

St. Francis Xavier University
Department of Sociology

SELECTED TOPICS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY (SOC 496)

Fall 2013

Lecture Room: Annex 113

Time: Mondays: 8:15 – 9:30am; Thursdays: 9:45 – 11:00am

Instructor: Dr. Stephen Marmura

Email: smarmura@stfx.ca

Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:00am – 1:00pm; Thursdays: 12:00pm – 3:00pm

Office: Annex 111C

Required Texts:

Course Reader: available in bookstore

The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace
Vincent Mosco (2004)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The rise of sociology as a discipline was largely predicated upon a growing concern with the vast social/cultural transformations tied to the technological advances of the industrial revolution. However, only fairly recently has technology has come into its own as a major focus within the field. This course is designed to engage students with a variety of issues and debates pertaining to technology. While some of these are linked to more traditional sites of sociological enquiry such as the workplace, others have come to the fore within the relatively new interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies. We consider such matters as the role played by technology in relation to social evolution and cultural identity, the relationship between technological innovation and scientific knowledge, the nature of technological artifacts and systems, the social shaping of technology, forms of governance in contemporary 'information societies', and questions of human and non-human agency.

Please note: This course is designed as a fourth year seminar and should only be taken by students prepared to attend all classes, participate in group discussions, and engage critically with novel and challenging ideas.

COURSE OUTLINE

(Sept. 5) Introduction: course structure and expectations; overview of key issues and debates

no reading

(Sept. 9, 12) Technology, social change and the problem of determinism

The Original Affluent Society
Marshall Sahlins

The Hydraulic Trap
Marvin Harris

(Sept. 16, 19) The Industrial Revolution: Causes and Consequences

Film: The Factory and Marketplace Revolution

The Theory of Crises
Julian Borchardt

Engaging with Luddism
Robins & Webster

(Sept. 23, 26) Technique and Modernity: Utopian and Dystopian visions

The Posthistorical Period and the Technological Environment
Jacques Ellul

The Technologies of Total Domination
Maria Los

The Technological Sublime
Jos De Mul

(Sept. 30; Oct. 3) The Social Shaping of Technology

The material of male power
Cynthia Cockburn

The American Army and the M-16 rifle
James Fallows

(Oct. 7, 10) Science and Technology in the Popular Imagination

Two Questions Concerning Technology
Sergio Sismondo

The Public Understanding of Science
Sergio Sismondo

(Oct. 14) *Thanksgiving – no class*

(Oct. 17*) Social Constructivism and Anti-essentialism

Evidence in Science and Religion
Stanley Fish

What's Social about Being Shot?
Grint & Woolgar

** Response Assignment due in class*

(Oct. 21, 24) Social Constructivism cont.; Actor Network Theory

Introduction: How to Resume the Task of Tracing Associations
Bruno Latour

Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay
Michel Callon

(Oct. 28, 31) Rise of the Post-Industrial Society

The Information Society Debate Revisited
Nicholas Garnham

A social shaping perspective on the development of the world wide web
Edward Lenert

(Nov. 4, 7) Information Technology and State Power

A Faustian Bargain? America and the Dream of Total Information Awareness
Reg Whitaker

Visible War: Surveillance, Speed and Information War
Kevin Haggerty

(Nov. 11) *Remembrance Day – no class*

(Nov. 14) Labour and Leisure in the Reflexive Economy

The New Taylorism: Surveillance, Work and Discipline
Christian Parenti

iCommerce: Interactivity Goes Mobile
Mark Andrejevic

(Nov. 18, 21) Information/Communication Technologies and Human Subjectivity

Identity Theft and Media
Mark Poster

Surveillance, Mass Culture and the Subject: A Systems/Lifeworld Approach
Stephen Marmura

(Nov. 25, 28) A Posthuman World?

Post/Human Conditions
Elaine Graham

Data Made Flesh: Biotechnology and the Discourse of the Posthuman
Eugene Thacker

Evaluation:

Critical Response Papers: 30%

Class Participation: 20%

Book review: 30%

Student Presentations: 20%

Please see requirement and assignment descriptions below.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Class Participation: 20%

Small, seminar-style classes provide students with a unique opportunity to engage in class discussion and reflect in depth upon the course material. To benefit fully from this opportunity, keeping up with course readings and attending classes regularly are essential. Students will be expected to arrive in each class with short write-ups of roughly a paragraph in length concerning their reflections, thoughts, and questions with respect to the reading(s) for that day. One copy will be handed to me at the beginning of class with another copy retained by the student for reference during the seminar. Reflections on readings will also provide a basis from which to develop more formal write-ups in the form of response papers for later submission (see *Critical Response Papers* below).

Class participation provides the foundation on which other course components rely, and irregular attendance will result in either the partial or complete loss of the participation grade. We will go over this policy in more detail during the first week of class.

Critical Response Papers: (3 X 10) = 30%

Due Date: Oct. 17

Students will select any three readings dealt with during the first six-week period of the course for critical evaluation. Responses for each reading should be 3-4 pages in length. They should be bound together and handed in as a unit in class on the due date.

The point of this exercise is to identify a key line of argument or theme in a reading and then subject it to critical appraisal. For example you may find a line of reasoning or path of investigation advocated by the author to be particularly strong, useful or insightful, or conversely to be highly suspect, flawed, incomplete, or misleading. Either way, you need to make your case in a concise, well reasoned and clearly articulated manner. While your responses should be written in paragraphs, they do not require formal introductions or conclusions. Simply begin with a very brief summary statement identifying the issue(s) in question and then expand. No additional sources need be consulted, although you may feel free to draw upon insights or arguments raised in other readings and/or during seminar discussions.

For some good tips on writing response papers you may wish to visit the following Web site: <http://www.davidhildebrand.org/teaching/tips-hints/paper->

[how-write-short-critical-response-paper/](#). While the guidance provided is for single-page responses, the general recommendations are still useful.

Critical Book Review: 30%

The Digital Sublime: Myth Power and Cyberspace
Vincent Mosco (2004)

Due Date: Dec. 6

Length: 8 – 10 pages

The idea of the ‘technological sublime’ was most extensively developed in a book of the same name by historian David Nye (see course reading by De Mul). Vincent Mosco makes reference to the same concept in his own more recent analysis of the politics, culture and mythology surrounding the internet. While relatively short in length, this book is rich in content and touches upon many important ideas raised in this course. This assignment requires that you draw upon your knowledge of theories and controversies pertaining to technology and/or information societies to critically assess the value of Mosco’s contribution.

Approach this as a longer, more formal version of the critical response papers you wrote earlier. However, while your review should be written in essay-style format, you should still avoid spending too much time summarizing content. On the one hand you want to give the reader a general sense of the book as a whole; its overall direction as well as the types of issues it covers. For the most part, however, your focus should be upon the author’s main line of argument and/or guiding themes in the book – sufficiently contextualized – which you feel hold particular sociological significance... How helpful is Mosco’s book when considering the cultural importance of digital technology in societies like our own? What are the author’s most important insights? Is there a hidden bias and/or important blind spots which limit his analysis? Etc.

At least three course readings should be cited in your analysis. You may consult additional sources if you wish although this is not required.

Student Presentations: 20%

Each student will give a presentation of roughly 20 minutes based on a reading from the course. Presentations will take place during and/or after week seven (depending on the number of students enrolled) with one presentation per class. How the presentation is approached may depend in part upon the nature of the reading. In many cases the theoretical and/or substantive issues explored within the paper will require all of the presenter’s attention. In other instances students

may wish to consider a related case study not dealt with in the reading but which relates directly to central ideas discussed within it. We will pursue these points further in class.

Students may present their material however they wish (e.g. through use of overheads, power-point, black board or simply by talking), but must create a short (roughly 2 - 3 page handout) for distribution in class. The latter should include main summary points and highlights pertaining to the most important issues and concepts raised in the reading, and their relevance in relation to existing trends and/or other issues raised in the course. Be as explicit as you can in this regard and organize your hand-out carefully as it will provide me with a key source of reference and recall when evaluating your presentation. You should also include at least one question designed to generate class discussion. The professor and students will also ask questions of presenters. The idea is that the presentation will provide a starting point and lead-in for more general group discussion on that day.