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Infrastructural Imperialism

Rebecca Bryant

Department of Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands;
email: r.e.bryant@uu.nl

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Abstract

In places as far-flung as Addis Ababa and Astana, Dakar and Dushanbe, high-speed railways and shiny new city centers promise to boost economies and give residents a better life, as well as boost a nation's position in geopolitical hierarchies. However, it is often ambitious powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey that fund and build these new futures, employing infrastructural largesse to showcase their own generosity and greatness. This review asks what anthropologists might gain from rescaling our study of infrastructures to see them as geopolitical sites that materialize new global imaginaries and become the scaffolding for new forms of power. The aim is to show how infrastructure can constitute the basis of an ethnographic and materialist geopolitics, one that allows us to elucidate the geopolitical imaginaries that shape our interlocutors' lives while not ignoring the global political economic forces that structure those imaginaries.

INTRODUCTION

In early European imperialism, trade and resource exploitation financed lavish building projects in metropolitan centers and fueled further colonial expansion. Today, new economic powers with global ambitions rely on building the infrastructure of other states to drive construction in their own capitals and to create “soft power” empires. In places as far-flung as Addis Ababa and Astana, Dakar and Dushanbe, high-speed railways and shiny new city centers promise to boost economies and give residents a better life (Appel et al. 2015a), as well as boost a nation’s position in geopolitical hierarchies (Ong 2011). However, it is often ambitious powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey that fund and build these new futures, employing infrastructural largesse to showcase their own generosity and greatness. This review asks what anthropologists might gain from rescaling our study of infrastructures to see them as geopolitical sites that materialize new global imaginaries and become the scaffolding for new forms of power.

At the turn of the millennium, a so-called infrastructural turn gave new life to political anthropology and the ethnographic study of the state (e.g., Chu 2014, Dalakoglou 2017, Ferguson 2005, Fırat 2016, Larkin 2008, Mains 2012, Mitchell 2012, Venkatesan et al. 2018, von Schnitzler 2016, Weszkalnys 2015). In particular, it offered new ways to understand the simultaneous presence and absence of the state (Harvey 2005) and why the state remains one of the primary sites in which yearnings for a better future are produced (Fehérvári 2002; Greenberg 2011; Hetherington 2014; Jansen 2014, 2015). In the context of neoliberal globalization and the failure of the welfare state (e.g., Bear & Knight 2017, I. Koch 2018, Susser 2017), collapsed or crippled infrastructure is one of the main ways in which citizens understand the demise of a state “that works” (e.g., Björkman 2015, Hartblay 2017, Schwenkel 2017).

Anthropologists, then, have investigated infrastructure as something states do for their own citizens and so as a material instantiation of the state as such (e.g., Anand 2017; Harvey 2005; Harvey & Knox 2012, 2015; von Schnitzler 2013). In an *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, for instance, Larkin (2013, p. 327) argues for viewing infrastructures both politically and poetically, where “the poetic mode” allows us to understand infrastructures as “concrete semiotic or aesthetic vehicles,” ones “that constituted citizens through modes of address” (p. 335). “Infrastructures are the means by which a state proffers these representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts,” he writes (p. 335). The focus, then, remains firmly on the relationship between state and citizen, even in cases where the state itself is not financing or building the infrastructures under investigation (e.g., Laszczkowski 2015, N. Koch 2018 on Astana). As one recent article observes, “the anthropology of infrastructure as a programmatic endeavor does not appear to have the strength to scale up in its understanding of infrastructure’s embeddedness into the global economic conjuncture” (Buier 2023, p. 53).

This review argues for precisely such a rescaling. It contends that (a) in order to scale up, the geopolitical needs to be more central to the ethnographic imagination, (b) only by addressing the geopolitical can anthropology engage with the rise of authoritarianism, (c) infrastructures as geopolitical sites provide important insight into the purported return of empire, and (d) studying infrastructure geopolitically challenges us to redefine what empire means.

The aim of this review is to show how infrastructure can constitute the basis of an ethnographic and materialist geopolitics, one that allows us to elucidate the geopolitical imaginaries that shape our interlocutors’ lives while not ignoring the global political economic forces that structure those imaginaries. After all, “[t]oday, capitalism operates in the infrastructural mode. The violence of financial capitalism finds its corollary in the violent rematerialization of surplus capital as infrastructure” (Buier 2023, p. 57; see also Ong 2011). Indeed, this review argues that the study of foreign infrastructural investment gives us important insight into neoliberalism’s

current instantiation as authoritarian or illiberal capitalism and into why this new phase of capital's expansion is both imperialistic and multipolar.

In contrast to the post–Cold War unipolar world of neoliberal globalization, which gave rise to a US empire based on a feeble ideology of “freedom,” or the bipolar world of competing ideologies that preceded it, with its “empires in denial” (Ferguson 2004) or “imperial innocence” (Kassymbekova 2025), today we see an unapologetic return of empire, where the so-called hard facts of geopolitics overtake ideology and new financial instruments undergird multipolarity. The review contends that viewing foreign infrastructural investment as a new imperialism allows us to see not only how states use infrastructures to address their own citizens but also in what ways those citizens’ geopolitical imaginaries constitute, deform, and reform the state in an era when the speculation of finance capitalism so often manifests itself in spectacular infrastructure.

ON NOT SEEING GEOPOLITICALLY

Anthropology has long had a problem with geopolitics, and this problem is reproduced in the discipline’s parochial approach to infrastructure. While anthropologists have often reported that their interlocutors are highly attuned to the effects of geopolitics on their daily lives (e.g., Jansen 2009) and on how they calculate the future (e.g., Oguz 2023, Ulturgasheva & Bodenhorn 2022), anthropology as a discipline has nevertheless struggled with ways to study the geopolitical (for a historical overview, see Bryant & Henig 2027). The local-ness of ethnographic knowledge still pushes the discipline toward seeing politics and power from the vantage point of the nation-state. Indeed, geopolitics is “a phenomenon often relegated to the ‘context’ of our work” (Al-Bulushi & Peterson 2022) and viewed as the purview of those disciplines studying elite state actors and “great power” politics (on everyday geopolitics and everyday diplomacy, however, see, e.g., Billé 2021, Jansen 2009, Marsden 2021, Marsden et al. 2016). Although a small, developing literature has recently begun to point to the need for an ethnographic engagement with the geopolitical (Al-Bulushi & Peterson 2022) and to explore methodological problems (Firat 2022), much conceptual research remains to be done to build an anthropology of geopolitics (but see Bryant & Henig 2027).

Methodological nationalism has also been a hallmark of the infrastructure literature, observed in the way that anthropologists have so often ignored the financiers and contractors of the infrastructures they study. There are two main exceptions to this observation. The first is a growing body of ethnographic literature on Chinese-built infrastructure, reflecting a broader fascination with ambitions of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which examines China’s regional (e.g., Callahan 2016), geoeconomic (Cai 2018), geopolitical (e.g., Blanchard & Flint 2017, Rimmer 2018), or “geocultural” (Winter 2019) power. In anthropology, the literature on the BRI has focused primarily on specific regions and projects within them (e.g., Driessen 2019, Joniak–Lüthi 2016) or on particular forms of interaction around BRI megaprojects, such as trade (e.g., Marsden 2021, Rippa 2020; see also Bunkenborg et al. 2022).

The second exception to relying on methodological nationalism is the literature on extraction, which generally examines the ways in which North–South colonial relations are reproduced in oil and gas enclaves (Appel et al. 2015b; Rogers 2015; Wieszkalnys 2015, 2016), in mining minerals and metals (e.g., Butler 2015, Jacka 2018), or in new plantation forms (Murray Li 2018). “Infrastuctural violence” (Appel 2012, Rodgers & O’Neill 2012) and “infrastructural harm” (Kallianos et al. 2022) are key terms in this literature, showing how late capitalism forcefully appropriates the means of production through infrastructural forms.

Yet assessments of the state of the art in infrastructural studies often note the blind spots of these bodies of work. Rival (in Venkatesan et al. 2018, p. 15), for instance, remarks that in “a world now under the aegis of financialization. . .our anthropological questions regarding infrastructural

investments will have to probe the politics of financing more systematically.” Doing so requires, she suggests, thinking through the various forms of South–South finance. Indeed, while there has been considerable focus on debt-based Chinese infrastructural financing, the singular focus on China obscures South–South foreign infrastructural investment as a new global phenomenon. As Appel & Kumar (2015) ask, “How might practices of south-south finance. . . reconfigure notions of liberalism and empire?”

Addressing this question requires us to see beyond China’s infrastructural investments or the extractive relations of the postcolony. In particular, it requires us to de-exceptionalize China “as an externalized, separate, and self-contained ‘Other’” (Franceschini & Loubere 2022, p. 5) and to contextualize the BRI as part of a global phenomenon of financialization through construction. It entails seeing Russian expansion of Soviet-era energy infrastructures in Uzbekistan and acknowledging that Turkey is the largest investor in Albania and the second largest in Ethiopia and Tajikistan. Doing so, in turn, necessitates recognizing varieties of capital, where there are often significant distinctions between “global private capital’s ‘profit-maximization’ and. . . state capital’s ‘profit-optimization’ goals” (Kwan Lee 2017, p. 12). Financing might include “debt relations, public-private partnerships, state-supplied petrodollars, and taxation half a century into the future” (Appel & Kumar 2015). The Turkish government, for instance, tends to directly fund certain infrastructural projects such as hospitals and schools but often uses public–private partnerships for larger projects such as roads and pipelines.

Acknowledging the varieties of capital also requires us to think about financialization beyond money markets and to look at the ways in which infrastructure, “development,” and authoritarianism become entangled in the material assemblages of financial encounters. To date, anthropologists have addressed financialization primarily as an economic abstraction (e.g., Appadurai 2016; Fisher & Downey 2006; Leins 2018; Miyazaki 2003, 2013; Zaloom 2003, 2006). However, today, “infrastructure is also increasingly seen by governments, private operators and investors as an alternative asset class alongside bonds, currencies, equities and so forth in the financial investment landscape” (O’Brien & Pike 2015, p. 2). This is because “global capitalism is increasingly dominated by accumulation through the control of scarce rent-generating assets rather than productive activities” (Gillespie & Schindler 2023). These often include infrastructural investments that result in the assetization of land, especially in urban centers (Gillespie & Schindler 2023). As discussed below, rentier capitalism (Christophers 2019; see also Bierschenk & Muñoz 2023) goes hand in hand with an approach to the global flow of capital that is both imperial and geopolitical.

THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS AND EMPIRE

In the past decade, popular policy articles along with publications in international relations have warned of the return of both geopolitics (e.g., Bongiovanni 2024, Mead 2014) and empire (e.g., Storm 2025, Yermolenko 2025). Interesting for the purposes of this review is the history of the concept of geopolitics, which has its roots in the period of Western European colonialism (Castree et al. 2013, Gregory et al. 2009) and more recently has appeared as a sign for empire’s resurgence. Although geopolitics was originally a field of study that aimed to understand the relationship between geography and power, in its colloquial use it has become “a catch-all category for international violence” associated with *Realpolitik* and particularly the neo-imperial United States (Gregory et al. 2009, pp. 300–1; on the history of *Realpolitik* as a concept, see Bew 2016). It often “appears as a disembodied term” and “carries connotations of hard-headed, no-nonsense realism” (Hepple 1986, pp. S28–29).

It seems not to be a coincidence, then, that the perception that geopolitics “disappeared” and has now “returned” is so often associated with a particular kind of power politics perceived as

imperial. For instance, former US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster declared in 2017, “Geopolitics are back, and back with a vengeance, after this holiday from history we took in the so-called post-cold war period” (Immerwahr 2022). Many cite Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 declaration of the “end of history” as indicative of the mood after the fall of the Soviet Union and the purported triumph of capitalism, when the United States emerged as the single hegemon and globalization presumably signaled the inevitable progress of democracy and freedom. The post-1989, unipolar world was one in which “there came to be a general feeling, especially in the West, that we now lived in a new world where everybody benefited from globalization let loose” (Bongiovanni 2024, p. 6), making geopolitics irrelevant. Cooperation was key, and the European Union was on the rise. Today, though, not only has geopolitics apparently returned, but one reason we know it has returned is because of the purported return of empire: “From China to Turkey, Russia to Iran, this model of hegemony [i.e., empire] makes serious progress in the name of the emergence of a multipolar world, which these powers would dream of seeing as ‘post-Western’” (Minassian 2022).

This change began as early as the 2000s, when the hopeful mood of the early 1990s spawned “millennial capitalism,” that form of neoliberalism that, at the time, Comaroff & Comaroff (2000, p. 322) argued “portends the death of politics.” It does so, they claim, “by hiding its own ideological underpinnings in the dictates of economic efficiency: in the fetishism of the free market, in the inexorable, expanding ‘needs’ of business, in the imperatives of science and technology.” Their article portended a burgeoning literature on neoliberalism across the social sciences and its effects on politics, the state, and sovereignty. By the 2010s, the general conclusion was that “the neoliberal revolution takes place in the name of freedom—free markets, free countries, free men—but tears up freedom’s grounding in sovereignty for states and subjects alike” (Brown 2015, p. 108).

As we now know, the result of neoliberal globalization has been a return of nation-state sovereignty in a distinctly illiberal and authoritarian form. Indeed, that “fetishism of the free market” may be considered what political theorist Peter Bloom (2016, p. 169) calls “a reconfigured modernization discourse updated for the new millennium.” In that discourse, the assumption that free markets will free our lives “has been transformed into a twenty-first century story of authoritarian progress, where a fiscally self-disciplining state and disciplining international institutions will use their power to ensure that countries around the world develop and prosper” (pp. 169–70). The nation-state is necessary, Bloom argues, because in a world where globalization seems “inevitable,” in which there seems “no alternative” (Fisher 2014), only the state can negotiate the global market and ensure prosperity for its citizens.

In this vision, heads of state become CEOs (Comaroff 2011), while citizens become shareholders. This “corporation state” (Küçük & Özelçuk 2015) dispenses with liberal democratic restrictions in the interest of “getting things done”—developing the country, providing services to its citizens, and improving its standing on the geopolitical stage. Discussions in the literature on Turkey, for instance, have noted that “[q]uite unlike the dominant images of the neoliberal state, the Turkish state emerges as the actor who mobilises capital with specific motivations rather than being the passive instrument of capital accumulation” (Adaman et al. 2017, p. 246). Adaman et al. (2017) refer to this phenomenon as “authoritarian developmentalism,” in which the state delivers “products,” such as highways, airports, and hospitals, that citizens are able immediately to consume.

The corporation state claims to bring services to those who had previously been denied them (Küçük & Özelçuk 2015; on unequal infrastructural provisioning, see Anand 2017, von Schnitzler 2016). The extension of services is in turn made possible by the evolution of financialization, which is increasingly turning from stocks and bonds to land. Around the world, construction companies are “taking on the functions of investment banking, property development, asset management and ‘risk trading’, mirroring broader transformations in the corporate structure of nonfinancial

firms” (Bloom 2024, p. 48; see also Musaraj 2020, Ouma 2014). Commonly referred to as rentier capitalism, this new form of financialization relies on speculative economies in real estate, often spurred by government-led construction of highways, bullet trains, and shiny new city centers, which drive up property prices and make speculators of us all (e.g., Kanai & Schindler 2022, Schindler & Kanai 2021, Wahdan & Elshayal 2024).

Additionally, authoritarian leaders in Russia, Turkey, India, and elsewhere have recognized infrastructures’ future-making capacities and use them “to engineer particular futures into existence” (Winter 2019, p. xiii). When we look at them comparatively, we see that the most active South–South funders of infrastructural development and their clients in Africa, Central Asia, and much of the post-Soviet world are increasingly rejecting Western European models of political and economic liberalization in favor of “local solutions” that emphasize historical and cultural uniqueness (Bilgin 2004, Callahan 2012, Linde 2016, Petito 2016). Such geopolitical imaginaries become concrete through infrastructural projects—particularly spectacular megaprojects—that materialize visions of non-Western futures (N. Koch 2013, 2018; on infrastructures and promised futures, see Ferguson 1999, Gupta 2018, Hetherington 2014). Indeed, infrastructural megaprojects may assert “greatness” and the capacity for a “modern” future even where states do not conform to prescriptive formulae for democracy, security, and economic growth.

Indeed, such states engage in “civilizational geopolitics” (Agnew 1998), a product of the nineteenth century, when “different parts of the world were categorised in people’s mental maps according to the ‘civilisation’ to which people that inhabited that ‘region’ were perceived to belong” (Bilgin 2004, p. 270; see also Petito 2016). Such civilizational discourses explicitly harken back to imperial periods portrayed as less divisive and hierarchical, indeed, as benevolent (Ardıç 2014, Linde 2016, Zhang 2011). That benevolence is nowhere more prevalent than in infrastructural largesse, particularly among former imperial powers, who fund megaprojects that demonstrate greatness and magnanimity. In the case of China, for example, Winter (2019, p. 15) argues that the BRI is an attempt “to reclaim its great power status—both culturally and politically—and overcome the bitter legacy of the ‘century of humiliation.’” Or, in the case of Turkey, infrastructural largesse enables the ruling party “to construct a new relationship of superiority over Muslim nations by imagining itself as their protector and magnanimous patron” (Küçük & Özselçuk 2015).

Authoritarian capitalism, then, builds; it constructs. It does so as a service to citizens but also to spur economic development through speculation and the growth of rentier economies. Additionally, it is expansionist and multipolar and has been at the heart of the return of geopolitics and empire in a challenge to the neoliberal order.

INFRASTRUCTURES AS GEOPOLITICAL SITES

Thus, infrastructural projects are key nodes in the construction of new forms of power. While roads and railways support the idea that political leaders get things done, spectacular megaprojects project a country onto the global stage and spur speculation in real estate. Within the “illiberal international” (Cheeseman et al. 2025) that is emerging, infrastructural largesse is one of the most important ways to construct the patron–client relations that form the scaffolding for a new multipolar world. One way to begin the conceptual work of building an anthropology that can scale up to understand this new geopolitical conjuncture is by viewing foreign-funded infrastructures as geopolitical sites—that is, viewing the practices and orders that make up any site as inherently global and shaped by geopolitical imaginaries. Ethnographically, doing so allows us (*a*) to see how infrastructures become sites for staging new geopolitical futures, (*b*) to investigate the kinds of geopolitical imaginaries that materialize in such sites, and (*c*) to examine claims to empire-building through the new power relationships and subjectivities that emerge.

First, geopolitical sites are spaces for staging geopolitics and enacting narratives of a new world order. The term “geopolitical stage” is commonly used in foreign policy discourse to refer to the ways in which important “actors” (i.e., nation-states) project power, act out diplomacy, and perform geopolitical relationships (e.g., Deleuze 2013, 2019). While the geopolitical stage is a metaphor, we may also see how infrastructures give that stage material form and allow aspiring actors to project visions of a geopolitical future to local, regional, and global audiences. Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, uses megaprojects both in his own country and elsewhere to showcase the “greatness of Turkey,” suggesting that “bigness” itself propels one into a different hierarchical position in relation to other states (Koolhaas 1995, Ong 2011). Moreover, infrastructural largesse builds on the idea that China, Turkey, and increasingly states such as Brazil and India are bringing the same “bigness” to client states that they have used to bolster political power and spur economic dynamism “at home.” Thus, spectacular infrastructures become sites for staging aspirations rather than conforming to the prescriptive claims of political or economic models.

Second, viewing foreign infrastructural investments as geopolitical sites enables us to ask what new imaginaries and orientations to the future emerge through infrastructures that evoke or stand for larger geopolitical entanglements. For instance, one researcher notes that Turkish-funded mosques in European capitals “are regarded as contested ‘foreign territories’; the yards, walls, properties, and daily life of mosque communities turn into spaces of everyday geopolitics” (Öcal 2020, p. 630). Similarly, my own preliminary research in the Georgian city of Batumi suggests that residents view the futuristic city center, built largely by Turkish firms, as a way in which Turkish influence is creeping across the border (on the idea of state “auras,” see Billé 2021). In both cases, geopolitics shape affective responses to the material environment (Dittmer & Gray 2010, Laketa 2016, Williams & Boyce 2013). Such affective responses give rise to collective emotions such as fear, desire, and loathing (Davidson & Milligan 2004, Pain & Smith 2016, Williams & Boyce 2013), shaping imaginations of the future and political choices (Anderson 2010, Bryant & Knight 2019, Stockdale 2015). Moreover, there may be a palimpsest of geopolitical imaginaries at work in any such site. Multiple and overlapping geopolitical imaginaries intersect when, for instance, shiny new high-rises built by Turkish companies stand in front of the crumbling ruins of Soviet-era apartment blocks.

Of course, these examples show that even if spectacular infrastructures condense geopolitical aspirations and become staging grounds for geopolitical futures, the audience perception of that staging is never a foregone conclusion. As Laszczkowski (2015) notes, recipients of spectacular infrastructure often perceive the dazzling changes as having show but little substance (see also Khan 2006). Indeed, infrastructures may breed ambivalence, being sources of pride but also implying social change and threat (Jovanovic 2018). One explanation for this seeming paradox of simultaneous spectacularity and failure may be the “demonstrative effect” of countries on the economic rise. Such countries may be viewed as “works in progress,” making them appealing models for other states that “would be arguably encouraged and inspired” and could learn not only from their successes but also from their failures (Alessandri & Altunışık 2013, p. 9; see also Kirişçi 2011). As one Senegalese minister remarked regarding China, “Beyond just money, China is seen by many Africans as a model to aspire towards” (Crabtree 2018). One might, then, see such new economic powers through the lens of aspiration: states that inspire hope precisely through their imperfections.

Third, viewing foreign-funded infrastructures as geopolitical sites allows us to examine the types of relationships that are emerging and to analyze the extent to which they constitute new imperialisms. The rhetoric around South–South financing claims to develop the client state not through extraction but through cultivation of the relationship. In this new world order, “fraternity” supposedly replaces the paternalism of both Western European colonialism and US-led

“liberal” imperialism. Instead, “brotherhood” euphemizes relations of domination and dependency as equal, historical, and familial (Bourdieu 1977, p. 191). One sees such a euphemizing kinship metaphor in the words of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro only hours before his capture by US forces in January 2026. That evening, he met with a diplomat from China, which by some reports has invested up to 100 billion dollars in the country’s infrastructure, and said in a press conference, “I thank President Xi Jinping for his continued brotherhood, like an older brother” (Liu & Jiang 2026). Indeed, the concept of the global “big brother” is one that is quite common in such interactions and that rhetorically enables and defines many emerging patron–client relationships.

As one recent volume on anthropology and international relations observes, kinship is “an organizing principle and driver in the dynamics of global power politics” (Neumann & Haugevik 2019, pp. 1–2). As the editors of that volume note, and as anthropologists know, kinship is a form of self-evident classification, both natural and social, that institutionalizes trust (p. 5). Kinship also institutes hierarchies of gender and age. Much as postcolonial literature has sought to understand how paternalism worked in the European colonies and postcolonies (e.g., Brysk et al. 2002, Keal 1995), so it is important to examine the work of euphemization in the “fraternal” clientelistic relationships being developed today, as well as to understand the consequences of this disguised or misrecognized domination in the ways that infrastructures are reshaping lives.

EMPIRE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

So far, this review has argued for studying foreign-funded infrastructures as geopolitical sites that condense new geopolitical imaginaries, as well as new forms of power and subjectivity. In what way, though, may we see infrastructural largesse as a new kind of imperial power? And how can infrastructures help us understand empire’s return? Answering these questions requires a short historical excursion into the long-standing relationship between infrastructure and empire. Indeed, a historical view allows us to both broaden and narrow the scope of what we identify as imperial infrastructures and to isolate certain material assemblages as infrastructural to the ordering and centering of empire.

We know that in Western European colonialism, infrastructure was a means of domination and extraction and a conduit for violence. As one historian remarks, “For every heroic accomplishment of modernity in, for example, France or Britain, there was also, across a sea or an ocean, a landscape of parasitic infrastructure” (Christensen 2017, p. 1). At the same time, as Rabinow (1989) has demonstrated for Morocco and Mitchell (1988) for Egypt, European colonial administrators not only built roads and railways to facilitate the export of raw materials but also redesigned urban colonial spaces to make them more visible and legible to colonial control. In other words, colonial infrastructures aimed to extract, but they also aimed to facilitate the routes of power.

It would be a mistake, however, to view this welding of infrastructure and empire as a Western European invention. From the age of the Mayan and Mesopotamian empires, ruling extensive terrains has always relied on infrastructure. While both Rabinow and Mitchell demonstrate the rationalist and racialized ideologies that undergirded European colonial designs, French and British administrators were building on and innovating longer traditions of imperial architectural and infrastructural interventions.

European colonizers’ immediate predecessor in North Africa was the Ottoman Empire. As that empire expanded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, mosque building became a symbol of conquest. Moreover, a mosque was not only a religious structure but also part of a *külliye*, an ensemble of buildings that combined, for instance, soup kitchens for the poor (*imaret*), religious and primary schools, hospitals, caravanserais, and bazaars or markets, among other elements. These

complexes became centers of social and economic life, both occupying the core of provincial towns and cities and enabling their growth (Tokay 1997). Hence, while Rabinow (1989, p. 298) describes colonial Rabat as designed “to be a center of circulation in all senses of the term. . . conceived to facilitate communication among government services and to permit expansion,” Rabinow’s description is also consonant with how historians have described the Ottoman city as one that asserted Ottoman culture and values in urban form (An 2006, p. 66, note 17).

This comparison allows us to appreciate how, in addition to roads and railways, architectural forms and urban design may also be infrastructural to the project of imperial ordering and centering. The ideas of ordering and centering empire broadly map onto Larkin’s (2013, p. 328) observation that infrastructures seek “to organize populations and territories through technological domains” and also that they are “aesthetic vehicles” that “address and constitute subjects” (p. 329). In the Ottoman Empire, urban infrastructures ordered the economic, social, and religious life around the *külliye*. At the same time, the design aesthetics and organization of many *külliye* in Ottoman peripheries imitated the imperial center, Istanbul, thereby serving as everyday reminders of the geopolitical ordering of power. Similarly, in Rabat and Cairo, the colonial reordering of urban spaces was both an ordering of empire that facilitated circular flows of goods and people, and a daily reminder of the imperial center through architectural gestures of colonial design.

We find, then, that “[i]nfrastructures make empires” (Christensen 2017, p. 1) through ordering and centering. Throughout its history, China has used spectacular infrastructures such as the Great Wall, the Silk Road, and the Grand Canal—the last of these constructed in the sixth century BCE—to claim hegemony over vast spaces. One scholar of Chinese empire observes that all were infrastructures of connection: Although the Great Wall appears as a form of exclusion, “[w]e must understand the significance of the Great Wall as a symbol of imperial unity and extension sired by a highly centralized monarchy” (Van Dinh 2020, p. 83)—in other words, a form of centering empire. Similarly, both the Russian and Soviet empires employed the infrastructures of not only roads and railways but also new city planning and district governorates to order and center extensive territories and to shape subjects and citizens (e.g., Högselius 2022, Humphrey 2005, Ledonne 2006, Mahmudov 2022, van der Straeten & Petrova 2022).

While I use these examples to explore empire’s historical reliance on infrastructure, I also use them to draw attention to multiple histories of imperality. It is surely no coincidence that many of the powers engaging in infrastructural largesse today, such as Russia, China, or Turkey, are the former seats of extensive empires that remained uncolonized by Western Europe. They are also states that have historical memories of imperial expansion and contraction. In a recent magisterial overview of overlays of empire in Eurasia, Burbank & Cooper (2010) argue that we need to take a long view of empire instead of a teleological one that sees the nation-state as empires’ inevitable successor and the sign of empires’ end. After all, empires both are the institutional foundation for their successor nation-states and are sedimented in the historical memory of both rulers and ruled. That memory is one of connections that the nation-state has not been able to sever and is manifest in the remains of former empires that form the basis for imperial connectivity today. If the nation-state is, as Burbank and Cooper claim, a “blip in the historical horizon” (p. 2), that is because the memory of empires continues to pervade political imagination in much of the world.

Infrastructures are significant to the political imagination because of the ways that they both point to the past and gesture to the future (Larkin 2013, Weszkalnys 2017), as exemplified in the epochal temporalities that would-be imperialists often employ. The Chinese government has dubbed the Anaklia Port on the Georgian Black Sea coast “the project of the century” (Gambino 2025, p. 183). This is also the label that Chinese President Xi Jinping has given to the country’s globe-spanning BRI (e.g., Oliveira et al. 2020, p. 1). The Chinese government, however, is not the first or only to use this label. It is also a label that Turkish President Erdoğan gave to an

undersea pipeline delivering fresh water to north Cyprus. In this epochal vision, “projects of the century” are daring, risky, even “crazy”—as Erdoğan has called his project to build a new canal to the west of Istanbul (see, e.g., *Cumhuriyet* 2025, *Hürriyet* 2011). Such a description, in turn, evokes the exploits of legendary leaders, such as Mehmed II’s audacious conquest of Istanbul, even while indicating that future conquests will be material and economic. Such epochal thinking also points to durability over the eons of empires rather than the decades of the nation-state.

This political imagination is at work even more potently in the strategic mobilization of history. For instance, when the Chinese government labeled its new connective infrastructures after the Silk Road, this was more than a marketing ploy. In doing so, “[n]ot only had China invoked the romance and memory of the old Silk Road but had also added its vision of a new modernity—of free-flowing goods and services, people and ideas, of ‘common prosperity’ and ‘a shared economic future’” (Bhoothalingam 2016, p. 48). Not only China but also India, Turkey, and other former imperial powers mobilize “different aspects of culture, religion, and history. . . to win friends and build loyalties, and to legitimate expansionist ambitions to public audiences, both at home and abroad” (Winter 2019, p. 18). While client states’ acceptance of these ambitions is debatable, they point to ambivalent views of the past, ones in which imperial powers such as Russia and China may be remembered as occupiers but at the same time are the source of cultural and social forms that unite regions and impart a sense of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997).

PALIMPSESTS OF EMPIRE AND INTERIMPERIALITY

Places like Batumi, Georgia, mentioned above, are today visible palimpsests of empire. The city has always been a playground for Russia’s elites, and its elegant nineteenth-century center reflects a period of Russian imperial investment. Rising behind that city center are towering Soviet apartment blocks, and today the center is cut off from the sea by a Dubaiesque waterfront built largely with Turkish capital. At the same time, only 150 km north along the Black Sea coast, the Chinese government is the main actor in the new Anaklia Deep Sea Port project, intended as an important hub in the BRI. Indeed, throughout Central Asia, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the African continent, China’s BRI results in new highways, railways, and ports, while Russian and Emirati investments prop up militaries and secure waterways. The Turkish government renovates mosques and donates hospitals and schools, while its contractors build new airports and housing projects. These layers of infrastructural intervention may be sedimented into the landscape, visible only to those who know of them, or they may be imbricated in palpable ways, as in Batumi. As anthropologists, we have only begun the task of probing what these palimpsests of empire transmit and transform.

In writing about remnants of empire activated in the present, Stoler (2016, pp. 4–5) remarks, “The geopolitical and spatial distribution of inequalities cast across our world today are not simply mimetic versions of imperial incarnations but refashioned and sometimes opaque and oblique reworkings of them.” More than vestigial traces or “haunting,” Stoler suggests, imperial legacies are durable marks, but ones that are often occluded or unexpressed. Certainly, the ways in which infrastructural projects and their packaging point to the past is not straightforward, as in the example of epochal temporalities that suggest durability and evoke legend, even as the label “project of the century” sounds like bad marketing. In an essay on the remnants of the Prussian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires in Europe, Walton (2019, p. 355) proposes postimperial ambivalence as a concept for understanding “a simultaneity of love and hate, desire and disdain” that pervades “the knotting of the familiar and the strange.” Ambivalence in such cases also entails both closeness and distrust, as well as expectations of failure.

However, while Batumi and other, similar examples present palimpsests of empires, they also call for an awareness of interimperiality, both past and present. Not only have empires appeared

in successive layers; they have also always interacted and overlapped, as they do today. As imperial formations, they have always been marked by “the prevalence of blurred genres of rule and partial sovereignties” (Stoler & McGranahan 2007, p. 8). Interimperiality, then, is a term that “names a political and historical set of conditions created by the violent histories of plural and interacting empires and by interacting persons moving between and against empires” (Doyle 2014, p. 160). Doyle advances this concept as a way to counteract the tendency to view even empires as bounded entities, worlds unto themselves, or to see world history as torch passing between empires, and latterly from empires to nation-states. While relegated by Doyle and other scholars to the realm of history, this concept can be helpful for thinking about differing layers of infrastructural investment and intervention in the present, as well as their power and perception.

In a forthcoming book, Dzenovska (2027) takes the case of Latvia to discuss interimperiality ethnographically, arguing that certain groups of people may find empire inevitable and navigate interimperiality by choosing the empires to which they belong. The book treats empire “as a constellation of dominating and enabling forces that small states and peoples cannot ignore.” Rather than viewing imperial powers only as oppressive enemies, Dzenovska argues that “small states and peoples, especially those on geopolitical fault lines, continuously navigate an interimperial terrain, forging and breaking alliances and pursuing ‘good enough sovereignty’ as a tactic of survival” (Dzenovska 2027). In the current global political conjuncture, this navigation is nowhere more apparent than in the ways that “small states and peoples” accept infrastructural largesse as a way of “choosing” empires, as Dzenovska frames it.

Thus, shifting and overlapping spheres of influence are part of what empires are about; there is no single historical model of imperial governance or influence; and our model of empire based solely on Western European colonialism and its extractivism is misleading (on the last point, see Stoler & McGranahan 2007). Indeed, “making the right alliances and calibrating forms of subordination” (Dzenovska 2027) may, for certain states and peoples, be the only pathway to sovereignty rather than a hindrance to it.

CONCLUSION

In this review, I have argued for attention to foreign infrastructural investments as geopolitical sites, ones that condense new forms of power and futural imaginaries. Those imaginaries, I have argued, are of a still emerging world order that some academics and policymakers are calling “the illiberal international” (Cheeseman et al. 2025, Benson 2026). This is a new order that emerges out of the political ruins of neoliberalism and the authoritarian wave that has literally built and cemented prosperity into the political landscape. “As the capability gap between authoritarian and democratic networks widens,” Cheeseman et al. (2025) commented in *Foreign Affairs*, “authoritarian rule has become easier to sustain and democratic backsliding harder to combat.” In other words, authoritarians get things done while democrats are mired in red tape and the need for consensus.

Studying this rapidly changing political landscape is both urgent and ethnographically challenging. While authoritarian regimes may not share an ideology, they claim to share a vision of a multipolar future, one that is imperial but familial, presumably less extractive and more collaborative. Infrastructure and the futures they promise both order and center these new imagined empires. And as the construction sites for today’s geopolitics, infrastructures can show us new futural imaginaries, new configurations of power, and new forms of subjectivity in a postneoliberal world.

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