HIST 77300
History of Infrastructure and State Power in Latin America
Class 41618
Mondays 4:15 PM - 6:15 PM, In-Person

Professor: Mark Rice
Contact: mark.rice@baruch.cuny.edu

Class description:

While many infrastructure projects in Latin America take form on an engineer’s drafting table, their origins and effects extend well beyond the technical questions of their design. This seminar will examine how Latin American states have employed infrastructure to exert influence over their territories and citizens. Beginning in the pre-contact era and extending to the recent past we will examine how diverse states and actors influenced, negotiated, and resisted infrastructure as part of regional politics. A central question we will consider is how – in a region that has historically lacked strong state capacity in other areas – infrastructure projects have had a disproportionally large role in the projection of political power. We will also examine how investigating the history of infrastructure in Latin America can shed new perspectives on historical fields like environmental history, economic history, labor history, developmentalism, and gender. While focused on Latin America’s regional history, a key goal is to use the case studies we examine to think about infrastructure more broadly as an approach to understanding history. Learning will be based on class discussion, short response entries, and an end-of-semester historiographical paper.

Learning goals:

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:
1. Identify specific ways in which Latin American states use infrastructure as a political tool.
2. Identify specific ways in which Latin American people and societies used infrastructure as a tool for agency or resistance.
3. Understand and critique scholarly arguments on the role of infrastructure in Latin American history.
4. Be able to write clear summaries and comparisons of different academic approaches and studies of infrastructure in Latin America.

Assignments:

Class participation, 25 total points: This grade will be composed by participation in weekly class meetings. In some cases this grade will be determined by short, in-class written prompts. In other cases by participation in class discussion. Each class meeting will be worth 2 points. The lowest grade will be dropped.
Reading summaries, 25 total points: Each week, students will submit a one-page response to the week’s reading. These responses will hopefully be used in the future as preparations for comprehensive exams and/or annotated bibliographies. The lowest grade will be dropped.

Presentation, 10 points: Each student will give one, 10-minute presentation related to their assigned week’s reading.

First paper, 10 points: This will be a 3-5 page response paper comparing and contrasting different theoretical approaches to studying infrastructure.

Final paper, 30 points: This final 10-12 page paper will examine a theme in the history of infrastructure in Latin America.

Required reading to obtain:


Required reading posted by instructor:


**Schedule**

**Monday, August 28:** Introduction

**Monday, September 4:** no class

**Monday, September 11:** Thinking about infrastructure and state power
Reading:
Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (portions)
James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (portions)
Hirschman, *Development Projects Observed* (portions)
Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State”

**Monday, September 18:** Infrastructure and empire
Reading:
Mumford, *Vertical Empire*

**Monday September 25:** No class

**Monday, October 2:** Thinking critically about infrastructure in the “modern” period of Latin America
Reading:
Anad, Gupta, and Appel. *The Promise of Infrastructure* (selected chapters)
M. vom Hau, “State Infrastructural Power and Nationalism”

**Tuesday October 10: Railroad infrastructure**  
Reading:  
Matthews, *The Civilizing Machine*

**Monday, October 16: Public health infrastructure**  
Reading:  
Weber, *Death is All Around Us.*

**Monday, October 23: Water infrastructure**  
Reading:  
Vitz, *A City on a Lake*

**Monday, October 30: Disaster infrastructure**  
*PAPER 1 DUE*  
Reading:  
Carey, *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers*

**Monday, November 6: Road infrastructure – part 1**  
Reading:  
Bess, *Routes of Compromise*

**Monday, November 13: Road infrastructure part 2**  
Reading:  
Perz and Castillo Hurtado, *The Road to the Land of the Mother of God*

**Monday, November 20: Power infrastructure (part 1 – building systems)**  
Reading:  
Folch, *Hydropolitics*  
Hill, “Circuits of State”

**Monday, November 27: Power infrastructure (part 2 – electricity use and community)**  
Reading:  
Montaño, *Electrifying Mexico*  

**Monday, December 4: Urban housing**  
Reading:  
Velasco, *Barrio Rising*

**Monday, December 11: Urban transport and planning**
Reading:
Chastain, “Planning the Santiago Metro in Cold War Chile.”
Yee, “The Making of Mexico City’s Historic Center”