Anthropology and Sociology

Academic year 2020-2021

Concrete Politics: the anthropology of infrastructures and development

ANSO135 - Autumn - 3 ECTS
(S1) Monday 9 November 12:15-16:00
(S1) Wednesday 11 November 14:15-18:00
(S1) Monday 16 November 12:15-16:00
(S1) Wednesday 18 November 14:15-16:00

Course Description

This course investigates the various ways in which anthropology seeks to apprehend the built environment and infrastructures as materialising political projects and forms of power and control, but also as technologies of enchantment and objects of desire and aspiration. We also examine their flipside, and the affective charge of buildings as melancholic objects of ruination, materialising the debris of capitalism and collapsed futures.

Syllabus

Course overview

Drawing on close readings and discussions of texts mainly from anthropology, but also from STS, history, geography, and urban studies, students should come out with a firm knowledge of the social and political potency and supposed developmental benefits of infrastructures, and the different conceptual approaches to make sense of them.

We will look at roads, ports/airports, power plants and dams, as well as urban housing projects, and reflect on how visual methods can help us analyse and interpret them. We’ll think about the rise of Dubai Modernity and World Class cities by looking at ambitious urban development projects such as the construction of ‘new centralities’, and grand ‘waterfronts’. We’ll also look at the material and aesthetic qualities of different building materials like wood, stone and cement, and at the techno-politics of service infrastructures such as electricity, water, and sewage.

The course will be structured into four intensive meetings, or seven sessions – three half days consisting of two double sessions, plus a conclusive session. Each session includes a brief lecture part, and then extensive group discussions based on readings and reading notes prepared by the students. All but the first session will also include student presentations on selected topics/case studies.
This is a discussion seminar, and your learning success depends on commitment and involvement of all participants. This only works if you arrive well-prepared, and actively participate in the discussions and listen to your peers.

The reading list includes core readings per session that all students are expected to read and prepare for discussion — these are normally two journal articles or book chapters, though in some sessions we will rely on shorter, alternative forms of conveying analytical insights to academic and non-academic audiences (online resources, shorter posts, etc.). In addition, students in teams of two will lead the discussion based on a selection of suggested readings. I will allocate these topics/sessions prior to our meetings — you may e-mail me a preference by the end of September, though depending on sign-up and interests, I cannot guarantee you will be allocated the topic of your choice. Finally, the syllabus also includes additional readings for those wishing to explore a certain topic in greater depth (for their essay, for example).

Course evaluation

Students will be assessed based on their participation to discussions in class, including their reading notes/response papers (30%); their short presentations/leading of the discussion (20%); and a final 2,000-word photo essay (50%). More precisely students are expected to:

- **Read the core readings** for each session. I will pre-circulate questions to help you prepare for our discussion in class, but you should always be ready to answer basic questions, such as: What is the main point(s) or argument(s) of this text? What are the stakes of the argument, or why, according to the author, does this argument matter? What kind of evidence does the author use to make their points/arguments?

- **Write brief response papers** to the core readings for every session in which you are NOT leading the discussion. Posts are due on Moodle by 2 pm the day before class. Aim for 500 words; do not exceed 600 words. You can assume that we’ve all read the texts, so do not summarize the readings. Instead, pick a theme that cuts across several of the readings and engage with that theme analytically, drawing on examples from the texts. These posts should be carefully written and argued.

- **Lead the discussion** for one session. For one session, you, together with one or two fellow students, will be in charge of leading the discussion via a selection of suggested readings. You should each aim to read one additional article (different articles each presenter; I am also open to your own suggestions if discussed with me beforehand).

- For your presentation, write a brief (500-800-word) post that links your readings to the core readings, which should also be uploaded to Moodle by 2 pm the day before class.

- Together with your presentation partner(s), prepare a 1-page handout as an aid to class discussion. This handout should list what you consider to be the three or four most significant analytical points for the week’s common reading. For each point, add a brief comment linking it to the background reading done by you and your partner(s). The handout should also offer 2-3 questions designed to provoke class discussion. Write the handout in outline or bulleted form (rather than continuous prose). Do not exceed 1 page. Please bring enough paper copies of the handout to distribute to all class members — though feel free to also select visual materials to illustrate your points, and put them up on Moodle before class.

- **A 2,000-word photo essay.** The topic is up to you, though it must fit within the ambit of the course, but your piece should be modelled on the shorter pieces and posts we will read in class (some examples are also included at the end of the syllabus).

- You should seek to blend your text and the images to tell a compelling story (using about 5-8 photos/images/maps). Given the current situation and course format, I do evidently not expect original photos for this; rather, you may source these from the internet with proper attribution of the source. We will discuss this assignment further in class.
To kick-start your thinking and our discussion, I ask you to find a photo that represents ‘Concrete Politics’ in the Global South to you and share this with the group (see session 1, below, for details).

Topics should be discussed and cleared with the instructor via a 250-400-word abstract and provisional bibliography of 6-8 titles, no later than 1 Dec.; hand-in date for the essay is XXX.

Course Policies

- Papers should be written in English or French, double-spaced, set in 12-point Times New Roman, with 1-inch margins.
- Quotations and bibliography must follow the Chicago Manual of Style or the Harvard Referencing System.
- Students must hand in papers on time electronically as a Word file (no need to provide a hard copy). Papers that are sent late without a valid reason or importantly exceed the word limit will not receive a grade higher than 4.0.
- Papers for this course will take the form of a 2,000-word photo essay (details to follow in the course). Word limits must be adhered to within +/- 10%. Word limits exclude references.
- Students who missed more than one session without being excused by the instructor will not receive a grade higher than 4.0.
- Plagiarism constitutes a breach of academic integrity and will not be tolerated. Students who present the work of others as their own will receive a 0.
- Assigned readings will be made available as electronic reserve on the class’ website.

Sessions and readings

**Wednesday 11 November 14:15-18:00**

**Session 1: 14:15-16:00 — Conceptual Bases // Thinking Visually**

**Core readings**


**Additional readings**

No student-led discussion for Session 1: rather, read EITHER de Boeck or Hoffmann and find a photo that represents an aspect of Concrete Politics in the Global South of particular interest to you. Upload the highest-resolution version you can find to the Moodle folder for this session by 2pm, and include a brief caption (photographer and source, plus a c. 25-word description). Please look at the other photos before the session, so that we can discuss them together.


**Session 2: 16:15-18:00 — Transport infrastructures**
Core readings


Please also read at least one of these, they are short posts.


Suggested readings for the discussion


Additional readings


Thursday 12 November 14:15-18:00

**Session 3: 14:15-16:00 — Urban development**

**Core readings**


**Suggested readings for the discussion**


**Additional readings**


**Session 4: 16:15-18:00 — Service delivery and infrastructural publics**

**Core readings**


**Suggested readings for the discussion**


**Additional readings**


---

**Wednesday 18 November 14:15-18:00**

**Session 5: 14:15-16:00 — Infrastructures of Extractivism & Climate Change**

**Core readings**


**Suggested readings for the discussion**


**Additional readings**


**Briefings/short posts:**


**Session 6: 16:15-18:00 — Infrastructures of Security, Migration & Health**

**Core readings**


**Suggested readings for the discussion**


**Additional readings**


Thursday 19 November 14:15-16:00

**Session 7: 14:15-16:00 — Financing Infrastructures; Politics by Concrete Design**

**Core readings** (read the short piece by Laura Bear first, then read the other to think about the different modes of finance and planning and the infrastructure politics they produce).


**Suggested readings for the discussion**


**Additional readings**

Bogaert, Koenraad. 2018. *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press. (Especially Ch. 5 and 6)

Mattioli, Fabio. 2020. *Dark Finance: Illiquidity and Authoritarianism at the Margins of Europe*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. (Especially Ch. 2 and 6)
Possible inspiration for your visual essay:

