

Lisa Björkman, *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters: Embedded Infrastructures of Millennial Mumbai*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015

Democratic Pressure

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Andrew Barry

The first chapter of Lisa Björkman's book opens with a telling vignette. During the early period of her fieldwork, the ethnographer imagined that there had to be a map of the hydraulic infrastructure of Mumbai and that if only she could get hold of such a map this would be 'the most sensible place to begin'. But after she finally managed to procure what looked like maps of the city's infrastructure she found that that they were not exactly maps at all. The 'maps' turned out not to representations of the existing state of the infrastructure but plans of projected futures that were never, or only partially, materialized.

Unsurprisingly, given that there are apparently no reliable maps of Mumbai's water pipes today, local knowledge of their location turns out to be critical for those who are expected to keep the water flowing. In chapter 5, Björkman tells a story of following the work of an engineer who, in the absence of maps, makes use of a 'sounding man' who locates the presence of pipes by listening to the movement of water below the city's streets. In principle, the sounding man can detect the difference between sewage and water pipes and, as the ethnographer puts it, all manner of 'subterranean sloshing'. In practice, traffic noise is likely to impede his work, and engineering teams may have to resort to excavating the road in order to generate knowledge of pipes whose exact location has long been forgotten.

In these circumstances, it is impossible to represent the totality Mumbai's hydraulic infrastructure, or perhaps even to visualize it as a network at all. Indeed, *Pipe Politics* presents us with a world of fragments, mundane events, interrupted supplies, and fluctuating pressures. Susan Leigh Star's often cited observation that 'infrastructure is only visible on breakdown' doesn't apply to Mumbai's pipes: the availability of water varies, and this variability is unevenly

visible all the time, not just visible 'on breakdown'. In this world, the partial knowledge of engineers is both supplemented by sounding men and local residents and displaced by various brokers, who know how to get pipes fixed or connected in the absence of systematic knowledge. In this respect the figure of the 'plumber' turns out to be of particular significance. As Björkman explains, plumbers do not to repair or lay pipes; they facilitate the necessary political and bureaucratic work that in practice enables individuals and communities to gain access to water.

Björkman's book is richly ethnographic. Like both the author herself and her informants, searching for water pipes in the 'M-East Ward', the reader is continually surprised by specific details. Maps are not maps, plumbers do not plumb, and water emerges in unexpected places, or fails to emerge where it is expected. Nonetheless, some elements of Björkman's story are familiar enough. She writes at some length about how the urban slum redevelopment of M-East had not been planned, but driven largely by the 'dual imperatives of profit and expediency' (80), while the construction of new gated communities, swimming pools and luxury hotels, whether legally authorised or not, generates massive demands for water, exacerbating existing inequalities. The effect of rapid and unplanned urban development is that engineers continually need to make water 'appear in places' that were not envisaged. No wonder that plans and maps are of little use, and that the sound of water's subterranean flows can prove to be so vital. The need for local knowledge of Mumbai's hydraulic infrastructure is a function of the city's rapid growth, and its designation as a 'World-Class City'.

But if this story is an important one to tell, the originality of the book lies elsewhere. Björkman begins by questioning two common accounts of urban politics. One follows from the work of neo-Lefebvrian urban geographers who have promoted the idea of 'planetary urbanization'. The other derives from the theorists of what she terms the 'antiplan', who celebrate the disorder and informality of the city as vital antidotes to both the plans of the modern state and the creative destruction of late capitalism.

In opposition to both these critical accounts of power and resistance, and despite her reference to theories of materiality and infrastructure, Björkman's analysis is decidedly unfashionable. As a good ethnographer, she pays close attention to her informants' practices and, while she is certainly not uncritical of Mumbai's engineers and plumbers, she also recognizes the significance of their work and its embeddedness in a dynamic cultural and geographical context. Above all, it is the plumbers, engineers, sounding men and a host of others, including 'social workers', meter readers and valve operators, who drew her attention to the opacity and fluctuations of the hydraulic infrastructure.

One may ask where is the politics in *Pipe Politics*? My sense is that the idea of politics operates in three different registers. First, Björkman does have a lot to say about the politics (and the failures) of marketization. Despite the dominance of the discourse of market liberalization, Mumbai's hydraulic infrastructure is still state owned and many household supplies are unmetered or, if they are metered, the water meters either do not work or are not suitable. But while *Pipe Politics* offers us a subtle account of the operation of what Michel Callon once termed 'market devices', Björkman is above all concerned with the politics of access. At this second register, the work of engineers and plumbers, and the tensions between them, are profoundly political matters.

Indeed, in these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that those who possess knowledge of the hydraulic infrastructure of Mumbai also come to acquire formal as well as an informal political power. After all, 'authority based on intimate infrastructural knowledge wins elections and can then facilitate public investment'. Politics is less about disagreement, agonism (cf Mouffe) or, as the antiplan theorists would argue, about resistance or informal practice. Nor despite Björkman's title, is it primarily about contestation, although contestation certainly does occur. It is much more about getting things done, getting access to a vital necessity or, to put it bluntly, in Mumbai politics is 'only about water' (228). In an acute analysis, she draws our attention to the practice of paying crowds to turn up to demonstrations, even to those that will never be reported by the mass media. As she argues, the capacity of local politicians to mobilise

crowds in this way should not be interpreted, and thereby explained away, as a manifestation of the problem of corruption. Rather such demonstrations demonstrate to those who take part in them that a political actor, who may well be a plumber, as well as a local politician, is able to perform authority 'over the roads, pipes, and police' (216). A third register that runs through Björkman's work, is that *Pipe Politics* actually turns out to be a story about the conduct of democracy. This is a book about how democratic politics is not necessarily about public debate or representation, but about mobilizing and demonstrating the capacity to get things done.

Two further conclusions follow. One concerns the distinction that is frequently drawn between the transparency of liberal or radical democratic politics and the corruption of the state. On the one hand, Björkman argues that the 'corruption' involved in getting access to water is not necessarily problematic. A distinction needs to be made between 'morally reprehensible actions by public officials' and the forms of 'corruption' that may be required to mobilize the resources necessary to enable the hydraulic infrastructure to work. On the other hand, blaming 'corruption' for the evident difficulty in obtaining reliable access to water is a pervasive idiom. Indeed, even engineers may encourage the idea that problems with the delivery of water are due to corruption rather than due to their own lack of knowledge, maps, or competence. Corruption is commonplace, but the commonplace talk about corruption also turns out to be a way of evading discussion of the materiality of the hydraulic infrastructure.

A second conclusion is that the focus of Björkman's study, although it is not explicitly theorized, is not exactly the pipes themselves, or even water, but the presence or absence of a core property possessed by water when it is contained in pipes - namely *pressure* (13). The challenge for the engineers, plumbers and residents of Mumbai is to find where there is pressure in the network and where there is an absence of pressure. Lacking maps of the network as a whole, the focus of engineers and residents, as well as the ethnographer, is on the problem of how to locate and enhance water pressure. Democracy plays the role of a

'political device' that might enable the pressure of the hydraulic infrastructure to be raised, whether in specific locations or in general.

One test of a good ethnography is whether the material it generates challenges its readers to think differently. Certainly, *Pipe Politics* highlights the limitations of dominant geographical accounts of urban politics and government. However, my sense is that the range of concepts deployed here, including infrastructure, embeddedness and materiality, don't quite do justice to the richness of this ethnography and its empirical preoccupations. By focusing on the everyday work of engineers, sounding men, plumbers and local politicians, Björkman's study directs to acknowledge not just the political significance of their expertise, but also the importance of sights, sounds and pressures that may otherwise be unrecognized.