

## Infrastructure

*Jeff Diamanti*

The safest place for rich people to dump their money during a recession is usually the one most likely to receive government stimulus—historically, public works projects aimed at shoring up both employment rates and the physical carrying capacity of an economic setting. Whether new, refurbished, or expanded, infrastructure has always functioned as a kickstarter for macroeconomic recovery, leading (so this fantasy goes) to long-term growth. The idea is somewhat paradoxical: the current configuration of a given economy (call it economy A) has either 1) reached a natural limit or 2) never really worked but works so badly now that its contradictory core has become inoperative; thus economy A needs to become A+ (the same but bigger, faster, and with the capacity to become much larger than the original A). Hence, an “infrastructure boom” after proverbial decline; more of the same but different.

Even in times of relative stability, infrastructure (more, different, better) occupies a unique position in the economic imaginary of growth: it seems necessary and appears, almost in spite of social constraints, to itself produce growth and is thus indistinguishable from it. Infrastructure thus resembles bonds in the medium-view of business cycles. Neither is a commodity in the strict sense (although both are increasingly treated as such), but a deficit in one or the other immediately spells dire consequences for growth. With bad (or no) roads, electrical grids, or waste management systems (whether through negligence or strike), all three moments in the cycle of accumulation—production, circulation, and consumption—dry up. This is why the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is devoting so much attention to long-term policy forecasts regarding infrastructure

in developing and developed economies alike: needing roughly 3.5 percent of global GDP to keep apace with capital's growth needs, infrastructure is becoming a major economic sector in its own right (a roughly 2.5 trillion-dollar industry in 2012) (OECD 2007). Unlike bonds, the stuff beneath both house and factory is always immediately social and political—increasingly so as investors find new ways to turn the infrastructure of social and economic life into a cash grab. Bonds, however, are mediation par excellence. If you burn down the treasury, you still have to round up the accountants; but if you take down the power plant, the workday comes to an end.

### *Nobody Works in a Blackout*

Only very old materialists would assign such political primacy to roads, sewage systems, and power plants. Newer materialists would say such systems have a life of their own. In any case, infrastructure fits neither within the art history taken up by [architecture](#) nor in the naturalism implied by architecture's external constraint, much less the economic structure that gives value to land and buildings. How then, given the sensitivity with which investors have recently turned their attention to infrastructures (see Torrance 2009), to develop a political and epistemological relationship to infrastructure? Access to basic services such as [electricity](#) and water increasingly defines the process of proletarianization at a global scale (see Endnotes 2010) and, as Paul Virilio has shown regarding electricity, also facilitates the “absolute power” of state militaries (Virilio quoted in Jakob 2001); infrastructure today has become something like the naked medium of political economic friction. This claim is not far from Angela Mitropoulos's—which is also Hannah Arendt's—that politics, after a definite moment in the history of economics (around 1945) “is premised not on a subject . . . but on the *infra*, the unassimilable plurality of that which lies between” (Mitropoulos 2013, 115). And once the social gets

electrified and the primary source of **energy** is not **coal** but oil (also not too long after 1945), *infrastructure* is the place where (economic) value and (social) energy share a provisional identity.

At the level of economic growth (or, in an older idiom, the forces of production), infrastructure regulates the value-time of a given economic setting. Any regional economy will have a limit beyond which production, circulation, and output are system-clogging (A1 in the above formulation, where a natural limit is expressed in traffic jams, power outages, and slow delivery times), which is why upgrading electrical grids, transportation **networks**, and bandwidth availability is synonymous in policy-speak with economic stimulus. President Obama's plan to open an "infrastructure bank," which would hold in reserve billions of dollars for states most desperate for new hardware, literalizes the **crisis** of public coffers in the United States (which have suffered hand in hand with municipal public works departments) and shows how much *infrastructure* is a code word for economic growth that tells us something about the internal logic of growth itself (Baker and Schwartz 2013). An infrastructure bank would fundamentally alter the financing of urban construction. It would remove tax barriers to public and private pension funds investing in infrastructure bonds, a 1990s financial innovation designed to open the market to private investment. Notwithstanding the fact that this model stinks too much of what Republicans would call "nanny-state economics," the idea is to treat infrastructure as a commodity like any other in order to transfer the costs of upkeep onto users or publics and the risks onto pensioners. Energy spent outside the factory creates as much value as inside and should thus (so the logic goes) be brought to market.

At the level of political relations (or, in an older idiom, the relations of production), the watts, water, and waste flowing across today's social bedrock constitute the immediate conditions of social reproducibility as such, without which—

say, in a postapocalyptic wake—we would have nothing but its symbolic remains. If that is true—if infrastructure is the moment and place where labor power as a value-creating commodity and a concrete social relation is fueled (with watts, water, and waste removal)—then what it is “between” are two antinomical moments of the value form itself: the moment between concrete and abstract and that between labor in itself and capital in itself. If the “hidden abode of production” is for Marx where all the secrets of the commodity are to be found (1977, 279), then it is in infrastructure—the material bedrock upon which social, political, and economic life now depends for its energy—where the secret of labor’s metamorphosis into labor-for-capital occurs or its reproduction into a (indeed, the only) source of exchange value. Which is why nobody works in a blackout.<sup>1</sup>

### *Everyone Is a Homeworker During a Blackout*

In a long-term blackout, everyday habits become life-threatening: food turns sour; weather is unmediated; water becomes undrinkable; use-value trumps exchange-value. Variegated moments of production, circulation, and consumption are isolated, emptied of value-time, leaving only social time determined by reproductive (not productive) needs. Stored fuel becomes a source of heat, streets a place to find one another. A unique materialism emerges, capable of isolating moments of what is otherwise the unity of labor and labor power (the worker on a labor market). If infrastructure is the medium where politics and economics become one (i.e., autonomous in appearance during the work day), then its breakdown is also the separation of social energy and energy as value. Although most of us cannot help but wait for the return of power, the city-wide blackout generates a series of important disarticulations (Luke 2009). Without functioning infrastructure, system and subject sublate one another; the aesthetic genre of the electrified city mutates temporarily into a postwork naturalism. Labor power is

returned to the worker as collective labor, indistinguishable from the reproductive labor otherwise keeping the whole thing afloat. Objects become either useful for labor or not—a tyrannical and ruthless materialism inverting the class tyranny under capitalism.

Circuit breakers and aqueducts are more likely found in engineering histories than the art historical canon of architecture studies. The beaux-arts inheritance of buildings makes them primary sites for an archive of cultural historicity, not unlike painting or poetry. Theirs is a humanities standpoint, given their universal function: to house people. Yet infrastructure is what houses all the stuff in between: it gives time to moments between production, circulation, and consumption—indeed it makes time the unitary medium across which all three become instances of one another. Infrastructure is the most immediately historical of any medium for describing the proximity of politics and economics or culture and [work](#). Though there is as yet no critical theory of infrastructure, its rapidly growing status as an object of capitalist desire, and our increasing reliance on its vital, cultural, and political function, will demand more of our collective attention.

See also: [crisis](#), [dams](#), [disaster](#), [energopolitics](#), [limits](#), [work](#).

## Notes

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1. Of course, it is not quite true that *nobody* works during a blackout. The economic function of those who do work—municipal workers and caregivers—is rendered visible as the panic of a day without profit and a day with life-threatening shortages become identical; such labor is increasingly considered “essential services,” rendered exceptional before the law.