Frail Modernities: Latin American infrastructures between repair and ruination

Deadline for abstracts: July 31, 2018

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Description:

Common sense tells us that infrastructures are important, if possibly boring, parts of daily life. Most are seemingly built to blend into the background, being "designed to become invisible as [they are] stabilized" (Lampland & Star, 2009, p. 207). However, a growing amount of STS case studies have shown that infrastructures never become completely stabilized, or even invisible, in the first place. Instead of being perfectly immutable devices, infrastructures are shown to be highly paradoxical things—malleable, yet rigid; future-oriented, yet bound to their context of creation (Edwards 2003; Graham 2010; Howe et al. 2016; Jackson et al. 2007).

In Latin America, the social study of infrastructures has also recently grown. Taking a predominantly genealogical approach, most studies tend to focus on the connections among the construction of infrastructures, such as roads and dams, and joint processes of State formation and modernization (Harvey and Knox 2015; Hetherington and Campbell 2014; Rodgers 2012, Silva Barbosa 2011). In many cases, new infrastructures appear as the most prominent embodiment of "modern" entities. Especially when deployed in contexts lacking any kind of regular connectivity, infrastructures tend to be described as the ultimate form of "politics by other means" (Latour 1993), imposing particular kinds of order and rationalization upon worlds that exist beyond such categories.

However, beyond few exceptions (Gordillo 2011, 2014), there is one key aspect that has escaped most social analyses of infrastructures in the region: their *decay*. From (and prior to) their inauguration day, infrastructures are exposed to a constant process of decay and deterioration. Especially in institutional contexts characterized by low public budgets and political turmoil, constant decay is one of the key, yet often unseen, characteristic of Latin American infrastructures.

Such constant decay should point social studies of infrastructures in the region towards two interrelated concepts: repair/maintenance and ruination. Repair/maintenance is related to the ongoing labor process undertaken to ensure the continuous functioning of these large systems to varying degrees of success, not only 'mechanically', but also socially (Graham and Thrift 2007; Henke 2000, 2007; Jackson 2013; Ureta 2014; Denis and Pontille 2013). What most of these analyzes show is that, beyond being merely processes of conservation, repair/maintenance also tend to be creative, pointing to potential interventions for "improvement, innovation, even growth" in infrastructures (Graham and

Thrift 2007, p. 6). Such interventions thereby increase the chances that infrastructures are kept in functioning order despite contexts crisscrossed by multiple forms of decay.

However, there are many instances in which repair proves to be only temporary. In such cases, infrastructural decay rapidly becomes ruination, replacing promises of improvement with "a ghostly world of decaying modern debris" (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014, p. 1). As an active concept, ruination does not only concern the status of infrastructures as ruins, but also explores the multiple side-effects of terminal decay—from unseen environmental pollution to memories of a promised future that never fully materialized. Ruination aims to show the "conceptual limitations of modernization" (Yarrow 2017, p. 568). With acute sensitivity, ruination points to the places where processes of infrastructural modernization, usually dependent on Northern ideals, have fallen apart in colonized contexts (Stoler 2008; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013; Yarrow 2017; Dawdy 2010; De Cock and O'Doherty 2017).

Through a joint focus on processes of infrastructural repair and ruination, this special issue aims to explore the seemingly "dark side" of Latin American infrastructures, when promises of modernity turn sour and breakdown and obsolesce replace functionality. This issue aims to open up this field in Latin America, questioning how infrastructures, developed and often discussed using frames imported from the Global North, might be better thought to deal with contexts characterized by acute infrastructural decay. Through this, we aim to center the study of infrastructuration as a form of nation (un)building and thus how repair/maintenance and ruination processes fit into infrastructures, making them more-than-visible things with significant, but fragile, power.

Potential themes:

- Explorations on the role of decay, repair and ruination on infrastructuration processes.
- In-depth analyses of practices of repair, care and maintenance of decaying infrastructures.
- Accounts of daily experiences with, and adaptation to, decaying infrastructures.
- Historical accounts on processes of infrastructural abandonment and ruination in the context of national development projects
- Analyses on the rediscovery and resignification of ruined infrastructures (as monuments, sources of pollution, touristic sights, etc.).
- Discussions on decaying/ruined infrastructures resulting from the importation of Northern projects to Southern contexts.
- Theoretical explorations on alternative futures for decaying and ruined infrastructures in Latin America.

Finally, it is important to note that for infrastructures we will understand material ensembles of various scales, from large sociotechnical systems such as highways or sanitation systems to bounded entities such as hospitals or scientific labs. Such infrastructures, hence, could also be limited to specific locations or extend transnationally, even globally.

Practical information

Your proposal should consist of an abstract (ca. 300 words) and a brief biographical note (ca. 100 words). Please submit abstracts to Raquel Velho (velhor@rpi.edu) and Sebastian Ureta (sureta@uahurtado.cl) by July 31, 2018 with the subject "Frail Modernities." We will also accept proposals for photo essays. If accepted, full 8000-word drafts would be due December 31, 2018. This thematic cluster is planned to be published during the first half of 2019.

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