SCIENCE, POWER AND POLITICS (I)*
STP 291, History of Science 285a (Fall 2007)

This is the first semester of a year-long graduate seminar on the major contributions of the field of science and technology studies (STS) to understanding the relationships of science, technology, and political power in democratic societies. The fall semester (STP-291) is devoted to reading, analyzing, and critically integrating works by scholars in STS and related fields who have addressed such topics as the nature of scientific authority, science’s relations with the state, science and democracy, scientific and technical controversies, and the politics of technology. The spring semester (STP-292) is designed as an advanced research seminar in which students will read further current works in STS and also complete and present a major piece of research and writing.

In the fall semester, we explore how the modern state’s capacity to produce and use scientific knowledge influences, and is influenced by, the production and maintenance of political order. Beginning with standard models of science and politics, such as the “republic of science,” the syllabus develops an alternate framework that sees these two spheres of action not as cognitively and culturally distinct but as engaged in a constant process of exchange and mutual stabilization. For this purpose, the course combines theoretical ideas and empirical examples from STS, both historical and contemporary, with approaches from social and political theory. Particular attention is paid to the cultural resources used in the simultaneous production of scientific and political authority. These include technologies of visual representation, quantitative analysis, standardization, material stabilization, persuasion, and dispute resolution, as well as associated ideas of objectivity, rationality, credibility, legality, accountability, and reliability. Seeing power as immanent, the course takes special notice of the techniques and discourses through which actors in modern polities frame and manage their perceptions of the world, in the process of framing new issues for political action. Illustrative topics include maps, museums, elections, risk, intelligence tests, and genetics.

*Either STP-291 or STP-292 may be taken as a separate course for credit, but only for extremely compelling reasons, with the instructor's permission.

Readings

Required books for the course are on reserve in the Kennedy School library, ground floor of Littauer. Articles and book chapters are available in pdf format at the course web site.


Requirements

Students in STP-291 I (Fall) are expected to write weekly reading responses and lead class discussion approximately twice during the semester. The latter task involves preparing written notes and questions for class use and, depending on class size, may be done in collaboration with others responsible for a given session. A final written exercise will be required of credit students, in a form to be negotiated with the instructor. Auditors may attend with the instructor’s permission only if they participate actively in class, including leading discussion, but they will be excused from the final written exercise.
SYLLABUS

September 19: Introductions and Overview

What does the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) contribute to the study of policy, politics, and power? How do the organization and materials of the course reflect perspectives from STS, and how do these relate to work in other fields? What major themes does the course develop, and what are the expectations from students? Also class self-introductions, explaining people’s interest in the course.

Suggested:

September 26: STS Analytic Frameworks – Contingency and Interpretive Flexibility

What does the field of STS have to do with the analysis of political power? What is at stake in questioning “realist” views of scientific knowledge? How have different disciplines tackled the theme of contingency (or context-dependence), and how can we relate these writings to one another? How can we explain why artifacts and ideas can be constructed and yet be seen as parts of nature, as if they are not social? Put differently, how should we problematize stability, in ideas ad things, and how do our answers to that problem bear on the study of politics and power?


Suggested:
October 3:  Science – A Model Polity?

Is science a culture, a distinct organizational form, an interest group, or a model political system? How do we know? Using what criteria? Does it matter to the way we think about politics?


Suggested:

October 10:  Modern Constitutions -- The Co-Production of Science and Politics

How does the constitution of knowledge relate to political constitution-making and the constitution of states? How do states constitute themselves as knowledgeable and as capable of deploying knowledge for public purposes? How do knowledge and knowledge-based technologies function to advance or impede the expression of democratic values?

S. Jasanoff, “In a Constitutional Moment: Science and Social Order at the Millennium,” in B. Joerges and H. Nowotny, eds., Social Studies of Science and Technology:


Suggested:

October 17: Citizens in the Knowledge State

How is the very idea of citizenship conceptualized in contemporary knowledge societies? How if at all do epistemic considerations feature in theoretical analyses of citizenship? What opportunities exist for active intervention by citizens in the knowledge-making practices of modern states? Who can participate in such interventions? Who is excluded? How does political culture matter in the production of knowledgeable citizens?


October 24: Constitutive Visions

How does seeing influence the making of a communal political space and the legitimation of the rules that bind polities together? How does the interpretive flexibility of seeing get disciplined to make points of view that we consider “objective”? How are particular “witness” standpoints authorized? In other words, whose sight matters to the state and in other public realms?

S. Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of Las Meninas,” Representations 1 (1983), pp. 30-42 [available through JSTOR].
B. Anderson, Imagined Communities, Chs. 2, 3, pp. 9-46.
October 31:  The Politics of Stabilization – Networks, Materiality, and Power

How does materiality affect the state’s exercise of power? How, in particular, does capital matter, and is it useful to think of knowledge as a form of capital? How should we think about the exercise of epistemic and technological power across borders, especially when we consider the interpretive flexibility of knowledge and its embodied forms?


Suggested:


November 7:  Objectivity – The Public Display of Reason

Reason in public life does not consist merely of justifying official decisions with reference to pre-existing principles in designated political fora. Rather, reason results from active performances, enactments, and embodiments of agreed-upon forms of rationality in varied cultural domains, not all of which are recognizably “political.” What are some of the most prominent strategies for displaying public reason in contemporary political systems? How do they integrate knowledge with power?
Y. Ezrahi, *Descent of Icarus*, Ch. 6 (“Machines and Images of Order”), pp. 149-166.
B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Ch. 10 (“Census, Map, Museum”).

**Suggested:**

**November 14: Rationality – The Politics of Numbers**

*Quantification is considered by many to be the most powerful technology for producing objectivity, and we rely on (ac)counting to establish the legitimacy of many kinds of political decisions. But how apolitical are numbers? How do they mediate politics?*


M. Power, *The Audit Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Ch. 5 (“Audit Knowledge and the Construction of Auditees”), pp. 91-121


**Suggested:**


**November 21: *** THANKSGIVING BREAK (NO CLASS) ***
November 28: The Politics of Normalization

Many social arrangements and political decisions hinge on determinations of what counts as normal: in identity, behavior, social relationships. How are these normalizing moves made in society, where do standards of normality come from, and how do they reflect the institutionalization and exercise of power? How do ideas of normality relate to judgments concerning sameness and difference?


Suggested:

December 5: Discourses of Reason

Politics in complex societies is the art of living with irresolvable conflicts and irreducible uncertainties – cognitive, moral, social. How do polities make judgments that most citizens are willing to accept as binding, if not legitimate? How do technical discourses (not just science but also law and ethics) reduce uncertainty in the political realm? Why do they sometimes fail?


Suggested:

December 12: Rethinking Democracy through STS

How should we retheorize our ideas of democracy in a world saturated with S&T?
Who is the “demos” or the “public”? How can its voice(s) be adequately represented?
What is the role of experts? Must the idea of politics be expanded to include sites beyond the nation state? Which ones, and with what implications and consequences?


Jasanoff, Designs on Nature, Ch. 3 (“A Question of Europe”), pp. 68-93; Ch. 11 (“Republics of Science”), pp. 272-292.


Suggested: