Dialogues in Human Geography

Commentary

Coming to terms with affective infrastructure

Dialogues in Human Geography
2023, Vol. 13(1) 81–85

DOI: 10.1177/20438206231154347
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg


Helen F. Wilson
Durham University, UK

Abstract

Affective infrastructure has become an unremarkable feature of geographical research. By examining how 'affective infrastructure' has been mobilised within geography and political theory, and charting its distinguishing features – whether as metaphor, analogy, or material-technical system – I suggest that Bosworth's explication presents an opportunity for thinking about the role and development of concepts more broadly. Using the Tyne Bridge as an example of affective infrastructure, I reflect on the mechanisms through which a concept appears and ask whether affective infrastructure's 'power' comes from its circulation as a term or shorthand. In clarifying its analytical utility, I ask what implications there might be for affective infrastructure's spaces of connotation, and what is at stake when a concept appears.

Keywords

Affect, geographical concepts, infrastructure, multispecies, Tyne Bridge

An opportunity

'Does an affective perspective on infrastructure, or an infrastructural perspective on affect, provide a different vantage point from which to evaluate the way that affects condition politics and everyday life?' (Bosworth, 2023). Given that 'affective infrastructure' has become a pervasive, even unremarkable feature of geographical research, this is an important question. It could be said that a successful concept should permit freedom at the edges and a certain degree of elasticity as a vocabulary or resource to think with (Anderson et al., 2023). Yet, while refusing closure or coherence can pluralise ways of intervening in the world, the ubiquitous and multifaceted use of a concept can also undermine its analytical purchase.

As Aradau et al. (2022) argue, attending to disruptions in the taken for granted relation between a concept and its object can signal both problem and opportunity. In its invitation to (re)think affective infrastructures, Bosworth's paper is certainly an opportunity not least because there isn't one singular relation, but rather several that have emerged from different, albeit partially related problem spaces. In the first half of the paper, Bosworth's analysis of affective infrastructure and its mobilisation draws out its distinguishing features, charts its explanatory power, and reads through different accounts in such a way as to resist the imposition of an internal coherence, while nevertheless demonstrating commonality. The interludes are playful.

Corresponding author:
Helen F. Wilson, Department of Geography, Durham University, Lower Mountjoy, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK.
Email: Helen.f.wilson@durham.ac.uk

Especially striking are the questions posed around the potential connections between a concern for the affects of infrastructure, and the language of pipes and cables that can be seen in some of the earlier geographies of affect and emotion. Pinpointing the coincidence of pipes and cables with a turn in attention to the mediation and distribution of affect opens up the possibility of a shared problem space that might be gleaned in retrospect.

Given the endeavour to identify a 'common notion' of affective infrastructure, and how such a notion has developed, I suggest that Bosworth's intervention is an occasion to think more broadly about the role and development of concepts, as much as it is an opportunity to scrutinise affective infrastructure anew. In the following sections I ask whether affective infrastructure's power comes from its circulation as a term or shorthand, and what is at stake when a concept appears.

'Affective infrastructure' as shorthand?

Having recently turned my attention to how infrastructure such as the Tyne Bridge in northern England operates as a medium for non-human life (Wilson, forthcoming; see also Barua, 2021), the notion of affective infrastructure has never been too far away. It is especially valuable for understanding the contestations that surround a breeding colony of kittiwakes and their use of the bridge's steel ledges and sandstone abutments for nesting. A key part of the North East's transportation infrastructure, the iconic Tyne Bridge is a Grade II* listed structure that connects the city of Newcastle upon Tyne with the town of Gateshead via a suspended deck some 26 meters above the River Tyne. Like so many infrastructural projects, the steel and cast-iron structure was hinged upon a 'promise of delivery' (Carse and Kneas, 2019): to improve the chronic unemployment levels that were associated with the decline of shipbuilding on Tyneside. The bridge design was based on Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was designed by Ralph Freeman and derived in turn from Hell Gate Bridge, New York (Manders and Potts, 2001: 74), thus offering an excellent example of how the repetition of infrastructural projects shaped a common understanding of what it meant to be modern in the early twentieth century.

The Tyne Bridge is a listed structure on account of its special architectural interest, which not only includes its steel arch design but its status as a 'potent symbol of the character and industrial pride of Tyneside' (Historic England, 2021). For some, the presence of nesting birds threatens the bridge's symbolism, while extensive patches of rust and delays to central government approvals for the work required to stabilise the bridge have come to symbolise the region's neglect. (The bridge was last fully painted in 2000, which was designed to last approximately 20 years. It now needs steelwork, concrete and masonry repairs, waterproofing and joint replacement to maintain its load capacity (Brown, 2021)). During the delays for approval, this sense of neglect was compounded by the context of the government's so-called 'levelling up' agenda, which promised to build more equitable 'post-Brexit futures' by supporting infrastructure and regeneration priorities across the country (cf. Anderson et al., 2020 on post-Brexit futures). The proposed maintenance is not only integral to the region's transport infrastructure but is intimately connected to regional pride and identity, and the promise of a fairer future (Wilson, forthcoming).

I would describe this as an account of affective infrastructure. It demonstrates how concrete infrastructures – and their temporalities and spectacular arrangements – generate affects, futural discourse, and ambivalent experiential qualities based on historical intentions and planning objectives, as well as personal histories and perceptions that have the capacity to engender different forms of political action and potentiality. This account of infrastructure becomes an opening for understanding social feeling and the debate around non-human use of the structure, while also revealing the structure's role in climate change – which is partly responsible for kittiwake declines. Yet, even while I wouldn't hesitate to present this as a description of affective infrastructure (it certainly

resonates with Bosworth's reading on the affective dimensions of infrastructure), it is not a term that I use.

The omission of 'affective infrastructure' from my writing resonates with some of Bosworth's questions around its status as a vantage point, what differentiates it from other concepts, and whether it offers anything sufficiently different enough to warrant its analytical appeal. As Bosworth puts it: 'what gives specificity to the concept of 'affective infrastructure' that is not already given in a relational account of affect'? Of course, what I am talking about here is just one side of the coin – the affective perspective on infrastructure, rather than infrastructural perspectives on affect. To consider the other use of the term, I might turn the analysis to the amplification of clean air campaigns that have seen the bridge placed at the centre of a clean air zone; the promise and resonance of post-Brexit futures; or the social media campaigns that have stymied efforts to remove the birds from the bridge (Wilson, 2022). Regardless of the side at issue, perhaps one question that is left unasked, is whether affective infrastructure's power comes from its circulation *as a term* – a shorthand for a group of closely related concepts – rather than a concept in and of itself. Asking this question would require a different starting point and objective to the one outlined in '*What is affective infrastructure*?', which is to explicate how 'the *concept* of 'affective infrastructure' is currently being used by geographers and political theorists' (Bosworth, 2023, italics in original). It would instead start with the possibility that 'affective infrastructure' is being used as a descriptive term rather than a concept. Starting with this point would change what is at stake in Bosworth's intervention, which offers more than a reading or reconstruction of what has come before to instead play its own part in bringing a concept into being.

The appearance of a concept: What is at stake?

Ophir's (2018) reflections on 'the concept' and the mechanisms through which a concept appears are particularly useful. As he argues, concepts appear when terms are conceptualised; when we take the time to 'disengage [terms] from their daily use in order to put [them] on display, wonder about [their] meaning, explicate [them] and render public [their] discursive being' (62). As part of this work, 'any attempt to determine their semantic content (for instance through a successful explication or a novel use) will affect their interrelated constellation, but also narrow down their possible spaces of denotation and connotation' (63). It is perhaps for this reason that I found the article's conclusion or 'wager' slightly jarring (that affective infrastructure gains analytic utility when it is used to 'clarify' the ratio between 'historically situated technical alienation' linked to colonialism, and political-affective organising for the transformation of capitalist modes of production) (1). While attending to such a juxtaposition is an invitation to geographers to question and/or elaborate how this 'ratio might be understood and thus composed differently' (2), the specificity of this analytic utility and the insistence on a ratio would seem to narrow down the use of affective infrastructure and its possible spaces of connotation. Such a narrowing might be valuable in a context where a term derives its power and common currency from a relative emptiness. However, as Bosworth demonstrates so well, there is already a closeness and complementarity of attendant concepts and concerns. This demonstrates some degree of consensus or specificity around the actualisation, function, and application of affective infrastructure, even if a thorough (and very welcome!) conceptual inquiry has been wanting.

What Bosworth's excellent analysis of affective infrastructure's mobilisation does so well is sharpen sensitivities to what is being described and explained when 'affective infrastructure' is deployed in geographical work. At the same time, it also underlines its political potentialities, demonstrating how any interrogation of conceptual meaning should also be an opportunity to consider how different ways of intervening in the world are made possible – something that is addressed with a keen sense of responsibility. This sharpening of sensitivities to differing mobilisations of affective

infrastructure exposes and addresses the risk of analytical confusion as it moves between metaphor, material-technical system, and different contexts. This alone is important work, so my question is whether it is necessary to additionally outline what its greatest utility might be, especially when this limits its value to the study of very particular forms of alienation and organisation. If those that have previously used the concept fail to see themselves in either of the 'sides' of affective infrastructure proposed here (a scenario that Bosworth is open to), then it raises the question of why and what the consequences of such dissonance might be.

In asking this question I was reminded of Berstein et al.'s (2018) collection on political concepts and their discussion of what is at stake when examining the meaning of a singular concept:

'Focusing on a single concept leaves open the question of whether the concept needs to be undone or whether it can be renewed; whether what is required is to uncover its contingent genealogy and arbitrary application, its ideological functioning and the underlying interests it serves. Or is it also possible to reconstruct or refound the concept, along with the rest of the conceptual apparatus to which it relates, motivated by an effort to gain a more adequate perception of the political potentialities that this concept can either suppress or unleash?' (p. 4)

In asking what affective infrastructure might be, what is the need that is addressed? A renewal or reconstruction that redraws its parameters and analytical scope? A challenge to its arbitrary application, ideological utility, or perhaps political quietism? There is certainly a concern here that, as with anything that becomes common currency, affective infrastructure risks losing some of its analytical purchase (a concern that has frequently been raised in relation to the deployment of infrastructure on its own terms). Perhaps it is because the question of its conceptualisation remains unresolved that the question of need is also left hanging, although the article's wager on its analytic utility certainly gives the concept political grip. In many ways, whether a reader sees oneself in Bosworth's conceptualisation is not the point – if one doesn't, why not? The very question invites reflection, not only on a term that has been taken for granted but on the status of concepts and the process of conceptualisation itself.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Helen F. Wilson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5154-0467

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