

Ruptures, Transformations, Continuities. Rethinking Infrastructures and Ecology

Call for Papers for the Conference of the DFG Centre for Advanced Studies “Futures of Sustainability”, University of Hamburg
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Organizations, institutions as well as everyday life are permeated and characterized by a variety of interests and objectives regarding sustainability. They all relate to sustainability as a strong normative point of reference. However, this complexity of interests and goals associated with the concept of sustainability inevitably gives rise to conflicts, incompatibilities as well as contradictory and paradoxical effects. This is also reflected in the notion of contested "futures of sustainability," whose multiple, sometimes conflicting tendencies describe different potential trajectories of social change (Adloff/Neckel 2019). Discussions about these futures remain controversial, since the concept of sustainability is highly open to interpretation and has varying effects in different contexts. Looking at ruptures, transformations and continuities, we want to explore the meaning of infrastructures in the context of the ecological crisis and its implications for the multiple futures of sustainability. As a promise of progress, material and immaterial infrastructures shape contemporary societies in a variety of ways (Anand et al. 2018, van Laak 2018). In addition to material infrastructures of the technosphere and immaterial infrastructures of social institutions, Purdy (2020) identifies a third level that encompasses the fundamental areas and cycles of the natural world, such as the atmosphere, water cycle and movements, soil, and fertility. Here the planetary dimensions of infrastructures come to the fore. Against this background, we understand infrastructures as prerequisites for societal action, as outcomes and entities that in turn affect the constitution of social structures.

Moreover, on the one hand, the ecological crisis highlights the dysfunctionality of existing infrastructures. For example, mobility concepts that are pursued and continued despite their incompatibility with climate protection goals. However, infrastructures - as the material foundations of everyday life - are not immutable or timeless, but fluid and changeable (Appel et al. 2018). Especially in moments of crisis and rupture, they are vulnerable, precarious, and fragile (ibid.; Star 1999; Graham/Thrift 2007). Accordingly, both material and immaterial infrastructures are being criticized with regard to inequality-promoting implications (Hetherington 2019; Boyer 2016; Foundational Economy Collective 2018; von Schnitzler 2013), global resource overuse (Thacker 2019), or their underlying anthropocentric guiding principles (Haraway 2016).

On the other hand, the modification or redesign of these infrastructures offers the opportunity to respond to the challenges and threats of the Anthropocene. Here, we find promises of digital infrastructures or the financialization of sustainability (as in the Green (New) Deal, Sustainable Finance). In addition, so called climate engineering technologies are being discussed as emergency measures and instruments of control in light of slow or even failing societal change towards more sustainability (e.g. Gunderson et al. 2019). Struggles for the futures of sustainability are thus always struggles for the modernization of, transformation of, control over and through (material, immaterial, planetary) infrastructures.

We will discuss the above-mentioned problems based on various fields, which actors from politics, business and civil society are affiliated with:

- Actors of social and transformative movements engage in “real utopias” (Wright 2010), “prefigurative organizations” (Reinecke 2018), or “entry projects” (Brangsch 2014, Brand/Schickert 2019), each of which anticipates the future, sustainable world on a small scale and attempts to demonstrate its viability. Debates about the diffusion and growth of such alternative organizations bear witness to attempts to form new structures beyond individual organizations and initiatives (Schiller-Merkens 2020).
- The legitimacy of sustainability beyond the boundaries of eco-movements is also evident in economic structures, where sustainability is no longer seen as a disruptive factor, but rather as a business case or strategy for success. The newly emerging sustainability markets, in turn, are intended to structurally integrate sustainability issues into economic decision-making, which in turn affects understandings, perceptions and practices of sustainability.
- Political regulations also shape, force or enable the orientation towards sustainability, as reflected in the ECB's green monetary policy, for example. Accordingly, the European Union's Green Infrastructure Strategy refers to a modernization narrative that locates the solution to the climate crisis in the renewal of infrastructural projects. At the same time, the relationship between market and state is being recalibrated and restructured through the financialization of sustainability (Chiapello/Knoll 2020).

In all areas, different persistences and limitations, but also new possibilities for the implementation and transformation of infrastructures can be identified. The conference will focus on such contested processes, which also include reversals and disruptions. It discusses the preservation, development or disorder of infrastructures by different actors and practices against the background of specific imaginaries of sustainability. The latter are often seen as implicit starting points for the consolidation of structural change. At the same time, these imaginaries are always dependent on the structures already in place, which continue to shape and constrain them. Infrastructures, imaginaries and the scopes of action bound to them thus have an interdependent relationship.

Against this background, the conference explores varying processes of infrastructure formation, disruption, and maintenance in the context of sustainability. The following questions can be addressed theoretically and empirically.

- What happens when material or immaterial infrastructures (e.g. transport, agriculture, knowledge) prove to be unsustainable? What reactions and efforts at change can be observed?
- Who are the actors that form or obstruct structures? What are the fields they can be found in?
- What happens when companies translate sustainability into their structures? How do new organizational structures of sustainability emerge? What changes can be identified in evaluations aimed at structural change?
- Under what conditions can structure-building processes of transformation succeed? What effects does the expansion of non-capitalist and sustainable forms of organization originating from civil society have within a capitalist environment?

- How do local to global policies respond to the infrastructural challenges? What solutions can be found? What conflicts arise?
- Which questions and potential challenges arise for social-scientific considerations of infrastructures as fundamental prerequisites of societies? What are the analytical benefits or/and pitfalls of the “infrastructural turn” for exploring ecological challenges?

The conference is directed primarily towards doctoral students and postdocs.

Dates and deadlines

The digital conference will take place on November 25th and 26th 2021. It is hosted by the Centre for Advanced Studies “Futures of Sustainability” at Hamburg University.

Submission of abstracts (max. 500 words): 30.04.2021.

Submission of conference papers: 31.10.2021.

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