Contents

Notes Towards an Antifascist Infrastructural Analysis

The Institute for Technology In the Public Interest

Gwen Barnard, Naomi Alizah Cohen

Notes Towards an Antifascist Infrastructural Analysis

Gwen Barnard, Naomi Alizah Cohen

'The infrastructure of fascism is staring us in the face' - Arundhati Roy (Roy, 2020)

Introduction

If the infrastructure of fascism is staring us in the face, then our task is to learn to recognise it and critique it so that we can most effectively fight fascism. It is often argued that infrastructures in general, almost by definition, tend to fade into the background of material, social life. Since infrastructures are that which make *other things* possible, they remain unnoticed - all attention focused on the phenomenon they exist to support – only coming into sharp relief when they cease to function (Parks & Starosielski, 2015). But what of the cases where it is this very ceasing to function which acts as the infrastructure of something else? Where it is a lack which acts as the condition of possibility? We might take the example of a vacuum which by dint of its lack of pressure, exerts a negative pressure, a suction, on the matter surrounding it. Maybe it is by paying attention to the complex dynamics of infrastructural presence and absence that we might be able face down the stare of the infrastructure of fascism about which Roy warns.

In this article we seek to outline some of the methodological and theoretical principles of what might be termed an antifascist infrastructure analysis. The insights we bring are borne out of the collective discussion in our workshop on this topic and from the participants and our own experiences of fascism and antifascist organising. We will begin by introducing certain abstract, conceptual elements of critical infrastructure analysis as we see it. Specifically, we will focus on the key distinction between *positive* and *negative* infrastructures, and the analysis of infrastructures as both sites and media of social antagonism. We continue, then, to apply this conceptual framework to the issue of fascism in the present-day political landscape. We tease out the distinctions between state and non-state forms of fascist actors and the different forms of positive and negative infrastructure that compose their conditions of possibility. In the next section, we explore examples of antifascist antagonistic interaction with fascist organisations and the ways in which these antagonisms take place both in and through forms of infrastructure: for example, online social media and message boards, IRL platforms for meetings, the streets. We also bring into play the question of infrastructures of antagonism, i.e., the infrastructures that make possible any kind of mobilisation against fascist organising. This leads us to our concluding thoughts on feminist organising principles and the infrastructures of care and social reproduction which must be centred when we think about what makes antifascism possible and, crucially, sustainable over the long-term. We approach these analyses from the perspective of our shared experience of organising within the Feminist Antifascist Assembly in London, UK.

Critical Infrastructure Analysis

Expanded notions of infrastructure

The notion of infrastructure which we put forward to be used in critical studies of fascist infrastructures requires expansion from traditional conceptions of what constitutes infrastructure. Whereas it might be usually assumed that infrastructures are simply the various forms of technology, hi- or lo-tech, which are established and maintained to make production, distribution, consumption, and communication etc. possible, this can be seen as a limited and substantialist approach. An expanded notion of infrastructure includes not simply roads, sewers, electricity grids, and fibreoptic cables networks, or even apps, algorithms, or social media platforms, but should include relational, affective, and behavioural elements too. This is what Parks & Starosielski (2015) have called 'soft infrastructures such as daily routines, marketing, and knowledge practices'. A climate of fear can become an infrastructure for many political phenomena, including fascist ones, and can be engineered as literally as any heavy machinery. We propose that that critical infrastructure analysis should approach its object with a speculative notion of infrastructure that includes *any material-social system that is engineered and maintained for the purpose of making another activity, process, or phenomenon possible.*

On Negative and Positive Infrastructure

However, in our times of drawn-out social, economic, and ecological crisis, it is often a lack of, or inadequacy in, infrastructure that acts as a condition of possibility for some of the most defining aspects of our society. Here it is the very

absence of infrastructure, or the inadequacy of its maintenance, that can itself act as the condition of possibility for other, often unintended, social phenomena. For example, it is the gross inadequacy of transgender healthcare infrastructure in the UK which itself acts as a condition of possibility for a thriving culture of self-medication and hormonal experimentation. Another example could be the specific lack of and limited possibility of state transport infrastructure in the Zomia mountainous region of Southeast Asia that has acted as the condition of possibility and continuance of non-state social formations to resist encroachments of state and capital (Scott, 2009). We propose this be termed *negative infrastructure*. The infrastructure's negativity is not to be understood in a moral sense, but rather in the sense that art theorists refer *negative space* in visual art, as referring to an absence or lack which is nonetheless productive of noticeable effects. This nomenclature therefore positions what is usually considered to be infrastructure, e.g., the presence of a rail network making train travel possible, as *positive infrastructures.*

Furthermore, infrastructures do not simply act as neutral conditions of possibilities but are themselves imbricated in the array of social antagonisms which define modern societies. Social antagonisms are fought on the basis of infrastructure, for the control of it, for the existence or non-existence of it, it shapes its form and content. Often, if we want to fully understand a form of social antagonism, we have to look at how it is fought on and through material and social infrastructures.

Fascist Infrastructures

So, if we want to understand how fascism is emerging, or re-emerging, in our societies, then it is instructive to look at the positive and negative infrastructures which make fascism

possible, but also look at how fascist power is wielded and resisted through the materialities of infrastructure.

First, we must make two distinctions. The first is that between the fascist state and non-state fascist organisations and mobilisations. The second is between "ordinary", so-to-speak, capitalist infrastructures and the fascistic use/abuse of them. With both of these, inevitable overlap and collusion between elements are likely to make drawing sharp distinctions impossible. These are nonetheless important questions to consider when analysing the infrastructures of fascism.

We can, for example, speak of the fascist or post-fascist (Tamás, 2001) operations of contemporary border enforcement regimes and the infrastructure that enables them: electronic passports, biometric residence permits, facial recognition systems, checkpoint architecture, immigration detention centres and transportation vans, private company planes chartered for mass deportation, a climate of distrust and hatred of migrants… to name quite a few. But we must also speak of how the income that border and immigration enforcement provides (along with many other roles in the vast array of carceral operations of contemporary nation states) can act as an infrastructure for individuals engaged in non-state fascist organisations to support themselves and their political work. These "workplaces" can also act as recruiting grounds for such non-state fascist organisations. In this way, the infrastructures of state and non-state fascisms can overlap and reinforce one another. Indeed, in contemporary neoliberal nation states, the distinction between state and private infrastructures are increasingly blurred due to outsourcing and subcontracting private companies to fulfil functions of state apparatus.

With regard to non-state fascist organising, we find that digital social media as well as the anonymous-by-default imageboard platforms such as 4 and 8Chan act as crucial infrastructure for recruitment, organising and the spread of fascist ideas and sentiments. Pubs and other meeting places also serve as infrastructure for fascist meeting and recruitment.

However, there are crucial infrastructures of fascism which must be understood in their negativity. For example, the lack of housing infrastructure in the UK has led to exceedingly high rates of homelessness; this acted as a condition of possibility of "hipster fascist" organisation Generation Identity's strategy of feeding only white rough-sleepers with GI branded food packages in Glasgow (Stewart, 2019). This fascist strategy itself took the form of a positive provision of infrastructure to fill the lack of broader social infrastructure. Here we find a complex interplay of negative and positive infrastructures of fascism where fascist organising itself takes the form of infrastructure provision. Similarly, in Italy the fascist group Casa Pound has been following a strategy of social infrastructure provision, taking over empty buildings, and turning them into social centres for communities, to build a fascist cultural hegemony (Jones, 2018). These are examples of a broader trend which sees the crisis in social infrastructures in Western countries as a negative infrastructure providing the soil in which fascism can grow.

Antagonisms of Infrastructure

Heretofore we have seen examples of fascist positive infrastructure building in the zones of negative infrastructure space which are left by ongoing social crisis. Fascist infrastructural strategy does not only take a positive movement however, but rather is equally often engaged in strategies of negation of the

infrastructures of communities and organisations which they consider anathema to their worldview. An example from sphere of digital infrastructure is the so-called "raids" carried out by online fascist groups on targeted forum pages or Facebook groups in which a concerted wave of illegal and banned content is posted in an effort to have this community digital infrastructure removed by platform moderators.

Similarly, the familiar phenomenon of fascist marches and demonstrations can be analysed through an infrastructural lens. Here we might understand the fascist strategy as of infrastructural takeover or negation; the street, often residential and commercial neighbourhoods of targeted ethnic minorities, is taken as an infrastructure to be removed from the targeted community. The space which acts as a infrastructure of ordinary social life is suddenly an unsafe space which no longer makes possible the lives which is did. Similarly, ethnic minority businesses, community centres and places of worship are targeted for vandalism, targeting infrastructure of community culture and social cohesion as well as income. This strategy has a long fascist history with its most famous example the mass destruction of Jewish businesses, schools, and synagogues during the 1938 *Kristallnacht* pogrom. In these occurrences, it is often only made possible via collusion or collaboration of state forces such as the police and army which would otherwise interfere.

Antifascist Antagonism

However, this strategy of infrastructural negation does not occur only in one direction. The most visible example of fascist-antifascist antagonism is that of the street confrontation. Here the street is not only the site of the antagonism, but it is the medium through which and also the object over which the antagonism is

fought. The confrontation is a matter of mutual negation of access to the infrastructure of the street fought through the spatial politics of territory.

The tactic of doxing, the publishing of previously anonymous personal data online, is a key example of the negation of the infrastructure of online anonymity which is practised by both fascists and antifascists in a melding of online and offline antagonism. Doxing not only removes the affordance of online anonymity but can also result in the removal of other infrastructure which makes the lives of the individuals targeted possible; doxing of fascists can often result in loss of employment, housing, or even intimate familial relationships, or can lead to arrest and incarceration in certain cases.

We can see through these examples that there is a lot to be gained by analysing fascist-antifascist political antagonism through the lens of infrastructure – recontextualising phenomena of force and violence as infrastructural interactions – giving us a deeper view of the complexities involved in these processes.

Feminist Organising Principles and Infrastructures of Care

We have looked at the infrastructures of fascism and the infrastructural interactions that take place in the antagonisms between fascists and antifascists. We must also address the infrastructures that make antifascist struggle possible and sustainable over the long term. Here we turn to our own experience in organising in the Feminist Antifascist Assembly (FAF) in London, where we collectively attempted to put feminist organising principles into action in the organisation of resistance to several fascist marches.

14

We would argue that feminist organising principles centre the often-invisible relations and practices of care which act as an infrastructure for social and political struggle. A feminist infrastructural approach would understand that antifascist struggle required not just antagonism with fascists but also the construction and maintenance of infrastructures of care that would be able to make possible both the necessary antagonism with fascists and the undermining of the conditions for fascism to take hold. For example, the medical, mental, and physical, care that is required prior to, during and after any confrontation or interaction with fascists acts as an infrastructure making that confrontation possible.

But we can also see the building of infrastructures of care which alleviates the negative impacts of ongoing social crisis in communities as an essential aspect of antifascist organising as well. The building of infrastructures such as squatting networks, mutual aid funds, mutual care networks and social centres can be seen as the building of positive infrastructure which fills the negative infrastructures of fascism with positive non-fascist content. This both undermines the conditions of possibility of fascism and can meet the needs of those communities engaged in struggle against fascists.

Conclusion

We have seen that bringing an infrastructural lens to the matter of fascism and antifascism can be very fruitful, both in the understanding of how fascism works and in understanding how it can be fought and undermined. We have seen how a distinction between positive and negative infrastructures can elucidate the complex interactions of social infrastructural crisis and the strategies of infrastructure building embraced by fascists.

We have also seen how an infrastructural lens can be effectively utilised when bringing into play feminist conceptions of the importance of systems of care as the conditions of possibility of any community, and especially communities engaged in difficult and often traumatic struggles with fascist forces.

We might tentatively conclude that the question of fascism and its opposition is fundamentally a question of infrastructure. Indeed, fascism is best fought by paying attention to what infrastructures are making fascism possible and targeting these, as well as paying attention to what infrastructures of care and otherwise are required for powerful and sustained struggle against fascism.

Bibliography

- Jones, T. (2018, February 22). The fascist movement that has brought Mussolini back to the mainstream. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/22/casapound-italy-mussolini-fascism-mainstream
- Parks, L., & Starosielski, N. (Eds.). (2015). *Signal traffic: Critical studies of media infrastructures*. University of Illinois Press.
- Roy, A. (2020). *Azadi: Freedom, fascism, fiction*.
- Scott, J. C. (2009). *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Stewart, S. (2019, July 10). 'Hipster fascists' feed only white homeless while spreading race hate in Glasgow. *Daily Record*. https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/hipster-fascists-feed-only-white-17793094

- Tamás, G. M. (2001). What is Post-fascism? *OpenDemocracy*. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/article_306jsp/