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(In)visible BRI

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In infrastructure studies, it has become almost a cliché to say that ‘infrastructure is invisible’, especially when it works as designed. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is primarily a platform dedicated to the construction of infrastructure, yet invisibility is not what first comes to mind. The ribbon-cutting ceremonies, world leader summits, as well as the cautionary headlines and anxieties in the West about China’s rise—all indicate that the BRI is very visible and tangible. There are reasons for this. The hypervisibility of certain infrastructure (bridges are a prime example) is hard-coded into their form, evoking emotional responses as much as enabling circulation. High-speed rail, for instance, is a symbol of the success of Chinese engineering and a powerful marker of modernity, speed, and comfort. Equally, ports, special economic zones, and inland connectivity projects all pledge a future of rapid economic development for the global majority. Infrastructure possesses an ability to link physicality with political effect, producing what Larkin (2013) called a ‘poetics of infrastructure’ or affects that Harvey and Knox (2014) have called ‘enchantments’.

Enchantment, however, blurs our vision. Invisibility suddenly becomes situated. As structural inequalities come into play, some people’s concerns start to matter less than those of others. Expert knowledge and tools become necessary to ‘see’, but some dangers remain so invisible that even their victims refuse to believe in them; radiation dangers after the Chernobyl accident were gradually *made* invisible in Belarus, for example (Kuchinskaya 2014). On the other hand, visibility is also situated and relational. Chinese people and practices can be perceived as foreign or exotic and thus rendered more visible, their actions more deserving of scrutiny. Lastly, visibility can be an entirely desired outcome for an ambitious state such as China that often resorts to the politics of spectacle.

Considering Van Veeren’s (2018) typology of invisibility as a barrier, inexpertness, culture, or something absolute, the BRI’s decade of existence spans these divisions. The BRI is as much a spectacle of development as it is a feature of global capitalism, as much a local politician’s dream as it is a tool in Xi Jinping’s hand. It is at once opaque and omnipresent, but instances of (in)visibility are not scattered at random. Rather, they emerge from the political relations shaped by the many actors involved in the BRI as a platform—a holdall of large projects that lean towards the extractive and the logistical.

Invisibility is tightly linked to transparency or lack thereof. Researchers and commentators consistently remark on the BRI’s notoriously light paper trail, but one common item of documentation is the onerous confidentiality clause (sometimes even mandating secrecy about the very existence of a loan), which started being widely used from 2014 (Gelpert et al. 2022). The BRI, for all its pomp and fanfare, was built on

hundreds of mutual pledges of invisibility that run, like a hidden vein of gold, through the contracting strata that support the infrastructure built on top of them. This invisibility is a barrier to outside scrutiny and results in a skewing of the economic case for (or against) large projects. When the details are unknown, both proponents and opponents of a BRI project tend to paint onto it their worst fears and ignorance. Gelpern et al. (2022), for example, noted how BRI clauses about arbitration and conflict resolution were very controversial among BRI critics, even though they were not at all unusual in comparison with other developmental loans. Taking ‘Chinese’ practices out of a global context made them seem stranger than they were.

Instrumentalised invisibility significantly alters the playing field, often for the benefit of the powerful. If we agree with Flyvbjerg (2009) that ‘survival of the unfittest’ means it is often the worst infrastructure that is built, this becomes very worrying. As he explains, underestimating costs and overestimating benefits is a common strategy to ensure funding, but if a lack of transparency and lack of ‘reality checks’ are also present, the results can be shockingly expensive. For instance, Montenegro’s Bar–Boljare Highway (Grgić 2021)—which cost one-quarter of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and so far only connects the capital city to a sparsely populated mountainous region—should probably never have been built, at least if ‘value for money’ was the goal. Were it not for the sufficient invisibility of costs and contracting on one side, and the overlaid visibility of its technical prowess and promise of speed and modernity on the other, the project would have lived out its life in a drawer. Now, drivers can enjoy a spectacular descent from more than 1,000 metres above sea level to a mere 60 metres altitude in just over 40 kilometres. They can also use the stretch of road to think about the sovereign debt crisis that the country may (again) face (World Bank 2022). Lastly, arriving at Podgorica, we all can think about how this scenic road has become a geopolitical meme about debt traps and corrosive capital (von der Burchard 2021)—a meme made visible by China’s threatening rise. There are so many iterations of (in)visibility that are contingent on constellations of power, structures, norms, and geography that it is impossible to list or categorise them. Rather, we should be attuned to the nuances of visibility, to study when and why certain things are kept safe from view.

Quite often, the ‘Chinese-ness’ of the BRI is not even the main impediment to visibility. In the ‘Upper Horizons’ system of canals and dams in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s karst region, the water was historically invisible or inaccessible owing to the porous limestone geology. Extensive, usually flat-floored depressions known as *polje* are common across the otherwise dry Dinaric karst, with water filling these basins after heavy rain, only to disappear underground through large ‘swallow holes’. In the twentieth century, states started to redirect and collect groundwater flows by plugging the *polje* swallow holes with concrete. This rather heavy-handed way of harnessing underground rivers and complex aquifers was first done in socialist Yugoslavia, resulting in the ‘Lower Horizons’ project. The project then lay dormant as socialism fell and civil war began, but the influx of Chinese developmental capital, with its no-questions-asked approach

(or fewer questions, at least), has revived the Upper Horizons project. To make matters more complex, the project now spans several sovereign borders, as well as the border between the two entities of the fragile Bosnian state. Unlike with sovereign state borders, no cross-border environmental treaty (such as the Espoo Convention) exists between the two entities. The threat to drain an important aquifer of the Bosnian-Croat entity's biggest river, the Neretva, and divert the water to the Serbian side has become a visibly polemical question. The presence of Chinese contractors and lenders gave opponents of the project an added target, given China's reputation for poor environmental standards and lack of transparency, as seen in other BRI projects in the region (Tsimonis et al. 2019). Chinese companies working on the BRI have walked into similar tense situations around the world and their visible 'foreignness' becomes an issue, even when the projects themselves have no strategic gain for China at large or were not Chinese designs.

Perhaps more so in Europe than elsewhere, the arrival of Chinese workers and engineers—and Chinese language on billboards—was highly visible, which environmental activists found to be both a barrier and an opportunity to advance their claims. European institutions have largely been supportive of civil society attempts to disrupt environmentally damaging BRI projects in the region, even though European enterprises and funders received a free pass in the region just years earlier with damaging projects such as the European Investment Bank's funding of Slovenia's Šoštanj Power Plant (EIB 2012). As the lender of last resort for many carbon-intensive projects, China began to suffer reputational damage, which perhaps helps explain Xi Jinping's surprising pledge to stop international coal financing, which was made before the whole world at the United Nations in 2021 (Chen and Shen 2022).

Global China not only arrived on construction sites, it also became a notable topic of research. Moreover, a literature largely developed through fieldwork in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America was then 'imported' to Europe to make sense of what was happening around the world. It is amazing that the influence of China (and the BRI) seems to have broken through some of the Eurocentric barriers that separated the analysis of a dam in Ethiopia from that of one in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It took the arrival of Global China to make visible the commonalities of infrastructural development, the dislocations of globalised capitalism, and the relevance of studying politics on levels from the subterranean to the geopolitical that bind 'developing' and 'developed' countries. The politics of (in)visibility has always been relational and power-based, but rather than seeing it as a tool to apply to cases, it is worthwhile also to question our own understanding of Global China as a field of research. ●