

THE URBAN POLITICS OF INFRA-DENSITY

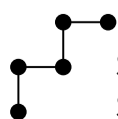
14.12. COLLOQUIUM 14-19:00
15.12. WORKSHOP 9-11:30

SOKU
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO NEW POPULISM



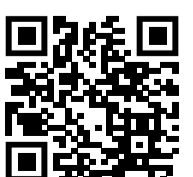
University of
Zurich^{UZH}



SPONSOR:

Swiss National
Science Foundation

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH



PROGRAM

Urban density has been catalysing authoritarian, populist and other modes of urban politics in our urban now-here. We have been witnessing not only the target of population control (23 million) in the urban master plan of Beijing that has been inducing large-scale demolition and displacement, but also the stubborn slogan of the SVP, which just got overwhelming victory in Swiss elections, that claims “Keine 10-Millionen-Schweiz!” With these observations, we may wonder: how is urban density politicised and with what discursive and material mechanisms at work? What are the roles of urban infrastructures in enabling, sustaining and intensifying such political dynamics? How are these urban dynamics in turn associated with other political agendas of authoritarian, (new) populist and other regimes on the one hand and, on the other, the everyday life of urban subjects that has been affected heavily by this process? Drawing on recent literature on the urban political, urban-state nexus and urban density, this symposium aims to foreground infra-density as an analytical lens to interrogate the infrastructuralisation of urban densities and the (power) density of urban infrastructures.

The rationale of the symposium is to bring together researchers working on urban densities and urban infrastructures into dialogues with each other, so as to develop the analytical power of infra-density in authoritarian, populist and other contexts. This symposium will consist of two half-day events, including a colloquium on 14th December with talks and panel discussions, and a workshop on 15th December to make further discussions on related working paper(s).

DAY 1: COLLOQUIUM, 14:00-19:00, 14 DEC 2023

VENUE: KOL-H-317, CITY CAMPUS, UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH

14:00 - 14:10

OPENING REMARKS - HANNA HILBRANDT (UZH) /
YIMIN ZHAO (UZH/RENMIN)

14:10 - 15:30:

PANEL 1: THE DENSITY OF URBAN INFRASTRUCTURES
CHAIR: HANNA HILBRANDT (UZH)

Colin McFarlane (Durham): Reflections on infra-density: materiality and everyday life in comparative perspective
Gabriela Debrunner (ETH): Property, Power, and
Densification: A Landownership-Centric Perspective
Yimin Zhao (UZH/Renmin): The infrastructural lives of
authoritarianism: Interrogating the topology of urban
density in Beijing

15:30-15:50:

COFFEE BREAK

15:50-17:10:

PANEL 2: THE INFRASTRUCTURALISATION OF URBAN
DENSITIES
CHAIR: JULIE REN (UZH)

Charlotte Lemanski (Cambridge): Infrastructural
Citizenship as a relational and political process
Jon Schubert (Basel): Authoritarian Infrastructures:
Empire, Extractivism and Crisis in Angola
Nitin Bathla (ETH): Infrastructure density, the
authoritarian state, and the infrastructuralisation of
accumulation by segregation

17:20-18:20

ROUNDTABLE
CHAIR: YIMIN ZHAO

Panellists: Charlotte Lemanski, Colin McFarlane, Gabriela
Debrunner, Hanna Hilbrandt, Jon Schubert
Julie Ren and Nitin Bathla

18:20-19:20

APÉRO

DAY 2: WORKSHOP, 9:00-11:30, 15 DEC 2023

This workshop is invitation-based and will discuss a working paper that is to be shared in advance (contact: yimin.zhao@geo.uzh.ch).

ABSTRACTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

PANEL 1: THE DENSITY OF URBAN INFRASTRUCTURES

REFLECTIONS ON INFRA-DENSITY: MATERIALITY AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

COLIN MCFARLANE

While there is a long and varied history of research on urban density, there is little work examining how high-density urbanism (HDU) is perceived and experienced amongst poor and marginalised residents. Yet, paying attention to how residents understand density offers important insight into what density is and to how it matters for cities. One of the themes that emerges as key here is urban infrastructure. Drawing on research in different cities globally, this presentation examines how 'infra-density' takes shape in different urban contexts, why and how it matters to residents, and how a comparative perspective helps us to understand the multiple relations between concentration and the city's material substrate.

PROPERTY, POWER, AND DENSIFICATION: A LANDOWNERSHIP-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

GABRIELA DEBRUNNER

The lack of housing supply in the context of increasing housing demand has become a key challenge for global urban development. This is particularly true in densifying cities, where land is scarce and highly contested among urban actors (e.g., owners, investors, authorities, residents). In such conflicting land use situations, the question of who owns, controls, and decides on the land available to meet the housing demand is critical to the effective development of our cities. As legal property title holders, landowners have significant territorial power to shape the socio-economic geography of cities. While they cannot be legally compelled to meet public land use objectives within a given time frame (e.g., with respect to zoning for densified housing), they have the legal capacity to block, delay, or redirect planned housing (re)development. This makes landowners key decision-makers in implementing housing provision goals – regarding the implementation of economic, environmental, and social aims. However, little is known about how and why different categories of landowners (re)develop their stocks in densifying cities, and what strategies and rationales they pursue throughout the densification process. This paper closes this gap by focusing on two large-scale densification projects in the cities of Zurich (Brunaupark) and Basel (Schorenweg) owned by the same institutional investor – Credit Suisse. The aim of the article is to show how and why the power of landownership and property gives them decision-making capacity and leeway to decide on the development of their private land for housing provision. By focusing particularly on the Swiss political-legal context, results of the comparative analysis show how densification obtained by institutional landowners

Colin McFarlane is Professor of Geography at Durham University. His work explores how cities are known, lived, and politicised. This includes research on urban life, density, fragments, waste, and learning, focussing in particular on the economic margins. He is author of 'Waste and the City: The Crisis of Sanitation and the Right to Citylife' (2023, Verso), 'Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds' (2021, University of California Press) and 'Learning the City: Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage' (2011, Blackwell), as well as many edited collections and academic papers.

effects socio-economic and -environmental housing outcomes (e.g., energy efficiency, affordability, community cohesion), and ultimately fails to contribute to sustainable urban development. Results are reflected and discussed regarding the "property-oriented turn" (Jacobs & Paulsen, 2009) in land use policy, which calls for urban planning to reopen the contested land issue and its diverse political-economic implications. These issues are not only evident in global urbanization and the struggle for natural resources (e.g., land, energy, climate adaptation) but also in the analysis and understanding of the socio-economic and political power imbalances attached to it.

Gabriela Debrunner has a PhD in geography and environmental social sciences with a focus on spatial planning and political urbanism. She works as a postdoctoral researcher, lecturer, and research associate at the Institute for Spatial and Landscape Development IRL at ETH Zurich. She is associated at the Chair of Spatial Development and Urban Policy SPUR (Prof. Dr. David Kaufmann). In her research, she focuses on sustainable urban development from the perspective of urban governance. Hence, the question of how actors can strategically influence spatial development e.g. through the targeted activation of spatial planning instruments or property rights. Before Gabriela joined ETH Zurich, she gained a wide range of experience in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. Since October 2022, Gabriela also works as independent advisor in multiple spatial development mandates.

THE INFRASTRUCTURAL LIVES OF AUTHORITARIANISM: INTERROGATING THE TOPOLOGY OF URBAN DENSITY IN BEIJING

YIMIN ZHAO

This paper offers a new approach to interrogating authoritarian urbanism by focusing on its articulations with urban infrastructures in the name of disciplining urban densities. It has been highlighted in China's national agenda since the mid-2010s that the control of urban densities is a key to upgrading the biggest Chinese cities into "world-class" ones. Nevertheless, this intense deforming of the urban has increasingly been deployed through the building and expansion of various urban infrastructures, many of which seem to be inclusive and supportive at first glance. What political dynamics are at work when urban infrastructures are not interrupted but instead newly erected and hence made visible to tackle the urban density? Following previous inquiries on the politics of urban infrastructure, this paper aims to examine how and how far the civic and state's "infrastructural lives" have been infused with each other through material configurations, political sensibilities and infrastructural affects. It draws on recent reflections on the topological quality of infrastructural relations (Harvey, P., 2012) and brings this view into the critical evaluation of the state question in the rise of "entanglements of

state-economy-society-materiality" (Furlong 2021). In so doing, this paper foregrounds governmental techniques and the subjectivity of the governed in the infrastructuralising process of the state power, where the state turns out to be the centre of various types of urban densities – and of our lived experiences of the urban in toto.

Yimin Zhao is Assistant Professor in Urban Planning and Management at Renmin University of China, and an SNSF Swiss Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography at the University of Zürich (2023). Trained as a Human Geographer, his research focuses on the nexus between the urban and the state in China and East Asia through the analytical lenses of urban materiality, land and everyday life. After previous investigations of Beijing's green belts and the Jiehebu area, his current research develops along two lines of inquiry, one attending to the infrastructural lives of authoritarianism and the other looking into the urban mechanisms of "Global China." He is an editor of *City*, and a corresponding editor of *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

PANEL 2: THE INFRASTRUCTURALISATION OF URBAN DENSITIES

INFRASTRUCTURAL CITIZENSHIP AS A RELATIONAL AND POLITICAL PROCESS

CHARLOTTE LEMANSKI

It is widely acknowledged within the urban studies 'infrastructural turn' (Graham and Marvin 2022) that infrastructure is not just the technical service or product that is physically delivered via reticulated pipes, wires, sewers, and roads, but that infrastructure is fundamentally a socio-political and relational process of complex contestation and negotiation over power and resources (Graham and Marvin 2001; Larkin 2013; Amin 2014; Coutard and Rutherford 2015; Lemanski and Massey 2022). In other words, infrastructures are not an inert, taken-for-granted substrate upon which social life unfolds; rather, that material/technical forms only become infrastructure when they enable human

life to function (Star, 1999). Adopting a relational understanding of infrastructure trains our lens on the ways in which infrastructure illuminates and mediates political life, captured through the concept of Infrastructural Citizenship (Lemanski 2019, 2020).

Charlotte Lemanski is Professor of Urban Geography at the University of Cambridge, UK. She has worked in South Africa for more than twenty years, exploring everyday forms of inequality through the lens of infrastructure, urban governance, and citizenship. Most recently she has been researching Off-Grid infrastructure transitions in African cities.

AUTHORITARIAN INFRASTRUCTURES: EMPIRE, EXTRACTIVISM AND CRISIS IN ANGOLA

JON SCHUBERT

This paper develops how a logic of speculation is replicated across scales, conditioning urban development and the possibilities of economic diversification in Angola. Angolans across social classes track the oil prices almost like a divine phenomenon that directly shapes the conditions for their individual and collective plans of social advancement, which conveniently obscures how the oil-dependent economy is produced. There is a popular argument that extractive industries in Africa today are enclaved and socially 'thin', offering little benefit to the country and society at large: oil production happens offshore, and mining ventures increasingly work like offshore oil, walling themselves off from the surrounding social fabric. Thus, capital jumps globally from point to discrete point, bypassing the nation-state altogether. Yet the case of Angola shows that while oil-production is indeed enclaved in nature, oil-dependency is a total social fact. Empirically, the paper turns around processes of urban planning and the question of administrative autonomy in a system that is so heavily centralised as Angola.

Rather than being a question of lacking capacities or planning failure, I show how oil-dependency and infrastructural speculation are a fundamental and deliberate instrument of regime maintenance, that produces its own logics and aesthetics.

Jon Schubert is Professor of Urban Studies at the University of Basel. He is a political and economic anthropologist with long-time ethnographic research experience in urban Angola and Mozambique. His research interests include the social life of infrastructures, the impact of extractive industries on African polities, questions of political authority and the experience and memory of political violence, and sustainable urban development in times of climate crisis. Schubert leads the SNF-funded research project PRECURBICA — Precarious Urbanisms in Coastal Africa. He is the author of *Working the System: A Political Ethnography of the New Angola* (Cornell University Press 2017).

INFRASTRUCTURE DENSITY, THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE, AND THE INFRASTRUCTURALISATION OF ACCUMULATION BY SEGREGATION

NITIN BATHLA

Fast-paced infrastructure construction has been a key feature of the ground rent driven and jobless neo-liberal economic development model in India. A model that has especially taken off since the rightward and authoritarian shift in state power since 2014. India's road network, which is already one of the densest in the world, will add an additional 100 greenfield highway corridors to its existing network in the coming years. Premised on the narrative of historical lack, these new highway corridors are emerging parallel to existing corridors in territories that were bypassed by previous phases of economic development. In the words of the Minister for Road Transport and Highways, "these highway corridors represent an opportunity to urbanise and develop the tribal and backward regions of the country while at the same time opening cheap green land for international and domestic capital investment." However, rather than bringing promised development, these highway corridors seem to be unleashing a socio-ecological upheaval and infrastructuralisation

of accumulation by segregation in the territories that they are passing through. This contribution will seek to unpack the conjuncture between densification of infrastructure, authoritarianism, and infrastructuralisation of segregation under extended urbanisation.

Nitin Bathla is a lecturer and postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zürich, where he coordinates the doctoral program at the Institute of Landscape and Urban Studies. He lectures on urban studies, and political ecology, and his current research focuses on agrarian questions under the planetary age. In his academic practice, Nitin actively combines research with artistic practices of filmmaking, and socially engaged art. His 2020 film *Not Just Roads* with Klearjos E. Papanicolaou premiered at over 30 film festivals across the world and won the prestigious SAH Film Award 2022.