

Editorial

The symbolic value of megaprojects in urban and regional development

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Across both industrialised and emerging economies worldwide, megaprojects have become important drivers of economic development. These large-scale ventures take diverse forms across multiple sectors, from cultural institutions and infrastructure to energy systems and industrial development (Huda, 2022; Lauermann, 2019; Müller, 2011; Sovacool et al., 2023). Due to their exorbitant costs, extraordinary complexity and transformative ambitions, megaprojects consistently attract scrutiny. While early criticisms primarily focused on financial sustainability and public expenditure burdens, contemporary debates have increasingly centered on their symbolic value. Megaprojects serve as powerful but contested symbols, with their meanings evolving throughout the project lifecycle. Different stakeholders ascribe competing values to these ventures, making their symbolic significance inherently unstable.

This special issue advances a new generation of megaproject research that examines this volatility of symbolic value. Through cases ranging from Tesla factories and TikTok data centres in Scandinavia to transportation and waterfront regeneration in Latin America, and from new city developments in China and the Middle East to

global infrastructure projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, our contributors analyse how megaprojects' purported symbolism, as economic saviours, sustainability champions or manifestations of geopolitical ambitions, is persistently contested. Ultimately, the fluctuating symbolic value mirrors shifting visions of urban-regional futures and explains the rise and fall of megaprojects.

Megaprojects: An Overview

Megaprojects are defined as “large-scale, complex ventures that typically cost 1 billion USD or more, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, are transformational, and impact millions of people” (Flybjerg, 2014, 6). They have attracted sustained research attention in global urban and regional studies since the 1990s (Audikana et al., 2024). The pivotal moment that transformed research surrounding megaprojects came around 2008, at the time of the global financial crisis. Prior to that research on megaprojects focused on those in global cities in the West, Middle East and China, the regions that saw a boom of iconic architectural megaprojects. Scholars examined the

conception, design, implementation, impact and contestation of the megaprojects in these regions (Orueta and Fainstein, 2008). The focus of these analyses was on the valorisation of the economic impact of megaprojects, mobilised by the private sector and the neoliberal state at the national and local level. Urban entrepreneurialism often formed the primary lens of such analyses, and megaprojects are seen as paradigmatic examples of entrepreneurial policies aimed to attract investment and enhance prestige in the competitive global arena.

With the financial crisis in 2007–2008, the times have changed from boom to austerity. Megaprojects, while continuing to be proposed and built, have also been turned into symbols of governance failure. More recent literature converges on the theme of legitimacy of megaprojects, examining how state and private elites try to justify their megaprojects in times of austerity. In this “legitimation game,” the symbolic aspect of megaprojects gains salience, as supporters and opponents selectively use elements of local history, regional identity, iconic aesthetics and environmental sustainability to justify or challenge megaprojects.

Contemporary megaproject research has evolved and expanded to a wider range of geographies outside the West, Middle East and China. Emerging scholarship examines megaprojects in Latin America, in relation to urban redevelopment and gentrification (López-Morales et al., 2023); in Africa, in the context of building private cities (Ablo, 2023; Côté-Roy and Moser 2019); in Russia (Kinossian and Morgan, 2023) and in South, Southeast and other parts of Asia, often in connection to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Santasombat and Lee, 2024; see also Shin and Gimm, 2025). Some of this scholarship re-examines familiar topics such as policy mobility, place branding, starchitects and “worlding practices” and identifies similar tendencies of the local elites’ attempt to use megaprojects to represent a prosperous global city in the fashion of London, Dubai or Shanghai. Some examine the social polarisation and spatial fragmentation brought about by megaprojects. Others uncover new themes unexplored previously, such as the undercurrents of populism, right-wing politics and rising authoritarianism.

In the evolving scholarship on megaprojects covering more diverse geographies, the symbolic value remains a focal point of analysis. “Symbols are intended to transmit meanings among some group of agents” (Davis, 2019, 450) and “symbolic value of an object refers to the semantic and cultural universe linked to it” (Bonazzi, 2015, 1), which goes beyond its functional use. In the post-crisis decade, the symbolic value of megaprojects seems to have become more diffused, no longer confined to icons of globalisation, economic competitiveness and local entrepreneurialism. Megaprojects are under more scrutiny today, as they often signify over-spending, corruption, authoritarian governance and environmental wastefulness. Several

countries learned at their own expense that phasing and segmenting urban development may be more manageable than deploying one single megaproject. Moreover, the megaprojects conceived under China’s Belt and Road Initiative are even more polarised and contested. As some articles in this special issue illustrate, what determines the success or failure of a megaproject is not only economic calculus. The rise and fall of some megaprojects are also closely tied to the new international order, and the engagement of the recipient city and country with the United States vs. China.

This special issue aims at contributing to the debate by gathering the latest scholarship on the symbolic dimensions of megaprojects. The central questions addressed are: What do megaprojects symbolize? What are their symbolic values? How are the symbolic values created, deployed, or represented in city imaging, nation building, or even transnational development initiatives? How do the symbolic values boost or hamper the urban-regional economy, enhance or threaten legitimacy of the governing coalitions, shape the sense of place?

Below, we will first review the evolving roles of megaprojects in driving urban and regional development. Next, we examine the symbolic dimension of megaprojects and their contestation. At the end, we will briefly introduce the articles that follow in this special issue.

Megaproject as Drivers for Urban and Regional Development: Promises and Risks

Megaprojects, large-scale and capital-intensive infrastructure ventures, are often deployed as strategic instruments for economic and urban development (Altshuler and Luberoff, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2017). In both industrialised and emerging economies, urban and regional development is affected by megaprojects as complex ventures of 1 billion USD or more. This financial threshold is relevant but we interpret it as a reference to the “magnitude” of such projects rather than a way to filter case studies, as other megaproject features other than financial size are important to explore their symbolic value. Megaprojects are notorious for their exploding costs and are hence often controversial, in different sectors. The range and scope of megaprojects vary. While some focus on single large-scale transport, energy and utilities infrastructure projects, megaevents such as the infrastructure and facilities for Olympic Games (Lauermann, 2019; Müller, 2011), or specific urban revitalisation, smart cities, or industrial and economic zone initiatives, others take on a more geographically spread and multi-faceted approach, such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Deng, 2021). The overall objective that drives most, if not all, of these complex ventures is to initiate economic development, revitalisation

and growth, in an attempt to enhance national, regional, urban competitiveness, integration and, more recently, also to support aspects of environmental sustainability (Eriksson et al., 2024; Metaxas, 2024).

However, designing a megaproject that produces widespread socio-economic and environmental benefits is challenging, in particular, once other highly relevant factors are considered, i.e., issues that relate to budgeting, financing, governance, public engagement, or even potential corruption and political conflicts. Despite these latter negative connotations, which frequently only emerge once a project has got underway, the initial motivation and set-up of a megaproject are usually characterised by overwhelmingly positive messages, and, of course, these usually refer to the great benefits that will be enjoyed universally following completion.

Megaprojects create substantial employment opportunities, both during construction and after completion, stimulating local economies through direct and indirect job market effects (Hodge and Greve, 2007). The construction phase alone generates jobs across multiple sectors, including materials supply, transportation and local services, fostering regional economic activity. Additionally, these projects are said to produce multiplier effects, where increased employment boosts demand for goods and services, further expanding job opportunities (Flyvbjerg, 2014). Large infrastructure developments, such as transport and energy megaprojects, can reinvigorate local economies and drive sustained economic growth (Altshuler and Luberoff, 2003). Moreover, well-executed megaprojects enhance long-term economic productivity by improving infrastructure efficiency and attracting further investments (Siemiatycki, 2013). When securing financing for large-scale megaprojects, foreign direct investment increasingly plays an important role. It enables domestic economies and host locations to undertake ambitious projects that may otherwise exceed their financial capacity, while also attracting multinational firms and boosting global economic integration (Mistura, 2019). This also adds to economic benefits enjoyed by foreign investors due to the move towards the international financialization of domestically motivated megaprojects, which is especially evident with projects located in the Global South (Klagge and Nweke-Eze, 2020). The possible loss of control on the part of national and local government is usually justified with the potential benefits that go well beyond simple job creation, such as more competitive environments that enable business clusters and innovation ecosystems to thrive.

Megaprojects can also revitalize economically declining areas into vibrant, multi-functional spaces that attract businesses, residents and tourists. Moreover, megaprojects can contribute to the establishment of more sustainable urban environments by integrating green spaces, cultural facilities and public transportation networks, all of

which, in turn, are expected to enhance urban livability and social engagement (Johnstone et al., 2012). Many of these aspects need to be problematised as megaprojects mobilize strong political narratives and symbolic power, that is "... a type of power associated with symbolic systems and their ability to impose a particular vision of the world" (Cohen, 2018, 1), that tend to escape the high risks involved in such planning processes.

Frequently a focus on improving infrastructure to increase regional connectivity and to stimulate private sector investments is of particular relevance in large-scale urban regeneration projects. Infrastructural improvement seems to hold immense potential for transforming economic landscapes, shaping urban environments and influencing social dynamics. The scale involved in such endeavours, e.g., transport-focused megaprojects, frequently transcends from the local to the regional and evidence indicates that improved connectivity between cities can bolster regional economic activity, resulting in increasing tourism and local business revenues. After the completion of such projects, formerly isolated areas become more viable for development, and as such it drives urban renewal and economic revitalisation in previously underdeveloped or declining neighbourhoods (Anas and Chang, 2023; Rothengatter, 2019).

Some notable examples are large-scale redevelopment projects, such as the Bilbao waterfront renewal centered around the Guggenheim Museum, which was said to have successfully rebranded the city, boosted tourism and spurred economic growth but, in fact, iconically represented a season of massive investments in infrastructure and economic base conversion (Ponzini, 2010). In other words, the megaproject of the museum and its surrounding area, namely Abandoibarra, became the symbol of urban change but, arguably, it was not its cause. The Canary Wharf redevelopment in London, which reinforced the image of London as a global financial hub attracting significant investment and job creation in East London, raised substantial questions regarding democracy and social justice (Fainstein, 2010).

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) often drive megaproject initiatives. They aim to leverage private sector investment, expertise and efficiency, while mitigating public financial burdens. PPPs are considered favourable due to their ability to facilitate risk-sharing and their potential to result in more efficient project execution as well as financial sustainability throughout project phases (Grimsey and Lewis, 2004; Volden and Welde, 2022). Nevertheless, despite some notable success stories surrounding large-scale transport infrastructure initiatives developed through a PPP model, e.g., London's Crossrail Project (Mboumoua, 2017), there are numerous examples where PPPs have failed to deliver on their promises, even when the economic and political conditions were favourable according to mainstream theory (Codecasa and

Ponzini, 2011). In such cases, public skepticism mounted over whether PPPs can deliver critical infrastructure via private financing while public oversight is still maintained (Davies et al., 2019). One significant concern relates to the inception of a PPP, which frequently involves intricate contractual arrangements, and coordination of various stakeholders that might pursue different visions in the context of a planned megaproject. These arrangements and negotiations can result in inefficiencies and project delays. Another concern relates to issues that might arise in the post-project phase when potential financial commitments by public budgets towards PPP agreements could experience significant overruns, in particular if a megaproject does not achieve the projected revenues. In these situations, megaprojects will compete for revenues intended for other public focus areas, social programs and essential services. The fiscal strain will affect urban and regional economies due to hampering job creation and economic growth (Hodge and Greve, 2017).

Megaprojects are frequently accompanied by significant socio-economic risks, challenges and controversies. For example, megaprojects often require land acquisition, which can lead to the displacement of low-income communities and the eviction of residents without adequate compensation. In some cases, this can exacerbate gentrification and social polarisation (Gellert and Lynch, 2003; Smith, 1989). Similarly, infrastructure improvements frequently do not benefit everyone equally, and it is especially the lower-income groups that potentially face challenges in accessing new and improved services due to unaffordability. The lack of public participation in the planning and execution phases of public infrastructure megaprojects can further fuel perceptions of injustice and inequity regarding the distribution of resources and benefits and eventually result in social unrest and resistance. Thus, public participation and stakeholder engagement are considered highly relevant to ensure the success and sustainability of megaprojects, and the involvement of the public in the decision-making process can further enhance the original vision of a megaproject that promises universal access and benefits (Drazkiewicz et al., 2015; Leung et al., 2014). In addition to socio-economic opportunities and challenges also environmental concerns are frequently discussed in the context of megaprojects and sustainable development (Metaxas, 2024). Essentially, megaprojects might have significant ecological impacts and, in a worst-case scenario, potentially result in habitat destruction and biodiversity loss (Balfors et al., 2005). Historically perhaps a second thought, environmental considerations, especially in the context of climate change, environmental risks and impacts, and sustainable and green energy provisions, are now increasingly evaluated and respected when large-scale development projects are planned and implemented (Lehrer and Laidley, 2008).

Symbolic Value of Megaprojects

As we showed in the previous section, much of the literature on megaprojects is on their economic effects. Moreover, in management and organisational studies, much work focuses on management and cost-related issues (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Flyvbjerg et al. 2003), which is also referred to as the managerial approach to megaprojects (Audikana et al., 2024). Elaborations on the significant symbolic values of such megaprojects in that literature are much scarcer (see for instance Rego et al., 2017; Söderlund et al., 2017; Steen et al., 2017; Syn and Ramaprasad, 2019; Van Der Westhuizen, 2007), which in turn offers ample opportunities to advance this line of inquiry by theorizing, investigating and discussing megaprojects in an urban and regional context. However, we do not conceive of the economic and symbolic value perspectives as a dichotomy. Similar to how Audikana et al. (2024) argue in favour of cross-fertilisation between the managerial and activist approaches in megaprojects studies, we also see potential for economic studies on megaprojects by including the symbolic value perspective.

The issue of uncertainty and underlying irrationality of megaproject planning processes emerged during the early debates of the second half of the last century. The relevance of the political and symbolic dimension was not systematically analysed over the years, despite its explanatory potential. In general, megaproject proponents underplay the uncertainty and suggest planning and implementation processes that are easier than they prove to be in reality. In his foundational contribution, Peter Hall (1982) criticised this approach to complex projects as the difficulty or even the impossibility of knowing all the relevant information before the process starts, potentially leading to disaster (cost increase, delayed delivery, abandonment). Political values and reality checks are part of such processes, but the latter tend not to build on existing knowledge of past failures. Hirschman (1967) acknowledged the lack of information, though suggesting that thanks to the “hiding hand”, large and complex development projects tend to avoid paralysis (that would result from purely rational choice). This benign principle recognizes ignorance as a contribution to action, whereas the actual costs and foreseeable problems would deter rational decision-makers from embarking on most projects. The projects evolve over time and serendipitously may mobilize latent resources and find or eventually, generate new solutions to emerging problems. More critical voices labeled this principle as negative or even “malevolent” (Flyvbjerg and Sunstein, 2016). Ignorance allows for deception and even “lying” on the part of decision makers (Flyvbjerg, 2014). Articulating the role of the economic discourse in decision-making seems a way to expand on these debates and grasp the symbolic dimension of such projects as a potential contribution to understanding.

Perhaps many of these risks are connected to the narratives that cloak megaprojects. In other words, the political and symbolic motivations of megaprojects influence the activation and direction of megaprojects themselves (despite the economic and feasibility problems, high risks and negative effects) and, therefore, may be an important explanatory dimension that received limited scholarly attention.

Symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Nice, 1980) and symbolic economy (among others Zukin, 1996) perspectives help to analyze megaprojects from different angles. The political motivations and real conditions may escape rational evaluations and require explanations regarding technological breakthrough, nation-building purposes, international soft power and driving consensus, rather than only what gets built. Of course, the symbolic value attributed to a project differs depending on the perspective of the individual actors and agencies involved. The latter may build their symbolic capital, referring to prestige and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013), and cultural cache through ambitious projects despite their uncertainty. Megaprojects sometimes get promoted by politicians and rulers to draw a grand picture of one city or country. Design and technology service providers, on the other hand, are interested in megaprojects as mere symbols of technical prowess or distinctive aesthetics.

This symbolic perspective on megaprojects can also be related to imagined futures and visions that are put forward, often by investors, policy-makers and planners (in a way stretching the idea of symbolic policy, see Edelman, 1985). Gustafsson (1983) explained that, under conditions of uncertainty, scarce information and knowledge, or insufficient resources, decision makers may promote policies and projects that are not intended to be implemented in full, while gaining consensus, visibility and navigating in their political environment. Based on a case study of megaprojects in South Africa, Van Der Westhuizen (2007) argued that the symbolic dimension (in addition to economic and political dimensions) has an important, though underestimated, potential in explaining decision making, implementation and effects of such projects. We also see the relevance of this dimension. Further explorations of the symbolic relevance of infrastructure megaprojects showed that projects are bearers of political values and social meanings that can help explain the process, outcome and broader urban and regional effects (Van Marrewijk, 2017). Considering broader global trends in planning, Siemiatycki (2013) argued that certain megaprojects become symbols of success and urban and economic development and, therefore, spread internationally. The question of transnational mobility is recurrent and it is sometimes explained by using reputation as a powerful symbolic means.

Moreover, the symbolic value of megaprojects can also be discussed in relation to authenticity (Zukin, 2011), local

democratic discourse (Fainstein, 2010), sense of place (Ren, 2011) and place marketing (Balke et al., 2018; Ponzini, 2011). The problematisation of the symbolic allows one to observe how project-related and socially shared meanings are capable of attracting public and media attention and, therefore, are used to maintain or consolidate political balance in situations of fragmentation or uncertainty regarding ongoing urban and regional economic transition. The construction of a megaproject public discourse, in general, seeks to mobilize actors and guide future actions even in the absence of urban and regional modifications and effects that can be envisaged according to economic rationality (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003).

This Special Issue

This special issue consists of eleven papers and one commentary tackling several questions that were posed in the introduction. All papers deal with symbolic value and/or power of various kinds, to different extents and in multiple geographic settings. From the papers, the following four cross-cutting themes can be identified.

First, many papers emphasize the role of megaprojects and their symbolic value in relation to the urban context. In their study of waterfront regeneration megaprojects, Jajamovich et al. (2025) focus on three megaprojects in the Latin American cities of Buenos Aires (Argentina), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Barranquilla (Colombia). They show that within Latin America, policy mobility, circulating practices and inter-referencing are used to legitimize these projects, to reach consensus and avoid resistance and criticism. At the same time, the symbolic dimensions of the megaprojects are based on relational and territorial processes and are contested and not linear. Koch (2025) focuses on the symbolic power of sustainability and the related green framing of megaprojects with the case of Expo City Dubai. She critically argues that Emirati leaders use the setting in Dubai as a world stage to legitimize the continuation of a resource-intensive political economy. Stokols (2025) studies the planning of a new city in China, Xiong'an, as a megaproject with large symbolic political power, as it is supposed to be Xi's showcase of the new, leading ideology for other Chinese cities. It follows Deng's Shenzhen and Jiang's Pudong in previous periods in China. Far from being realised due to the slow pace of relocations from Beijing, it is supposed to emphasize a Chinese-style of modernisation and should symbolize Xi's "new era", as a correction to the previous more decentralised and liberal reform era.

Secondly, other papers have an explicit regional focus. With the case of Tesla's Gigafactory in Berlin-Brandenburg, Germany, Roessler et al. (2025) show how large-scale greenfield investments of multinational enterprises, as potential transformative megaprojects, are embedded in regions

to different extents. Moreover, they demonstrate that they have different symbolic values for different social stakeholder groups (economic, political and social) at different scales, which either hinder or facilitate embeddedness. [Hauge et al. \(2025\)](#) analyse the megaproject for a large data storage centre in Inland Norway from a multi-scalar regional path development perspective. They emphasize the role of narratives and symbolic value in relation to imagined futures and visions for regional development. They argue that the perception of the symbolic value of a megaproject depends on the agencies involved, such as change agencies and reproductive agencies. [Eriksson et al. \(2025\)](#) critically analyse three megaprojects in the region of left-behind Northern Sweden. They show that these green megaprojects are based on male-dominated ideological fantasies produced by green heroes who tend to hide tensions by dismissing or silencing feminist killjoys. They plea for a feminist perspective of green megaprojects in relation to their symbolic power, also to avoid green discontent. [Durrant \(2025\)](#) studies the interesting case of the giving up of a mega-transport project, namely the High Speed Two (HS2) in the UK, against the background of regional policy. It is, therefore, a study about the rise and loss of symbolic power and how meta-narratives developed by professionals and politicians shifted over time from celebrating ambition to facing failure. In this case, the role of costs plays an important role as legitimisation of cancellation.

Thirdly, strikingly many papers emphasize the role of the symbolic power of megaprojects for legitimizing particularly political actors. In their study on the protests and attacks of the Mapuche indigenous group of people in Chile against two strategic road infrastructures, [Livert et al. \(2025\)](#) show the double-edged sword nature of the symbolic power of megaprojects. On the one hand, they potentially have the symbolic power to transform societies, on the other hand, they can also become the locus of political contestation and resistance. [Madden \(2025\)](#) discusses mega sporting events, such as Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, and the trend of increasing political resistance in potential host regions due to the high and increasing costs of these events. This has recently led to a decrease in the number of bidding countries and regions. The symbolic value and capital of these events are often overlooked concerning the intangible effects, such as pride and a healthy lifestyle, as they are hard to measure, which he tries to improve in his paper by proposing a more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. In other cases, such as in the above-mentioned [Koch \(2025\)](#) on Dubai and [Stokols \(2025\)](#) on China, megaprojects function as legitimization of political leaders.

Finally, the studied megaprojects and their symbolic power are often embedded in multi-scalar and transnational networks. [Fellbrich et al. \(2025\)](#) analyze the Belt and Road Initiative as a global network of megaprojects by

focusing on projects in Duisburg and Germany. They emphasize the change that has taken place from the economic symbolic value of the project to geopolitical symbolic value. They coin *netscape* megaprojects as megaprojects that consist of strongly interconnected individual projects, such as in the case of the Belt and Road Initiative. In a study of the infrastructural Grand Paris Express megaproject in Paris, [Gosnet \(2025\)](#) emphasizes the internal, multi-scalar state perspective on megaprojects against the background of decentralisation processes, competing urban visions and related intra-state conflicts. He also elaborates on four different stages of intra-metropolitan transition and how these stages interact with the development of the infrastructural megaproject. In her commentary, [Sami \(2025\)](#) illustrates, with the help of a critical analysis of infrastructural megaprojects in India, that megaproject planning and analysis should go beyond linear, hierarchical planning. It should instead include the analysis of multi-scalar imaginaries and networks to get a better understanding of their particularities and transition process outcomes. Moreover, the role of foreign direct investment or foreign ownership for megaprojects is emphasized in some studies, such as in [Hauge et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Roessler et al. \(2025\)](#). In some cases, foreign direct investment and foreign ownership have a symbolic value, such as in the case of Dubai ([Koch, 2025](#)), with the symbolic role of international companies and architects.

The contributions in this special issue adopted and mixed different methods, generally paying particular attention to the mega-project public discourse, planning and implementation processes. They highlighted the perspectives of the different public and private agencies involved as well as of the places and communities impacted by such projects. The economic and the symbolic are often intertwined in qualitative observations but they can become more discernable (see, for example, how [Madden, 2025](#), approached mega-events) and meaningful if seen as processes. Methodologically, this special issue expands beyond traditional single-case-study approaches in megaproject scholarship by incorporating comparative analysis, path-tracing and quantitative methods. The symbolic dimensions of megaprojects, as both sources of legitimation and grounds for contestation, provide fertile ground for comparative research. The contributions engage at least three comparative approaches. The first is individualizing comparisons ([Tilly, 1984](#)), which contextualize a single case within a broader landscape of megaprojects to deepen its interpretation, as exemplified by [Koch's \(2025\)](#) study of Expo City Dubai. The second type is variation-finding comparisons, which analyze two or more cases to develop meso-level theoretical insights aligned with critical realism ([Cox and Evenhuis, 2020](#); [Gong and Hassink, 2020](#); [Sayer, 1992](#); [Yeung, 2019](#)). The third type is relational comparisons, which situate megaprojects within global networks, such as [Jajamovich](#)

et al. (2025) examination of waterfront regeneration across three Latin American cities. Beyond comparison, some contributions employ path-tracing to identify critical junctures in megaproject development (Hauge et al., 2025), while others leverage quantitative analysis. For instance, Livert et al. (2025) assess highway construction in indigenous Chilean territories, revealing that road attacks, more than other tactics such as protests, could more effectively disrupt the symbolic narrative of modernity tied to such projects and reduced electoral support for the governing coalition in adjacent polling stations.

This special issue highlights the symbolic dimensions of megaprojects, how they are constructed, interpreted, emphasised or obscured. By encompassing diverse geographical contexts and methodological approaches, it seeks to advance megaproject scholarship into a new phase, marked by a revitalised political economy framework for understanding urban-regional development through the lens of austerity, ecology, sustainability and geopolitics. In many of the case studies in this special issue, megaprojects symbolize state power in specific regions, nationally or internationally. Different elites in various geographic settings use the grand infrastructure and urban renewal gestures as ways to manifest their power despite controversial effects. Rising costs, uncertainty in the implementation process, socially unbalanced effects, disconnect from context, local conflicts, and other problems emerged—again—from many cases in this special issue. Perhaps the megaproject's symbolic pay-off motivates decision-makers beyond the actual environmental, economic and social effects. In a phase when political narratives dangerously depart from reality, we understand the symbolic as an increasingly important dimension for research to question the status quo and push public debates beyond the official narratives. In this sense, we hope that this special issue will motivate more research regarding megaprojects and other manifestations of power in the urban and regional realms.

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