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JOINT INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP  
IHC, NOVA UNIVERSITY OF LISBON - UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA

## CALL FOR PAPER

### *Infrastructures of Rent Extraction*

[28th of November, 2025 - University of Bologna]

According to a number of prominent analyses, the contemporary world-market is characterised by “a full-fledged comeback and proliferation of forms of rent” (Vercellone 2010; see also: Harvey 2015, Mezzadra & Neilson 2017, Purcell 2018, Christophers 2020, Standing 2020). This political and economic shift demands granular reflections, and it has stimulated widespread theoretical and political debates.

Building upon classical Marxist critiques of imperialism - which emphasized the role of the imperialist “rentier state” as “a state of parasitic, decaying capitalism” (Lenin 1917) - a number of critics have suggested that the growing centrality of rent-extraction in global cycles of capital accumulation indicates a significant shift in the history of the capitalist mode of production from ‘neoliberalism’ to ‘rentier capitalism’ (Christophers 2020, Sadowski 2020, Birch & Ward 2023; Borg & Policante 2024). The neoliberal market presents itself as an arena of free trade, competition, entrepreneurship, and frictionless mobility. Yet, as these authors emphasize, control over key assets - such as land, intellectual property, natural resources, logistical and digital infrastructure - is increasingly dominated by a restricted number of companies and individuals: rentiers, passively piling up the returns accruing from their ownership of essential conditions of (re)production: land, water, housing, utilities, infrastructures and platforms.

Others (more problematically, from our perspective) have gone as far as suggesting that the growth of rent relations can be interpreted as a shift from capitalism to techno-feudalism (Varoufakis 2023, Durand 2024, Mazzucato 2019, Dean 2025). This narrative stresses that contemporary digital economies are no longer driven primarily by labor exploitation, but by monopolistic control over digital infrastructures and rent extraction. According to this approach, today’s tech giants resemble lords presiding over private infrastructural fiefdoms, continuously extracting value from us captured users. This dynamic is intricately linked to ‘platformisation’, whereby Big Tech firms charge ‘rent’ for providing access to monopolised digital platforms (Sadowski, 2020; Mezzadra et al. 2024).

By controlling different layers of the digital stack, Big Tech companies appear to be increasingly able to extract value from global production chains. GAFAM - and more precisely the Big Three of the Cloud (AWS, Google Cloud Provider and Microsoft Azure) - currently control two thirds of global Cloud capacity. Citizens, private firms, states, and international organizations increasingly rely on their services, renting stock capacity, algorithmic elaboration, and AI functions. Such a position of power is reinforced by their growing control over many of the infrastructures that support the digital - datacenters, submarine fiber cables, power plants etc. How do we make sense of the power of Big Tech, and the growing importance of what we may call imperative “infrastructure rents”, i.e. rent relations that have become increasingly compulsory, inescapable and designed within the very infrastructural fabric of the world market?

Moving away from “presentism” may help us to properly contextualize and historicize this contemporary conjuncture. Current analyses of Big Tech ‘rentierism’, for instance, has pushed many to turn back to classic studies

on “rentier states” and “imperialist rent”. Samir Amin, for instance, focusing on the impact of colonial control over extractive and logistical infrastructures, stressed that “to the extent that monopolies operate in the peripheries of the globalized system, monopoly rent becomes an imperialist rent” (Amin 2019). Similarly, Hazem Beblawi’s classic “The Rentier State in the Arab World” (1987: 383) stressed the emergence of “extraverted states”, whose main lever of power is the control over infrastructures enabling the extraction of rents. In particular, according to Beblawi, “transit countries” such as Egypt have long relied on their control over key global infrastructures - such as ports, railways, oil pipelines, and the Suez Canal - to extract and distribute “external location rent”.

This analysis may provide a point of entry to reflect upon the growing competition to control key “global infrastructures” such as pipelines and ports, power cables and fiber optic networks, transcontinental railways and highways. For instance, Loftus, March and Purcell (2019, 2020) have shown how processes of financialization have enabled “apparently fixed and stable forms such as pipes, water treatment plants, and sewers to be transformed into liquid assets”, opening up new opportunities for rent-extraction. More generally, Ranabir Samaddar (2018: 110) suggests that “the logistical expansion of the city [...] resurrects the rent factor from oblivion in a capitalist economy”; and urgently asks: “What does the revival of the rent question mean for postcolonial accumulation?” These analyses emphasize that global infrastructures play a fundamental role in planetary processes of value-capture and rent-extraction.

**Expanding on these debates, the conference intends to investigate the relation between “global infrastructures” and “practices of rent-extraction”, both historically and in the global present. We welcome contributions that investigate the relation between historical processes of infrastructuralisation, financialisation, and rentierisation of the economy. We are particularly interested in furthering a collective reflection on the ways in which rent relations extend well beyond land markets and shape the global circulation and capture of value across logistical, extractive and digital infrastructures.**

Some possible questions that demand further reflection and analysis may be:

- What is the role played by global infrastructures in enabling practices of rent extraction by transnational corporations as well as national states?
- How is rent extracted in different geographical and historical contexts?
- What forms of labour(s) and knowledge(s) are mobilised in order to extract rents?
- How has the control over key infrastructures enabled the capture of value in colonial and post-colonial context?
- To what extent concepts such as ‘rentier capitalism’ and ‘techno-feudalism’ may further - or hinder - critical understandings of contemporary capitalism?
- How can we understand the relationship between ‘rentier states’, ‘rentier capitalism’ and ‘rentier imperialism’, both historically and in the present moment?
- Who has monopolistic control over key global infrastructures, and what sort of power results from such control?
- What forms of resistance to ‘rent extraction’ have been growing in recent years, from ‘rent strikes’ to cyberpiracy?

We welcome papers dealing with all these aspects from an interdisciplinary perspective. Interested scholars are invited to send an abstract and a short bio to Amedeo Policante [policante@fcsh.unl.pt] and Mattia Frapporti [mattia.frapporti2@unibo.it] by **September 15th, 2025**. The final workshop will take place on **November 28th, 2025**, at the University of Bologna.

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