Democratising Security in Turbulent Times: An Infrastructural Lens

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1. Introduction

Current crisis conditions – be that the ongoing global pandemic, the global rise of antidemocratic forces or the decline of multilateral cooperation – have led to deep uncertainty about what is to come and what we can do about it. This uncertainty is a crucial hallmark of politics in today's turbulent times, where demands can be intensified, tensions exacerbated, relationships transformed and policymaking paralysed.[1] In physics, turbulence is understood as "a chaotic motion".[2] In the social sciences, it refers to the existence of complex, discontinuous and unpredictable conditions, combined with increasingly fragile institutions, surprising cascading dynamics and vanishing trust.[3] The current global turbulence also challenges and changes established relationships between security and democratic rule. Growing societal polarisation and political fragmentation in many world regions negatively affect core democratic values of inclusivity, participation, and accountability. Trust in democratic political institutions is diminishing, with profoundly negative consequences for the quality of democratic (security) governance around the world. Meanwhile, unequal dynamics of resource concentration and abandonment shrink political spaces for providing security in line with core democratic principles and digital infrastructures rapidly accelerate information flows and increase global connections, changing how security issues are identified, accessed, and addressed.[4] For democracies, the advent and spread of digital technologies raises questions about the possibilities of democratic oversight over new information and communication technologies in the security field. Finally, the increased rescaling of security functions to actors and arenas beyond and below the state affects the role of established state infrastructures such as its constitutive monopoly on the legitimate use of force. With non-state, informal or supranational infrastructures for governing security gaining relevance, their expanding roles need further analytical attention.

To investigate the different and at times contradictory ways in which democratic forms of governing security are currently changing, this short think piece suggests an *infrastructural lens* to study the governability as well as the democratic dilemmas of security in these turbulent times. Extending current research in critical security studies on materialities and objects of security,[5] we show here that a focus on infrastructures – when not understood as *objects* alone, but as an analytical *lens* – can usefully be applied to study the transformation of the relationship between security and democracy at large. Going beyond analyses of the protection of 'critical infrastructures', i.e. the protection of objects deemed "indispensable for the functioning of social and political life"[6], we hold that an infrastructural lens makes visible the intrinsic connections between material and social facts in the field of security. It includes three complementary perspectives on democratic governance that are normally addressed separately in studies of security: its mode of organization across scales, its technological fundament, and the imaginaries it invokes. We argue that the relationship between security and democracy can be fruitfully analysed by research that joins up attention to these three perspectives.

2. Infrastructures for analysing turbulent times

Infrastructures are commonly understood as "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space".[7] But they are also defined more broadly as "enabling conditions" that "organize the social world by setting out paths and structures through which people come together – or don't – in particular ways"[8]. Infrastructures have been a prominent concern in a range of debates reaching from urban and political geography to social anthropology, history, and literature. Scholars are interested in their role in restructuring a rapidly urbanising and digitising world, their vulnerability to external hazards or attacks, their ability to overcome or deepen inequality and to shape experiences or modes of communication and cooperation, and their potential to move societies towards more sustainable futures.[9]

Especially in times of crisis and uncertainty, infrastructures are a promise[10] of delivery, connectivity, and distribution. Often long-standing features of social and political life, they tend to change incrementally over time. Complementing the focus

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1 James N. Rosenau 1990: Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 8.

2 Sergey Nazarenko 2011: Wave Turbulence, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, p. 11.

3 Christopher K. Ansell, Jarle Trondal, and Morten Øgård (eds.) 2017: Governance in Turbulent Times, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 Stefan Kaufmann 2016: Security through Technology? Logic, Ambivalence and Paradoxes of Technologised Security, *European Journal for Security Research* 1(1), pp. 77–95.

5 See e.g. William Walters 2014: Drone Strikes, Dingpolitik, and Beyond: Furthering the Debate on Materiality and Security, *Security Dialogue* 45(2), pp. 101–118.

6 Claudia Aradau 2010: Security That Matters: Critical Infrastructure and Objects of Protection, *Security Dialogue*, 41(5) pp. 491–514, p. 491. s.f. Stephen Collier, Andrew Lakoff 2015: Vital Systems Security: Reflexive Biopolitics and the Government of Emergency, *Theory, Culture, and Society* 32(3). pp. 19–51.

7 Brian Larkin 2013: The politics and poetics of infrastructure, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, pp. 327–343, p. 328.

8 Hillary Angelo, Craig Calhoun 2013: Beneath the Social: An Invitation to Infrastructural Sociology, New York University: Unpublished article, p. 1.

9 See e.g. Stephen Graham, Colin McFarlane (eds.) 2014: Infrastructural Lives: Urban Infrastructure in Context, London, New York: Routledge.

10 Laura Kemmer, AbdouMaliq Simone 2021: Standing by the promise: Acts of anticipation in Rio and Jakarta, *EPD: Society and Space,* Online First, January 6th, pp. 1–17.

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on speed, escalation, tipping points and cascading effects that characterize many analyses of current crisis constellations, an infrastructural lens brings attention to longer standing and slower developments as well as to the ways in which older and newer infrastructures interact, conflict or merge. This can happen for instance when existing infrastructures are creatively repurposed or reinvented. Yet, infrastructural change can also be destructive: new infrastructures, from highways to fossil extraction projects, can ruin existing organisations of social life or devastate natural habitats.[11] There are many features in the lives of infrastructures that are of interest for grasping social change,[12] but we believe that the following three features in particular make infrastructures a promising concept to study these turbulent times.

Infrastructures are heterogeneous configurations that encompass material and social dimensions. When studying the functioning of a border hotspot infrastructure, the logistics of a smart city, the organisation of rural sanitation or the creation of a global digital platform, we never analyse solely the bricks and wires, but always also the social patterns, the modes of control, the mechanisms that grant or deny rights, as well as the forms of subjectivation and habits of communication and mediation.[13] Attending to a turbulent world through the lens of infrastructures therefore means to trace complex and heterogeneous "configurations" of "multiple technological artefacts, uses and users":[14] how they are assembled, maintained, repaired,[15] auto-constructed,[16] or how they themselves leak, rust, or corrode.[17] Grasping these configurations across the social/material divide helps us to follow possible chain effects when interdependent systems become locked in a downward spiral, e.g. the climate heating up, biodiversity reducing, food shortages, and water scarcity expanding, all leading to social and political tensions and the further weakening of democratic rule.[18]

Infrastructures are foundations of social life. An infrastructural lens focuses on the underlying factors that contribute to the functioning of (democratic) societies and that often remain unseen: what people can rely on, beyond formal societal and political institutions. This focus allows us to understand what is beginning to shift when some of these foundations become unstable or even collapse. As we are witnessing in the current global pandemic, moments of crisis bring about different sensitivities toward "indispensable" infrastructures as well as new experiences and narratives of how the different elements are related. Research on the "ethnography of infrastructure" has long pointed to the "invisibility" of infrastructures until they break – the server down, the bridge washed out, the health system overburdened.[19] Other works on infrastructures, especially in the Global South, have pointed to the everydayness of repair, maintenance, and crisis associated with infrastructures as well as to improvisation and makeshift practices, often by the users themselves.[20] Taking this perspective seriously for infrastructures *everywhere* helps to attend to the multiple agencies on different scales involved in the making and maintaining of infrastructures of cooperation, provision, and transformation in turbulent times.

Infrastructures are both connectors and excluders. Complementing concepts of 'governance' that are primarily concerned with analysing coordination and cooperation among multiple actors, an infrastructural lens focuses both on infrastructures' abilities to connect and enable as well as on their potential exclusionary or destructive effects. Especially in times of deepened polarisation and a loss of trust in democratic institutions, infrastructures enable relatedness and inclusion, but may also aggravate polarisations by fostering exclusion and the unequal distribution of resources in different communities.[21] Infrastructures powerfully reach across neighbourhoods, cities, countries, or the ocean; they can constitute a pattern for cooperation, a shared use, a common good, and yet they have often failed in realizing that potential. Scholars have pointed to "massive infrastructural absence and decay,"[22] such as in informal urban settlements without running water.[23] But even in these cases, people are found to engage in collaborative activities that become infrastructures themselves.[24] Grasping the work of connection that infrastructures accomplish must therefore also consider the informal, flexible and provisional intersections and collaborations that people build and sustain even when formal infrastructures fail them.

3. Democratising security: thinking with infrastructures

How does this infrastructural lens help us analyse changes in the relationship between security and democracy and understand what is at stake today? In order to conceptualise the governability as well as the democratic dilemmas and opportunities that arise in these turbulent times in the field of security, thinking with infrastructures provides us with an analytical lens that brings to bear organisational, technological

11 Deborah Cowen 2019: Following the infrastructures of empire: notes on cities, settler colonialism, and method, *Urban Geography* 41(4), pp. 469–486.
12 Stephen Graham, Colin McFarlane (eds.) 2014: Infrastructural Lives: Urban Infrastructure in Context, London, New York: Routledge.
13 Antonis Vradis et al. 2020: Governing mobility in times of crisis: Practicing the border and embodying resistance in and beyond the hotspot infrastructure, *EPD: Society and Space* 38(6), pp. 981–990.
Hillary Angelo, Craig Calhoun 2013: Beneath the Social: An Invitation to Infrastructural Sociology, New York University: Unpublished article.
14 Mary Lawhon et al. 2018: Thinking through heterogeneous infrastructure configurations, *Urban Studies Journal* 55(4), pp. 720–732, p. 725.
15 Ibid. p. 726
Colin McFarlane 2011: Learning the city: knowledge and translocal assemblage. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
16 Teresa PR Caldeira 2017: Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(1), pp. 3–20.
17 Claudia Aradau 2010: Security That Matters: Critical Infrastructure and Objects of Protection, *Security Dialogue*, 41(5) pp. 491–514, p.505.
18 Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens 2020: How everything can collapse: a manual for our times, Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, p. 3.
19 Susan Leigh Star 1999: The Ethnography of Infrastructure, *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (3), pp. 377–391.
20 AbdouMaliq Simone 2019: Improvised lives. Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Steven Graham, Nigel Thrift 2007: Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24(3), pp. 1–25.
21 E.g. Colin McFarlane, Jonathan Silver 2017: The Political City: "Seeing Sanitation" and Making the Urban Political in Cape Town, *Antipode* 49(1), pp. 125–148.
22 Raquel Velho, Sebastián Ureta 2019: Frail modernities: Latin American infrastructures between repair and ruination, Tapuya: *Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 2(1), pp. 428–441, p. 431.
23 Stephen Graham, Renu Desai, and Colin McFarlane 2013: Water Wars in Mumbai, *Public Culture* 25(1), pp. 115–141.
24 AbdouMaliq Simone 2004: People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg, *Public Culture* 16 (3), pp. 407–429, p. 407.

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and imaginative perspectives on the relationship between security and democracy: an *organisational* perspective across scales, focused on the networks and forms of organisation through which cooperation, commitment, decision making, and innovation are enabled; *a technological perspective,* interested in the smart devices, fences, or walls through which the flow of people and information are channelled in particular ways; and an *imaginative* perspective analysing the narratives, affects, and visions attached to it.

First, an infrastructural lens allows us to see where and how security in turbulent times is organised beyond and below the formal institutions of the state. In a classical Weberian understanding, the provision of security and the guarantee of order in a society is intimately tied to the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In many regions of the world, however, this has never been the case, as state authority over security governance is often contested, with multiple formal and informal actors involved in producing security as a club good for different beneficiaries.[25] Moreover, faced with borderless threats such as pandemic diseases, climate change or political violence,[26] states can no longer provide security to their citizens on their own. Security provision is thus scaled up to regional, global, and multilateral security arenas as well as scaled down to local or informal actors, affecting established understandings of legitimate authority and the democratic control of security. In parallel, states try to reinstate control over matters of security by strengthening their borders or military capabilities or by turning to increasingly autocratic forms of rule. Here, an infrastructural perspective allows us to grasp the complexity of the agencies involved, their division of labour, modes of cooperation and decision making as well their in/efficiencies. Instead of focusing solely on the state as the core security provider, we are invited to ask what works and how? This approach helps us to make sense of the simultaneity of these forces away from and towards the state by making visible the complex formal and informal arrangements of security infrastructures that can coexist and overlap in complicated ways.[27] An infrastructural lens may lead us to splintered security responses in "heterogeneous infrastructure configurations"[28]. They allow for an inquiry into the nature and legitimacy of plural forms of security provision by both public and private actors: how are norms of accountability, participation, transparency, and inclusivity brought to bear on new security constellations and where do we find democratic innovations, including in incremental, makeshift, or informal infrastructures?

Second, an infrastructural lens brings into view the technological features through which contemporary security practices are realised and affect core questions of democracy, such as justice, inclusivity, access, and accountability. Technological innovations such as predictive policing, biometrical data bases, artificial intelligence for suicide prevention in prisons, or satellite applications in new forms of warfare have transformed the material foundations of democratic security and have raised new ethical questions of unequal suspicion, sorting, suffering, and care.[29] The technological curiosity that is part of our infrastructural lens attends to the "mundanity" of these technological configurations. As Georgios Glouftsios shows for the case of EU border security, security technology never simply works as designed, but must consistently be monitored, maintained, repaired, or upgraded.[30] A technological sensitivity for security governance thus not only leads us to innovation but, following Claudia Aradau, to "recomposition" as well as to modes of "decomposing, disjoining or undoing" related to technologies of security[31]. At the same time, it directs attention to the safeguards to prevent or deal with the event of infrastructural breakdown, failure, or attack. In all – mundane or exceptional – efforts to operate, recompose, undo or protect key infrastructures, the relationship between democracy and security is at stake. Finally, a technological sensitivity involved in our infrastructural lens helps us to find orientation in what Marieke de Goede called the "analysis at the intersection of the 'small' and the 'big' of global politics [as] a key challenge for critical security studies and its futures."[32] Researching with and through infrastructures allows us to focus on these intersections and interactions[33] so as to not only consider a security device in its immediate environment, but also as part of a wider global configuration of security.

Third, an infrastructural lens can help us to attend to security as an affective matter around which communities and publics form in times of radical uncertainty. "Security seeking"[34] is entangled with public articulations of grief, anger, fear, or pride, with claims of collective identities, belonging and othering and with promises and speculations about what is to come.[35] An infrastructural approach explores how people come together to contest, worry, or speculate about matters of security, be it on digital platforms, image boards, public squares, or town hall meetings, and what these formats enable them to do and with what effects. An infrastructural lens also asks how certain security infrastructures themselves become matters of public concern: as a contested terror warning app, a toxic pipeline, or a brutal police apparatus. There are moments of

25 See further Ursula Schroeder 2018: Security. The Oxford Handbook of Governance and Limited Statehood, T. Risse, T. A. Börzel and A. Draude (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 375–393.

26 Shahar Hameiri, Lee Jones 2015: Governing Borderless Threats: Non-Traditional Security and the Politics of State Transformation, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

27 See e.g. Peter Albrecht, Louise Wiuff Moe 2015: The simultaneity of authority in hybrid orders, *Peacebuilding* 3(1), pp. 1–16.
Charis Enns, Nathan Andrews and J. Andrew Grant 2020: Security for whom? Analysing hybrid security governance in Africa's extractive sectors, *International Affairs* 96 (4), pp. 995–1013.

28 Mary Lawhon et al. 2018: Thinking through heterogeneous infrastructure configurations, *Urban Studies Journal* 55(4), pp. 720–732, p. 722.

29 Antonis Vradis et al. 2020: Governing mobility in times of crisis: Practicing the border and embodying resistance in and beyond the hotspot infrastructure, *EPD: Society and Space* 38(6), pp. 981–990.
Georgios Glouftsios 2020: Governing border security infrastructures: Maintaining large-scale information systems, *Security Dialogue*.

30 Georgios Glouftsios 2020: *op. cit.,* p. 4.

31 Claudia Aradau 2019: Politics of technoscience and (in)security, in ‚Horizon Scan: Critical security studies for the next 50 years', Mark B Salter (ed.), *Security Dialogue* 50(4), p. 24.

32 Marieke de Goede 2019: Infrastructural geopolitics, in 'Horizon Scan: Critical security studies for the next 50 years', Mark B Salter (ed.), *Security Dialogue* 50(4), p. 31.

33 Hillary Angelo, Christine Hentschel 2015: Interactions with Infrastructure as Windows Into Social Worlds. A Method for Critical Urban Studies: Introduction, *City* 19 (2–3), pp. 306–312.

34 Catarina Kinvall, Jennifer Mitzen 2017: An introduction to the special issue: Ontological securities in world politics, *Cooperation and Conflict* 52(1), pp. 3–11, p. 4.

35 See further Emma Hutchison 2016: Affective communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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intense imaginary work in the face of disastrous events or at the verge of innovation, e.g. when cities declare themselves as "welcome cities" or states proclaim a "climate emergency". In these moments, infrastructures receive public attention as complex configurations that must be unravelled: either after the fact, as in 'how could that have happened?'; 'what lever did not work in the overall machine?'; or as projections, as in 'how do we imagine this to work differently'? An infrastructural lens invites us to also ask how infrastructures of security and democracy are perceived: trusted or not, experienced as unjust or incapable, and how this gravely differs along racial and class lines as well as political partisanship. We have yet to understand the consequences of different forms of affective divestments or detachments from key infrastructures of security and democracy.

By bringing together organisational, technological, and imaginative perspectives, this think piece has suggested an analytical pathway to better analyse emerging configurations between security and democracy in turbulent times. Moving beyond the study of singular disruptive and seemingly sudden or 'surprising' events, an infrastructural lens emphasizes longer-term transformations of the relationship between security and democracy. This lens may also inspire emerging research to focus on innovative democratic practices and unexpected trajectories of cooperation in the security domain that arise in times of crisis.

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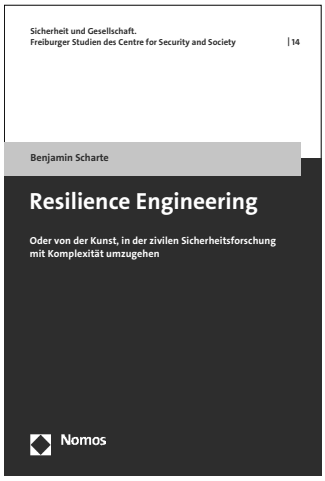

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