

Infrastructures in Perspective:

Dams and roads in Africa, the Middle East and Asia

In 2012 ZMO is organizing a series of two conferences that look at two forms of infrastructure – dams and roads – and their social, spatial and political effects. While quite different in their materialities and histories of construction and use, dams and roads as features of infrastructural ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ can be investigated as manifestations of human (especially state-sponsored) domination and control over the environment. They channel flows of people and resources, and transform the use of geographic space. Both kinds of infrastructure have an enormous impact on settlement patterns and economic practices.

The core idea in organizing these two workshops is to investigate material manifestations of notions such as governmentality, state power and modernity that are often associated with infrastructural investments such as dams and roads. We set out to analyse different discourses that legitimise the monetary expenses as well as the social, political and environmental ‘sacrifices’ that accompany such expenses. We also aim to document and question their practical usages, and the resistance that such ‘modernist’ projects have attracted to in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. We adopt an interdisciplinary approach by taking into account the historical antecedents of such movements as well as their contemporary relevance.

Rather than comparing ‘roads’ with ‘dams’, the two workshops address a set of overlapping conceptual questions. To name a few, these are the following: relationship between technology, society and state, social adaptations and resistance to technological changes, issues related to nature of modernity, and not least, social space and material infrastructures. By questioning two historically very different aspects of infrastructural modernisation (dams are more the feature of twentieth century compared to roads whose ‘civilizational’ and ‘progressive’ role has much longer history), we aim to contribute to the empirical investigation of governmentality and space in a historical and anthropological perspective.

1st International Workshop: Big Dams – Investigating their temporal and spatial politics in Africa, the Middle East and Asia

Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, June 1-2, 2012

This workshop, held at Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin on **June 1–2, 2012**, seeks to explore the spatial and temporal dimensions of big dam projects in Africa, Asia and the

Middle East. Big dam building projects are often associated with the post-war high modernist moment, but they have never ceased to proliferate, particularly in the global South. Costs and benefits of these enormous projects are hotly contested. Hydro-electric dams have stood as symbols of human ingenuity, signs of progress, and imposing greeners of the desert (McCully 2001) and ‘temples’ of the modern nation-state, as Nehru put it for India. On the other hand, displaced populations, environmental activists, tax payers and creditors throw heavy doubts on the justification and means of building large dams (Ghosh 2006; Roy 1998; Scudder 2005).

As highly loaded symbols of state power and as sites which incorporate specific practices of “governmentality”, dam building projects bring together actors, materialities and discourses from very different **spatial scales**. local activists and populations interact with national and regional governments, international organizations, or globally operating companies. They are also sites which focus representations of **heterogeneous temporalities**. notions such as progress, modernisation, development and securing future wellbeing, are contrasted with the loss of ‘traditional’ ways of life, of ancient environmental balances, of cultural and archaeological traces of the past.

With a view to a subsequent publication, we invite papers on empirical case studies from various disciplinary backgrounds that address any of the following questions:

- Can we find typical patterns of cost-benefit analysis by different actors? Do these differ in any way from those relating to other large-scale modernisation projects, such as urban (re)building, highway construction, etc.?
- What are the spatial scales of social belonging invoked in the contestations of dam building projects, e.g. ‘small’ and marginal communities having to sacrifice for the ‘greater’ (national or regional) good?
- How are these discourses temporalized, how do they articulate ideas of ‘modernisation’, ‘progress’, ‘backwardness’ and ‘tradition’? How do the different social actors deal with processes of erasure and submerging sites of past experiences and memories in the name of the future? And how do governments, citizens and corporate investors deal with historical successes or mistakes associated with dams?

We invite abstracts of no more than 500 words until **January 30, 2012**, to be sent to the conference organizers at jeannefeaux@yahoo.co.uk, langekat@rz.hu-berlin.de, katrin.bromber@rz.hu-berlin.de. Limited funding is available to help cover accommodation and travel expenses (please indicate where needed).

2nd International Workshop. Roads as routes to modernity

Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, October 5-6, 2012

As a 'permanent way' roads are part of a material infrastructure that have an important impact on many historical processes such as trade, mobility, circulation, migration, state formation and not least empire building. They are as much the means of physical movement as a medium for social connections and contestations. Roads facilitate movement, establish connections and enable communication and therefore should be taken into consideration in any connected or trans-local history. In certain regional historiographical traditions, for instance in western Europe, the Mediterranean and the Ottoman empire, roads are an established subject of research in the field of pre-modern history but the scholarly focus wanes away once we enter the age of modernity. For other regions like South Asia, the research focus is still poorer even for the pre-modern period. The idea of 'transport revolution' in the 19th century is over dominated by the fascination with modern communication infrastructure, primarily the railways, telegraph and later in the twentieth century by motorised forms of movements. Historians have constructed elaborate histories of modernity around these examples while neglecting older and more mundane forms such as roads.

Retrieving the significance of roads from within the 'family' of modes of transport and infrastructures of mobility is one of the concerns of our workshop. The other significant aim is to produce independent histories of roads that integrate with and explain the social and political processes of state-formation and empire building. It is no surprise that in the late eighteenth century one of the first concerns of colonial rule in India was to accumulate knowledge about different routes that would help them strengthen their rule. Control over communication was and remains an integral part of governance in both colonial and post-colonial periods. In the Ottoman empire, railways were projected and constructed on a larger scale only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Before, road building was an important project of modernisation. Taking this understanding as background, we seek to ask:

1. When and how did roads become important part of processes of control and consolidation of power, either by state or regional powerful elites?
2. What discourses ('opening up the interiors', 'moral and material advancement', 'civilizing mission', 'progress and modernity' for instance) were used to justify such a control and how did they manifest themselves?
3. What was the nature of finance and expenditure? What kind of labour (forced, free, contracted) was used to make roads? What was the nature (temporary, seasonal, migrational, level of skill, etc.) of this labour market? What were the disciplining mechanisms applied on the group of workers?
4. How did roads relate to other forms of communication (river navigation and railways)? Is the nature of this interaction conflictual or complementary?

We invite papers that, on the basis of concrete case studies, will examine these or similar themes.

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