

ANTINA VON SCHNITZLER, *Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics & Protest after Apartheid*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (hb US\$80 – 978 0 6911 7077 0; pb US\$27.95 – 978 0 6911 7078 7). 2016, 238 pp.

In the Preface to *Aramis, or, The Love of Technology*, Bruno Latour asks whether it may be possible to turn "...a technological object into the central character of a narrative, restoring to literature the vast territories it should never have given up – namely, science and technology" (pp. vii). In *Democracy's Infrastructure*, anthropologist Antina von Schnitzler does just that: she turns the prepaid meter into the central character of interconnected stories about the "service delivery protests" taking place in postapartheid South Africa. Through a historically informed ethnographic study of technological artifacts and infrastructures, the author provides an intellectually stimulating entry point into the materiality of democracy and the political in South Africa and elsewhere. Her work adds to the growing scholarship that foregrounds infrastructure as a political terrain, not just as a substrate for political action or a conduit for grand state narratives of modernization and development. Theoretically, the book is strongly engaged with Foucault's biopolitics and various strands of science and technology studies. It is of obvious interest to South Africanists, but also to those interested in how technology mediates everyday experiences of state, citizenship and democracy.

Von Schnitzler brings her ethnographic focus to bear on how the adoption of prepayment in South African townships becomes a political terrain for the contestation and negotiation of state-society relationships. She examines the everyday administrative interactions around the provision of basic services such as water and electricity, a terrain one step removed from the normative domains of liberal politics. Central to those negotiations and contestations are differing notions of citizenship, civic virtues, moral obligations, and forms of sociality that oppose residents of townships to the administrative state. Von Schnitzler traces the differing notions back to broader ideologies and practices of colonialism, apartheid, antiapartheid struggle, liberal democracy and neoliberalism. By focusing on the prepaid meter, she explores how questions about payment for basic services relate to (unfulfilled) promises of citizenship in postapartheid South Africa. Overall, the book offers a critique of the possibilities of liberal democracy in neoliberal times, where precarity and inequality have arguably been normalized.

This theoretical and empirical focus is well articulated in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 offers a historical account of how the apartheid regime drew on neoliberal ideas to craft pragmatic responses to the various problems it faced in governing urban black populations in the late-1970s. Chapter 3 discusses the historical connections between contemporary anti-prepayment protests and strategies of nonpayment first rehearsed during the antiapartheid struggle. Chapter 4 introduces the history of prepayment devices, travelling from Victorian Britain all the way to late-apartheid South Africa. The chapter explores how every technology is inscribed with moral and political projects and aspirations for their users, which is why technology can become a political terrain for the negotiation of those same projects and aspirations. Chapter 5 examines the practices of living prepaid through a focus on the metrological regimes and calculative practices of water provision and consumption through a prepaid meter. Chapter 6 discusses how metrological regimes become entangled in global discourses on human rights in the court battles waged by activists against prepayment. The Conclusion summarizes the argument for infrastructure as a novel empirical object and epistemological vantage point into South Africa's 'transition' to democracy, as well as a

metaphor for the exploration of the various dimensions of democracy in contemporary times.

While I highly recommend this book, two main apprehensions emerged as I read it. The first relates to how wedded the author seems to be to the pervasive powers of neoliberal thought and its translation and appropriation into local forms of biopolitics. I side here with those scholars who are increasingly skeptical about neoliberal ideas having such totalizing power in global South contexts. The second apprehension concerns the underlying judgment against prepayment as mediator of a state project imposing an unwanted calculative disposition and a fiscal ethos that fosters further precarity onto an already impoverished population. In my ongoing study of the introduction of electricity prepayment in Maputo, Mozambique, I have found little to no opposition to it – a puzzling finding if we were to assume that prepayment is closely associated with such a reprehensible ethico-political project. However, the fiscal relationship between the state and the population in Maputo seems to have different historical roots and discursive and practical expressions. The population seems rather relieved that prepayment allows them to have indirect interactions with a state apparatus that remains largely oppressive, extractive and incapable (or unwilling) to provide for its citizens. In such context, almost ironically, electricity users prefer the precarity they know than the precarity they don't. These findings are not contradictory to von Schnitzler's, but serve as a reminder that the same technology can be inscribed with different political projects, values and aspirations. Instead of seeing neoliberal ideas and biopolitics everywhere, this suggests we must continue to thoroughly interrogate the historically and site-specific technopolitics of the projects we investigate.

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