Politics of Infrastructure: Power, System, Technology
POL.GA.3501.002 -Seminar in Comparative Politics
19 West 4, Room 212

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A nest for contradictions since its emergence during the Neolithic revolution, infrastructure is
timeless but time-bound, man-made but organic, suffocating but breathing, artificial but also
biological, the most and least visible governmental and governmentalizing body in the same
beat. Governing all aspects of our lives, infrastructures are complex systems of systems,
institutions, individuals, behaviors, expectations, states, governments, bureaucracies, policies,
gineers, architects, lifeforms, culture, borders and resources.

Comparative costs of major infrastructure projects (all of them underground and urban infill)
could be a window to a complex array of federal, state and city level debate on politics and
policy making across countries. For example, Second Avenue line in NYC cost a staggering $1.7
billion/km, followed by a $1.3 b/km 7 Line Extension in an unusually sparse area in NYC.
Priced at $1 b/km Crossrail London is the closest in cost but the most complex of the three given
London’s already existing subway lines. Compare these to Berlin ($250 m/km), Milan ($110
m/km), Istanbul ($400 m/km), Tokyo ($280 m/km), Paris ($230 m/km). Is the difference based
solely on real estate value, degree of NIMBYism, corruption, age of the urban landscape and
seismic vulnerability or are there other factors that need to be accounted for?

This example alone illustrates that, infrastructures’ tentacles touch almost all aspects of political
science. The question of “Who is going to build what, when, how?” is central to state theories,
politics of property ownership and taxation, wealth accumulation,
health/education/environmental policies, racial segregation, resource allocation, redistribution,
regulation/deregulation, sustainability, interstate/intrastate politics, city/state politics, global
politics, resource sharing / border politics and indivisibility issues among others. The
maintenance, construction of infrastructure or its failures can make or break governments,
sustain otherwise corrupt political elite and authoritarian regimes, may facilitate or curb citizen
participation, and as we have seen in the recent net neutrality debates, traditional as well as
non-traditional highways and infrastructures may empower or emasculate the once revered,
 somewhat powerful citizen. The quality and proper maintenance of infrastructure directly impact
our lives and as New Yorkers we are all too familiar with it with MTA malfunctions, blackouts,
Combined Sewer Overflows, etc. At a national scale, American Society for Civil Engineers
raised US’s overall infrastructure grade from D (2013) to D+ (2017), aging infrastructure still
“remains a drag on the national economy, and, costs every American family $3400 a year.” (ASCE, 2017)

The Politics of Infrastructure is a graduate level introductory reading seminar aiming to familiarize the students with a broad range of issues stemming from the organization, construction and governance of traditional as well as non-traditional infrastructures. Since the class will be taught by a political scientist and an architect/environmental psychologist, it will be a collection of curated readings ranging from classical sociological/political thought to new technologies and environmental sustainability and resiliency. There will be a sociological, a political/ politico-economic, an architectural/technological and an environmental module.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the class students are expected to choose a case study that will address a variety of ideas covered in class readings and discussions. There are several salient cases such as Flint and other water crises, overall infrastructure failure in the aftermaths of Katrina (New Orleans), Sandy (Eastern seaboard), Maria (Puerto Rico) or the New York City/MTA, New Jersey/PATH, however students are also expected to come up with innovative paper ideas covering other aspects of aging infrastructure failures or problems in new infrastructure financing and debates surrounding these. All paper topics should be approved by the instructors.

REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to attend each class and to read the syllabus selections assigned for each class session ON TIME since the lectures will serve merely as outlines for the readings -On time means before class. Students are also responsible for ALL readings on the syllabus, regardless of whether or not we cover all of the assigned readings. If you miss class, YOU are responsible for finding out what you missed, including handouts, announcements, etc.

Students will have to turn in weekly assignments (15 %) and present the class readings (20 %) and respond to class readings (15 %). Students will have to submit a paper topic by the end of the third week of the classes, and submit a term paper (50 %) no later than two weeks after the end of Summer Session 1.
Week One – The City as Living Organism –Issues at Stake

Tuesday, May 28th, 2019

Introduction to Class


Suggested:
Durkheim, E (1883). Division of Labor in Society.

Thursday, May 30th, 2019

The Art of Governing W/Out Governing. 
Quo Vadis America?

Bentham, Panopticon Writings. (Selections)

Thomas Lemke, “‘The Birth of Bio-Politics’: Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality.” Economy and Society, 30 no. 2 (May 2001): 190–207 ( @ Google Drive)

ASCE 2017 Infrastructure Report Card Full Report (check NYU Classes)

ASCE 2017 Infrastructure Report Executive Summary (check NYU Classes)


Week Two  
Tuesday, June 4th, 2019

James Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (Yale University Press 1998), introduction, chapter 1 & 2, p. 1-84. (NYU Classes)


Shared Resources – Social Goods – Regime Types

Thursday, June 6th, 2019

Sparrow, Novak, Sawyer. Boundaries of the State in US History. ch. 1 (21-56), ch. 3 (79-100), ch. 5 (127-151), ch 7 (183-208)


Week Three - Economy, Development & Democracy

Tuesday, June 11th, 2019


Timothy Mitchell, Carbon Democracy, ch. 1 (12-42), ch. 5 (109-143), ch. 8 (200-230)
Thursday, June 13th, 2019

Resources, Infrastructure Development and Corruption

Ehrenhalt, Alan. The Paradox of Corrupt Yet Effective Leadership

Infrastructure for Whom? Corruption Risks in Infrastructure Provision Across Europe

Flint- Michigan


Health & Welfare Industries

Death by a Thousand Clicks: Where Electronic Health Records Went Wrong

Deloitte again in cross fire, this time in R.I.
https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2017/01/12/deloitte-again-crossfire-this-time/xdKf74pE8g0UMi1rtNxNVK/story.html

How A Government Computer Glitch Forced Thousands Of Families To Go Hungry
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/food-stamp-delays-north-carolina_n_4994822
Reading on New Orleans and Corruption (TBD)

Suggested:


Tuesday, June 18th, 2019
Infrastructure Crisis in the USA, What Is to be Done?

(video) America Betrayed
https://search-alexanderstreet-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1797245?utm_source=aspresolver&utm_medium=MARC&utm_campaign=AlexanderStreet

Morrish, W. R. After the Storm: Rebuilding Cities upon a Reflexive Urban Landscape. Accessed on April 8th, 2019 (20pp) PDF @ NYU Classes
http://designpracticesandparadigms.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/wk4_dpp_morrish.pdf


Thursday, June 20th, 2019
Non-Traditional Infrastructures, Citizen Activism, Political (Im)Possibilities

Frischmann, Brett M., Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources. 227-316


Tuesday, June 25th, 2019
Big data and Citizenship

(Video) Big Data Foundations: Techniques and Concepts, by Barton Poulson

Frischmann, Brett M., Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources. 317-364

Inside China’s Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras

Chinese Interests Take a Big Seat at the AI Governance Table

China’s Orwellian Social Credit Score Isn’t Real (PDF NYU classes)

Will Democracy Survive Big Data and Artificial Intelligence? (PDF NYU classes)

Who needs democracy when you have data?
https://www.technologyreview.com/s/611815/who-needs-democracy-when-you-have-data/

Big Data and Democracy: Facts and Values https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651700107X

Thursday, June 27th, 2019
Smart Cities, Autonomous Vehicles, Internet of Things (IoT) Architectures

https://www.bbhub.io/dotorg/sites/2/2017/05/TamingtheAutonomousVehicleSpreadsPDF.pdf (43 pp)


What is the IoT? https://www.zdnet.com/article/what-is-the-internet-of-things-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-iot-right-now/ (PDF @ NYU classes)


**Monday July 2nd, 2019**

**The Future of Infrastructure: Climate Change and Beyond**


Wrap up, student presentations