

Infrastructural and urban transformations: Theoretical and methodological approaches

Daniel Florentin and Leonardo Ramondetti

Presentation

A number of scholars within the social sciences have remarked that we are in the midst of both an ‘infrastructural moment’ — with massive symbolic and financial investment in, especially, energy, digital and transport infrastructures — and an ‘infrastructural turn’ — with a growing and increasingly diverse use of the notion in various research areas. Indeed, infrastructures have been at the forefront of major, and interrelated transformations for several decades, from the intensification of global environmental changes (such as climate change) and responses to these changes to the ongoing, multifaceted ‘digital transition’, through accelerated processes of urbanization, and increased economic and metabolic globalizations. This context has fuelled a renewed interest in infrastructures in public and academic debates.

This seminar reflects and builds on this context: it first offers the PhD candidates an overview on the current debate in infrastructure studies, and discuss some of the methods adopted by scholars to investigate and problematise infrastructure development.

After an introductory lecture, the subsequent seminars will be organised as follows: a one-hour lecture on a specific methodology from a scholar who adopted it in previous research, followed by a one-hour collective discussion. For preparing the collective discussions, PhD candidates will be asked to read a given paper in advance on the topic. Finally, a final workshop will be organised for participants to discuss the applicability and challenges of infrastructural methodologies to their research.

Ph.Ds. who intend to participate please inform the organisers by April 7 by sending an email to: leonardo.ramondetti@polito.it, daniel.florentin@minesparis.psl.eu

Program Outline (up to 15 h Hard Skill)

Seminar 1 – The extension (and limitations) of the infrastructural realm: shall we call everything an infrastructure? (3h)

Lecturers: Daniel Florentin and Leonardo Ramondetti

Data: April 15th, 2.30-5.30 pm

Location: Sala Vigliano, Castello del Valentino

The first lecture will frame the interest on contemporary infrastructural development, providing PhD candidates with an overview of the current debates in urban studies, the diversification and heuristics of the uses of infrastructures in academic debates to study urban and territorial questions .

Seminar 2 – Attention to the unspectacular – The interest of maintenance-centred approaches (2h)

Lecturer: Daniel Florentin

Data: April 17th, 2.30-4.30 pm

Location: Sala Vigliano, Castello del Valentino

In this second lecture, models of infrastructure development will be questioned, also through the processes of

infrastructural change and the place of innovation in these processes. As opposed to a long tradition of scholarship focused on infrastructure development, the lecture will expose the PhD candidates to the interest of considering the non-spectacular phases of infrastructure exploitation, and the new research questions opened by a maintenance-oriented approach.

PhDs will be divided into two groups, and each will be asked to read one of the following articles in advance and arrange a collective discussion:

- 1) Denis, J. and Pontille, D. (2022) 'Before Breakdown, After Repair: The Art of Maintenance', in Mica, A., Pawlak, M., Horolets, A. and Kubicki, P. (eds.), *International Handbook on Failure: Critical Perspectives from Sociology and Other Social Sciences*. London: Routledge, pp. 209-222.
- 2) Sovacool, B., Lovell, K., and Ting, M.B. (2018) 'Reconfiguration, Contestation, and Decline: Conceptualizing Mature Large Technical Systems', *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 43(6), pp.1066-1097.

Seminar 3 – Investigating infrastructural space through critical cartographies (2h)

Lecturer: Leonardo Ramondetti

Data: April 22nd, 2.30-4.30 pm

Location: Sala Astengo, Castello del Valentino

The third lesson by Leonardo Ramondetti will discuss how to research complex infrastructure networks using critical cartography. PhD will be introduced to the theory and use of critical cartography as a speculative and artistic practice for problematising the spatialisation of policies, financial interests, and trade flows; and developing counter-narratives.

After the lecture, PhDs will be divided into two groups, and each will be asked to read one of the following articles in advance and arrange a collective discussion:

- 1) Ramondetti, L. (2024). Untangling infrastructure networks through critical cartographies: The port of Trieste, Italy. *Annals of American Association of Geographers*, in press.
- 2) Murton, G. (2021). Power of blank spaces: A critical cartography of China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 62(3), 274–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12318>

Seminar 4 – Ethnographies of infrastructure and infrastructures of ethnography

Lecturer: Andrea Pollio

Data: April 26th, 2.30-4.30 pm

Location: Sala Vigliano, Castello del Valentino

Lesson 4 will be held by Dr Andrea Pollio and will delve into ethnographic approaches to the study of infrastructure, with a specific focus on the study of digital infrastructure. The session will be organized around two sets of reflections: first: how and to what end can infrastructural expertise become an entry point for understanding infrastructure? And second, what are the infrastructures that make ethnographic encounters possible in the first place? In answering these questions, students will work on defining strategies for accessing infrastructure through technocratic power.

PhDs will be divided into three groups, and each will be asked to read one of the following articles in advance and arrange a collective discussion:

- 1) Seaver, N. (2017). Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems. *Big data & society*, 4(2), 2053951717738104.
- 2) Pollio, A. (2021). Uber, airports, and labour at the infrastructural interfaces of platform urbanism. *Geoforum*, 118, 47-55.
- 3) Günel, G., & Watanabe, C. (2023). *Patchwork ethnography*. American Ethnologist.

Seminar 5 – Final Workshop (6h)

Discussant: Daniel Florentin and Leonardo Ramondetti

External discussant: Olivier Coutard (tbc)

Data: April 29th, 9.30-12.30 am – 2.00-5.00pm

Location: Sala Vigliano, Castello del Valentino

PhDs will be asked to present and discuss their research, and the methodology adopted to investigate their subjects.

The aim is twofold:

- 1) To understand how the infrastructural lenses and the methods discussed in the previous lessons could be of help in PhD's research;
- 2) To open up the dialogue between methods in researching infrastructures and other topics and approaches.