

ERC Advanced Grant InfraNorth Workshop: Ethnographies of Infrastructure

May 22, 2023 at the University of Vienna

Presentation abstracts

SESSION 1

Introduction: InfraNorth and Ethnographies of Infrastructure

Peter Schweitzer, InfraNorth, University of Vienna

The presentation will introduce *InfraNorth* project and its relation to ethnographies of infrastructure. *InfraNorth* is the acronym for the ERC Advanced Grant project “Building Arctic Futures: Transport Infrastructures and Sustainable Northern Communities”, which focuses on the nexus between transport infrastructures and the well-being of Arctic communities. There is a long history of southern actors planning, building and abandoning infrastructure in the Arctic in order to extract resources and transport them elsewhere. Still, once in place, these infrastructures have a significant impact on local practices and social relations. The question, however, is whether these changes benefit the well-being and viability of local communities or not. The project will interrogate how residents of the Arctic, both indigenous and non-indigenous, engage with (primarily large-scale) infrastructures, and to examine the intended and unintended consequences these projects have on their lives.

InfraNorth is a pan-Arctic project, working in more than 10 local field sites situated in communities ranging from small villages to mid-size towns. Almost all of these case studies employ a variety of ethnographic methods. In addition, for many team members, *InfraNorth* is not the first encounter with human-infrastructure

entanglements. In referencing some of these earlier projects, the presentation will provide a diachronic perspective on scholarly engagements with infrastructure and their use or non-use of ethnography.

Peter Schweitzer is currently Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Vienna and Professor Emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Since 2021, he has been leading the ERC Advanced Grant Building Arctic Futures: Transport Infrastructures and Sustainable Northern Communities (InfraNorth). His theoretical interests range from kinship and identity politics to human-environmental interactions, including the social lives of infrastructure and the community effects of global climate change; his regional focus areas include the circumpolar North and the former Soviet Union. He has published widely on all of these issues.

Life Support: Global Shipping in the Age of Ecology

Ashley Carse, Vanderbilt University

The Savannah Harbor Expansion Project began as an average harbor deepening project. In the early 1990s, the Georgia Ports Authority argued that new dredging was necessary to accommodate the ever-larger container ships that the state wanted to attract in its push to establish a dominant logistics hub around Savannah. In terms of its economic aspirations and proposed channel depths, the SHEP resembled port expansion projects underway around the planet. But one thing made this megaproject stand out: only half of the billion-dollar project budget was dedicated to deepening the harbor. The other half was spent on mitigation measures designed to neutralize the environmental impacts of dredging the surrounding estuary. The river was rerouted. A tract of wetlands was purchased and protected to replace those expected to be degraded. A fish passage was planned to offset the loss of habitat in the estuary. And, most controversially, an oxygen injection system was installed to maintain conditions for aquatic life near the port. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, this presentation explores the question: What survives, dies, and flourishes in a place with ecological parameters pegged to the latest infrastructure standards of global shipping and the environmental regulatory state? In conclusion, I use my own experience studying this project to reflect on the uses and

limits of ethnography for anthropologists interested in the study of large-scale infrastructures.

***Ashley Carse** is a cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Human and Organisational Development at Vanderbilt University. He focuses on the intersection of culture, technology and ecology. His research is interdisciplinary in orientation, combining anthropology, geography, environmental studies, and STS. Ashley Carse has conducted long-term, community-based field research in Panama, the southeastern United States, and along transnational transportation networks. Among his many influential publications is the book resulting from his first research project, *Beyond the Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, and Infrastructure at the Panama Canal* (MIT 2014).*

The Ship as a Methodological and Theoretical Tool in the Anthropological Study of Infrastructure

Johanna Markkula, Central European University

Shipping infrastructure has been characterized as a “black box” in the sense of being a “complex system or device whose internal workings are hidden or not readily understood” (Oxford Dictionary). A key element of this infrastructure is the container ship, which both carries “boxes” while also itself being a kind of “box” that conceals within its steel walls complex social worlds whose workings are of essential importance for the global economy yet remain invisible to most people.

In taking the ship seriously as an object of anthropological and ethnographic inquiry, I try to do two things. First, by looking **into** the black box of the ship, I show how container vessels are real-world objects, whose material presences in the world are entangled with multiple and complex economic, social and cultural processes. Second, I propose that by looking **through** the ship, it can provide us with both a methodological and an epistemological tool to help us understand some of these same processes.

Here another kind of black box, the camera obscura, seems a useful metaphor. Rather than obscuring or hiding things within it, when you look at the world through the lens of the ship it reveals and casts new light on some of the otherwise hidden workings of the global economy, logistics and labor practices.

Johanna Markkula has been Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology of the Central European University (CEU) since 2022. She received her Ph.D. in anthropology from Stanford University in 2019. Prior to joining CEU she was Postdoctoral Fellow in the project “Dis-assembling the Life Cycle of Containerships: Ethnographic Explorations into Maritime Working Lives” at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo. Her research constitutes an anthropological study of global mobile labor in the context of the maritime industry, and of the sea as a social, political and legal space that is at the very foundation of global capitalism.

SESSION 2

The Power of Unbuilt Energy Infrastructure in the Arctic: Visions of Hydropower in Greenland

Janina Priebe, Umea University

Infrastructure can be viewed as a global assemblage, a “bundle of relations”, and an ensemble of different actors, materials, and ideas that shape its significance both globally and within its local microcosmos. Unbuilt energy infrastructure exacerbates the dynamic of these assemblages because their promise of development is negotiated, imagined, and contested within the coordinates of expertise, funding, corporate interests, and public authorities while the arrangements for producing, controlling, and using energy remain fluid. This presentation zooms in on the unbuilt infrastructure of hydropower in Greenland, and the potentiality of large-scale energy production anchored in particular landscapes. Through methods of historical ethnography, this presentation reconstructs the past scientific exploration of the potential for hydropower production on Johan Dahl Land, South Greenland, in the 1970s and explores its shadow histories. Hydropower on Johan Dahl Land held (and its current non-existence still holds) many possible futures that can be recovered through historical materials, such as drawings, photographs, and scientific and media reports.

The Cold War, and global energy crisis prompted the exploration of Arctic energy resources in the 1970s, and due to glacier runoff and elevated lakes close to the inland ice sheet, Greenland's potential for hydropower appeared limitless. In Johan Dahl Land, foreign investors saw this potential as enabling the extraction of uranium in nearby Kvanefjeld and various other purposes. Danish hesitancy toward the project baffled the Greenlandic community, which moved toward more autonomous governance in the 1970s. These frictions and hesitations were highly political and shaped by colonial hierarchies. The shadow histories of Greenlandic hydropower call into question the grand narrative of development led by Denmark, and tie the past to the present because they provide new vantage points for shaping Greenland's imagined future built on clean energy.

Janina Priebe holds a Ph.D. in the History of Science and Ideas, and is a researcher at Umeå University, Sweden. She is Arctic Five Chair in environmental history and co-director of the Future Forests platform, a transdisciplinary forest research and communication platform of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and the Swedish Forestry Research Institute. Her work centers on sustainability transformation and transition studies and the history of natural resource development in the Arctic. She combines historical and transdisciplinary research methods and currently works on research projects on Arctic energy transitions and the climate transition in the Swedish forestry sector.

The Social Lives of Roads: Scales, Patchworks, and Materialities

Till Mostowlansky, Geneva Graduate Institute

In this paper, I explore what ethnography can offer to the social scientific study of roads. Based on fifteen years of research on infrastructure in the borderland of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, I discuss methodological and theoretical challenges of studying roads on three planes. First, I analyse road construction and maintenance as an ever-unfinished process of labour and care that provides insights into human-non-human entanglements. Linking this process to the historical establishment of political power through infrastructure in this borderland, I then focus on places and lives that are located off the road but nevertheless shaped by it. Finally, drawing on ideas from multi-scalar and patchwork ethnography, I examine the possibility of studying infrastructure under the conditions of increasing

securitization and fragmentation. This multi-layered ethnographic perspective, I suggest, provides insights into mundane, historically contingent relationships between humans and roads, the constellations of power in which these relationships are embedded and processes in which people along the road claim agency through alternative ideas, productions and uses of infrastructure.

Till Mostowlansky is Research Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the Geneva Graduate Institute. He is the author of *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), co-editor of *Infrastructure and the Remaking of Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022) and the principal investigator of the Swiss National Science Foundation funded project "Quiet Aid: Service and Salvation in the Balkans-to-Bengal Complex" (2022-27).

Arctic Coastal Communities and Global Connectivity: Towards an Ethnography of Maritime Infrastructure

Olga Povoroznyuk, InfraNorth, University of Vienna

The Arctic has been experiencing unprecedented levels of climate and environmental change, as well as increasing resource extraction activities, while seeing a growing indigenous rights movement at the same time. Its coastal communities have become increasingly included in global networks of cruise ship tourism, cargo shipping and cultural exchange across the Arctic Ocean, often referred to as "the new Mediterranean". However, since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the region has been turning into an arena of struggles for access to marine resources, reconfiguring connectivity, and military exercises. Geopolitical tensions and security concerns might become the main drivers of infrastructural developments along the Arctic coast shaping the futures of local communities in the next decades.

My research, which is based on ethnographies of modernization and expansion of Arctic seaports, examines the social, cultural, and environmental agency of maritime transport infrastructure in the context of reconfiguring connectivity of the Arctic. In order to address my research question – *What are the promises and threats of maritime transport infrastructure for Arctic coastal communities?* – I employ an array

of approaches from the anthropology of infrastructure. The empirical part of my research is drawing on case studies of the sea port communities of Tiksi in Russia, Nome in the USA, and Kirkenes in Norway. In the case of Tiksi, I am relying primarily on field data collected before the war. To explore the social life of port expansion projects in Nome and Kirkenes in the current geopolitical situation, I combine ethnographic fieldwork, with archival research and analysis of media and policy documents.

Olga Povoroznyuk is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna. Her interests include the issues of infrastructure and development, identity, ethnicity and indigeneity, (post)socialism and colonialism, climate and environmental changes in the Circumpolar North and beyond. Her research has been focused on large-scale infrastructures, modernization and nation-building projects in Post-Soviet Siberia. Currently, she works as a research coordinator and a study region lead in the ERC project “InfraNorth” and explores the role of maritime infrastructure in social dynamics, connectivity and sustainability of coastal communities in Northeast Siberia, Alaska and Northern Norway.

SESSION 3

The Moral Economy of Infrastructures in Everest Tourism

Jolynna Sinanan, University of Manchester

The Nepali state government and private telecommunications corporations have made a committed effort to increase digital connectivity in the largely remote and underdeveloped Solukhumbu region in the wake of the earthquake and avalanches in 2014 and 2015. Recently improved digital infrastructure has coincided with an increase in the number of tourists arriving in the region between 2016 and 2019. Today, tourism numbers are set to overtake previous years in the post-pandemic industry recovery, and improvements in accommodation, amenities and services have been underway.

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in the Solukhumbu region between 2017 and 2023 with guides, porters and tourists and explores negotiations of responsibility within unequal social relations of the tourist encounter. The paper presents insights from the fieldwork under the themes of verticality, visibility and values. It contributes to ethnographies of infrastructure by arguing that within an anthropology of mobilities, where tourism and seasonal labour is characterised by fragmented social temporalities, the commitment to participant observation and oral testimonies reveals changes, continuities and contradictions in moral reasonings related to infrastructures over time. In the Solukhumbu, such long-term commitments are needed to address challenges posed to livelihoods and the impacts of climate change.

***Jolynna Sinanan** is a Lecturer in Digital Anthropology in the Department of Social Anthropology and the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester. She has an interdisciplinary background in anthropology and development studies and has conducted comparative ethnographic studies of digital practices and infrastructures in relation to intergenerational mobilities in the Asia-Pacific, the Caribbean and South Asia. She is the author of *Social Media in Trinidad* (UCL Press, 2017) and the co-author of *Digital Media Practices in Households* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), *Visualising Facebook* (UCL Press, 2017) and *How the World Changed Social Media* (UCL Press, 2016).*

Disassembling the Social: Connection and Disconnection on a Capitalist Frontier

Geoffrey Aung, University of Vienna

This paper rethinks a core common sense undergirding anthropology's infrastructural turn: the idea that infrastructure, fundamentally, brings people, things, and ideas into relation. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork on a special economic zone (SEZ) in southern Myanmar, the paper balances this relational, connective notion of infrastructure with an alternative set of concerns. The Dawei SEZ shows how infrastructure, while connective at some scales, can at other scales be seen as anti-relational and disconnective. Infrastructure can press upon and break down collective life; it can deepen social differences along spatial, gendered, and racialized ethnic lines. Following a set of disputes that emerged around the main

project areas and resettlement villages of the Dawei SEZ, I suggest that the SEZ foregrounds the need for an ethnography of infrastructure closely attentive to processes of dispossession, exclusion, and abjection on today's capitalist frontiers. Such an ethnography of infrastructure, I argue, moves beyond dominant paradigms in economic anthropology and political economy. At stake is an alternate conception of infrastructure. On Myanmar's capitalist frontier, infrastructure does not bind together new social forms—whether in the logic of the network or the spatial fix—so much as provide for a crisis in sociality itself, disassembling the economic and political relationships that once sustained collective life otherwise.

Geoffrey Aung is a postdoctoral research and teaching associate (Universitätsassistent) in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. Between economic and political anthropology, his research examines the aesthetics, politics, and historicity of large-scale infrastructures on Southeast Asia's capitalist frontiers. His current book project is an ethnography of the political and economic life of infrastructure around a major special economic zone (SEZ) in Myanmar's southern borderlands.

Digital and Transport Infrastructures in Remote Canada: Notes on Ownership and Control

Philipp Budka, InfraNorth, University of Vienna

Infrastructures are at the core of many social transformations, sociopolitical developments, and creative processes of innovation. They have become key indicators and signs of economic development, technological advancement, and modernization. Particularly in small and remote communities, infrastructures are often associated with economic growth, socio-economic well-being, and therefore communal sustainability. This paper looks into the role of digital and transport infrastructures in remote communities in Canada by discussing questions of infrastructural ownership and control. In doing so, it draws on completed ethnographic fieldwork on the development and appropriation of digital infrastructures in Northwestern Ontario as well as on ongoing fieldwork in Northern Manitoba on the affordances of transport infrastructures in relation to sustaining

communities; the latter being conducted within the ERC project InfraNorth. Both cases show that the creation of social relationships and organizational partnerships are key for the planning, developing, building, continuing, and maintaining of infrastructures. At least from an ethnographic and anthropological perspective, infrastructure is therefore much more than just an operational system of technological objects.

Philipp Budka is a research associate and lecturer at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Vienna. He has been researching infrastructures, technologies, and media in the Americas and Europe. Currently, Philipp leads the North American study region in the ERC project "InfraNorth" and explores transport infrastructures in northern Canada. He is the co-editor of *Theorising Media and Conflict* (Berghahn, 2020) and *Ritualisierung – Mediatisierung – Performance* (Vienna University Press, 2019) and has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes. Philipp is currently working on a monograph about transport infrastructures in northern Manitoba, Canada.