

# Imagined Infrastructures: Eurafrica and Worldmaking in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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Infrastructures of great scale have fuelled the imaginations of humankind in various ways. Think of the mythical tower of Babel as a human attempt of community building to reach God in heaven which ultimately resulted in the Babylonian confusion and scattering of humankind all over the world. The *long durée* of the Suez Canal, whose precursors go back to the second millennium BC, and which saw several construction attempts before its eventual opening in 1867, is another infrastructural project that was both fraught with imaginary power and entailed double-edged social effects. As Valeska Huber has shown, the realization of the canal did not simply connect Europe with Asia, it also acted as an infrastructural chokepoint that created new ethnic and spatial demarcations.<sup>1</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, many infrastructural projects have been large-scale utopian blueprints to improve human living conditions that could gain a lot of public attention but never turned into reality. Later on, dubbed by development experts as “white elephants,” they symbolized the technological hubris widespread among engineers, technocrats, and politicians from the mid-twentieth century western world onward.<sup>2</sup>

Over the second third of this century, numerous imagined infrastructures, which ultimately turned into white elephants, clustered around the concept of “Eurafrica.” The term, which can be traced back to the years around 1900, basically denotes a vague idea of close political and economic ties between Europe and Africa. During the interwar period, thanks to Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and his Pan-European movement, the idea of Eurafrica gained currency among intellectuals, politicians, and colonial business circles. Whereas Coudenhove-Kalergi and his fellows sought to use Eurafrica as a geopolitical argument and economic incentive for European reconciliation, integration, and community building, other

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1 Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

2 Dirk van Laak, *Weißer Elefanten. Anspruch und Scheitern technischer Großprojekte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), 9, 13.

blueprints of Eurafica such as architect Herman Sörgel's famous *Atlantropa* project, launched in 1932, took a decidedly infrastructural approach to reach these goals. The construction of a gigantic dam at the Strait of Gibraltar was supposed to control and substantially lower the level of the Mediterranean in order to gain fertile land, territorial connectivity to Africa, and energy through several hydroelectric power plants to be placed at the shores of the imagined inland sea. After the turmoil of the Second World War, these political-economic and infrastructural ideas of Eurafica experienced a second heyday during the 1950s and peaked in the so-called association of European member states' overseas territories in Africa to the European Economic Community, the forerunner of today's EU founded in 1957. However, disillusion about this alignment on many sides was not a long time coming.<sup>3</sup>

Both the political-economic and the infrastructural variants of Eurafica have been subject to detailed historical investigation. Whereas Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson use political visions of Eurafica to reveal the colonial roots of European integration, Dirk van Laak highlights German engineers' and technocrats' infrastructural visions for Africa to trace the career of the very concept of infrastructure and to point to the crucial role of these figures as worldmaking public intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> Following in their footsteps, this essay argues that imagined infrastructures of Eurafica transcended the political realm and reached society at large. Their imaginary power mattered because they transported distinct geopolitical visions of an African continent in transformation. By highlighting technical feasibility and economic advantages, these visions carried strong notions of European community building. At the same time, they largely concealed possible societal repercussions for African people and thus helped to preserve well-established ideas of "traditional" African societies.

The emphasis on the popularization of imagined infrastructures has several purposes. First, it aims to bring immaterial dimensions (back) into the study of infrastructures which, particularly in the colonial context, has in recent years been shaped by a focus on built infrastructures, including their materiality, various uses, and social as well as political consequences.<sup>5</sup> Second, by focusing on ways of dissemination and reception within society at large, the cultural significance of imagined in-

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3 Sven Beckert, "American Danger: United States Empire, Eurafica, and the Territorialization of Industrial Capitalism, 1870–1950," *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (2017): 1137–1170; Thomas Moser, *Europäische Integration, Dekolonisation, Eurafrika. Eine historische Analyse über Entstehungsbedingungen der Eurafrikanischen Gemeinschaft von der Weltwirtschaftskrise bis zum Jaunde-Vertrag, 1929–1963* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2000).

4 Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–5; Dirk van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastrukturen. Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004), 12–13.

5 See, e.g. Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327–343; Deborah Cowen, "Following the Infrastructures of Empire: Notes on Cities, Settler Colonialism, and Method," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (2020): 469–486; Julia

frastructures and the distinct worldviews aligned to them come to the forefront.<sup>6</sup> Overall, these Eurafrican dreams are a case in point for taking imagined infrastructures—past and present—seriously because they both stabilize and transform society’s ability for “worldmaking,” to borrow and widen Adom Getachew’s catchy phrase. Whereas Getachew contrasts worldmaking with nation-building in order to highlight the global aspirations of anticolonial nationalists in the age of decolonization, I use it here to coin the activity of ordering and envisioning the world more generally.<sup>7</sup>

To elaborate on my argument, it is necessary to go back to Herman Sörgel’s *Atlantropa* project. Among the infrastructural Eurafrican dreams, it has no doubt attracted the greatest attention just because of its infrastructural boldness. 3.5 million square kilometres of arable land were supposed to be generated by the construction of several dams and the irrigation of the Sahara, and 150 million horsepower of energy would be produced by the hydropower plants—an amount which at that time equalled all existing powerhouses in Europe.<sup>8</sup> However, Sörgel’s concept was not a solely technological project. On the contrary, *Atlantropa* was imagined as a solution to perceived economic and geopolitical challenges of the time. As the Munich architect put it in his 1932 project description, “the final aim of Atlantropa is the transformation of Europe with Africa into a strong and healthy continent between Pan-America and Pan-Asia,” with the effect of “multiplying Europe’s strength and dimension, ultimately turning it into a unified power.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, the great utopian surplus of *Atlantropa* attracted interest among politicians and engineers as well as among architects and writers.

As Alexander Gall in his pioneering study of the project points out, nothing served the dissemination of *Atlantropa* more than (science-)fiction books which put the construction of a dam centre stage. The most successful novel, *Amadeus*, published by the Swiss author John Knittel in 1939, quickly sold up to 200,000 copies in Germany, Switzerland, England, and the United States. After the Second World War, translations into Italian, French, and Spanish followed, while the German

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Tischler, *Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

- 6 A similar argument is made by Ashley Carse and David Kneas in “Unbuilt and Unfinished: The Temporalities of Infrastructure,” *Environment and Society* 10 (2019): 9–28, here 15–16; see also the essays of the online project “Coloniality of Infrastructure,” eds. Nick Axel, Kenny Cuppers, and Nikolaus Hirsch, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/coloniality-infrastructure/>.
- 7 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 1–5.
- 8 Alexander Gall, *Das Atlantropa-Projekt. Die Geschichte einer gescheiterten Vision. Herman Sörgel und die Absenkung des Mittelmeers* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1998), 21–24.
- 9 Herman Sörgel, *Atlantropa* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth A.G., 1932), 115.

version experienced several reissues. Altogether, Gall estimates around 1 million copies of *Amadeus*, which uses a trivial love affair as a background story to explicitly promote Sörgel's vision and to spread the idea of European community building through joint work on the infrastructural extension to Africa, were published.<sup>10</sup>

Next to Knittel's bestseller, Gall identified eight science fiction novels published between 1930 and 1956 that, more or less prominently, featured the construction of the projected Gibraltar dam.<sup>11</sup> The German engineer and author Titus Taeschner wrote two books in a row, entitled *Atlantropa* (1935) and *Eurofrika: Die Macht der Zukunft*, (*Eurofrica: The Power of the Future*) which was published three years later. Whereas the former highlights the realization of Sörgel's vision under German leadership and against both French rivalry and indigenous resistance, the latter places the plot decades into the future: thanks to the construction of the Gibraltar dam, Europe and Africa have been joined for a long time, whereas the Jews have been ousted from Europe and banned to the Asian part of Russia, now a "Jewish-Bolshevik refuge."<sup>12</sup> "Eurofrika" is now in European hands under German leadership and the task the infrastructural penetration of the African inland. By damming the Congo River at several points, a huge new "Congo Sea" was to be created and Lake Chad to be considerably increased. These tasks had to be implemented against the "barbarian" locals, for which respect was out of the place in the eyes of the German central character Sörrensen (the phonetic proximity to Sörgel is of course no coincidence).<sup>13</sup> Overall, the completion of the infrastructural penetration of the African continent would serve the self-assertion of German-dominated Europe against communist and Jewish threats. Taeschner's books harmonized Eurafrican dreams with Nazi ideology and fascist visions of the future. Even though his story went against the official party line—the Bavaria Film studios actually produced a very successful movie entitled *Ein Meer versinkt* (*A Sunken Sea*) in 1935 which featured *Atlantropa* as a gigantic failure—it provided a basis for individuals' worldmaking through imagining Eurafrican infrastructures.<sup>14</sup>

Another great fan of Sörgel was the successful Austrian journalist, energy expert and nonfiction writer Anton Zischka (1904–1997). In his first book entitled *Le monde en folie* (*The World in Madness*) published in 1933, Zischka depicted *Atlantropa* in detail as a solution to the political and economic crisis in Europe and praised Sörgel as a

10 See John Knittel, *Amadeus* (Berlin: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1940); Gall, *Atlantropa*, 151–152.

11 Gall, *Atlantropa*, 153.

12 Titus Taeschner, *Eurofrika. Die Macht der Zukunft* (Berlin: Buchwarte, 1938), 9. Cf. Titus Taeschner, *Atlantropa* (Bern: Goldmann, 1935).

13 Taeschner, *Eurofrika*, 17–20.

14 Cf. Gall, *Atlantropa*, 40, 155–157; on Taeschner in the context of other fascist visions in science-fiction novels, see Jost Hermand, "Zwischen Superhirn und grüner Siedlung. Faschistische Zukunftsvisionen," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 40, no. 2 (1988): 134–50, here 146–150.

“prophet”: “I don’t know whether he is a good prophet, but at least he has a vision.”<sup>15</sup> The book became a bestseller and sold over 200,000 copies, allowing Zischka to become self-employed and to settle in Mallorca in 1935, where he lived until his death. All in all, his literary oeuvre includes more than 50 books, some of which have been translated into up to 18 languages, as well as countless articles in magazines and newspapers worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

While Sörgel was very active (albeit not very successful) to win political and societal support for his project after the Second World War until his sudden death in December 1952, Zischka became another, and perhaps the most important, advocate of Eurafrika during the 1950s. This was mainly due to his book *Afrika: Europas Gemeinschaftsaufgabe Nr. 1* (*Africa: Europe’s no. 1 Community Task*), published in 1951. Again, Zischka’s imaginations of Euraffrican exploitation were based on well-known infrastructural projects, from the Gibraltar dam and the Congo Sea to the Chad Sea and many more large-scale undertakings. To give but one more example, Zischka dreamt of the continental connection of Africa’s railways, including the construction of the so-called Trans-Sahara railroad, the idea of which dates back to the last third of the nineteenth century. Zischka claimed that technical feasibility was beyond any doubt, and he dreamt of massive deposits of coal, phosphates, copper, and zinc, not to mention the estimated 300,000 tons of cotton to be transported from freshly irrigated and cultivated land in the Niger region, between Timbuktu and Ségou. In a nutshell, following Zischka, Africa was Europe’s rosy future and infrastructures were key to its realization.<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly, the sales figures of Zischka’s book were by no means exhilarating. The first edition was to have 14,000 copies printed, and only 6,000 sold after about a year. Nonetheless, the book was quickly translated into Dutch, Italian, and French. In addition, it was widely and predominantly positively reviewed in European academic media like the *Geographical Journal* as well as in political weeklies like *Der Spiegel*, which is reflective of how serious Zischka’s ideas were taken. Following a review in the *Wochenend*, Zischka even turned into a regular guest writer for this German penny press. Hence, as I argue elsewhere in more detail, Zischka’s book was attractive for many different audiences just because his book depicted

15 Anton Zischka, *Le monde en folie* (Paris: Les Editions de France, 1933), 240–244, quote 240.

16 On Zischka see in detail Dirk van Laak, “Energie von A bis Z. Anton Zischka erschließt die Welt,” *Non Fiktion. Arsenal der anderen Gattungen* 2, no. 1 (2007): 79–93; on his positioning towards the Nazi regime, see Heike Weber, “Technikkonzeptionen in der populären Sachbuchliteratur des Nationalsozialismus. Die Werke von Anton Zischka,” *Technikgeschichte* 66 (1999): 205–236.

17 Anton Zischka, *Afrika. Europas Gemeinschaftsaufgabe Nr. 1* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1951), 70–71. On the history of the Trans-Saharan Railroad, see Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 199–202.

Eurafrica as a crude mixture of a technocratic development project, an apology of colonial politics, and a German large-scale fantasy. Ultimately, Zischka blended all the dominant conceptions of the relationship between the two continents that had unfolded since the interwar period into a grand Eurafrikan peace project under European leadership.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, he created an intellectual space for individual worldmaking.

At the same time, Zischka's imagined infrastructures omitted any true reflection of the actual future of African societies. Consequences of his infrastructural dreams for the local populations were hardly mentioned in the book. As a staunch defender of racial hierarchies, Zischka argued for the separation of living and working environments between Whites and Blacks. While he acknowledged that modernization was under way and that Africans had in principle the right to benefit from it, he was at the same time convinced that "peasant activities remain the norm for native Africans."<sup>19</sup> Zischka's intention to disseminate stereotypical images of "traditional" African societies became crystal clear in one of his follow-up articles in the penny press *Wochenend*. Entitled *Ur-Afrika lebt weiter...* (*Primordial Africa is Alive...*), Zischka explicitly juxtaposed the most vulgar clichés of uncivilized, wild, and even cannibalistic Africans with modern infrastructure built by European colonial powers for a White population.<sup>20</sup>

These Eurafrikan visions of the mid-twentieth century and their popularization have shown that imagined infrastructures mattered. They mattered because they offered multiple possibilities to both consolidate and transform the worldmaking of a broad German and European readership of fiction and nonfiction literature as well as of highbrow to lowbrow print media. Thus, imagined infrastructures raised the possibility of envisioning the world and of intellectually arranging spatial belonging and demarcation.

Relating this practice to Benedict Anderson's famous *Imagined Communities*, imagined infrastructures can and should be studied as one mechanism or "style," as Anderson puts it, to create community.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Eurafrika, Knittel and Zischka even explicitly pinned their hopes in the practical infrastructural work to create a European community. However, imagined (as well as realized) infrastructures might also entail destructive effects for communities, as the introductory examples of the Babel Tower and the Suez Canal have already indicated, and the

18 Martin Rempe, "Think Global: Anton Zischka, Eurafrika and His Followers," in *France, Allemagne, Afrique: représentations, transferts, relations / Frankreich, Deutschland, Afrika. Repräsentationen, Transfers, Beziehungen*, eds. Emmanuel Droit, Anne Kwaschik, and Silke Mende (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2023 forthcoming).

19 Zischka, *Afrika*, 254–256, quote 255.

20 See Anton Zischka, "Ur-Afrika lebt weiter..." *Wochenend* no. 3 (14 January 1953): 3.

21 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]), 5–7, quote 6.

Eurafrican dreams prove in detail. Worldmaking through Eurafrikan infrastructure concerned primarily imagining only Europe's geopolitical and economic future, first under Nazi domination and later, during the early Cold War, as a third force between the superpowers, leaving Africa and its populations out of the picture.

Another slight difference of imagined infrastructures to Anderson's framing concerns their temporality. Of course, the practice of imagining has its reference point in the past present. However, while Anderson's nations are thought of as immortal, fusing past, present, and future, imagined infrastructures were specifically focused on one of these temporalities. They were either oriented to the remote past, as in the case of the Tower of Babel, to the past present, as in the case of the Suez Canal, or to the past future, as in the case of Eurafrika. To what extent these specific temporalities affected the imaginary power might be an interesting question to follow up.<sup>22</sup> Finally, in the light of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013 and includes the African continent as well and is perhaps the biggest infrastructural vision the world has ever seen, research interest in imagined infrastructures should not be relegated to the past. On the contrary, the new "Silk Road" not only testifies to the continuity (or return) of large-scale infrastructural projects till now, but should also make us keep track of both the realized and the imagined parts of the initiative.<sup>23</sup> In the end, as this brief essay has sketched out, studying infrastructures in all its consequences can only work by reflecting on both dimensions at once.

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22 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11–12, 36.

23 Seth Schindler, Simin Fadaee, and Dan Brockington, "Contemporary Megaprojects: An Introduction," *Environment and Society* 10 (2019): 1–8; on the African dimension of this initiative, see Yunnan Chen, "Silk Road to the Sahel: African Ambitions in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Policy Brief*, no. 23 (2018): 1–4.

