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**Published on** H-Sci-Med-Tech (March, 2024)

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Dirk van Laak's *Lifelines of Society: A Global History of Infrastructure* is a book that—echoing the life cycles of many infrastructures themselves—might be read as crystallizing emerging relations and pressing issues of its time, while serving as a reminder that further attention will be required to ensure future vitality on the foundations set forth. The book was originally published in German in 2018, with translation to English in 2023. The preface to the new addition offers examples of world-historical events—the COVID-19 pandemic, global shipping disruptions, the Russian invasion of Ukraine—that have occurred in the interim between the two editions and that corroborate the continued centrality of infrastructure to world events. But reading to fully appreciate the implications of the latest developments requires a deeper critical-historical perspective on the techno-social, political-economic, and habituated aspects that shape infrastructures and that infrastructures themselves shape in turn. This book delivers that perspective.

In the book's introduction, supplemented by a new preface to the English translation, van Laak clearly lays out the central themes. Infrastructures are literally the stuff of how societies work, flow, are organized, and are connected. Relationships and connections to infrastructures are primary among markers of “development,” are key indexes of quality of life in any given place and time, and can be understood as indicators of the health or fragility of societies. Infrastructures deeply shape daily routines and habits and profoundly influence ways of knowing and experiencing the world, including perceptions of time and space. And yet, where and when they are successfully realized and operational, infrastructures are often taken for granted and left unquestioned, largely fading into the background only to be noticed (and then perhaps with ire) when problems or disrup-
tions occur. If we think of all of these dimensions together, van Laak argues, many intriguing paradoxes are readily apparent: infrastructures facilitate freedom and movement even while they entail sometimes intense forms of control and normative prescription; they create dependencies at the same time they open up previously impossible horizons of mobility, connection, and action; they can bring both prosperity and debt; and they constitute both crucial assets and potentially critical vulnerabilities. Framed as a kind of historical survey of these complex considerations—and one that is not focused on any particular location or technology but on these broader dynamics themselves—*Lifelines* is less an attempt to offer a definitive account than a provocation to carefully consider the deeper histories, social relations, tensions, and possibilities at play in different infrastructural projects. The book does not offer an overarching theory or analysis but rather a meticulously sourced and crafted trail of breadcrumbs for approaching that provocation in relation to a wide-ranging array of historical examples. The point, van Laak explains, is not to define infrastructures or examine them through any one theory or category but to “examine infrastructures as parts of a history that has been shaped not by exceptional individuals so much as by the interplay of varied forces and interests” (p. xiii).

Toward those ends and further underscoring van Laak’s resistance to tidy compartmentalization, the book is broken up into two parts with quite different organizational logics. Part 1, “The Classical Era of Infrastructure,” is organized chronologically, focusing on the period from the nineteenth through the late twentieth century. Readers looking for extended explication of specific cases from this period are most likely to find it in this section, which grazes across numerous fascinating examples that could each be subjects of rich studies in themselves. Yet here again the structure of the text resists convention. Rather than offering a neat chronology of any place or infrastructure, the chapters in part 1 trace different periodized technobureaucratic and sociocultural conceptualizations of infrastructure as they come together across the globe (but especially in Europe and North America): infrastructures as central to the consolidation of state capacities, as public works and goods, as central to processes of colonization and notions of development, as radical reconfigurers of space-time and community, as totems of modernity, as geopolitical necessities and vulnerabilities, and as concretizing forms of inertia that can be difficult to maintain and/or alter once consolidated, to name the most prominent conceptualizations discussed.

Part 2, “Nodes of Infrastructural Debate,” then dispenses with periodization entirely to focus on these different “nodes,” or key questions and tensions that cohere in relation to the production, functioning, and maintenance of infrastructures. What are the relative advantages and drawbacks of public, private, or public-private modes of funding and operation? To what degree might the symbolic aspects of infrastructure conflict with and undercut the practical and pragmatic? What different challenges tend to present themselves at different moments in the life cycles of infrastructures? What new vulnerabilities and problems emerge once people, states, and societies become dependent on certain infrastructural assemblages and arrangements? How and to what degree do particular infrastructures change the textures of social and collective life and perhaps the character of social being and connection themselves? The chapters of part 2 offer relatively brief explications of these and other questions, again by engaging with wide-ranging historical examples.

There are some potential criticisms of the book, and they may be especially significant given the temptation to approach *Lifelines* as a point of entry into infrastructural thinking and debate more broadly (as opposed to as a narrower historical project). The book’s stated conceit is to explore “the subterranean social relations that are built into” infrastructures and, by extension, into insti-
tutions, societies, and ways of life (p. xiii). In many respects van Laak delivers on that conceit. But the account offered here does miss some of the nuance and complexity that characterizes the recent infrastructural turn in social and critical thought. *Lifelines* focuses largely on literal material infrastructures and pays scant attention to what one might think of as the affective, social, and lived infrastructures that condition and are conditioned by the material and that are crucial to the functioning and character of material infrastructures as well as of complex societies and institutions. Relatedly, van Laak’s account tends to focus on infrastructural outcomes without offering much sense for forms of contingency, contestation, struggle, or perhaps even resistance that would help us understand in whose images and interests infrastructures have tended to be produced, let alone how things might have turned out otherwise. There is almost no mention of capitalist political economy and ways it depends on and indeed necessitates the production and manipulation of space and time that many infrastructures deliver (and that have been the focus of much scholarship on the social relations of infrastructure). The matter-of-fact accounts of colonialism, and perhaps particularly the discussion of US settler colonial expansion, do little to help us understand, let alone how Eurocentric beliefs, forms of common sense, bigotries, ideologies, and so forth continue to deeply condition imaginations of historically loaded notions of civilization, development, and progress to this day. Some of these issues are no doubt because contestation and contingency are difficult to read from historical records, which tend to reinscribe the perspectives of the forces that carried the day. And, even if thin, there is at least some attention to most of the aspects just named, so these seem like matters of limited scope, not obfuscation. Still, in a current historical moment where the trajectories of radically world-altering things like climate change and artificial intelligence seem to hinge on sociocultural, political economic, and ideological infrastructures just as much as technical and material ones, the task of understanding how historical contestations and negotiations of contingency occurred in relation to infrastructural futures created in specific cases seems more urgent than ever.

Ultimately, *Lifelines* will be of interest and useful for several different audiences. Written as it is to eschew both jargon-dense theory and pedantic focus on any one period, place, or technology, the book offers a point of entry into infrastructural thought and scholarship that educated laypeople and researchers alike are likely to find accessible. It will also be useful to students, perhaps especially those searching for context or research inspiration rather than deep case studies; one could almost open this book at random and find an example, question, or case noteworthy of much deeper treatment, including leads on some of the urgent additional aspects described above, which the book was not able to address. Finally, *Lifelines* could be quite useful as a reference or a primer, for instance, as an organizing text in a course that then pulls out a few of the cases for closer scrutiny, supplementing with additional studies and analyzing with respect to some of the core tensions, questions, and conceptualizations offered by van Laak. On the whole, it is a volume that could be useful in the repertoire of anyone interested in thinking seriously about infrastructure.
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