



Urban infrastructures in energy transitions: between cure and curse

Thursday, 11 June 2015, 5.15 pm, Grimm-Zentrum/Auditorium

The infrastructures that underpin human settlements – both physically and figuratively – in providing essential energy, water and waste services were until recently largely immune to public scrutiny. They constituted an ‘invisible city’ of pipes, ducts, appliances and plant hidden underground or beyond the urban gaze which – so long as they continued to function satisfactorily – did not attract particular attention. Consumers took the infrastructures they used for granted, policy makers saw no need to question their developmental function, utilities were happy to be left alone, whilst researchers were content to tinker with technological modernisation. With growing intensity since the 1980s, however, infrastructures have been thrust into the limelight, as societies increasingly query their purpose, design, impacts, ownership and regulation. What began with calls for the liberalisation and privatisation of utility services has extended today to encompass responses to climate change, adaptation to demographic change, consumer rights, environmental degradation and development goals. This new ‘visibility’ of infrastructures is reflected in academia, in particular in social science debates on socio-technical transitions. Infrastructures, today, are no longer the “Cinderella” of urban studies (Graham/Marvin 2001).

In my lecture I want to unpack the different ways in which urban infrastructures (understood as socio-technical configurations) are being addressed in policy and research today and, from this analysis, to identify promising avenues for future scientific enquiry pertinent to IRI THESys. To this end I focus on the role of urban infrastructures in energy transitions. I begin by setting up

the current debate on energy infrastructures in terms of contrasting positions. On the one hand infrastructures are seen as a cure to current problems, enabling transitions via technical modernisation. On the other hand they are viewed as a curse, hindering change by virtue of their obduracy and path dependency. From the vantage point of this polarised debate, I then introduce more nuanced approaches to urban infrastructures, drawing on the recent literature to advance a deeper understanding of how infrastructures work in different ways as interfaces. The interfaces I highlight are, firstly, between society and nature, secondly, between provision and consumption and, thirdly, between the urban and the rural. For each I explore the mediating function exercised by – or, at least, attributed to – infrastructures and what this means in terms of their societal value. I conclude by mapping out areas for future research according to three strands which characterise my own research: a) politics of infrastructures, b) histories of infrastructures and c) geographies of infrastructures. Throughout the talk I will draw for illustration on the chequered history of Berlin’s energy infrastructures.

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Location

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
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