Cities, Infrastructures and Uneven Development

The Role of Physical Infrastructures in the Geographical Transfer of Value

The genius of cities is on everyone’s lips. The positive effects that agglomeration economies, social density and diversity, external networks and massive physical infrastructures – the built environment – have on economic and social development are praised by scholars and international organizations alike.

There is, however, a dark side of cities’ genius: Just as urban environments stimulate the emergence of the ‘good’ innovation, which drive economic growth, societal development, and cultural creativity, so too they are the milieu in which the “weapons of domination” (Fernand Braudel) are developed, which underlie exploitation and uneven development.

The talk highlights in particular the role of physical infrastructures in the organization of geographical transfers of value. Referring to historical and current examples, it shows that the built environment not only serves as the physical foundation for production, circulation, and consumption, as for example David Harvey points out, but also for exploitation across space.

Christof Parnreiter is Professor of Economic Geography at the University of Hamburg.