

ethnographic parenthesis D }

Infrastructural Breakdown

- *Water in the bathroom not working—hoses frozen. Water was warmed up for me on the gas stove. Hardly necessary for brushing teeth. But I postponed the morning shower I'd planned. (research diary, 05/01/2017)*
- *Hot water doesn't work. Checked the boiler¹ but it won't ignite. The butane gas bottle is pretty light, it's probably empty. I go to B. who is just in front of the little shop and describe the situation to him, asking him for help. He gets wrenches and keys for the butane box. I carry a new bottle over. After the new bottle is connected, the water still doesn't get warm. There seems to be a problem with the boiler. S. will have to take a look when he gets back home, I am told. I heat up water on the stove in the kitchen and have a bucket shower. For this there is a small black handle bucket, which I usually fill with water in the evening and place on the sink in the bathroom. In the morning the water pipe is often frozen and I take the water from the bucket for brushing my teeth and washing. For the bucket shower I mix hot water from the pot I had on the stove and cold water from the canister. It works quite well, though it takes a bit longer than actual showering. More water comes out of the bucket than out of the shower head and it is evenly warm. (research diary, 13/01/2017)*
- *The water pipes are frozen again due to bad weather conditions. Just quick washes again. Always a bit more complicated and colder than anticipated, and more time-consuming than expected. Regardless, afterwards I'm clean again. (research diary, 24/01/2017)*

1 Hot water for the tap water and shower was provided by a boiler, which in turn was fired by a butane/propane gas bottle.

For the introductory phase of my research, I was inspired by one quote, in particular, to write meticulous notes:

I teach students in my fieldwork classes to listen and look for two things: first, for the special language used in the location, metaphors, *mots justes*, turns of phrase, and private codes used by one group and not another. Second, for things that strike these groups as strange, weird, and anomalous. What is it that causes them doubt? How may this become inquiry? In this, the strength of field-work is its anthropological strangeness and nowhere is that more important than in the beginning stages of inquiry. (Star 2010: 605)

I thus kept both extensive field notes, as well as more personal diary entries outlining my own feelings and detailing my stay. Shortly after I had arrived for my extended fieldwork during cold January days, the water line froze. The house that I stayed in had the luxury, as it were, of a shower and running water, but during the winter months of ice and snow, the “modern sanitation” was very fragile. Access to water is one thing, mobilizing it efficiently is quite something else. Those such as myself—an anthropologist-in-training—are used to a functioning shower and consider daily washing with a bucket to be something worth writing about. If it was a problem, it was a problem I had to adapt to. Those excerpts reflect how I personally experienced the breakdown of water infrastructure. And as Susan Leigh Star made clear, infrastructure tends to be most felt in its absence (see Star 1999). However, for the family I stayed with, frozen pipes and failing tap water infrastructure were not the anomaly they were for me. They had recourse to alternative water reserves and sanitation practices that did not rely on tap water. Moreover, the weekly hammam was not in any way dependent on that kind of piped water. It was these first weeks in the snowy mountains that turned my attention—on a very experiential level—to questions of water and infrastructure.