Vasilina Orlova

Affective Infrastructures: Moving Through a Siberian Space

The materiality of the infrastructure as a part of surroundings and space where people find themselves, is persistent and enduring, even more so when infrastructure is collapsing. How do people make decisions regarding their mobility in the place where infrastructure is failing?

In the 2010s, theories of infrastructure went through an upgrade that made us think of infrastructure as dynamic systems, always-readjusting agglomerations, and shifting assemblages, rather than stable structures playing a supplementary role to living. Brian Larkin offered to see the road building as networks (Larkin, 2013) and suggested that the viewers might experience the sublime by looking at the creation of grand architectural and infrastructural development just as well as by looking at the mountains and rivers created by nature (Larkin, 2008). On the other hand, the new theories of materialities were attempting a divorce from the Marxist materialisms, trying to disentangle the materialism from the political structures and language ideologies in which it has come to be embedded, and see if there are new ways of talking about the palpable, perceptible, tangible textures of the world. Turn to materialism happened in the feminist discourse (Alaimo, Hekman's Material Feminisms, 2008)—the goal of this turn was to take into consideration the actual materiality of the body experiencing and exercising pleasure, pain, and violence. From the third side, the multiplicity of inhabitable worlds, in the sense that Descola proposed (Descola, 1996), constituted the "ontological turn." Thinking about different life-worlds enables us to understand how different entities and people navigate the disrupted infrastructures differently, depending on their age, gender, class, health conditions, ethnicity, and alike categories that position bodies alongside and vis-à-vis one another.

In my work, I propose to look at the tensions that emerge in the everyday life of people engaging with the morally outdated and sometimes malfunctioning infrastructures in remote Siberian villages on the shore of the Angara River. By looking at the margins (as Veena Das suggests we should do), we might be able to find out what is the nature of the ties between people

and their land, what keeps people rooted, why do they move, what do they think when they move or stay.

The term "affective infrastructures" that I propose, connects theories of affect and theories of infrastructure on the basis that both affect and infrastructure emerge as network-like structures; they organize flow and exchange, facilitate connection between people and things. Infrastructure generates affects as well as affects partake in the construction of infrastructure.

Affects of infrastructure emerge when we put the question the way "How does infrastructure enable or prevent movement and mobility?" The question then becomes: do we consider beliefs, ideologies, emotions, particularly embedded in and conveyed within the language, to be infrastructure? Brian Larkin, in *The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure*, outlines two approaches to infrastructure that dominate the anthropological discourse (2013). First, anthropologists and social theorists see infrastructures as revealing when it comes to "forms of political rationality that underlie technological projects and which give rise to an 'apparatus of governmentality'" (Larking, 2013, 328). Alternatively, infrastructures "exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning, and they need to be analyzed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees. They emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function" (Larkin, 2013, 329).

If "infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter" (Larkin, 2013, 329), then everything becomes an infrastructure: "built things, knowledge things, or people things." (Larkin, 329). One might suggest that the language is not "matter," and therefore is not infrastructure, but if we are talking about "semiotic and aesthetic vehicles," then language is an infrastructure, and in fact elsewhere Larkin makes a distinction between "hard" and "soft infrastructure," and to the latter the language belongs.

The danger of this approach, is that infrastructure read this way practically loses its meaning and is synonymous with "exchange," "circulation," "flow," "network," "connection," "relation," and even "tension" or "friction," "assemblage" or "arrangement," depending on context. In this case, with blurred edges, "infrastructure" is not particularly useful. At the same time, we know that infrastructure is a tangible stuff, from systems of objects like dams, airports, roads, canalization systems, to concrete objects and "stubborn things" like wires, pipes, signs on

the sides of the road. But then there is a class of objects that belongs to infrastructure, but we do not always think about them these ways: flash button in the toilet, facets in the kitchen, phones—things that enable the flow of matter but are too close to one's body and soul and are rather likely to be perceived as ordinary objects, elements of decoration or interior, or things in one's personal space. Arguably, the toothbrush is an infrastructure within the frameworks of biopolitical modernity, as well as teeth, to take AbdouMalique Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" to the extreme. If bodies are infrastructure ("people things"), then members of the body are infrastructure, either potentially or in actuality, and lawful and unlawful systems that traffic people and organs seem to be taking them as such.

Infrastructural aspects not always can be distinguished from beliefs, and sometimes these beliefs, regardless whether they are true or not, enable or prevent people to make decisions regarding mobility. During my fieldwork in Anosovo in 2016, I came across an example of reluctance to move, refusal to exercise mobility under the threat of death, that was profoundly embedded in the ways the infrastructure functions.

The physical condition of Maria (name changed) was rapidly deteriorating. She was warned by the paramedics in the Siberian village, Anosovo, that she would die unless she obtained professional medical care available in a hospital located in the nearby city. However, she refused to go, and died several days later.

While it is a story that can be imagined in any place of the world, it has aspects embedded in the given social realities. People dying do not want to be institutionalized if they can help it,[1] unless people can clearly see that there is a hope for survival and they have not yet lost their will to live. The will to live, as Montaigne observed, vacates our souls if the pain persists for too long. Maria's death was striking. And, it turn out to be embedded in infrastructural relationship. In discussion of this death, that unfolded in the village, people stated several reasons for her choice, that they saw as lamentable. There are many stories like that in the village; people refuse to go to the doctor until they absolutely must. And while it may coincide with Americans who would tell me that they won't bring their kids to the doctor unless it is absolutely inevitable, it happens in Siberia for a set of different reasons. My interlocutors in the village did not believe in the post-

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[1] Freud said: "What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die in its own fashion." (39; quoted by Derrida in The Post Card, 1987, 358).

Soviet health care system. During the Soviet period, there was a pervasive idea that the health care lacked quality. Despite this lack, the care was largely affordable and available. Now the health care system, villagers say, is lacking quality *and* is difficult to obtain. The difficulty does not merely concern paid health care, for in Siberia, as well as in Russia in general, many health care services are still available for free—the remainder of the Soviet health care system. However, medics providing health care are seen as increasingly rude and incompetent. It is a painful conversation, because obviously there are medical professionals who invest in their work all their knowledge and care without a hope of receiving the reparation either from people or from the state.

Another reason why Maria did not go to the hospital was that transportation was not immediately available and had to be arranged. The river hovercraft from the village to the town hospital runs on Sunday, by which time it was too late. The alternative, which is traveling by road, meant finding an off-road vehicle and a skilled driver. This could be arranged, but Maria adamantly refused on the ground that she didn't want to bother anyone.

This is an extreme example of how people navigate or refuse to navigate disrupted or malfunctioning infrastructure, in conditions of the lack of institutional presence, be it state-owned or private. In the absence of structures that facilitate their living, people find themselves in difficult situations that lead to injuries, sickness, and death. Lack of resources and the minimum of state presence characterize the infrastructures that people work around and appropriate for their needs, when they can. These infrastructures facilitate the feel and experience of precarity (as problematized by Anna Tsing and Anne Allison), vulnerability and godforsakenness ("No one cares about us, we are of interest to no one," people say). At the same time people actively exercise their agency, and they would actively refuse an attempt to categorize them as "bare life" (Agamben, 1998).

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