

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, London: Verso, 2014. ISBN: 9781781685877 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781685884 (ebook)

A few years ago, I was in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on a research project. I had just stepped off the plane and had, in usual style, failed to obtain any local currency before walking straight into a meeting at a café. However, once there, I found that this was not a problem, since I could simply use my UK debit card to pay for a coffee. As I entered my PIN into the machine and saw the words “contacting your bank” on the screen, suddenly my mind flooded with questions. Is that machine really contacting my bank? What wires does it traverse? Why does my PIN work here? Why are debit cards all the same size? How and when does the currency exchange happen in this transaction? It occurred to me that wherever I happened to be geographically, be it Singapore, Los Angeles or Caracas, I would still know little to nothing about how this network was built and maintained. Although this was a reflection of my own ignorance, it was also an indication of a lack of understanding about global infrastructure most of us live with.

Keller Easterling’s book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* is a fascinating meditation on contemporary global infrastructure. Compared to many geographic studies of infrastructure, this work is distinctly broader in scale. Rather than thinking of infrastructure as being comprised of the arterial stuff of the city—sewer pipes, streetlights, buildings, heating conduits, etc.: the kinds of spaces outlined in Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift’s (2007) seminal paper “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance”, where phenomenological apprehension of infrastructure unfolds mostly through failure, and Matthew Gandy’s (2008) study of social inequality through clean water distribution in Mumbai, for example—Easterling

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spotlights the intangible, inaccessible and invisible networks that increasingly regulate *global* standardization.

Jane Bennett (2005), in her treatment of power grids as assemblages, comes a bit closer to fleshing out the power of associative, mostly immaterial, nets of infrastructural connections but Easterling scales this up yet further to show us that the real power today lies in the invisible web of infrastructure being constructed that is increasingly an *extrastate* entity. This is an infrastructure of ideology, deployed materially only to harness forces necessary to keep it accelerating, resulting in the creation of homogeneous and geographically disinterested spaces, pre-planned and stamped down on the earth at alarming speed. These spaces, what Marc Augè (1995) might call “non-places”, though homogenized, remain saturated with political power. Easterling writes: “contemporary infrastructure space is the secret weapon of the most powerful people in the world precisely because it orchestrates activities that can remain unstated but nevertheless consequential” (p.15).

The social symptoms of this free market deployment are expected and obvious—international industry looks for “the cheapest labor and the most deregulated conditions at the expense of workers and the environment” (p.54). The most insidious form, perhaps, is what Easterling calls “the zone”—urban spaces built in international zones operating outside of the state so as to bypass legal, ethical, political and financial requirements that could dampen, slow or defang market forces. These zones, which include Dubai, Shenzhen, Astana, New Songdo City and Masdar, are compared to historic maritime free trade zones and, alarmingly, by 2006 numbered 3,500 in 130 “host countries” employing 66 million people (p.33). Easterling writes that in some cases, “surpassing all irony, the national capital and the zone become the same entity, making the zone itself the seat of governance from which it is selectively exempt” (p.51).

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Before we think that this is something taking place “over there”, it is worth reminding ourselves that the land around City Hall in London has been owned for some time by a private company called More London, which in 2013 sold off the land to a Kuwaiti investment firm for £1.7 billion in one of the largest land deals in UK history, meaning that “the seat of London’s government now has the State of Kuwait as its ultimate landlord” (LondonSE1 2013); or, more accurately, that the seat of London’s government now has an international corporation hosted in the State of Kuwait as its ultimate landlord.

Yet for all the disdain and frustration Easterling levels at this form of extra-state free market liberalism (she’s venomous when writing about “the zone” as a holiday destination for the global super-rich), she avoids wielding a classic Marxist critique of resistance that would propose derailing capitalism in favour of a more socially equitable economic system and suggests instead that we must learn to *see*, work with and hack into these new infrastructures. In some cases, she even suggests that the zones have assisted in combating bigoted social policy, such as in the Kish Free Zone in Iran where there is a loosening of the grip between the state and Islam that also allows for a “loosening of headscarves” (p.61) and greater opportunities for men and women to socialise.

The turning of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself is a classic Situationist tactic—the *détournement*, which collects useful bits, re-aligns them, and feeds them back into the system, tweaking it to our desires. Easterling is somewhat evasive throughout the book as to how exactly we are meant to *détourné* these spaces though. She does give a small push in the right direction where she suggests, and I agree with her here, that these spaces are being deployed somewhat thoughtlessly. For in cookie-cutter neoliberal urbanism we can always expect certain things to be true. Workers will be paid little and so will be apathetic or

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insurrectionary. Local residents may not be local and may also feel little love for these cities, since instilling a sense of place is not economically viable or necessary. Models for security, construction and everyday functionality will inevitably be streamlined and replicated to assure maximum profitability. The logic of spatial deployment in the zone is always the same, and it is simplistic (Easterling calls these zones “the MS-DOS of urban software” [p.68]). So, the thinking goes, learn to hack one zone and you can hack them all. For as space multiplies in predictable ways, it also multiplies a certain capacity for creativity and spontaneity in the void that the producers neglect to fill. Gaps and cracks abound—all you have to do is get your crowbar in and wrench, we hope.

In order to clarify this point, allow me to return to my credit card transaction epiphany. The credit card itself, what form it takes, whether it works with a strip or chip or pin or pen, doesn't really matter all that much. What matters is that through extrastate standardization, an association was built between my card and all the cards that work in all the machines in all the banks networked into this web of associations across the globe. These associations, Easterling suggests, all have similar dispositions. This means that if a loophole into this system is identified, the whole system is susceptible. This has been exemplified many times in the last decade via the release of massive swathes of credit card information through “cloud” hacks.

I cannot help but recall the 2004 TV series *Battlestar Galactica* where Cylons, machines created by humans, wipe out most of humanity through a systematic disabling of the human military apparatus by infecting the networked infrastructure with a Trojan virus. The battleship *Galactica* survives because the obstinate Luddite captain of the ship refused to be networked (see Potter and Marshall 2008). In the same way, in Cambodia, if I had been well-prepared enough to pay cash, or indeed kept my money with a bank that used its own infrastructure that was disconnected

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from this global network, I would be less at risk of infrastructural infection. However, we all know this kind of behaviour is slipping from impractical to impossible in today's world, and Easterling rejects the Luddite model and tells us, somewhat depressingly, that escape is futile and that, more hopefully, our best strategy here is in the understanding and manipulation of the new spaces of the powerful. The book goes a long way toward the former, at times to tedium, by revealing how extrastate infrastructure works.

Let me offer two examples from the book. The first comes from Africa, where Easterling tells us the familiar tale of how Africa is being “democratized” and “liberated” through mobile telephony networks. Many will be familiar with photos of Maasai herders in traditional garb using mobile phones to keep in touch with each other and, of course, make a “modern” living through eco-tourism. Yet mobile phone reception was not just lovingly beamed at the continent for the good of the people, it arrived in Africa through the laying of submarine cables by private corporations (many between 2009 and 2013) who were interested in a return on their investment, obviously. The libertarian hallucination of the Internet as a virtual explosion of anarchy, where anyone can dial in and make their voice heard, regardless of social or economic background, proves a damp squib as soon as you imagine the trenching of physical cables and brutal backroom negotiations over who will control what runs through those cables. What libertarians *will* appreciate is that nation-states almost seem to be invisible in these negotiations—the IMF, World Bank, private corporations and NGOs are really the entities pushing forward the relentless advancement of mobile phone networks in Africa. Though people may, in the end, benefit in some ways from the implant of the networks, is also comes at a price—they must become part of the “global village”—and so the net is threaded around them. At our most cynical, we might think of this as a more insidious form of warfare meant to

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homogenise ontologies—creating an army of people looking for low-paid work in “the zone” to pay that phone bill, which completely rewrites their way of being in the world into one that better suits the ever-expanding global matrix. Easterling creeps toward this notion by suggesting that seeing infrastructure as a military tool or standard-bearer for economic liberalism is too simple: it is also about creating “a universal platform for rationalising global exchange” (p.138), even if she never quite gets around to making the ontological argument.

The second example of revealing how infrastructure works is for me the most important, and boring, chapter in the book. It is about how the International Organization for Standardization is “a quintessential parliament of extrastatecraft”. Founded in 1947, the ISO was arguably the beginning of the “world state”. Easterling argues that the power of the organization lies in the total control of global infrastructure. This powerful group, steered by members that pay huge dues (not necessarily nation-states) guide global standardization of everything from wine tasting glasses to ocean shipping containers, credit cards to cell phones. In doing so, the ISO habituates power without specific consent and is slowly homogenizing every single material object produced by humans. Though this story is in many ways terrifying, Easterling again also hints at some benefits. Global standardization can reduce waste and suprastate integration can decrease potentials for violence through traditional channels. However, and here is the rub, if we do not understand how all these things work, we will never have a chance at participating in this ubiquitous form of powercrafting. This is where that naïveté really matters.

In the end, it is Easterling’s contention that extrastatecraft has become the dominant power in the world not through opposition but through subversion and co-option. While nation-states were fighting over resources and squabbling over borders, extrastate entities simply wove a net around the whole mess, a net which is now

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keeping us aloft in an emerging new world order. Unraveling the net now seems almost suicidal. And so her suggestion, in Debordian style, is that if we cannot slip the net, we have to entangle it by its own means (see also Wark 2011: chapter 3). Following Rancière, what Easterling is calling for is not resistant as much as it is dissident. She suggests that “space has always been available for manipulation” and that “for the hacker/entrepreneur of extrastatecraft, space is the low-hanging fruit” (p.232).

However the fundamental gap in the book is its failure to grab the fruit. The book is important in making visible extrastatecraft but Easterling does not participate in it, which is what would have transformed a useful book into a manifesto for the age. If power lies in shaping infrastructure, not activities within it, how is it we are to shape or create infrastructure through co-option and reappropriation? We are never really told. The other major fault in the book is trying to introduce too much, perhaps in overcompensation for the lack of direct action contained therein. Every few thousand words, a catchy new theme is thrown out and then vanishes, only appearing later through token threading. The last chapter in particular was almost like reading an encyclopedia of neologisms. What I really wanted, of course, was a conclusion bristling with force—a call to action. The conclusion of the book, rather, left me feeling more knowledgeable, more frustrated, and rudderless.

Architecture, like anthropology, is a discipline that has backed itself into a theoretical ghetto over the years, where intramural bickering is often mistaken for critical engagement. Whenever anyone reaches outside the ghetto in an attempt to grab a new tool, they get their hand slapped. I commend Easterling for bravely reaching out. She acknowledges at the end of the book that architects and urbanists are too utopian in their thinking, and that when their utopian schemes are not adopted it is often portrayed as a sad mistake or lack of purity on the part of the “publics” they

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are offered to. What Easterling wants to be embrace, instead, is a hacker ethos that “does not value purity but rather relies on multiple cycles of innovation” (p.232). Each one of these cycles is an opportunity to détourné the system and wrench it in our direction. Walking a fine line, Easterling seems to want to suggest that despite the many, often hidden, terrors of extrastatecraft, we actually have a better shot at this than we did under nation-states. However, in order to plant the seeds, we will have to first accept the soil, toxic as it may be. I sincerely hope her next book is a how-to hacking guide to global infrastructure—I want to see Easterling get her hands dirty now.

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