The Politics of Infrastructure

Instructor: Danya Glabau

Mondays, 6:30-9:30, May 2-23, 2016
The Brooklyn Commons, 388 Atlantic Avenue in Boerum Hill

What does it take to build an infrastructural system? What kind of norms do infrastructures enforce, and what kinds of people do they allow to thrive? What happens when infrastructure starts to break down, or prove inadequate in the face of disaster? What do infrastructures teach us? And what kind of world do they make possible? This four-week seminar pulls back the curtain to reveal the people, processes, and values that shape the infrastructures of modern life, and how these systems simultaneously provide opportunities for and place constraints on social life. Course readings will examine many kinds of infrastructural systems, including transportation systems, water systems, the internet, and financial markets. Students will read canonical theorists like Louis Althusser, James Scott, and Michel Foucault alongside scholars in Science and Technology studies, including Susan Leigh Star’s work on the ethnography of infrastructure, Langdon Winner’s well-known essay “Do Artefacts Have Politics?”, Trevor Pinch’s work on the social construction of technology, and Paul Edwards’ work on infrastructure and modernity, to guide our critical engagement with real-world infrastructural systems.

This seminar offers crucial insights for anyone interested in how built environments shape our social lives, including designers, scholars, artists, practitioners (from workers to developers to
engineers to entrepreneurs), and interested citizens of every stripe. Supplemental materials on the methods of critically studying and designing infrastructures will be available.

Course Logistics

Texts. All texts will be provided as PDFs via email and/or the course Facebook page.

Participation. This is a discussion-based, seminar style class. Having the chance to participate in good conversation about difficult texts is (I hope!) why you signed up! Participating is easy: come to class having read the day’s readings and contribute to the group discussion in a constructive, supportive, generative manner. If something is preventing you from participating in the way you want to, please let me know and we’ll troubleshoot.

In addition to in-class discussion, we will have a closed class Facebook group. This will allow us to share reflections on the reading as we do them. It is expected that you will contribute to online discussions in a significant way at least once per week. These online discussions will become part of our weekly class meetings to the extent that there is interest in further delving into the issues they raise.

Reading. Reading is the basis for discussion, so it’s important to do it. The readings are designed to be a manageable amount for busy but motivated people, which we all are. Reading is a practice, one with which we all have different histories. In this class, I hope to read closely and generatively, seeking first to understand precisely what the author is saying and then to figure out where it stands in relation to other texts, to our lives, and to our world. To this end, we’ll talk about our visceral reactions to the reading and read passages closely together in addition to reading on our own prior to class.

As we encounter different authors and traditions we will discuss some of their methodological and disciplinary conventions as well as the theoretical points they open up about science and technology in the modern world. All of this is to say that you can – and should – bring up any questions or critiques of the authors’ various methodologies and conventions as well as questions about the content itself. Some weeks will more obviously encourage these reflections than others, but with a reading list like this it can be helpful to always keep these issues in the back of your mind.
Course Plan

NB: A syllabus is a plan, not a promise. It is always subject to change based on class preferences and logistical constraints. While it’s highly unlikely that we will add any mandatory materials, please feel free to contribute suggestions for supplementary material to me or on the class Facebook page.

Technological Systems

Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker – The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts

Langdon Winner – Do Artefacts Have Politics?


Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift – Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance [excerpts]

Subjectivity and Subjectification

Michel Foucault – Discipline and Punish [excerpts]

Ian Hacking – Making Up People

Judith Treas – Age in Standards and Standards in Age: Institutionalizing Chronological Age as Biographical Necessity

Louis Althusser – Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses [excerpt]

Scale and Quantification

Susan Leigh Star – Power, Technology and the Phenomenology of Conventions: On Being Allergic to Onions

Michel Foucault – Security, Territory, Population [excerpt]

Mary Douglas – Faith, Hope and Probability (review of Ian Hacking’s The Taming of Chance)

Francois Ewald – Insurance and Risk

Infrastructure and Modernity
Timothy Mitchell – Can the Mosquito Speak?

James Scott – The High-Modernist City: An Experiment and a Critique, from Seeing Like a State

Bruno Latour – Ethnography of a "High-tech" Case – about Aramis –

Supplemental Reading: How to Study Infrastructural Systems


