Forest Cartographies

Mapping Amazonian Urbanities and the Politics of Nature

Later, little by little, they disband and disperse. Following the current, which straightens out from the meanders, they go in single file, or one by one at random, processionally, to the river below, descending, descending, ever descending.

Euclides da Cunha, ‘Entre os serigais’

Instructors:  
Bruno Bosteels  bosteels@cornell.edu  
Tao DuFour  dufour@cornell.edu  

Meeting times:  
Thursdays, 2:30pm – 4:25pm  

Class location:  
East Sibley Hall, Room 142
II. Course Aims and Objectives

This seminar explores the relationship between the economies of emerging cities and the urbanization of fundamental historical ecologies. The seminar focuses on the geographical context of the Brazilian Amazon and the conditions of its urbanization, occasionally in dialogue with ongoing political processes in neighboring Bolivia. The urbanization that is characteristic of the Amazon rainforest is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon. It involves dimensions extending from the pole of industrial resource extraction and the resultant formation of advanced capitalist economies in the heart of the forest, to the fragile continuity of the traditions of indigenous societies whose economic structures and spatial environments are experienced as fundamentally intertwined with ritual and mythic horizons. Uniquely, global and local interests converge within an ecological territory of extraordinary biotic, historical and cultural differentiation. Through a process of mapping geographical, morphological and ecological transformations of urban and corresponding hinterland environments over time, students will develop a geo-spatial understanding of the nature of the formation of territorial frontiers that extend beyond the physical limits of cities. These frontiers emerge as a function of purely urban economic and political interests. Underlying this geo-spatial territorial expansion and, to a more limited extent contraction of urban generated frontiers is an ontology, whose manifestation is in the form of a political economy. In order to interrogate this urban driven form of spatial and territorial expansion in the Amazon, the seminar will inquire into the political economies that motivate it, and thus the orienting ontology, specifically, the ontological assumptions about the meaning and significance of the natural world. In so far as the rainforest remains the habitus of indigenous societies, the seminar will in contrast explore their ontologies, specifically, their manifest conceptions of human/non-human relations that take the form of spatial practices and technologically mediated appropriations of the environment.

Anthropologists have proposed that Amerindian understandings and technological manipulations of the natural world have historically contributed to the enrichment, rather than effacing, of biotic diversity, to the extent that the very constitution of large areas of rainforest are anthropogenic. In proposing a theoretical framework of ontological plurality, the seminar aims to explore the possibility for an engagement between modern economic conceptions and technological transformations of the space of ‘nature’ – conceived ontologically as inanimate and determined by relations of empirical causality, thus able to serve as pure resource – and Amerindian understandings and technical practices through which the spatiality of the natural world is understood as essentially animated. By considering ontological plurality at the level of spatial practices and technologies, the seminar aims to explore the possibility of complementarity between the global industrial economic tendency toward urbanization and ‘modernizing’, and the local, traditional orientation toward ‘ecologizing’ as the basis for an imagined political economy that is at the same time a politics of ecology.

III. Format and Procedures:

The seminar will be organized in a series of clusters with an interdisciplinary focus combining elements of architecture, ethnography, anthropology, cartography, political economy, and political philosophy. Clusters include theories of urbanization; nature/culture and human/nonhuman dualisms and critique; life-world and intentionality; commune, community, and state; primitive accumulation and neoeextractivism; geophilosophy and cognitive mapping; human ecology and the Anthropocene.

IV. Assumptions

Since this is an experimental graduate seminar that uses the topic of urbanization as a vehicle to question broader topics of a theoretical and philosophical nature, we expect students to research on their own the issues that they want to investigate in the framework provided in the different course clusters. Since this course brings together humanities, architecture and art, we also assume and expect that the students will engage with a variety of disciplinary perspectives beyond their individual specialties and comfort zones.

V. Course Requirements:
1. Class attendance and participation policy: attendance and participation is expected of all students at all times

2. Course readings:
   (a) Required readings: as per course schedule for each week
   (b) Internet resources:
       http://www.usgs.gov/
       http://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/
       http://infoamazonia.org/datasets
       http://www.inpe.br/ingles/
       http://raisg.socioambiental.org/

3. This is a 4 credit course.

4. Additional requirements:
   (a) Equipment needed for course (and estimated expenses): As per student project proposals. ArcGIS software is available through Cornell AAP IT Services. Students should also acquire photographic equipment and possible film/video equipment to document conditions of interest during the field trip.
   (b) Expected travel for course (and expected expenses not covered by Dept.): see your respective department administrators for details about the fieldtrip planning and costs.

VI. Grading Procedures:
(a) Attendance and active participation in class discussions: 40%
(b) Final project, which can be a mapping project, film or photographic essay, research paper, or other, to be discussed in advance with the instructors: 60%
For details of Cornell University grading criteria see: http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/pdfs/CUgrading.pdf

VII. Academic Integrity
Each student in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity.
http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/Academic/AIC.html
Any work submitted by a student in this course for academic credit will be the student's own work, except in the cases of projects that are specifically structured as group endeavors.
You are encouraged to study together and to discuss information and concepts covered in lecture and the sections with other students. You can give "consulting" help to or receive "consulting" help from such students.
However, this permissible cooperation should never involve one student having possession of a copy of all or part of work done by someone else, in the form of an e mail, an e mail attachment file, a diskette, or a hard copy.
Should copying occur, both the student who copied work from another student and the student who gave material to be copied will both automatically receive a zero for the assignment. Penalty for violation of this Code can also be extended to include failure of the course and University disciplinary action.
During examinations, you must do your own work. Talking or discussion is not permitted during the examinations, nor may you compare papers, copy from others, or collaborate in any way. Any collaborative behavior during the examinations will result in failure of the exam, and may lead to failure of the course and University disciplinary action.

VIII. Accommodations for students with disabilities
In compliance with the Cornell University policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. Requests for academic accommodations are to be made during the first three weeks of the semester, except for unusual circumstances, so arrangements can be made. Students are encouraged to register with Student Disability Services to verify their eligibility for appropriate accommodations.

IX. Tentative Course Schedule (May change to accommodate guest presenters & student needs):

Week 1 1/28
BB + TD
Introduction to the course: topic, themes, technique


Week 2  
2/4

TD
Theme: Toward a philosophical interpretation of ‘historical ecology’.

Week 3  
2/11
BB
Theme: Marx and primitive accumulation.

Week 4  
2/18 [February Break 2/13 – 2/16]
Workshop on geographical information systems (GIS) and remote sensing software – ArcGIS / invited specialist.

Week 5 2/25
Student preliminary presentations.

Week 6 3/3
TD
Theme: Epistemology and the constitution of ‘the savage mind’.

Week 7 [Field trip to Amazonas 3/4 – 3/13]

Week 8 3/17
TD
Theme: Ontology and the phenomenology of ‘wild being’.

Week 9 3/24
BB
Theme: Commons, commune, community

**Week 10**

[Spring Break 3/26 – 4/3]

**Week 11**

4/7

BB

Theme: Geopolitics and extractivism in the Amazon


**Week 12**

4/14

TD

Theme: The concept of ‘perspective’ in the constitution of the ‘natural world’.


**Week 13**

4/21

BB

Theme: Cognitive mapping, geography and geophilosophy


**Weeks 14-15**

4/28 and 5/5

Presentations Guest discussants t.b.c.

**X. Additional Resource Readings**


