

CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS IN GLOBAL POLITICS: ENGINEERING FUTURES BY MOBILIZING THE PAST

Jan Bachmann (University of Gothenburg), jan.bachmann@gu.se;
Jutta Bakonyi (Durham University), jutta.bakonyi@durham.ac.uk

Connectivity projects, both material and discursive, visibly shape global politics today. Roads, trains, ports, electricity, and communication networks, investments in cultural exchange and ‘people-to-people’ solidarity are tying together regions across the global South and promise to level the playing field in global politics writ large. A growing body of research explores the political character of such infrastructure investments. In International Relations, scholars mainly attend to the geostrategic aspects of mega-projects. However, aspirations to project infrastructural power have also been expressed in cultural and ‘civilizational’ terms. For instance, the EU has long entertained the image as civilian power, a self-attribution reanimated in its recent Global Gateway Initiative. In its rollout of the Belt and Roads Initiative, the Chinese government invokes the Silk Road as a space of pre-modern globalization. By investing significantly in arts and museums spaces, Saudi Arabia and the UAE stake their claims on a specific notion of Islamic heritage in the wider region. Furthermore, much of Turkey’s newer engagement with actors in East Africa are saddened with references to both joint Islamic bonds and the civilizational power of the Ottoman Empire.

The above are just illustrations of a broader dynamic observable in contemporary connectivity ventures. While infrastructures are rearranging interconnectivity, they are also drawing-up new boundaries: Projecting futures in international collaboration is imbued with notions of the past: be it that infrastructures are depicted as crucial for moving away from a problematic past such as colonial domination or underdevelopment; appealing to the solidarity of the previously colonized and exploited; or invoking prior greatness to legitimize expanded collaboration.

This workshop aims at shedding light on the ways in which reference to joint pasts or cultural bonds are invoked. It seeks to link scholarship on geopolitical and geo-economic power, with those working on geocultural and heritage dimensions of connectivity ventures. While these literatures diverge regarding scope, intent, theoretical and methodological orientations, they address discursive, symbolic and material aspects that underpin international collaborations on infrastructure. Bringing them into a conversation will add to the understanding of contemporary contestations and ambition emerging around infrastructural projects and aligned processes of planetary engineering and ordering.

We welcome both conceptual and empirical contributions that explore how political, economic and ideational aspects are mobilized and challenged in contemporary connectivity projects.

Questions may include, but are not limited to:

- How can we theorize the interplay between material and symbolic dimensions of international connectivity projects?
- What narratives and imaginaries do old and aspirational powers deploy when engaging in these projects?
- In what ways do these narratives align with other geostrategic considerations?
- What futures are designed and underpinned by what kind of pasts?
- How is space scaled, described and its future imagined in connectivity initiatives?
- In what societal arenas are the different geo-narratives formulated?
- Are these narratives widely accepted or challenged, and if so by whom and how?