

HSS 404 Honors Infrastructure and Inequality in American History

Fall 2023

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Meeting Time and Location

CKB 313, Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:30-12:50

Course Description

Infrastructure systems provide, but they also often divide. This course asks you to untangle this obvious, but often hidden, reality—and explore how various key infrastructures from American history of served some people and some interests at the expense of others. Why is this so? Why does infrastructure rarely benefit all equally? And who gets to decide who will win and who will lose? These questions are inseparable from all forms and specific examples of infrastructure. This means that infrastructure is an unusually useful means of studying the phenomenon of social inequality: who produces inequality? How? And why?

We will tackle all of these questions by way of a series of historical case studies that move sequentially through American history, from the nation's founding to the present. From canals and postal roads that integrated the fledgling United States after American independence to prisons and oil pipelines that define state building today, we will examine how power-wielders have used infrastructure to shape the nation's social, economic, and political geography with starkly disparate impacts. Working first in groups and then individually, students will simultaneously conduct their own research on one of several possible topics, applying insights from class to their own work in real time.

Reading, Writing, and Thinking

This course expects the highest level of reading comprehension, discussion participation, and writing that can be found at NJIT.

Reading assignments 25 pages per class meeting, although some weeks have no reading at all. You must complete the readings for each class meeting BEFORE class All readings will be available on Canvas or via links provided below in the syllabus.

You will also locate your own research materials as the course progresses, which you will need to read and study continuously as you work through assignments and craft your final research paper.

You will need to write continuously throughout term, both in the form of assignments and for your own progression toward the final research paper.

Grading

Syllabus quiz: pass/fail with unlimited attempts, 5% of final grade if passed. This quiz is on Canvas and aims to make sure you understand the course's organization and logistics.

Participation: 10 points per class/20% of final grade. This course focuses heavily on in-class discussion. You must complete all assigned reading before each class meeting and be prepared to discuss 1) what the author(s)'s main arguments are, 2) what the author(s)'s main research methods are, and 3) what insights you believe they produced about the study of infrastructure and inequality. Additionally, be sure to listen actively, engage with your classmates, and maintain a high level of curiosity. What does each reading make you think about? What problems does it identify and try to solve? What is confusing and why? What parts do you not understand? How should we think about future research after reading each assignment? Etc.

Discussion posts: pass/fail, sixteen posts with one omission permitted, 10% of grade. You must submit a discussion post on Canvas the evening prior to every class meeting in which there is assigned reading. The discussion post should 1) identify the author(s)'s main arguments, 2) describe a part of the reading(s) you don't understand and 3) pose a question about the author(s)'s research methods. Each discussion post in total should therefore be 3-5 sentences and must be posted on Canvas by no later than **5pm the day prior** to each class meeting in which there is assigned reading.

Discussion opener: 10 points, 10% of final grade. Once during the course, each student will be responsible for beginning a class meeting with a brief overview of the day's readings, followed by sharing 3-5 discussion questions to start our discussion. **See handout** on Canvas titled "Opening Discussion and Preparing Good Discussion Questions."

Group Update #1: 30 points, 10% of final grade. Each research group will collaboratively answer five guiding questions, and pose—but do not yet answer—five more questions that you decide on as a group. **See handout** on Canvas titled "Update #1" Due Friday October 6, 5pm in Canvas.

Group Update #2: 15 points, 10% of final grade. Working as a group, answer the five questions that you previously posed. **See handout** on Canvas titled "Update #2." Due Friday, October 20, 5pm on Canvas.

Individual Paper Draft: pass/fail, 15% of final grade. **See handout** on Canvas titled "Individual Paper Draft." Due Monday, November 20, 5pm on Canvas.

Final Paper: 100 Points, 20% of final grade. **See handouts** on Canvas titled "Research Paper Overview" and "Final Paper." Due Friday, December 15, 5pm on Canvas.

Course Requirements

Enrolling in this class indicates an intellectual commitment on your part to the class and to all of the learners in it. Please be respectful of each other's learning needs at all times. If you have learning needs of any kind, please feel free to bring them to the attention of Dr. Arcadi so that we can ensure a productive and fair learning environment for everyone.

Laptops are permitted **only** for taking notes or for other educational needs. Use of devices for non-class-related purposes will result in an overall grade reduction of one half-letter per instance. Additionally, please be mindful that some students learn better *without* electronics; if you need to use your device to learn effectively that is acceptable, but remember that others around you may find it distracting and their needs are equally important.

Use of cellphones in class is strictly prohibited; use will result in an overall grade reduction of one half-letter per instance. Assignments handed in late **will not** be graded, unless you have official medical or academic dispensation. Finally, your decision to take this class includes a commitment to **attend every class meeting**; you may have **one unexcused absence**. Additional unexcused absences will result in an overall grade reduction of one half-letter per absence.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

Academic integrity is enforced in this course. Academic integrity is the cornerstone of higher education, and it is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working toward achieving. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following the academic code of integrity policy that is found here:

<https://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/NJIT-University-Policy-on-Academic-Integrity.pdf>.

It is the instructor's professional obligation and responsibility to report any academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing, or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at dos@njit.edu.

Students will also be required to submit their original written work digitally. Student work submitted digitally will be subject to review by turnitin.com, an online service used by NJIT instructors to detect plagiarism, AI use, and irregularities in sourcing and citation of the written word and claims. Plagiarism, use of AI, and/or other irregularities may result in failure of the course.

Schedule

Week 1: Introductions.

Wednesday, September 6: Class Intro

- Online syllabus quiz circulated.

Week 2: Researching + Writing About Infrastructure

Before Monday, September 11:

- Read Peter A. Schulman, "What *Infrastructure* Really Means," *The Atlantic*, 2021
- Read Mary Bridges, "The Infrastructural Turn in Historical Scholarship," *Modern American History*, 2023.

Before Wednesday, September 13:

- Read Rebecca Solnit, "How to be a Writer: Ten Tips from Rebecca Solnit," *Literary Hub*, September 13, 2016 (3 pages). Available here: https://lithub.com/how-to-be-a-writer-10-tips-from-rebecca-solnit/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=How+to+Be+a+Writer%3A+10+Tips+from+Rebecca+Solnit&utm_campaign=How+to+Be+a+Writer%3A+10+Tips+from+Rebecca+Solnit
- Skim the "Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021," also known as President Biden's "Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill." <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr3684/BILLS-117hr3684enr.pdf>.
- Browse the YouTube episodes produced by Research/Craft, a channel about how historians at all levels go about researching and writing history (hosted by award-winning historian Rob Karl): <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLNQvfDJ4LAKhMEgL3SGow/featured>.

Week 3: Some Useful Concepts

Before Monday, September 18:

- Read Langdon Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus*, vol. 109, no. 1 (1980), pages 121-136.

Before Wednesday, September 20:

Bernward Joerges, "Do Politics Have Artefacts?" *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 29, no 3 (June 1999), pages 411-431.

- Discuss research interests and begin to form research groups.

Week 4: Case Study: Early America and Canal Transportation

Monday, September 25: Preliminary research discussion in class.

Before Wednesday, September 27:

- Read DeWitt Clinton, *Remarks on the Proposed Canal, From Lake Erie to the Hudson* (1816) (eleven pages).
- Read Carol Sherriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (1996), "Introduction," pp. 3-8, and part of Chapter 6, "The Perils of Progress," pp. 138-149.

Week 5: Case Study: American Slavery and Economic Growth

Before Monday, October 2:

- Read W.E.B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903), Chapter VII, pages 110-134.

Before Wednesday, October 4:

- Read Aaron Hall, "Slaves of the State: Infrastructure and Governance through Slavery in the Antebellum South," *Journal of American History*, vol. 106, no. 1 (June 2019), pages 19-46.
- Update #1 Due, Friday October 6, 5pm in Canvas,

Week 6. Research Group Meetings during class time.

Monday, October 9

Wednesday, October 11

Week 7. Case Study: Railroads and Industry

Before Monday, October 16:

- Read *Resolutions of the Legislature of Kansas*, "The removal of all Indians...to aid in the construction of railroads" (two pages).
- Read Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Norton, 2011), "Introduction," pp. xxi-xxxiv, and part of Chapter 1, "Genesis," pp. 1-9.
- Read Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (2021), pp. 215-223.

Wednesday, October 18:

- Research Group Updates and Discussion in Class
- Update #2 due Friday, October 20, 5pm on Canvas.

Week 8. Case Study: Concrete and Kids

Before Monday, October 23:

- Read Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (2006), Chapter One, "Reevaluating the New Deal and the Public Works Revolution," pages 1-20.

Before Wednesday, October 25:

- Read Gabriel Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*, Introduction: pages 1-20. Available here as eBook:
https://primo.njit.edu/permalink/01NJIT_INST/j1q527/alma994915932505196.

Week 9. Case Study: “White Men’s Roads Through Black Men’s Homes”

Before Monday, October 30:

- Read The President’s Advisory Committee on a National Highway Program. *A Ten-Year National Highway Program*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1955, pages III-VI, and skim the rest.

- Read Richard Whalen, “The American Highway: Do We Know Where We’re Going?” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 14, 1968 (fourteen pages).

Before Wednesday, November 1:

- Deborah Archer, “White Men’s Road’s Through Black Men’s Homes: Advancing Racial Equity Through Highway Reconstruction,” *Vanderbilt Law Review*, vol. 73, no. 5 (October 2020), Sections 1-II, pages 1261-1298.

Week 10. Research and Updates

Monday, November 6: No Class—work on your project.

Wednesday, November 8: Research updates in class.

Week 11. Case Study: Jim Crow, Jim Code.

Before Monday, November 13:

- Read New Jersey State Bar Foundation, examples of Black Codes handouts (three pages). Available here: https://njsbf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Examples_of_Black_Codes.pdf.
- Read Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (New York: Polity Press, 2019), PAGES TO BE ASSIGNED

Before Wednesday, November 15:

- Read Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, PAGES TO BE ASSIGNED
- Sigal Samuel, “Why It’s So Damn Hard to Make AI Fair and Unbiased,” *Vox*, April 19, 2022 (about eight pages). Available here: <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22916602/ai-bias-fairness-tradeoffs-artificial-intelligence>.

Week 12. NO CLASSES—Individual Paper Draft Due

Monday, November 20: Individual Paper Draft Due at 5pm on Canvas.

Wednesday, November 22. No Class.

Week 13. Case Study: Carceralism

Before Monday, November 27:

HSS 404 Honors: Infrastructure and Inequality in American History

- Read Elizabeth Hinton, "'A War Within Our Own Boundaries': Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State," *Journal of American History*, vol. 102, no. 1 (2015), pp. 100-112.

Before Wednesday, November 29:

- Read Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar America," *Journal of American History*, vol. 97, no. 3 (December 2010), pp. 703-734.

Week 14. Individual Meetings

Monday, December 4.

Wednesday, December 6.

Week 15. Individual Meetings

Monday, December 11.

Wednesday, December 13.

SUBMISSION: final research paper due Friday, December 15, 5pm on Canvas.