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Looking Through the Infrastructure Lens: review of Brett M. Frischmann's Infrastructure - the social value of shared resources

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BOOK REVIEW

Looking Through the Infrastructure Lens, Review of Brett M. Frischmann's Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources

Oxford University Press, New York, 417 pp

Stefan Larsson

In a way, Brett M. Frischmann is biting off a big chunk in *Infrastructure—The social value of shared resources* (2012), when looking at the world through the lens of "infrastructure", but it is not more than he can chew. It is a rich book that neither ducks from challenging the disciplinary boundaries of economic theory nor from complex issues of *spillover effects* or hard-to-measure *externalities*. Frischmann's contribution includes the grand task of comparing and analysing the very much different types of infrastructures—transportations, telecommunications, environmental, intellectual—in terms of managing *commons*. He focuses on possible, positive externalities as a field that arguably too many economic writers pay too little attention to. Frischmann stresses the fact that "spillovers matter" and that we therefore "ought to pay much more attention to their creation" (p. 41). In addition, Frischmann stresses, public policy must also pay closer attention to the ends enabled by infrastructure.

Frischmann's *Infrastructure* is divided into 6 parts over 14 (or 15 if you include conclusions) chapters. The *first two parts* are quite dense, at least for a reader not particularly acquainted with more than the basics in economic theory, in that they introduce the topic and outline the theoretical foundation on a quite abstract level. The *third part* adds to theory by addressing complications about commons management, congestion and supply-side incentives. For example, one of the most important challenges in managing the commons, which Frischmann sees in both transportation and the Internet, is dealing with *congestion*, this is when capacity of an infrastructure is not infinite (chapter 7). So far, the level is rather abstract and general, which is why the explicit examples and connection to more empirical phenomena following are welcome when they are introduced. The *fourth part* addresses traditional infrastructure (transportation, communication) and the *fifth*

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part non-traditional (environmental and intellectual) followed by a *sixth* and final part addressing modern debates around, for example, the Internet and net neutrality.

To me, a socio-legal scholar with strong interests in normative, conceptual and regulatory issues relating to the Internet and digitization, a clear strength in Frischmann's book that can be mentioned at once is that albeit strongly relying on economic concepts and terminology, it takes on a very broad costume for what matters in economy. It does so by looking also for those values that are hard to quantify or monetize, and instead of making simplifying assumptions of such phenomena, he sees the economic value in them. The difficulty in understanding them, Frischmann points out, is not a reason to disregard them (p. 43). This is one of the reasons why Frischmann's economical account opens up for a communication with other theoretical strands dealing with social values, shown, for example, in the discussion on "social capital", a concept owing to writers as Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu. Frischmann states that social capital "provides a useful way to think about value creation where social structure, networks, and relationships play an integral role in shaping opportunities and interactions" (p. 47). This cross-disciplinary openness is both a challenge and, as I generally see it, a great promise that I return to below.

Expectedly, Frischmann deals with issues often recognized with traditional infrastructure, such as for transportation and telecommunications, which "are mixed and not optimized for any particular use, user or market" (p. 187). Frischmann shows how these fundamental infrastructural resources generate value for society. I do not focus too much on these here, because I find that the most interesting contribution of Frischmann's book primarily can be found somewhere in the combined analysis of traditional infrastructures and other, perhaps less obvious, types of infrastructure, particularly those relating to the Internet. The non-traditional types of infrastructures Frischmann labels as environmental and intellectual (pp. 224 ff). One thing that may strike a reader at first glance is the broad definition of "infrastructure", and he himself speaks of "viewing through the infrastructure lens", which is an acknowledgement of that it is a bit of an uncommon leap to make. He defends the leap and broad definition with an ambition to "highlight the demand-side similarities and the important, if varied, role of commons management" (p. 225). So, by characterizing the environment and intellectual phenomena as infrastructure, Frischmann can draw a number of conclusions in how these fields can be managed and secured in the combined analysis with traditional infrastructure.

One of the most intriguing parts in the book is when Frischmann addresses *intellectual infrastructure*, however boldly ambitious it may be perceived for both economic theorists as well as those that are familiar with the classical texts in sociology, social-psychology, cognitive theory, sociology of law etc. Intellectual infrastructure, according to Frischmann, also includes language and ideas, which he sees as relating to aspects of "community building and interaction, democratic participation, socialization" etc. (p. 253). To simply sum these up in terms of "intellectual infrastructure" risks being a bit of a crude take on these theoretical traditions. However, I prefer to emphasize that I mainly see this as a hand that is being stretched out from economic theory in order to deal with more socially embedded values that somehow relate to different types of infrastructures. This is

also a clear encouragement for scholars within these other traditions to acknowledge the importance of and theorize about the infrastructural foundations relating to these types of values.

Frischmann circles the topic of intellectual property and seems to see it as problematic particularly in relation to how it is governed, on the one hand, and how creativity, innovation and "social goods" in much stem from a cultural basis of sharing within a commons, on the other. For example, he describes free-riding as "pervasive in society and a feature, rather than a bug, of our economic, cultural, and social systems" (p. 161, see also 269), which could easily be interpreted in terms of innovation. However, Frischmann describes IP as a particularly exceptional case where society employs intellectual property to limit free riding but also stresses that it only *limits* it, not eliminates it (p. 162).

In the last parts of the book, Frischmann discusses the Internet in terms of social media and collectiveness, among other things. It would not be just to expect that the given theoretical agenda should offer a sufficient explanation to complex phenomena like the fact that people in such massive amounts post home videos on YouTube, why some rather unexpectedly become 'viral' with millions of viewers or why Wikipedia actually exists through a massive amount of free labour and what meaning these activities offer for those performing them. The theoretical outlook is not there to comprehensively and thoroughly explain all the different phenomena, but to offer a particular type of understanding of them, an acknowledgment of their value, in relation to infrastructure and the management of it. However, it seems that Frischmann opens for that some of these phenomena pose a challenge to economic theory, which he indicates when emphasizing the need to focus on *externalities* and *spillover effects* and bringing in terminology like *social capital*. It is when he expands the analysis to include "social value" that it gets tricky while still very much interesting. For example, he asks, "what is the social value of the national highway system? Lake Michigan? The Internet? These infrastructural resources are incredibly difficult to value effectively" (p. 367). He acknowledges that his approach "complicates the inquiry tremendously", and makes it "even more difficult to devise formal mathematical models and to develop quantitative measures that purport to reflect value", but still does not find it objectionable. It is in this wider assessment he connects the analysis of infrastructure to the management of *commons* as a principle by which a resource is available to all within a community on (partly) non-discriminatory terms. In order to emphasize a more aware management of these systematic aspects of some of our most taken-for-granted features of our everyday lives, he convincingly reveal some of the benefits of looking at the world through the infrastructure lens.