

**“NUMBER NOT REACHABLE”  
MOBILE INFRASTRUCTURE AND GLOBAL  
RACIAL HIERARCHY IN AFRICA**

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“The number you are calling is not reachable, please try again later”. This automated voice message, or variations thereof, is a common response to phone calls in Tanzania, typically articulated by a friendly female voice in Kiswahili and English, to the perky tunes of popular background music. The status of being ‘not reachable’ is often not by choice, since people usually keep their phones on at all times. Nor is ‘not reachable’ the most frequent response, since most of the time, phone calls do get through. ‘Not reachable’ is, however, symptomatic of malfunctioning infrastructure, especially erratic network coverage and irregular power supply, which is a common feature in mobile infrastructure in many parts of Africa. A number can be unreachable for a few minutes or longer, depending on physical location and operator used. In rural areas, it may take hours to get to a place of connectivity, but even in urban areas, coverage tends to be rather haphazard, with plenty of blind spots and abruptly cut off phone calls. People can also be ‘not reachable’ due to lack of electric power, the management of phone batteries being a constant

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preoccupation. Charging batteries can be cumbersome in rural areas, often entailing travel to a place with electricity, but even in urban areas power is not reliable, due to unstable supply and rationing schemes. Interestingly enough, network coverage is not affected by power cuts, since phone towers often have their own supplies, thus isolating them from the unreliability of electricity grids. Aside from this infrastructural malfunctioning, people can of course invoke the lack of coverage or battery charge when choosing to be ‘not reachable’, for example when engaging in activities that are best kept hidden from friends, spouses, relatives, or colleagues, or when trying to avoid various social pressures. But this is not the subject of the present analysis.

This article discusses mobile infrastructure in Africa, offering a critical appraisal of what is often celebrated as a mobile success story, while broadening anthropological understandings of digital infrastructure through empirical inputs from the peripheries of the global network society (Uimonen, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. Following the call for ‘theories from the south’, the article is based on the premise that digital margins offer valuable insights into technology-mediated modernity, exemplifying how ‘old margins’ are becoming ‘new frontiers’ in contemporary world-historical processes (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012: 13). Thus rather than viewing mobile infrastructure

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in Africa in terms of ‘alternative’ modernity, this analysis follows scholarly efforts to recognize the dialectics of Afromodernity and Euromodernity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012: 9), paying attention to issues of material need and global inequality (Ferguson, 2006: 31-33), while recognizing Africa as a modern space that continues to be structured through global racial hierarchies (Pierre, 2013). This article further notes the problematic tendency of anthropologists to particularize African phenomena, while shunning away from broader questions of racialized inequality (*ibid.*: 202), thus overlooking the relationality and political economy of Africa in the global order (Ferguson, *op. cit.*: 17-19). Cognisant of the diversity of the continent, this article builds on Ferguson’s conceptualization of Africa as a *place-in-the world*, defined as a “location in space and a rank in a system of social categories” an analytical unit that also reflects how many people on the continent understand their lives in “an imagined ‘Africa’ and its place in the world” (*ibid.*: 6). In addressing global phenomena like mobile infrastructure, this perspective directs attention to questions of material and social inequality, especially the persistence of racialized ordering (Pierre, *op. cit.*) in the global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld, 2004). This article draws on material that I have gathered over ten years of ethnographic engagement in Tanzania<sup>2</sup>, combined with published scholarly accounts from different parts of Africa (Brinkman *et al.*, 2009), especially Ghana in West Africa (e.g. Shipley, 2013; Quayson, 2014) and Mozambique in Southern Africa (e.g. Archambault, 2012). Theoretically I build upon Larkin’s (2013: 328-329) work on infrastructure as relational systems with semiotic and aesthetic dimensions, while noting that his emphasis on materiality, e.g. “[i]nfrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter” does not fully cover the immaterial

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<sup>2</sup> Research and consultancy on digital media (e.g. Uimonen, 2012), including mobile infrastructure, most recently in June-July 2014 (Uimonen, 2015). My work in Tanzania has been combined with short travels to other countries on the continent: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Namibia, and South Africa.

aspects of digital and mobile infrastructure (e.g. electric power, digital transmission). Even so, this article focuses on the visual materiality and political economy of mobile infrastructure, thus addressing what has been identified as gaps in existing research (Horst, 2013; Larkin, *op. cit.*).

### **Visual materiality and malfunctioning modernity**

It is somewhat unfortunate that early anthropological conceptualizations of infrastructure have privileged functioning, while promoting a rather narrow view of visibility, suggesting that one of the properties of infrastructure is that it “[b]ecomes visible upon breakdown” (Star, 1999: 382). This statement has led to the oft cited postulation that infrastructure is invisible until it breaks down, thus taking the ‘invisibility’ of infrastructure for granted, a view that Larkin has rightly pointed out to be a “partial truth and, as a way of describing infrastructure as a whole, flatly untenable” (*idem*: 336). He argues that invisibility is but one extreme in the range of visibilities of infrastructure, which range from the unseen to grand spectacles. The visual materiality of mobile infrastructure is a case in point.

In many parts of Africa mobile infrastructure is visually prominent in urban and rural landscapes, from mobile network towers to colourful billboards. The distinctive colours and logos of mobile operators are omnipresent in various sensory forms; painted on buildings, worn on t-shirts, printed on umbrellas, and prominently displayed through sponsorship of cultural events (cf. Archambault, *op. cit.*; Molony, 2008; Shipley, *op. cit.*; Uimonen, 2012). There are some interesting variations in visibility. In Tanzania, mobile phone towers are often built in the midst of residential areas, towering steel constructions articulating the promises of urban modernity, of being ‘reachable’. In rural areas, the towers are few and far between, exemplifying how globalization not only flows but also ‘hops’, skipping spaces in between points of connectivity (Ferguson, *op. cit.*: 47). This urban-rural variation is also evident in mobile advertisements. In African urbanscapes, prominently placed

billboards sell smart phones and fast Internet access, through cosmopolitan images of ‘chic urban youth’ (Quayson, *op. cit.*: 148), often depicting ‘beautiful, successful urbanites’ (Molony, 2008: 344). In rural areas, simple signs with logos are more common, often selling m-banking services. A decade ago, mobile advertisements dominated urban billboards in Tanzania. Although still prominent, they now compete with advertisements for executive furniture, air travel and banking services, visual indicators of a growing urban middleclass. Meanwhile, in rural areas mobile advertisements still dominate, alongside promotions for beer and soft drinks.

The sensory materiality of handsets is another visible feature in everyday life, the mobile phone functioning like a ‘material extension of the self’ (Uimonen, 2015). The mobile phone is always within reach, often carried in hand, or safely tucked away in pockets or brassieres (cf Archambault, *op. cit.*). Phones are also heard; the soundscape often punctuated by ring tones, often personalized, or by music played on phone speakers, not to mention mobile conversations. Since it is an important status symbol, signalling a state of being ‘reachable’, people often show off their phone, which has become “a whole new vehicle of identity and identification for all walks of life” (Brinkman *et al.*, *op. cit.*: 14). The phone might be brand new, the latest smart phone available, an admired artefact that confirms the social superiority of its owner. Or it might be an older model; the case may be cracked, the numbers almost worn off, barely functioning. But even among poorer people, a simple, worn out phone affords some sense of status. The phone is a common object of social exchange and petty trade, as people pass on their old phones to family and relatives or sell them on local markets (Pfaff, 2009), and phones feature in transactional sexual relations (Stark, 2013). The desire for a mobile phone is so great that it is one of the most stolen items in Africa (Onyango-Obbo, 2014).

Another visible aspect is the entrepreneurial culture that mobile infrastructure has given rise to. In Tanzania, entrepreneurs selling airtime vouchers can be found everywhere, along with mobile repair shops, in Kiswahili called *fundi simu*. Shops selling

mobile phones are very commonplace, ranging from large air conditioned outfits in city centres offering the latest model smart phones to hole-in-the-wall shops in rural areas selling cheap Chinese brands and accessories, or promotional stands in market places. M-banking services are mushrooming, especially in rural areas, offering mobile cash transfers through agents, *wakala*, who function as ‘human ATMs’ (Maurer *et al.*, 2013). As observed in June 2014 on a main thoroughfare in Kisesa, a semi-rural town in Mwanza, 39 out of 95 shops served as *wakala* for Vodacom M-pesa, Tigo Pesa and/or Airtel Money. According to one of the agents, money transfers ranged from TZS 3-5,000 (EUR 1,41-2,35) to 200-300,000 (EUR 93,92-140,88) and the agent earned a small commission, e.g. TZS 1,000 (EUR 0,469) for a transfer of 100,000 (EUR 46,96). Companies supply the *wakala* with an agency number, posters and registration book, which agents sometimes complement by painting their shop doors in the colours of the operator.

In Africa where malfunctioning is the norm, the notion that ‘breakdown’ is an anomaly is even more troublesome than the supposed invisibility of infrastructure. Similarly to other forms of infrastructure, mobile infrastructure is characterized by all kinds of system failures, from absent or haphazard network coverage to poorly functioning handsets. Inadequate network coverage is a recurring problem, which often requires some mobility, thus inverting the logic of mobile communication. In rural areas, people may have to climb a hill to get coverage, or find some other ‘network reception spot’ (Molony, 2009), while in urban areas poor coverage is more easily side stepped, since blind spots tend to be limited to particular areas. But even when there is network coverage, the quality of the connection can be defective and sometimes the call is abruptly cut off. Similarly, handsets are often dysfunctional, whether from wear and tear or the poor quality of counterfeit and cheap models. In addition, irregular and inadequate power supply is becoming a growing problem throughout the continent, while many rural areas still lack electricity.

In an African context, systemic breakdowns in infrastructure are taken for granted; they are visibly present, while well functioning infrastructure is visibly absent.

The digital margins offer an empirically rich site for ‘broken world thinking’, bringing forth the ontological and analytical importance of breakdown, repair and restoration (Jackson, 2014). Not only does breakdown offer a more nuanced appraisal of mobile infrastructure, but it is also illustrative of the ‘coming apart’ of modernity, which can be appreciated in the very cracks and gaps of malfunctioning (*ibid.*: 221). As such, the state of being ‘not reachable’ can offer valuable insights into the contradictory visions and realities of modernity.

Modernity is particularly ambivalent in an African context, a spatiotemporal state of always becoming, of almost belonging. Through mobile infrastructure, modernity is within reach—it can be seen, heard, and held. But through its malfunctioning, “not reachable, please try again later”, it becomes equally palpable that modernity is neither universal nor linear. Not only does mobile infrastructure embody “the possibility of being modern, of having a future, or the foreclosing of that opportunity and a resulting experience of abjection” (Larkin, *op. cit.*: 333), but it also discloses the spatiotemporal ‘partiality’ of modernity in an African context, where digital technology mediates ‘partial inclusion’ in the global network society (Uimonen, 2012). This is not a question of inclusion/exclusion, of either/or, but a matter of partiality, of both/and, or what I have elsewhere described as a ‘state of creolization’, a constant coming together and pulling apart of various cultural fragments, within the structural constraints of global hierarchies and asymmetric power relations (*ibid.*). This is not an alternative form of modernity, but modernity writ large, uncovered and exposed through its very cracks.

### **Predatory capitalism and corporate governance**

Malfunctioning mobile infrastructure offers insights into the workings of global capitalism, especially the neoliberal logic of

self-regulated markets that has framed the so called mobile revolution. Similarly to the impact of structural adjustment programs, the effects of this market-driven paradigm are more visible and profound in the global south, exemplifying how many of the ‘historical tsunamis’ of our times break on the shores of postcolonies in their most palpable, hyperextended form (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006: ix). The very roll-out of mobile infrastructure throughout Africa has been driven by the principles of market liberalization, heralded by policy reformers as the end of state telecom monopolies and the arrival of corporate actors for more efficient service delivery. Statistics showing the remarkable growth in mobile access is often invoked as evidence of market triumph, quantifiable indicators of what is often cast as one of Africa’s success stories.

The extent to which the predatory instincts of mobile operators have been given free reign in Africa is often absent in the celebratory discourse of market success. Here mobile operators have earned faster returns on their investment than elsewhere in the world, while customers pay higher tariffs, despite lower income levels. This voracious extraction of resources is nothing new in Africa; compare for instance mining and trade in raw materials, or poaching of wild animals. If anything, the mobile industry follows historically established forms of exploitative profit making, a form of predatory capitalism that precedes the global spread of neoliberal capitalism, while highlighting its exploitative essence. While mobile operators draw enormous financial benefits from the need to communicate, African customers pay dearly for malfunctioning services. “They take much money but deliver only poor and fitful services in return”, is a common complaint in places like Accra (Quayson, *op. cit.*: 157).

In Africa, mobile operators have become primary suppliers of modernity, thus ensuring the dominance of corporate actors in the process of national development. Through the visual materiality of mobile infrastructure, commercial actors penetrate all aspects of daily life, from physical landscapes to the intimacy of corporeal self

expression. Mobile operators even engage in some public service projects, funded in the name of corporate social responsibility, often in the realm of cultural events and entrepreneurship (cf Shipley, *op. cit.*; Uimonen, 2012). Significantly, mobile operators are not only selling products and services, but they deliver development. For the relatively low price of a mobile handset, ordinary citizens can gain ownership of a valued artefact and subscribe to modern forms of communication. In the absence of other forms of modern infrastructure (e.g. educational institutes, health care facilities, roads and transport systems), mobile infrastructure offers at least a semblance of accomplishment, offering citizens a sense of progress and inclusion.

Corporate leaders are also playing a more active role in governance, as exemplified by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation established in 2006. The Foundation compiles an annual index of African governance and awards a multi-million dollar prize for African leadership<sup>3</sup>. In addition to centring on Mo Ibrahim, founder of Celtel, one of the largest mobile operators in Africa, the Foundation draws on a network of high profile political and corporate actors. Hailed as the Bill Gates of Africa, Mo Ibrahim personifies the entrepreneur-billionaire-philanthropist, a new type of influential actor that is rising to prominence around the world. As detailed in anthropological research on emerging power constellations in the West (Wedel, 2014), this new power elite exerts influence through branding, networks and nonprofit organizations. Operating beyond the bounds of public accountability, these elite power brokers practice an insidious form of corruption that has infiltrated every level of society (*ibid.*).

### **Self-regulated consumers and registered citizens**

Since the rise to prominence of mobile operators coincides with the privatization of the state, mobile infrastructure offers insights into the neoliberal reconfiguration of state functions. In an

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/>

African context, this global trend is particularly visible, along with its historical roots. As Bayart has argued, the privatization of the state, or *politique du ventre*, is not a case of retreat or collapse, but recomposition (2009: xliv). Following the strategies of extraversion that have characterized African state crafting, the neoliberal state merely augments the “hegemonic aspirations of dominant groups” (*ibid.*). If anything, as mobile operators offer a semblance of progress, thus overshadowing the shortcomings of the state apparatus, questions of citizenship are not only depoliticized, but thoroughly commercialized.

With mobile infrastructure citizens are recast as *self-regulated consumers* through prepaid regimes that avert the financial risks of service providers. As noted with regard to prepayment regimes for electricity in South Africa, ‘living prepaid’ is an emerging technopolitical terrain through which the ‘autonomous self-governing citizen’ is crafted through devices that “delink questions of payment and infrastructure from larger claims of citizenship” (Von Schnitzler, 2013: 681). Through mobile telephony, the prepaid logic penetrates ever deeper into society, remodelling citizens as prepaid, self-regulated consumers. In Tanzania, most people use prepaid phone services, only a small elite minority has postpaid subscriptions. Phone vouchers are readily available, often sold by entrepreneurs. Again, there is some urban-rural variation in the amounts sold. In rural and urban poor areas, phone vouchers tend to be around TZS 500-1,000 (EUR 0,22-0,45), while vouchers for TZS 5,000-30,000 (EUR 2,25-13,5) can be bought in more affluent urban areas. The lower denomination vouchers are smaller and often of poor quality, easily broken when scratched, while the more expensive, larger vouchers are decorated with promotional colour images.

Since it is up to the self-regulated customer to manage the cost of being ‘reachable’, low-income users rely on a variety of social strategies to economize their mobile communication. The practice of *beeping* (missed calls) is one such strategy (cf. Archambault, *op. cit.*), usually tied to existing social hierarchies, with less affluent

or junior people ‘beeping’ more affluent or senior people, and women more commonly beeping men. People also minimize costs by having more than one account, thus strategically *switching* between different operators to get the most value for their money. The popularity of mobile phones with dual SIM cards is illustrative of this practice. Strategic use of various *bundles* offered by operators is another way of optimizing airtime, taking advantage of lower costs between specific operators, for certain services or different time slots. People also *transfer* phone credit, which is a common way of managing social relations, including sexual ones, since phone credit is a well-established form of hard currency (cf. Stark, *op. cit.*).

These practices of beeping, bundling, switching and transferring exemplify how individuals rely on social relations to manage their lives as neoliberal consumers. Similarly to what Horst & Miller (2006) observed in the first ethnography of mobile communication, it is the economic value of social networking that makes mobile phones culturally significant among low-income groups, as exemplified by the social practice of Link-Up in Jamaica. Throughout Africa, citizens rely on social relations to manage daily life, family and kin forming important social security nets in the absence of state-run welfare systems and services. By weaving mobile communications into local forms of sociality, low-income users are able to navigate the financial demands of their prepaid consumer lifestyles, their social networking skills compensating for their subordinate position in the neoliberal market place. Consumers are thus creating their own moral economy, to cope with the constraints of self-regulated markets.

While customers rely on their social networks to afford being ‘reachable’, governments make citizens more ‘reachable’ for companies. Since 2010, many African countries have introduced mandatory registration for prepaid mobile users, to “combat crime, to prevent fraud and to support Anti-Money Laundering and the Combating of the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) measures” (Jentzsch, 2012: 2). Although procedures vary, they entail some

form of verified information on personal identity, which in itself can be a challenge, since many lack such documentation. In Tanzania, the registration process is usually done with the assistance of entrepreneurs who sell SIM-cards or in shops or stands managed by operators. Unless a new SIM-card is duly registered, it will be cut off.

Even though mandatory registration is rather toothless in fighting criminal behaviour (*ibid.*), it solidifies the self-regulated market for corporations. Instructive of the ‘dialectics of law and disorder,’ mobile user registration exemplifies how the “judicialization of politics has been mobilized effectively by corporate capitalism to create a deregulated environment conducive to its workings” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006: 19). Since the introduction of mandatory registration, mobile users have been flooded with commercial SMS. Meanwhile, little is done to address more compelling legal issues facilitated by mobile infrastructure, such as fraudulent contracts, tax evasion, or capital flight, let alone poor mobile service delivery.

### **(Infra)structural racism in mundus hierarchicus**

Malfunctioning mobile infrastructure articulates the ontology of ‘mundus hierarchicus’, of how Africa is ranked in relation to the world. It unravels the spatiotemporal ranking of a global hierarchy in which modernity serves as a universal telos (Ferguson, *op. cit.*: 178). For the people at the bottom of this global hierarchy, the promise of modernity has been one of inferiority and subservience: “Wait, have patience; your turn will come” (*ibid.*). Behold the excited buzz in media coverage and scholarly accounts of mobile success: alas, Africa has finally been connected, even leapfrogging development by bypassing landlines. But the reality hidden behind statistical success curves goes largely unnoticed. Except by Africans themselves, who keep hearing the words “The number you are calling is not reachable, please try again later”. What else is new? This is Africa! Try again, later.

By creating a sense of ‘universal commonality’, mobile infrastructure articulates a ‘global hierarchy of value’ that is “perhaps a more subtle kind of globalization than that of company logos” (Herzfeld, *op. cit.*: 3). As evidenced in its global spread, mobile infrastructure holds universal appeal, which in an African context translates into notions of progress and belonging, of being part of the modern world. But this sense of global unity builds upon processes of world domination that date back to colonialism, a significant aspect of which is how “certain places, ideas, and cultural groups appear as marginal to the grand design” (*ibid.*). In the grand design of mobile modernity, Africa is relegated to a subordinate position, malfunctioning mobile infrastructure serving as a reminder of marginalized membership and partial inclusion in the global network society. If anything, mobile infrastructure in Africa brings forth the ontological contradictions of modernity, especially the ‘artificial’ ideal of equality and the ‘deliberate denial’ of hierarchy, in other words a vision of *homo aequalis* as opposed to a reality of *homo hierarchicus* (Dumont, 1980: 20).

It is worth recognizing the racial dimension of global hierarchies, to appreciate the persistence of ‘racialized forms of inequality’ in this era of accelerated globalization (Pierre, *op. cit.*: 9). As much as culture has replaced race as a marker of human difference (*ibid.*: 201), as manifested in the global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld, *op. cit.*), race continues to play a significant role in the structural positioning of Africa. Far from representing a break with the past, mobile infrastructure reproduces, even intensifies, a global system of power in which Africa is valued as a site for resource extraction, while progress is restricted to malfunctioning infrastructure. There is nothing new about this system of racialized inequality. As Wallerstein (1990: 42) emphasized a long time ago, the ideologies of ‘universalism’ and ‘racism-sexism’ form a ‘symbiotic pair’ that helps contain the contradictions of the capitalist world-economy.

Racism reveals yet another crack in the facade of modernity, in this case the manifestation of hierarchy in what Dumont

(*op. cit.*: 237) identifies to be its “covert, shamefaced or pathological forms”. Underlining its function as a principle of unity, Dumont argues that “hierarchy integrates the society by reference to its values” (*ibid.*: 260). By contrast, the organizing principle of Western modernity rests on the ideals of equality, autonomy and freedom. Yet, contrary to the popular notion of a global village, the global ecumene is not a unity of equals (Hannerz, 1996). Quite the contrary, even in its digitally interconnected form, the global network society is highly asymmetrical (Uimonen, 2012). If anything, the historically formed global hierarchy is reified in countless measurements of the so called digital divide, using a new set of indicators for old forms of discrimination, thus legitimizing the unthinkable non-equality of modernity. Enter racism, to gloss over this ontological gap. As Dumont notes, when distinction is made illegitimate, it is replaced with discrimination and racism ideology: “[f]or things to have been otherwise the distinction itself should have been overcome” (*op. cit.*: 262-263). This is why the global expansion of mobile capitalism needs racism to legitimize the supremacy of western modernity, while disguising the hierarchy of ‘not reachable’.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article I have discussed the visual materiality and political economy of mobile infrastructure in Africa, focusing on the structural conditions of being ‘reachable’. I have argued that contrary to the oft cited notion that infrastructure is invisible until it breaks down; the visual materiality of mobile infrastructure is a dominant feature in everyday life, along with infrastructural malfunctioning. The material visibility and malfunctioning of mobile infrastructure offers epistemological insights into the ontological gaps of modernity. Far from constituting an instance of inclusion/exclusion, mobile infrastructure epitomizes the condition of partial inclusion: of almost becoming modern, of almost being part of world society. Embodied in mobile infrastructure, the discrepancy between ideal and reality is instructive of Africa’s

place-in-the-world in the global hierarchy of value. Contrary to the universalist claims of equality and liberty, mobile infrastructure unravels how modernity is structured by historically determined relations of inequality in a global racial hierarchy.

“The number you are calling is not reachable, please try again later” offers epistemological insights into the ontology of mobile infrastructure. Often heralded as Africa’s success story, a critical analysis tells a more nuanced story, unravelling the cracks and contradictions of mobile modernity. In Africa, mobile infrastructure captures the tensions of global relationality, connecting the visions of ‘first class’ modernity with the realities of ‘second class’ malfunctioning. Far from being a case of the culturally distant other, mobile infrastructure in Africa offers a privileged site for anthropological appraisals of what it means to be human in an age of digitally mediated and racially structured global capitalism.

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### Summary

Focusing on infrastructural malfunctioning, this article discusses the visual materiality and political economy of mobile infrastructure in Africa. Building on the anthropology of infrastructure, it argues that contrary to the oft cited notion that infrastructure is invisible until it breaks down, in an African context, systemic breakdowns in infrastructure are taken for granted; they are visibly present, while well functioning infrastructure is visibly absent. The material visibility and malfunctioning of mobile infrastructure are used as departure points for a critical appraisal of what is often celebrated as Africa's mobile success story. Noting how mobile phones are present in most aspects of daily life, functioning like material extensions of the self, the analysis focuses on neoliberal forms of predatory capitalism that recast citizens as self-regulated consumers while advancing corporate forms of governance. Following the call for theory from the south, malfunctioning mobile infrastructure is contextualized as a state of partial inclusion in the global network society, the structural underpinnings of which is interpreted in terms of Africa's place-in-the-world in a racialized global hierarchy.

**Key-words:** infrastructure, mobile, digital, hierarchy, race, global, Africa.

### Résumé

« Ce numéro n'est pas joignable. » Infrastructure mobile et la hiérarchie raciale mondiale en Afrique

En se focalisant sur le dysfonctionnement des infrastructures, cet article traite de la matérialité visuelle et de l'économie politique de l'infrastructure mobile en Afrique. En nous basant sur l'anthropologie de l'infrastructure, nous affirmons que, contrairement à l'idée fréquemment citée selon laquelle l'infrastructure est invisible jusqu'à ce qu'elle tombe en panne, dans un contexte africain, les pannes systémiques des infrastructures sont tenues pour acquises; elles sont visiblement présentes, tandis que les infrastructures qui fonctionnent bien sont visiblement absentes. La visibilité matérielle et le dysfonctionnement de l'infrastructure mobile sont utilisés comme points de départ pour une évaluation critique du développement de la téléphonie mobile en Afrique qui est souvent célébrée comme une *success story*. Notant que les téléphones mobiles sont présents dans la plupart des aspects de la vie quotidienne, fonctionnant comme des extensions matérielles de soi, l'analyse se concentre sur les formes néolibérales du capitalisme prédateur qui transforment les citoyens en

consommateurs autorégulés tout en faisant progresser des formes de gouvernance entrepreneuriales. En se rangeant à l’usage de la théorie venue du sud, le dysfonctionnement de l’infrastructure mobile est contextualisée comme un état d’inclusion partielle dans la société mondiale en réseau, dont les bases structurelles se trouvent dans la place-dans-le-monde de l’Afrique dans une hiérarchie mondiale racialisée.

**Mots-clefs : infrastructure, mobile, numérique, hiérarchie, race, global, Afrique.**

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