‘The social and political life of Latin American infrastructure: meanings, values, and competing visions of the future’

9.30-10: Registration and welcome

10-11.30: Panel 1: Infrastructures of nation-building


Yuri Gama (University of Massachusetts Amherst). Politics in the Americas and the State-Sponsored Housing in the Northeast Brazil: Unveiling Visions of Modernization and Hope in the City of Natal.

Diego Valdivieso Sierpe (University of Manchester). Dreams about an anchored state

Chair: Miranda Sheild Johansson (UCL)

11.30-11.50: Coffee break

11.50-13.20: Panel 2: Meanings, ontologies and contested futures

Ursula Balderson (University of Cambridge). Water Storage Reservoirs in Mataquita: Clashing Measurements and Meanings.

Julie Dayot (University of Oxford). ‘They want to change us by charging us’

Sam Rumé (University of Manchester). The contradictions of sustainability: Discourse, planning and the tramway in Cuenca, Ecuador

Chair: Jonathan Alderman (ILAS)

13.20-14.20: Lunch

14.20-15.50: Panel 3: Whose infrastructure is it anyway?

Clara Voyvodic (University of Oxford). Infrastructure Development and Mediated Stateness: State, non-state armed group, and local community interactions in Colombia

Nicolás Valenzuela-Levi (University of Cambridge). Bottom-up innovation as resistance, and top-down resistance to innovation: the case of internet and waste management in La Pintana, Santiago de Chile

Valeria Guarneros-Meza (De Montfort University). Infrastructure as a means of exploring governance and policy in Mexico

Chair: Patrick O’Hare (University of Manchester)

15.50-16.10: Coffee break

16.10-17.00: Round table discussion and future plans
Abstracts:

Maggie Bolton (University of Aberdeen)


The rusting locomotives in Uyuni’s Cementerio de Trenes bear witness to British involvement in South America in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in mining and the construction of infrastructure. Often, indeed, the two went hand in hand. This was the era in Bolivia of the transition from silver to tin mining and the rise of new entrepreneurs. It was also a time of nation-building, political upheaval and of road and railway construction.

This paper examines the intersection of nation-building and infrastructural projects with the foreign possession of some of Bolivia’s most profitable mines. I approach the issue through an archival ethnography, examining the lives of two Aberdeenshire families, the Pennys and the Duncans, owners of mines in Oruro department. Their activities can be traced through archival documents, fragments of their writing, family recollections and an extensive collection of photographs bequeathed by James Duncan’s family to the University of Aberdeen. Duncan’s photographs span a period from the 1890s to the 1920s, and demonstrate an unrelenting drive toward modernisation in mining infrastructure and technology. The photographs also document the mining workforce, material engagements between modernisers, modes of transport and the Andean landscape and changes in the sorts of knowledge and expertise valued and mobilised to extract, process and transport minerals from Bolivian mines.

Yuri Gama (University of Massachusetts Amherst)

“Politics in the Americas and the State-Sponsored Housing in the Northeast Brazil: Unveiling Visions of Modernization and Hope in the City of Natal.”

This paper examines the politics and ideology behind the construction of affordable housing in the Northeastern capital of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte - Brazil. Through a detailed analysis of the role of the state in providing affordable housing, this paper discusses concepts of modernization, and nation-building presenting the influence of the United States in Brazil, developmental regional differences, and the transnational character of mass housing construction in Latin America. In order to unveil this discussion, I rely on local, national, and international sources related to the Alliance for Progress, diplomats’ letters, newspapers, maps, planned neighborhoods data, government reports. My research understands that state-sponsored housing construction inserted Natal in the discussion of the Latin American city as a social construct aggressively urbanized between 1950 and 1980; mainly discussed by Adrian Gorelik. Moreover, housing construction served to help elect and keep in power regional politicians; to solve unemployment and migration issues; as an attempt of reshaping society and citizenship, and to jumpstart modernity; and as capitalist propaganda against communism during the Cold War. In Brazil imaginaries of modernization have been connected to contestations over the power to provide public goods, this paper investigates the domestic and foreign urban developments conceptualized and implemented in Brazil in order to understand how communities such as Cidade da Esperança in Natal literally grew as sites of competing visions of future and hope.
Ursula Balderson (University of Cambridge)

"Water Storage Reservoirs in Mataquita: Clashing Measurements and Meanings"

This paper draws on data collected during observations of a dialogue table that took place between a large multinational gold mine and small community whose water resources had been affected. The outcome of the dialogue table was a plan to construct a number of water storage reservoirs which would allow water collected during the rainy season to be used during the drier part of the year. These longed-for infrastructures were made up of expectations, government norms, contested calculations and expertise as well as being a locally significant experiment in water policy. Perhaps most importantly their materiality was a tangible outcome of the conflict which showed the community were valued citizens who were worthy of respect. My paper will also discuss the extended wrangling process that took place to determine the number and size of water storage reservoirs that needed to be built. This wrangling revealed that a particular ontology of water and a particular epistemology of knowing about water were shaping the infrastructure interventions in the village. During the dispute different ways of knowing scarcity jostled for precedence although eventually it was the immutable qualities of supposedly impartial calculations which won out. Interestingly, the intersection of mine and community lifeworlds had produced shared understandings of the value of technical expertise and formal documentation which the community used to try to hold the mine to account. Although these strategies were also complemented more embodied forms of knowledge that emerged from their lived experience of water scarcity in the village.

Julie Dayot (University of Oxford)

‘They want to change us by charging us’

The paper focuses on an ongoing conflict between the municipality and the inhabitants of Samona, revolving around the monthly payment which comes with the provision of drinking water to their community.

While the drinking water plant is perceived by the inhabitants as both necessary (due to the pollution of the river) and desired (promise of 'salir adelante'), they refuse to pay for the water – which they consider is a right and should be free. What seems to be a clash of worldviews is reframed, as the conflict unfolds, as a technical issue (lack of steady income), which will be ‘solved’ by the provision of jobs – by the same oil company – to the inhabitants and result in the weakening of an already weakened subsistence economy. As such, the conflict not only epistomizes the struggles of indigenous people in the face of modern development projects; but illustrates the inevitability of their incorporation, despite these struggles.

Two arguments follow. While there is no reason to assume that indigenous people will necessarily fight for their ‘cultural difference’ when faced with a dilemma between ‘difference’ and ‘equality’; the recognition of their ‘mixed values’ and ‘multiple worldviews’ should neither prevent nor obscure a critical analysis of the struggles inherent in such decisions; and of the consequences they have on peoples, territories and ‘culture’, but also and crucially on sustainable livelihoods which, if considered seriously rather than being constantly framed in antagonism with development, would surely represent a crucial input towards the design of sustainable alternatives to the modern development project – an arguably urgent task in the face of the 21st century’s ecological crisis.
Clara Voyvodic (University of Oxford)

Infrastructure Development and Mediated Stateness: State, non-state armed group, and local community interactions in Colombia

In conflict areas, infrastructure is often cited as one of the main reasons for isolation and lack of state presence. As a result, infrastructure interventions seek to re-impose the presence of the state in territories where it has been historically absent. However, these territories are not vacuums of order, and infrastructure interventions by the state must contend with existing informal governance actors. In Colombia, these actors may include non-state armed groups (NSAG) such as guerrilla, paramilitary, criminal, and composites of the three. This paper examines how infrastructure projects in conflict regions in Colombia, particularly roads seeking to promote economic growth, confronts and negotiates the authority of NSAG. Drawing from extensive field research within the last year in the departments of Antioquia and Nariño, including interviews, field observations, and other primary sources, this paper outlines how the state and NSAG adjust to the other’s presence and authority when the communities themselves seek the construction of the project. This paper examines how locally-desired infrastructure is built in areas of contested statehood through state-NSAG relations, community-NSAG relations, and state-community relations. The responsiveness by the state and NSAGs to community needs shapes the security experiences around construction of infrastructure projects. Drawing from work on mediated stateness, this research interrogates how the state and NSAG find ways to coexist in order to carry out much needed development work in marginalised spaces without deepening insecurity of the local communities and how communities themselves negotiate their desire for infrastructure with their own safety.

Sam Rumé (University of Manchester)

The contradictions of sustainability: Discourse, planning and the tramway in Cuenca, Ecuador

In 2013, the city of Cuenca initiated the construction of a tramway, a project that was presented by the then mayor as the solution to the increasing traffic in the city. Its proponents, furthermore, praised the tram as a system that would make Cuenca a more modern, sustainable, orderly and inclusive city. Depicted as a revolutionary technology in the Latin American context, the tram’s promises stimulated the diverse aspirations of many city dwellers. However, the construction process of the tram, during which I conducted my fieldwork, curbed these aspirations and revealed the inconsistencies of the project. Delays and paralysations of the construction, obstruction of people’s mobility and political fights characterised this period. The tramway thus started off as an incomplete, unadjusted object requiring the collaboration of a wide range of often unanticipated actors in order to fulfill its promise of sustainability, or even of becoming an infrastructure. The very notion of sustainability, ubiquitous in today’s planning discourse, thereby turns out to mean quite different things for different people, covering environmental, social and economic goals. This paper analyses the ambiguities of sustainable planning in Cuenca and describes the complex relationship between planning and infrastructures. It challenges the common idea of planning as an ordering technique of an unpredictable social realm, showing the vagaries of the former and the ordering techniques developed by the latter.

Nicolás Valenzuela-Levi (University of Cambridge)
Bottom-up innovation as resistance, and top-down resistance to innovation: the case of internet and waste management in La Pintana, Santiago de Chile

Chile has been acknowledged as one of the first and most radical neoliberal experiments (Harvey, 2005). The privatisation of the telecommunications sector, as well as fragmentation of local governments and devolution of services to municipalities, were part of a vision first implemented during the Dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) and later continued by democratically elected governments. Along with neoliberal policies, the military junta also implemented forced displacement of slum dwellers from wealthy areas, to create new neighbourhoods in which the poor were concentrated, deprived from their previous livelihoods and social ties. In Santiago, the capital, La Pintana was the most emblematic case of forced displacement and later reinforcement of segregation via building of social housing in cheap distant land, next to gravel pits and landfills. It reminds one of the poorest municipalities in the country, and is affected by lack of resources and redlining from privatised services. However, in this context, local innovations have emerged to resist exclusion. Using interviews to key actors from the waste management and telecommunications sector, this paper examines how local entrepreneurs have started to provide internet to those excluded by redlining, and how the municipality implemented the first and most extended municipal composting service in Santiago. It also illustrates the vulnerability of these innovations and how the power of public utility oligopolies is resisting them. The paper aims to use a political economy framework to explain institutional factors that produce both the conditions for these innovations, and the attempts to limit their emergence.

Valeria Guarneros-Meza (De Montfort University)

Infrastructure as a means of exploring governance and policy in Mexico

By building upon debates on urban geography and public policy, the paper will explore how infrastructures, related directly (tailings dam) or indirectly (roads, logistics) to mining, work as a means for defining governance and policy of place. Using two Mexican case studies, from qualitative data collected in 2018, the paper will analyse how mining infrastructures contrast between southern, indigenous communities in Oaxaca and northern, non-indigenous communities in Sonora. By acknowledging the role of social mobilisations in revealing normative assumptions underpinning the operation of power and governance, and thus the insertion of infrastructure into place, the paper will argue that mining infrastructures bring into question the role of government authorities (local, state and national), especially their organisation, the procedures and regulation followed, planning and policy-making practices (Addie and Keil, 2015; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Coutard and Rutherford, 2016). A particular emphasis will be given to the political challenges that local tier of government have over how and whether to begin to get ‘organisationally’ ready to align their policies to the processes that national agencies require (driven by development discourses) as opposed to getting ‘organisationally’ ready to contest the higher tier based on their constituency’s views.

Diego Valdivieso Sierpe (University of Manchester)

Dreams about an anchored state

Quehui Island, one of the more than 40 islands that form the Archipelago of Chiloé in the south of Chile, it is only reachable by motorboats. This particular type of technology of mobility enables the
mobility of field-level officials implementing public policies and social programmes on the island. Likewise, allows the trip to Castro (the capital of the province and where the majority of the state bureaus are based) of those islanders who need to sort out bureaucratic procedures and paperwork required by some state or local government departments in order to gain access to, or remain in, the different welfare programmes. In order to face the inconveniences that this dependence on the motorboats generates, the local government of Castro started the construction of a Delegación Municipal (Municipal Delegation) on the island.

Drawing on the anthropology of the state, anthropology of affects, and infrastructure and mobility studies this paper seeks to answer how the construction of this public building allows the emergence of affective registers which express a longing for an anchored state. As a public infrastructure intervention this construction enables the circulation of narratives of desire and distrust informed by situational configurations and historic relations, and also a deeper reflection on the symbolical representations of the state assembled by, on the one hand, the past and current mediation of motorboats and, on the other, the dream about an anchored state.