, and a second, more Kantian notion of the ‘transcendental’ as that which provides a solid footing for all that is empirical and contingent, without being any the less abstract; for Kant, the key instance is time and space as the transcendental conditions of experience. Drawing on this would mean developing a mode for critique that is not only aware of or dedicated to creating awareness of these (infrastructural) conditions of its own enunciation and the classed and racialised conditions of the critical encounter, especially in the institution of art, but a critique that makes cuts and lets in air, a critique that takes it upon itself to find or make the holes through which this infrastructure comes into view. And maybe these holes can be extended to enable a grasping and a torsion to be exercised on those conditions, tugging them into really completely different shapes if necessary, demolishing or abolishing them if not. Thus, a mode of critique that deals in contingent ruptures, but the interpretation and activation of these ruptures, thus giving them a political meaning.² The immanence of such an approach is also registered in the sense that it reaches for, works with, desires that are latent in the infrastructure.³ This was the dimension I tried to capture in the text when it addressed the temporal ‘cut’ or rupture posed by the political to the infrastructural in the sense of infrastructure as the resources of social reproduction. That is to say, infrastructure as the spatial articulation of historically specific social relations which persists over time: “This reproductive aspect of

2 In the words of Asad Haider in his recent piece – “Emancipation and Exhaustion” –, “Our capacity to theorize our reality will be limited by our ability to formulate a vantage point of emancipation”. It is this incapacity to separate a critical perspective from the praxis it would imply, no less than its own embedding in what it might wish to dismantle, that is central to the project of infrastructural critique.

3 Compare with the suggestion that desire is part of the infrastructure, as Deleuze and Guattari note in their work on the crisis of the production of subjectivity. (See also Lazzarato, 2012, p. 42.)

infrastructure, however, has to retain an openness to the “temporal cut,” which undoes crystallizations and institutions in the attempt to realize the desires that were the initial impetus for their establishment”. (Vishmidt, 2016) I concluded by describing the stakes of the shift in the following terms, “it is infrastructure’s transitive character—between the material and the possible, between machines and working drawings, between cognitive maps and what is pictured on them—that enables it to ask political questions that can no longer be replied to in the abstract, with the false totalizations of rejection or complicity.” (Vishmidt, 2016) It is both the ambitiousness of this closing claim, and the notion of infrastructure as a mode of thinking that favours the concrete over the abstract - albeit a concrete that is immanent to real abstraction – that I would like to account for and to develop in what follows. In fidelity to the topic of this special issue, I will be concentrating chiefly on the epistemic and political relations between infrastructure and critique.

CRITIQUE - HOWEVER

In order to detail this move from institutional critique to infrastructural critique and discover what kind of conceptual torsion it renders possible, it would be helpful to define which notion of critique is operative here. It is not just about a shift from a self-referential to an outward-facing or ‘multidisciplinary’ constitution of critique, itself reflecting a much more durable binary between theory and praxis, as already suggested. A transition envisioned at that level would replicate the terms of a moralised distinction between an irresponsible position that gratifies only itself and reproduces only itself, even and especially when it claims to be critical, and a responsible one which adopts the materialist axiom ‘the point is to change it’ not just as a riposte to its habitus but at an indeterminate scale potentially encompassing the totality (of a vicious and unjust social system). Such an indeterminacy lacks the materiality however, that would make it an effective alternative to institutional critique as a purely reflexive riposte against the conditions of production of one’s subjectivity as an artist, for example. In fact, such indeterminacy creates opportunities for the latter position, preoccupied with its own conscious and unconscious complicities and desire for power, to cloak its own moralism as pragmatism, and turn the accusation back on the drive to externalise manifested in the former.⁴ Moreover, the institutional ‘object’ in the West is not what it was fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five years ago, when the basic grammar of institutional critique was being consolidated. Decades of austerity, far-right politics infiltrating different organs of the state and most recently the repercussions of the pandemic, have seen art institutions become much more friable, more vulnerable, if no less aggressive and violent in many ways (in all the ways they hold on to their business models in changed times, or radicalise rhetoric while radicalising exploitation and extraction in patterns of ‘reproductive realism’). Without convoluting the point further, the first proposition for how to conduct the conversation about how we might move from the institutional to an infrastructural

⁴ In a rather more nuanced and psychoanalytically inflected way, these are the stakes of Andrea Fraser’s agenda-setting piece, “From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique” (2005).

otherwise is that we engage in a re-thinking of what we mean by the 'immanent' in 'immanent critique'.

One way to begin here would be to see if immanent critique – the keynote of all *materialist* approaches to critique – sustains a relation to critique in general that can be compared to the relation between 'critical theory' and 'theory' as put forward in Horkheimer's essay. If critical theory is theory that doesn't just acknowledge but has a normative and political mission to undermine its own conditions of possibility rather than just think about an object – thus, ideally, theory that is animated by the protocols of non-identity thinking – immanent critique is critique whose "right to exist" (Adorno, 1969), whose legitimacy and licence, is never given, just as its object is neither given nor subjugated to its purview, as in Theodor W. Adorno's positing of the object's resistance to the concept. It is 'immanent' because it is embedded in the conditions which enable it to operate and which to a greater or lesser degree it is concerned to foreground and ultimately perhaps to do away with as part of a collective practice of transformation. Epistemologically, and hopefully also materially, critical theory and immanent critique are class traitors in the knowledge disciplines. They are not only concerned to diagnose or diversify the institutions they work in but to contribute to a project of critical knowledge production and social practice that will not suffer but actually benefit from those institutions being blown sky-high. Thus immanent critique is a part of the "general antagonism" (Harney and Moten, 2013) and it is relational in its distinction-making. Kant's concept of critique was relational too, but its endpoint was legislative – creating an enclosure of decency and functionality in a lawless world. No wonder so many people are suspicious of critique nowadays, if it is seen as the founding gesture of a normative, male and white bourgeois psychology underlying all the 'human sciences'.

The simultaneity of 'relational' and 'antagonism' has an important role to play here. Without this simultaneity, this resonance, there is no way to create propositional space (possibility) on the basis (the ruins) of the negativity of what currently exists. Critique is just a cutting tool, not the price of admission. A device for making little breathing holes in the suffocating fabric of reality. At the same time, it is the pressure of negativity and non-identity on the world-making ambitions of the practice of critique that undermines its will to abstraction and imposes on it a responsibility to the 'concrete', which itself requires an understanding of how abstraction mediates and is mediated through intolerable realities, which is the ambivalent ground of possibility for critique. This evocation of the Hegelian and Marxian proposition about the conceptual, methodological and political implications of thinking abstraction and concreteness through one another is succinctly captured by Adorno in the second of a 1964 lecture course on the frayed relationship between philosophy and sociology against the background of confident, ratified empiricism: "with the notion of theory I have in mind, it is precisely the immersion in the concretions that allows us to move beyond the merely factual." (Adorno, 2019, p. 11) Likewise, this responsibility to the 'facts'

as a speculative and materialist rather than empiricist pursuit can be seen as a refrain of critical theory and the immanentist versions of critique that it has generated; an obligation that in many contemporary, non- or post-critical theoretical projects takes the name of ‘responsibility’ (citation) when aiming for (too succinctly) an *ethical* rather than a political horizon, painfully reflected in the drift of accountability from a community-facing to a managerial precept. Conversely, in the ‘critique of black reason’ project undertaken by Achille Mbembe, the historical centrality of the murderous plunder of labour and life from humans relegated to ‘blackness’ emerges as a transcendental condition not only for the modern reason of the Enlightenment, but as the condition of capitalist valorisation with ever more extreme and desperate means, as an eclipse of the very horizon of survivability in the relentless vortex of extraction. In this “becoming-black” of the world (Mbembe, 2017) what has elsewhere been defined as the ontological can be clearly grasped as the infrastructural. Further, there is an infrastructural explanation for what presents itself as ontology – a racialised ‘real abstraction’ which the turn of capital towards an overwhelming focus on extraction makes general and operative in ways hitherto opaque to white majority Global Western liberal societies who were told that this thing could be bargained with and bent ‘towards justice’.

CARING ABOUT CRITIQUE

There is a curious sense, which I will attempt to unpack in this section, in which the abundance of discourses around ‘care’ in the current moment are interpreted as if they are an effective means for sidelining critique as a modality, and should be used to revise the politics of responsibility as non-antagonistic. Yet if we approach care rather as a species of infrastructure, as a condition of possibility that persists, that can be appropriated, manipulated and destroyed for specific political and classed, gendered and racialised ends, then we understand that the notions should not be opposed. In fact, if we follow this route, it becomes clear that pitting care against critique is a formalist gesture which evacuates their respective traction, both in theorising social reproduction and the abolition of some of the relations enabling that reproduction to go on. By suggesting that antagonism and violence can be eliminated from movements for justice, it solidifies a managerial conception of the social where care compensates for the violence of what cannot be questioned, coming to shape a violent status quo in its own right. A basic reference for the truth of these observations is the eternal rhetoric of the bosses around every type of workers’ action, albeit inflected by the neoliberal common sense around individual fragility. By making an issue of destructive conditions, by withdrawing their consent and their labour, workers are cast as the real destroyers, forsaking their duty of ‘care’. In the instance of the university, this duty of care would be spelled out in terms of students and even to the ‘more precarious’ among the workers themselves, despite the fact that they are rendered as such by the violence of management.

This would also mean infrastructural critique needs to reckon with what it means that infrastructure is that which persists and which makes possible, insofar as it also makes *impossible*, requiring us to align a thinking of infrastructure with Foucault's discussion of regimes of governmentality whose purpose is to make live and let die. Thus care is always an infrastructure of care, and this includes how absolute lack of care is built into, is part of the infrastructure (if it is a 'desire' then it is a desire to forget about the ones who don't matter, which may or may not be subject to a psychopathology of group affirmation). Infrastructure, then, is always specific: it is sustained and maintained to achieve certain biopolitical outcomes, to enable certain strategies of accumulation that are founded on no-infrastructure, i.e. extraction and disposability of labours, lives and communities. A recent intervention in an online series on infrastructure and coloniality notes that 'race is an infrastructure,'⁵ which mediates access to resources, whose withholding is key to the population management key for efficient extraction – a differentiated management of "infrastructural coercion" and "infrastructural neglect" (Sherman, 2021) that enforces the nasty, brutish and short life prospects alluded to in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's often-cited formulation of racism as "the state-sanctioned [...] group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore, 2007). Death by infrastructure, as in large areas inhabited by racialised or otherwise powerless communities subject to environmental racism, unfolds in the shadows of death by police violence, death by poverty and deaths of despair; it could arguably even be said to precede and encompass all of these. And if more concrete examples of coercion and neglect as attributes of the functioning of infrastructure as intended would be useful, the architecture of health care in the United States would be a glossy brochure. An infrastructure of care whose organisation for profit generates endless instances of endemic absurdity, from the ruinous costs that restrict access and stratify quality, to the staggering bureaucracy of treatment, not to mention the exhausting labour of 'self-care' in the shadow of these interlocking systems of prosaic, self-perpetuating violence.

And yet if infrastructure should be identified and historicised as the material basis for violent processes of racialisation, for a materialist analysis it is crucial as well to look at the other side of this argument, that is, who benefits? Notably, extractive corporations and the perma-colonial states they are imbricated with, now reproduced at a global scale. For Sherman (2021), infrastructural and ontological lenses are not opposed; "infrastructure is ontological" because it is the material basis for the reproduction of race, i.e. the social being of race is both produced by the operations of extractive infrastructure, and race is an infrastructure in its own right, legitimating the violent and persistent processes physical infrastructure both reflects and unfolds. Timothy Mitchell (2020) adopts a different, although linked, angle on the ontology of infrastructure as core to capital's accumulation strategies. For him, part of the differentiated access to social reproduction that infrastructure represents has to be thought in terms of how its self-evident performativity (or degraded performativity,

5 Zandi Sherman (2021) elaborates "Race mediates the circulation and mobility of bodies, actually determining the spaces in which they are located and the extent to which those are spaces of nurturing, vitality, and care, or spaces of risk, neglect, and degradation. [...] From neglected water pipes to sophisticated supply chains, race is at the core of the circulation of bodies and objects. It is the master infrastructure that determines which bodies circulate where and how, and what kinds of mobilities and access are available to whom."

in many cases) “impedes us from thinking differently”. For him, capitalist valorisation is predicated on the possibility of delay; of capturing the future in the present, which is to say, of *extracting* from the future to substantiate value claims and preserve assets in the present, leaving very little future for those who might want to organise it differently, especially in ecologically calamitous times like now. In fact, the problem is that the materiality of infrastructure – here taken in the sense of railroads, ports, bridges, dams, mines – distracts us from the speculative financial flows that development couched in such ‘infrastructural’ or, to put it differently, self-evidently useful, terms is primarily intended to enhance.⁶

6 The conjunction of this financial ontology and infrastructure is captured well in his note that “Infrastructures work on time, but not only in the ways we commonly assume. While they may increase the speed at which goods are transported, people travel, or energy flows, this acceleration of time is not their most important attribute. Their physical scale, technical durability, and political strength give them another purpose. They introduce an interruption, a gap, out of which the present extracts wealth from the future.” (Mitchell, 2020)

So, what we can derive from these analyses is that care and critique cannot be counterposed to one another, because both only exist due to a specific disposition of infrastructure as the condition of possibility for both to persist over time. Such a minimal basis of commonality, however, needs to be supplemented by the mediation of care by critique and critique by care to ensure that maintenance of things as they are does not become the most salient goal in an era in which so many things are falling apart for so many people – yet in ways which are predetermined by centuries of functional infrastructures of violent neglect such as race. If we pick up on the idea that race is an infrastructure, what else does it make possible as the converse of its pedagogy of abjection and disavowal? As thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter, David Lloyd, and Denise Ferreira da Silva have been propounding for many years, it makes the ‘human’ possible. The human as the rational subject who creates and maintains infrastructures of progress and abundance where once there was only primitive subsistence and warfare. The human could thus be deemed a precondition for there to be such things as care and critique, as English-language predicates such as ‘humane’ and concepts such as humanity and humanism demonstrate. Can we jettison this figure of normativity while holding on to a notion of ethics, such as the “poethics” of existence without “separability” (da Silva, 2014)? This suggests an evacuation of the assumption that politics requires a normative reference of some kind to ground its claim to the necessity and desirability of transformation. A question could be, however, how to frame the levels of entanglement between the ethical approach and social antagonism that requires a thinking of negativity. The pragmatic negativity of infrastructural critique, perhaps, which recognises that insofar as we are situated in a space of “operations” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019) it is a contradictory one, yet still optimised for the valorisation of capitalist time, and favours the extraction of the resources that can guarantee it. Here we see infrastructure as a kind of ‘second nature’ that can both be collectively transformed for different ends, because it was collectively created, and as the enabling condition for anything we can do and anything we can think. This allows the negativity of infrastructural critique to adopt the standpoint of transformation, since the infrastructure is both the basis for miserable and distorted life and the resource for very different types of co-ordination, along with the subjectivities that would struggle to realise them.

INFRASTRUCTURAL CRITIQUE AND A TRANSVERSAL READING OF NON-IDENTITY

As its most basic move, the shift from institutional critique to infrastructural critique would have to decide whether the horizon that critique aims for in the space of art as a “space of permissible critique” (Black, 2016) (albeit not one ‘conducive to collective struggle’) is the institution or the social (and geophysical) world. One could say ‘surely, it’s both’, or designate the ways one folds into the other. That would imply the refusal of the metonymy of taking the former as the relevant microcosm of the latter but at the same time it would focus on not losing the specificity that gives any delimitation of a particular social space with particular affordances traction in the mode of thinking strategically. Thus there needs to be a double focus on infrastructure in - and beyond – institutions. This entails zeroing in on their conditions of reproduction, and drawing speculative lines of solidarity from there: “The terms—artist, tenant, worker—aren’t specific classes but, rather, forms of exploitation or forms of (re)production that can be overcome by creating solidarity networks across occupation, across fields, across income levels.” (Petrossiants, 2021, p. 35) The way this transversality can operate is shown by campaigns such as Strike MoMA with their focus on not just the implication in, but the reproduction by the institution of primitive accumulation and colonial oppression through the board memberships that secure its finances. This calls forth unionising campaigns in arts institutions that strive to bring institutional rhetorics in line with infrastructural justice for their reproductive workers across classes, from administrative workers to cleaning and security staff. Or should infrastructural critique be thought also in terms of the building of actual infrastructures that have their point of origin in cultural contexts? Following this line of enquiry leads us to consider how the entrepreneurial – however social - may be distinguished from the infrastructural. This is perhaps where critique has to come back in, with its evaluative dimension that has to connect with dimensions that exceed the ameliorative desires of cultural practitioners, just as all labour politics need to aim for the dismantling of the conditions that both oppress the worker and make minor improvements in their situation possible. Also crucial in the notion of critique here is how to draw the distinction between a political attentiveness to ‘real-world’ or material effects from a frankly neoliberal focus on performativity. This risks positioning activism as the realization of the ‘key performance indicators’ at the heart of a politics of representation. That is to say, the question is what kind of demands, what kind of implementation of demands, ensure that they don’t fall into endless, aporetic debate with the protocols of representation that must be defied by the praxis of antagonism in any institution, be it the institution of art or of wage labour.

CONCLUSION

All these questions point to the need to understand the concept of critique at issue in ‘infrastructural critique’. The shift argued for above

cannot leave critique in its own right untouched, with its acknowledged genealogy in the unconditional autonomy of the isolated and European-identified Enlightenment subject informing most debates around the notion in the sphere of radical theory these days, over the comparatively sidelined history of critique as a material practice of antagonism whose subject, if it has one, is dispersive, uncategorizable and collective. The resources necessary to flesh out that other practice of critique, in an apparent paradox, owe substantially to contemporary debates around ‘identity politics’ inasmuch as those debates can also flash up the salience of a relational nonidentity and negativity to any notion of critique that would make claims on the infrastructure that provides it with its conditions, that is to say, with the material possibilities of critique as well as its object. When Hannah Black (2016) writes about “the self as historical and social material” in the space of art, a self that entails a nonidentity with the ‘real structures of “identity”’, she is describing identity as a structure imposed on the non-white, non-male cultural worker, whether it’s by liberal arts institutions looking to burnish their inclusion agendas or ‘identity critics’ such as the ones who phobically denounce trans people nowadays or more consistently frame ‘identities’ as distractions from class on the Left. In this negative and problematic concept of ‘identity’ which is identitarian at the same time as it identifies with ‘criticality’ and where critique is only possible under conditions of non-identity, there is a contradiction between identity and nonidentity that recalls Adorno’s Hegelian appropriation of the latter but also visibly Hegel’s own argument in the *Science of Logic* when he notes that “Essence is mere Identity and reflection in itself only as it is self-relating negativity, and in that way self-repulsion. It contains therefore essentially the characteristic of Difference” (Hegel, 1904, p. 215). An infrastructural critique is therefore defined by the tension between a clarifying negativity when it identifies its opponents as well as the difference that traverses its own speaking position. Critique is then the practice of non-identity, a self-relating negativity, the irreconcilability without end of social antagonism of the institution of art and its real-world spaces, programmatically dedicated to inclusion and infrastructurally realized by domination. This antagonism is turned into aporia, insoluble, and perhaps not even interesting, within the framework of the institution – that is, the programmatic – but as soon as it gains a transversal dimension by looking to the infrastructure, there is a gain (one could even call it a ‘gain of function’?) in the capacity of critique to not only query its own conditions of existence but to see how the resources of critique itself can provide infrastructure for other fights which pull the institution into their vortex.

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