

**Mains, Daniel. *Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2019, 240 pages**

Felipe Fernández

Volume 63, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078621ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021340>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (imprimé)

2292-3586 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fernández, F. (2021). Compte rendu de [Mains, Daniel. *Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2019, 240 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 63(1), 1–5.  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021340>

© Felipe Fernández, 2021



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

# Book Review

---

**Mains, Daniel. *Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2019, 240 pages.**

Felipe Fernández  
*Freie Universität Berlin*

In anthropology, infrastructure as a site of inquiry or as an analytical framework has led to the steady production of ethnographical works around the world. Daniel Mains's book on infrastructural systems in urban Ethiopia represents a seminal contribution to the growing literature on infrastructure within the discipline. Looking at different infrastructural projects such as dams, roads, and three-wheel motorcycles in two medium-sized cities of Ethiopia, Jimma and Hawassa, the author focuses on the mere process of construction as "a site for exploring everyday encounters between citizens, the state, and infrastructural technologies" (4). In the course of global structural adjustments of deregulation, and a revolution which put an end to the military dictatorship (1974–91), the Ethiopian state, and so many more states in Africa and beyond, retreated from many areas of economic life. Notwithstanding and due to its central role in the country's development, the state is still a key actor in the processes of construction. Rapid economic growth between 2007 and 2017 and a new political agenda paved the way for state-led infrastructural projects in Ethiopia. *Meser Limat*, the term used in Ethiopia's national language Amharic, to refer to infrastructure literally translates to "the foundation of development" and encapsulates the narratives of progress and renaissance employed by the leading and ruling party EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front).

Mains has been conducting fieldwork in Ethiopia since the early 2000's and has previously published several papers as well as a monograph on urban youth and unemployment (2011). Building on this longstanding experience, his book benefits from the rich ethnographic material gathered in conversation with "workers, engineers, resident of rapidly changing neighborhoods, government

administrators, and taxi drivers” (7) involved directly or indirectly in the phenomenon of construction. Furthermore, his theoretical approach draws from vital and historical materialism, as well as from the study of affects, everyday improvisation, and state practices, and enables him to analyze this ongoing phenomenon of development through construction in the Global South. The book is structured in five chapters, each examining a particular form of urban infrastructure at different scales. Chapter 3 is the only exception, since this chapter addresses the affective politics of infrastructural development in the city of Jimma.

The first chapter explores the representations, state practices, critiques, and political consequences stemming from the construction of hydroelectric dams, especially the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and Gibe III. These last two represent the largest hydroelectric projects in the region and a crucial (material, social, and political) intervention of the Ethiopian developmental state and a legitimation strategy of the ruling EPRDF. Grounded on discourses of economic growth, a unified nation, and renaissance, the official narrative around these mega projects veils, according to Mains, the longstanding ethnic and regional inequalities within the country. The Gibe III project, for instance, is located in the South Omo Valley (a marginal lowland periphery) and could destroy the livelihoods of 500,000 pastoralists and fishers. Moreover, the construction of the dams does not exclusively envision the production of high amounts of electricity, but the irrigation of large-scale monocrop plantations to produce rice, sugar, and palm oil, deepening the historical inequalities between the highlands—characterized by sedentary agriculture—with the lowlands—inhabited mostly by mobile pastoralists. Dams, the author concludes, generate “high levels of conflict because they bring together competing temporal and spatial narratives” (55).

In examining the construction of asphalt roads in the cities of Jimma and Hawassa, the second chapter addresses a myriad of social, political, and material entanglements emerging from these particular infrastructural projects. Mains’s primary focus is on the improvisation and flexibility necessary in the contingency of construction: “Soil type, weather, corruption, mismanagement, revenue generation, ethnic politics, corporate greed, and prior urban development all undermine the strategies of engineers and urban planners” (66). Hence, seeing the construction of asphalt roads as a desirable vehicle for progress, the state has to improvise in order to smooth out bureaucratic bumps, local conflicts, and different irregularities. Furthermore, construction, in many cases, means

eviction (see Chu 2014). In these cases, infrastructure leads to disruption (Anand 2017), and to a new configuration of the relations between the state and the affected population. The bulk of ethnographic work addressing material improvisation within infrastructural systems focuses on the everyday survival practices of marginalized people (see von Schnitzler 2016, Anand 2017). Mains's argument on the strategies deployed by state agents to improvise in sites of construction represents a novel perspective in anthropological research on these issues.

The third, most theory-laden chapter of the book examines three key dimensions of affective politics of infrastructural development in urban Ethiopia, namely temporality, sensorial experience, and the intimate politics of exchange. The temporal dimensions articulated by developmental discourses are grounded on ideas and desires for change and growth, enabling envisions of a better (developed) future and dealing with the temporary discomfort caused by the construction process. At the same time, when the construction of infrastructural projects is delayed, sensuous interaction with this unfinished built landscape (in the case of Jimma: full of dust and mud) mobilize political affects towards the state, depicted as corrupt, sticky, and opaque. Another key analytical dimension of affective politics at sites of construction are the politics of exchange. The longstanding history of a patron-client model in Ethiopia has, according to Mains, impacts in the contemporary forms of relations between the citizens and the state. For example, people financially support the construction of roads, relying on a relationship rooted in trust and togetherness. Notwithstanding, this relationship erodes when infrastructural projects are not completed: "When construction fails, it is not only the city that suffers. Affective attachments to the state erode as well" (120).

In the fourth chapter, Mains examines a very particular form of urban infrastructure: the privately operated three-wheeled motorcycles (locally called Bajaj), which enable mobility within the city of Hawassa. These motorcycles are owned by private individuals and leased daily to drivers. Rather than the relationship between owner and drivers, the author addresses the state's regulations of the Bajaj regarding routes, passenger fares, and the issuing of permits. He argues that, first, when people and social networks function as infrastructure (Simone 2004), conflicts are created in relation to productive inequalities (rather than in terms of state/market binary); and second, that lively technologies and materials (as agents) shape these productive inequalities. Once the state aims to regulate the forms of circulation of the Bajaj, tensions between the drivers

(who are partly deprived of the product of their work) and city administrators arise. In 2015, in the context of a fuel crisis, several drivers' associations started a strike against state regulations. Bajaj drivers "were positioning themselves as key actors in networks of redistribution and demanding a state that supports, rather than interferes in, their activities" (140). City administrators argue that the Bajaj should not be part of Hawassa as a modern city, revealing an overt objection to a specific technology. Following an idealized aesthetics of a modern city, the local state envisions a near future in which the Bajaj should be replaced by buses and mini buses. These measures and statements unveil an unequal relationship between a paratransit system (the Bajaj) and the local government, which nevertheless depend on each other and are deeply interwoven.

The last chapter of the book looks at the construction of cobblestone roads in urban Ethiopia within the framework of different development projects. These were funded and initiated by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) and the World Bank, while adopted and implemented by the Ethiopian state. The projects aimed to create jobs for urban youth and to introduce good governance practices. Associations of young people were awarded with contracts, smoothing the longstanding tensions between the urban youth and the state, enabling forms of citizen/state relations. By focusing on the material politics of infrastructure, the author explores "the complex intersections between the multiple things that cobblestone builds—roads, states, lives, relationships" (151). Furthermore, he examines the particular transformation in the livelihoods of young people originating from their engagement with the construction of cobblestone roads.

The book represents an important contribution to the field of infrastructure within anthropology and beyond. The author focuses not on a single infrastructural system, or construction, as done by others (Anand 2017, von Schnitzler 2016, Larkin 2008, Knox and Harvey 2015), but shows the ways in which different infrastructural systems at various scales shape and transform the social fabric and the politics of everyday life. After all, subjects are surrounded, engage with, and are engaged by a wide range of infrastructures. This is exemplified by the fascinating portrait of Holyfield, a young Ethiopian whose life was shaped and transformed by different construction projects and his relation to the state: "He had worked [...] on a large-scale hydropower project, was involved in cobblestone road construction, and had just purchased a Bajaj" (168).

Although Mains's extensive fieldwork in urban Ethiopia enables deep insights into the everyday politics of infrastructure, unfortunately it is based on

uneven ethnographic experiences, depending on the infrastructural system he is focusing on. For instance, his first chapter on the dam projects is informed by limited fieldwork as compared to the chapter on cobblestone roads, which represents a rich ethnographic account. Furthermore, his reliance on a broad range of theoretical-analytical debates ranging from the politics of affects, to historical and vital materialism, and an anthropology of the state, provides the work with a veneer of eclecticism. However, his contribution to the field of the anthropology of infrastructure could have profited from a more focused approach to the selection of theoretical frameworks employed to understand and explain the encountered phenomena. Nonetheless, *Under Construction* represents a seminal contribution to this field of study.

## References

- Mains, Daniel. 2011. *Hope is Cut. Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Anand, Akhil. 2017. *Hydraulic City. Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Chu, Julie. 2014. "When Infrastructure Attack. The Workings of Disrepair in China." *American Ethnologist* 41(2): 351–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12080>
- Von Schnitzler, Antina. 2016. *Democracy's Infrastructure. Techno-Politics and Protest after Apartheid*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Larkin, Brian. 2008. *Signal and Noise. Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Knox, Hannah, Penny Harvey. 2015. *Roads. An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Simone, AbdouMalik. "People as Infrastructure. Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture* 16(3): 407-429. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-407>