

BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan Silver. *The Infrastructural South: Techno-Environments of the Third Wave of Urbanization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023. ix + 305. \$50.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780262546874.

The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, wallowing in the mire. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* interrogated decolonized African states as representations of "racist logics of colonial planning shaped cities" (128). This description also illustrates the "extended time/space of infrastructure" needed to develop Africa for Western modernity. However, Jonathan Silver's *The Infrastructural South* challenges these stereotypes, revealing precolonial African cities, colonial-built legacies, modernity as a European concept, and the emerging urban wave of techno-environments shaping everyday life in Africa.

Thinking about urbanization through infrastructures means understanding the creation and construction of a dynamic, "complex and interconnected entanglement facilitating the flows and circulations required for everyday social reproduction for households" (10). Engaging with technology in Uganda, Ghana, and South Africa, Silver captures how urban dwellers in "ordinary" or "secondary cities" struggle to "catch up" with digitized infrastructures found in large metropolitan regions. This gap prevents an understanding of the diversity of processes, trajectories, and futures in smaller urban centers (164).

Silver's text employs ethnography, in-depth interviews, and personal encounters to present his findings on the innovations of the "networked city" in the Global South. He discusses how these innovations manifest in enclave imposition, corridor digital, and postcolonial metropole scenarios, which differ from what might be expected when applying the "abstracted universalized model of urban modernity from the West to urban Africa" (242).

Frantz Fanon's perspective of underprivileged cities lacking essential resources has influenced the urbanization of African cities. The development of these cities now relies on "incremental techno-environments" to address challenges related to electricity, water, sanitation, and housing. For millions of people, living in the city means dealing with and adapting to the technologies required for social reproduction due to the absence of a fully functional networked system. Silver describes this urbanization from below as a process where residents, communities, and informal (and sometimes formal) service providers strive to manage and manipulate resource flows to sustain the urban experience despite its instability (85).

Summarizing popular infrastructure as “people as infrastructure,” Silver cautions against interpreting the contested African techno-environment of urban modernity solely through the lens of modern networked infrastructure. Instead, the urban modernity experience in the Infrastructural South is “suffused by a distinct series of techno-environments—the extended time/space of impositions that reinforce historical inequalities, the emergent high-tech enclaves, the incremental irregular systems of popular neighborhoods, the emerging digital layers of urban space, new corridor deployments, and the infrastructural catch-ups of secondary cities and towns” (246).

I am particularly intrigued by Silver’s observations on “digital mediation disruptions and extractions from above and below” as mechanisms to checkmate democracy, enhance leadership, bolster businesses, and monitor infrastructure through code and software. Engaging with the Infrastructural South today means grappling with this digital present, the technologies of African “smart” cities, and the ideas, experiences, and innovations of people navigating these disruptive waves (186).


The Infrastructural South is a profound and exciting contribution to the debate on urban infrastructure, decoloniality, and modernism in Africa and the West. I recommend this text to urban planners, historians, economists, and government policymakers. The findings challenge the portrayal of African urban infrastructures as merely unmodern and lagging behind the urban worlds of the North (242). Silver envisions African routes, pathways, and journeys toward a “popular infrastructure committed to decolonized cities, addressing the challenges and imperatives of infrastructure in the making of the third wave of urbanization” (266).

Along with the introduction and conclusion, which are Chapters One and Ten, Silver includes eight other chapters with shorter subheadings, making it an engaging and coherent read. I appreciate Silver’s use of interviews, focus group discussions, fiction, and personal experiences to analyze the everyday life of urban dwellers in Africa, showcasing his dual expertise as a historian and urban scholar. Though not in color, the images in the text are a valuable addition. It would have been beneficial if the author had included descriptive sentences alongside the image titles.

In discussing the postcolonial African narrative in *The Infrastructural South*, Silver examines contemporary African leadership, finance, corruption, development programs, and government “big constructions” as groundbreaking and objective analyses. The ongoing development of infrastructure corridors “remains steeped in and evolves from colonial histories” (136). The destruction of existing structures, displacement of people, and the focus on “social infrastructure” (148), while constructing “gigantic folly” projects, push countries into debt entrapment and prolonged dependency to meet the demands of Western modernism (137).

In conclusion, Jonathan Silver’s *The Infrastructural South* is a scholarly recommendation not only for African scholars in urban studies but also for those seeking to understand modernity and its technological environment in twenty-first-century Africa. Silver argues that Africa is not oblivious to changes and ongoing patterns of development and modernity and that the rigid model of

modernity assumed by Western countries is not applicable in Africa. This book has sparked critical debate on urban issues, particularly our understanding of urbanization and everyday urban politics in the Global South.

Mathias Chukwudi Isiani 
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA,
isiani@sas.upenn.edu.

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