



A COLLABORATIVE WORKSHOP ORGANIZED BY:
THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AT NOVA UNIVERSITY, LISBON
AND THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA

Global Infrastructures: The Production of the Modern World

The concept of “infrastructure” has become so central to contemporary societies that it has become increasingly difficult to specify what the term refers to. Rosalind Williams has described infrastructure as a “highly promiscuous concept” that, since its adoption in English in the late nineteenth century, has constantly taken on new meanings and connotations. Originated in the late nineteenth century, within a fairly restricted circle of French engineers, the term indicated the earth foundation on which the ties, rails and ballast of a railroad rest. Already in the 1955 Merriam-Webster dictionary, “infrastructure” had come to indicate the “underlying foundation or basic framework of an organization or system”. The development of the term is indicative of the rapid multiplication of entwined subterranean systems and networks – including tunnels, aqueducts, gas networks, electrical systems, and telephone cables – that sustain and support modern life. It also suggests both the political role that infrastructures historically play in supporting the “Operations of Capital” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019; see also: Winner 1980, Mann 1984 or Larkin 2008) and a persisting emphasis on the vulnerability of these artifacts: at once persistently crucial for the global value chain and increasingly targeted in recent years by so-called “Circulation Struggles” and new forms of “Riot Logistics” (Clover 2016; Dyer-Witheford, Reyes and Liu 2020).

Infrastructures have been always conceptualized as being at once an invisible *and* fundamental substrate of modern societies: a series of installations that lay below more visible social structures and that enable both biological and social life (Guldi 2010, Easterling 2014, Schindler e Di Carlo 2022, Naqvi 2022). As modern life came to increasingly depend on the construction and maintenance of infrastructural networks, tending to the “national infrastructure” came to be conceived as a quintessential state task at once too critical and too massive to be conceived, implemented, and run by a single corporation. Infrastructure has historically indicated the state-provided, universally-distributed services that sustain the national economy of a sovereign state: water and sewerage, energy, transportation, telecommunication and information exchange.

In recent times, however, the concept of ‘infrastructures’ is going through a further wave of semantic contaminations and expansions. In 2009 Edwards et al. could still affirm that the word infrastructure «often (but not always) connotes big, durable, well-functioning systems and services, from railroads and highways to telephone, electric power, and the Internet» (2009, 365). Today, however, this definition seems excessively restrictive. The concept of infrastructure is now applied to “digital platforms” (van Dijck et al. 2018 – define Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft as «infrastructural platform»). After the pandemic the term spread even more virally, and it has been applied to other fields such as care or education. This proves that “infrastructures” is a dynamic category, which historically grows and mutates according to societal transformations. What persists is the complex set of relations between ‘infrastructures’ and ever-changing ways of governing capitalist societies, a link that we set to interrogate from a critical and political perspective.

From this point of view, there has been an increasing emphasis on the key role played by a series of old and new “global infrastructures”, whose construction is perceived to be at once too critical and too massive to be conceived, implemented, and run by a single state. Global infrastructures traverse national borders and contribute to the formation of new planetary geographies of inclusion and exclusion. Examples abound: global critical infrastructures encompasses anything from the submarine cables that sustain the Internet to global shipping routes, intercontinental canals, satellite telecommunication systems, transnational electric

power grids. These global networks facilitate the material, digital, and capital flows that characterize the globalized economy, and necessitate the interaction of several sovereign states. The rapid expansion of multiple global infrastructures not only fosters new forms of connection, it also sparks global conflicts and rivalries: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, has unleashed a race to construct transnational physical infrastructures in Eurasia and Africa. Meanwhile, major powers are competing to shape the emerging global digital infrastructure. In general terms, we can even conceptualize contemporary capitalism as an «infrastructural capitalism» (Borghi 2021) or a «Global Infrastructural Capitalism» (Ngai and Peier 2022), which is indicative of how essential it is to collective work towards theoretical frameworks and historical analyses of infrastructures both as an abstract concept and as a very material set of entwined industrial artifacts.

In the last twenty years, in correspondence with the growing importance assumed by Global History, numerous studies have analysed past border-crossings and long-established transnational networks. This seminar intends to contribute to the discipline by promoting a collective investigation of the origins and development of global infrastructures, emphasizing how their construction interacted with colonial projects, capitalist ventures, and cultural superstructures.

The workshop will focus on questions such as:

- What global infrastructures have contributed to the construction of the modern world and the establishment of a single world market?
- Which public and private actors have participated to the construction and securing of global infrastructures?
- What ecologies of labour have been mobilized during the erection of global infrastructures?
- What forms of resistance and sabotage have opposed and slowed down the development of planetary infrastructures?
- What has been the impact of climate change and the ecological crisis on global infrastructures?
- How can the concept of infrastructure contribute to expand Marxist theories beyond the traditional distinction of economic structure and cultural superstructure?
- How can historical approaches help us rethink the relation between global infrastructures and imperialism?

We welcome papers dealing with all these aspects from an interdisciplinary perspective. Interested scholars are invited to send a long abstract between 400 and 700 words and a short bio to policante@fcsh.unl.pt and/or to mattia.frapporti2@unibo.it by the 9th of May.

Successful applicants will be communicated by the 12th of May and invited to the final workshop that will take place on the **9th of June 2023** at the University of Bologna in the Department of Arts.

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