

Hentschel, Christine

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THINKING THE URBAN IMPASSE BEYOND LOCKDOWN: AN AFTERWORD

CHRISTINE HENTSCHEL

Department of Social Sciences, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, Email: christine.hentschel-2@uni-hamburg.de (Corresponding author)

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ABSTRACT

How can the lens of the ‘urban impasse’ help us make sense of the relationship between inequality, institutions and contemporary urban life? And how can urban studies benefit from feminist affect theory to explore the theoretical potential of the ‘urban impasse’? An impasse is a dead end; it connotes an experience of being stuck, lacking orientation or a sense of the future. Still, an impasse also bears transformative potential as a powerful way of halting and denouncing that which does not work or is heading in the wrong direction—as was powerfully brought to stage in cities around the world by climate change, antiracist and women’s rights movements in recent years.

Key words: Impasse; affect theory; collective life; institutions; urban protest; inequality

While we are officially living in a post-pandemic era, the COVID-19 health emergency that swept through cities worldwide—with lingering effects—has dramatically reaffirmed the need to reflect on the relationship between inequality, institutions and urban life. The pandemic disproportionately affected the most marginalized—migrants, incarcerated people, Black and Brown communities, kids in disadvantaged areas and women who, in many cases, went back to extra care work at home. Being poor and Black meant a higher exposure to infection and death, as well as an elevated risk of becoming unemployed or homeless. This vulnerability ‘names the greater likelihood of dying, understood as the fatal consequence of a pervasive social inequality’ (Butler 2020). With the restrictions and formalizations seeking to keep people apart from each other, public spheres imploded; ‘waning [was] the sensuousness of the street as a locus of circulation—of knowledge, affect, and capacity—and the performance of solidarity’ (Lancione & Simone 2020).

Yet, while the quarantine measures were fixes par excellence, urbanites in most of the world did not stop engaging in collective city life because they could not afford to do so. As Bhan *et al.* (2020) argue in their reflections on Delhi, São Paulo, Johannesburg and Jakarta: ‘In these cities, getting by means being able to move, every day, both alone but also in concert with others, to stay open to the trade, the *skarrel*, the hustle to arrange water, food, work, waste, childcare, data and identity for that day, that week, for just some more time. It is these arrangements that make everyday life possible in the southern urban and they lie at the heart of [...] collective life’. The distinctions between ‘crisis’ and the ‘everyday’ or ‘before’ and ‘after’ the pandemic are not clear-cut in many lifeworlds, they argue and they call on us ‘to acknowledge the reality and potential of the tacit ways in which people moved, acted and related with one another to produce urban outcomes “before”’ (ibid.).

The papers in this edition give us a strong sense of this ‘before’ and its continuities into the pandemic: How social position and

location work together to cement inequality and how urbanites navigate through these conditions. What people do with, despite, against and beyond existing institutions and forms of governability and what they are trying to maintain, break loose from or create. The papers address these questions by looking at the manifold interactions between the everyday manoeuvrings of urbanites at different social and spatial positions and the regulatory logics of legalization, policing, schooling or care of state institutions. The impasse is their metaphorical starting point. In this short afterword, I reflect on how the lens of the urban impasse can help us make sense of contemporary urban life while drawing on elements of feminist affect theory.

IMPASSE, AFFECT AND COLLECTIVE URBAN LIFE

An impasse, the OED says, is a “road or way having no outlet; a blind alley, ‘cul-de-sac’”. Also, *figurative*, a position from which there is no way of escape, a ‘fix’”. Its spatial meaning as a dead end has been imported into social circumstances and experiences (Cvetcovich 2012, p. 20) of feeling stuck, frustrated, torn, lacking orientation, or hope. An impasse is also an experience of time as interrupted or frozen, deprived of a sense of future or imagination. In Lauren Berlant’s words, an impasse is “a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure.” (Berlant 2011, p. 199; Shomura 2016, p. 5). There may be a sense of unease, of nervousness about something not being resolved in the experience of an impasse. In its political connotation, ‘a site of impasse [means] a place where tensions will be unresolved’ (Zhang & Gray 2019, p. 69).

Affect theory has explored the impasse as a situation, structure and experience of the ordinary (Stewart 2007; Berlant 2011; Cvetcovich 2012) and as ‘deep disturbances of ordinary life’ (Shomura 2016, p. 95). When the ordinary becomes an ‘impasse shaped by crisis’, the prospects of upward mobility look bleak and ‘people find themselves developing

skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on’ (Berlant 2011, p. 8). These modes of living in conditions of ordinary crisis have been central to a strand of urban studies concerned with urban inventiveness and the infrastructures of urban life: What do people do with each other even beyond the concrete routines of daily survival? What is the ‘beyond’ of their actions? (Simone 2019, p. 88) What practices of collective resilience, inventions and gestures of repair can be traced in the midst of lasting crises (Mbembe 2018)? What infrastructures of urban life are assembled, maintained and auto-constructed (McFarlane 2011; Caldeira 2017) in a hostile climate of value extraction, refused rights and negligible formal support?

Impasses are not merely personal experiences. They imply ‘histories of capital, histories of racism, histories of patriarchy, empire and war’ (Shomura 2016, p. 101). Impasses are, therefore, encountered very differently across various social positions. It makes a difference whether someone faces a loss or experiences disillusion recently ‘or if one has long been captive to a state of never-had’ (Shomura 2016, p. 17). For many urbanites featured in this special issue, the promise of happiness, progress, upward mobility has always been distant. But the papers show that urbanites are not ‘standing still’, they are moving, and trying to increase their ‘room for manoeuvre, innovation and collaboration’ (Simone 2013, p. 256), with limited success and often bumping into limitations of all kinds. Thus, an impasse implies structure and experience, time and space, waiting and doing, being stuck and being active. But whether an impasse is perceived as a trap or a productive slowdown with a possible opening, whether people keep doing and hoping while feeling stuck, or whether they try and imagine something different is an empirical question. The papers give exciting and in-depth ethnographic answers.

THE IMPASSE THROUGH THE PAPERS

The assembled collection deals with ordinary, often marginalized urbanites—favela residents navigating conflict, mothers seeking the best for their children, homeless people or crack

users. In each case, we get a powerful account of how people engage with, try to penetrate or avoid institutions of welfare, control and their normative regimes.

The story of Crackland in São Paulo (by *Fromm* and *Blokland* in this issue), where authorities want to put an end to Brazil's largest consumption and sales hotspot of crack cocaine in public space, can be read as an account of the multiple attempts of Crackland's inhabitants to resist the codification and control of state institutions. Young residents involved in drugs in São Paulo's Crackland navigate different territorial codes—that of prisons, recovery clinics, shelters or police and try to turn them to their advantage. 'Switching' and 'making a run' are key modes of rejecting the trap—through moving in and out of the small grips of each institution, benefiting from the resources while refusing their full grip of care or control. Crackland becomes an 'urban refuse', a refuge for those refused, even as the leeway was limited and the circuits of movement predictable. In *Krüger's* piece on the dynamics between homeless persons and emergency services, the experience with welfare or other state services seems to be one of rotating and being moved in a circuit, receiving some attendance, getting out again, consuming, same story all over. Interesting here is the role of the 'third person', that is, by-standers who often call an ambulance, on behalf of the homeless person herself and frequently do so without checking what the need of the homeless person is as if contacting the state services would be a way of avoiding direct contact to the person in need. The impasse here is a predictable rotation of people experiencing homelessness between street and hospital, without the chronic conditions of their livelihood being addressed more structurally.

In her piece on 'motherhood, habitus and habitat', *Blokland* shows how urban impasses operate along the lines of gender and class and are reproduced through the routines and expectations of place. Focusing on the ordinary involvement of mothers at their children's schools, she offers a gendered lens into the workings of inequality and the traps of established ideals and norms on motherhood enacted through their engagement with the school. Here, the urban impasse comes in many

ways: as an incongruence between institutional logic, a place of meaning-making where gendered impasses are produced in very different ways. School, it turns out, has a very different meaning for a mother in a low-income mixed neighbourhood than for a mother in a more affluent and white neighbourhood: something to adapt and stay close to for the former versus something to control and improve for the latter. As it seems, the mothers in affluent neighbourhoods are also trapped in their performance of norms of good mothering, for example, when looking for a therapist for their kids, although they see them as totally normal, while teachers, social workers and health care professionals reinforce that idea of normalcy by drawing on experiences and making comparisons, thus bringing about an urban impasse that is not necessarily shaped by a lack of resources, but by the burdens of expectation and norms.

The complexities of norms in the reproduction of urban inequalities are also key in the paper by *Beraldo*, *Richmond* and *Feltran*. Focusing on a large favela in the city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil, they work out how the state, religious communities and criminal gangs have all established different and overlapping normative regimes that make competing claims for sovereignty on the same territory. As they show, none of these normative regimes fully grip the subjects they claim to govern because people fashion their own pragmatic and tactical compositions depending on situational resources and other considerations. The urbanites circulate between these logics and decide on a case-by-case basis which regime to appeal to for help, protection or conflict resolution.

While the notion of impasse is not always made explicit, its spatial-experiential grounding reverberates through each contribution: the struggle against abandonment, the endless rotation between control and care, the mismatch between habitat and habitus or the manoeuvring of overlapping normative regimes in dealing with conflict. All of the papers in this collection show how urbanites inhabit some sort of an urban impasse—a constant sense of being labelled, criminalized, rendered invisible, blocked or let down, yet try to work with it, constructing 'elastic relationships' (*Simone* 2013, p. 244) and, in so doing, stretching the boundaries of the impasse itself.

FROM GRIP TO HALT

In 1993, Nigel Thrift diagnosed an ‘urban impasse’ when writings on the city were no more than ‘a dead letter zone’ (Thrift 1993, p. 229) and urban studies were ‘left with recycled critiques endlessly circulating the same messages about modernity and postmodernity’. Breaking out of the urban impasse, he argued, meant escaping ‘charges of predictability’ in the writings, ‘extend[ing] the research frontier into new spaces’. The present issue does not work with recycled critiques but with curiosity about how urbanites live with, against and despite the institutions that are supposed to work for them.

By focusing on the involvement of institutions and care workers, clients, patients, mothers and potential criminals, the papers show how deeply inequality is woven into institutional logics in the city. We see how urbanites may be stuck, limited and restrained but also how they can reflect and make sense of their situation and look for more space to manoeuvre. Reading through the papers, it becomes apparent that rotation is a core mechanism of the impasse: small, predictable circular patterns with limited leeway or room for creativity but still pregnant with a kind of resourcefulness. The collection is thus not only an account of a series of navigation strategies but also of what Bhan *et al.* (2020) call the ‘quotidian formations of *collective life* [...] a broad fabric of relations, initiatives, efforts, ways of paying attention, of joining forces, investing time and resources that take place both as matters of intentional organization, but more importantly as a series of practices that people engage in to manage their everyday existence within cities’. The stretch from São Paulo and Belo Horizonte to Berlin—that is, from urban south to north and back is valuable and important: It brings into relation the different mechanisms that produce and solidify urban inequality without assuming beforehand what is and what is not comparable about the social life of cities.

Looking at urban dynamics through the lens of impasse pushes us to look for the work involved in staying attached to larger worlds beyond the concrete limited routinized settings of the everyday. As Simone (2021, p. 3) writes in his *Ritornello: ‘People as infrastructure’*, ‘What

was important was an experience of forward momentum, even in small increments; the feeling that one wasn’t stuck in place, that there were ways of ‘working’ the situation, playing the field, that allowed one a sense of agency. In this way, residents were always looking out for each other, not simply in the sense of taking care, of having their neighbors’ ‘backs’, but looking out onto the world with a receptivity that then rendered all of those arguments, all of those quotidian scenes of buying and selling, gossiping, exchanging, and witnessing a critical infrastructure for the endurance of a territory, a people, a community—whatever was the imaginary designation of what was shared in common’. Handling the impasse also means to push against the dismantling of functioning infrastructures of collective urban life.

But the impasse can also bring about a moment of realization that people are attached to worlds that do not work for them, that are ‘unsustainable, inequitable, and even harmful to them’ (Berlant 2011; Shomura 2016, p. 5). Nervousness, rage or new alliances may emerge when a long-standing condition is suddenly experienced as unbearable or scandalous and a ‘scene of being wound up’ comes into focus (Ahmed 2017): when you realize ‘with frustration that you are being wound up by somebody who is winding you up’. Taking this idea seriously, thinking in terms of impasses becomes an exercise in unearthing potentiality that begins with coming to terms with the ‘unbearability’ of a situation. Feminist affect theory directs our attention of impasse thinking also to ‘the possibilities that are opened when a world seems to be at its end’ (Shomura 2016, p. 22) since ‘to be halted in a track laid down by a damaging world can be a plus—even if the outcomes of that pause cannot be determined in advance of the unfolding of its life’ (Shomura 2016, p. 23).

In their protests in cities all over the world in the years of the pandemic, the radical climate movement, Black Lives Matter and women’s rights movements have powerfully brought to stage the ‘halt’: by disrupting car traffic, blocking the construction of fossil infrastructures, interrupting the business of deadly industries or performing mass die-ins (von Redecker 2020). They make present a widely shared acceptance of harm and death. They call attention to the

different and interwoven ways in which the marginalized are being exposed to racist or gendered violence, the destruction of living environments, a deadly virus, as well as the catastrophes that we call 'natural'. If impasse thus connotes being forced to or forcing others to pause and reflect and get a sense of the mess we are in, it also has a transformative potential as an instrument to denounce that which doesn't work, shouldn't be or is heading in the wrong direction.

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