

# Infrastructure reading group

Present: Angelina Fisher, Laura Knapen Almeida, Riccardo Nanni, aesaen (aka Asia), Selena, cc, Jenna Ruddock, Yug Desai, Niels ten Oever, Maxigas

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## Book context

Book review

### First impressions

- *Andreas*: Even if the previous book was somewhat disappointing, I recognised the references and contextual knowledge from the previous book in the introduction of this book, which made me happy because it proved that we learned something that stays with us from the previous book, and will learn something like that from this book too.
- *Selena*: Why is it important to claim the firstness [as in “a Bulgarian built the first computer”]?
- *Jenna*: The introduction was too long and winding
- *Maxigas*: Continuity and contrast with the previous book
  - Continuity: problematic of “bureaucratic capitalism”
  - Contrast: socialism was as capitalistic than capitalism
    - \* Raul Vaneigen & Guy Debord (Situationist International): USSR was not real socialism, ust bureaucratic capitalism
    - \* Andrew Feenberg (critical theory of technology): USSR failed because it followed a capitalist rather than communist path to technological and social development
- *Asia*: Argument of previous book: chaotic bureauctratic structure of the USSR prevented the network development – here the author offers much more! The unique perspective of a small state allows a kind of decolonial lens: the Third World was a place for the First World and the Third World could meet.
- *Niels and Selena and Asia*: Paul Edwards’ argument was that both sides of the Cold War constructed their technological systems in the image of the other.
- *Andreas*: The previous book was a too USA-centric view of the USSR, but this book has better prospect because the author has Bulgarian roots but tells the story of the previous generation (including his father). It is a personal story but told with a Western methodology that is contradictory, which is similar to some of our experiences.

## Discussions

### Some personal links of the reading group members to this region of the Soviet Block

- Selena grew up in Belgrade, Serbia
- Andreas in West Germany
- Asia in Ukraine (?)
- Maxigas in Hungary
- Etc.

### What were the stereotypes about Bulgaria in the other countries within the region?

- *Serbia*: Bulgaria is a poor country with good ski resorts.
- *Ukraine*: Bulgaria is where the sea resorts are for holidays.
- *Hungary*: Bulgaria is a country full of roses (industry).

### Balkan as a postcolonial place?

- *Selena*: Urge to catch up with the West [self-colonising discourse]. The usual way to remember Bulgaria is that in the 1st Balkan War “to get rid of the Turks” Serbia was with Bulgaria and one year later Serbia was actually fighting Bulgaria in the 2nd Balkan War to rule the present territory of Macedonia, maybe.
- *Maxigas*: Bulgaria as positioned by the author is not decolonising but decentering which is a more interesting lateral viewpoint. Had similar problem understanding Hungary in the World Systems Theory framework, where
- *Asia*: Continuity of the past imperial, feudal, conditions of the past and the conflictive (geopolitical) conditions of the present.

## Conclusions

We look forward reading this book because the combination of the “small state” and “computer history” lenses are a promising combination for an alternative history that can help co-producing alternative infrastructural futures in the present.