FYSM 1611E: The Politics of Things

Giovanni Bariletto, *I secreti d'Isabella Cortesi*, 1561 (detail).

The Politics of Things: From mRNA to the LRT

Thurs 08:35 a.m. – 11:25 a.m.
Please confirm location on Carleton Central.

I   General information

Instructor: William Walters
Office Hours: Thurs 12.30 – 2.30pm (Online – see Brightspace)
Email: william.walters@carleton.ca
Twitter: @WaltersWHCh

All email communication is to be via official Carleton university e-mail accounts and/or cuLearn, not personal emails.

II   Course description

We usually approach the study of politics by focusing on human actors, institutions, values and socioeconomic processes. Without disregarding these approaches this course takes a different perspective. We will look at politics in terms of materials, devices, and objects, studying their interactions with humans and societies. What can we learn about politics if we start with everyday digital objects like a hashtag or meme? Or really big things, such as urban transit megaprojects? How does our view of political struggles change once we take seriously the difference which the properties of things make, such as the viscosity of oil or the design of complex objects like the contraceptive implant or the mRNA vaccine? What can we learn about the politics of identity, race and culture if we focus on seriously contested objects like surveillance devices or Indigenous art and artefacts held in national museums? Taking a grounded approach that works mostly through case studies, and reading interdisciplinary scholarly research alongside quality journalism and public commentary, in this course we will explore some of the new lines of inquiry which a focus on the politics of things can open up. We will ask in what ways these inquiries can inform public action and democratic life as well as scientific understanding.

The course has three aims:

- o **First,** this course will introduce students to scholarship on the politics of things. It will ask whether such a focus can provide an empirically grounded, case-rich and materialist perspective on some of the major problems of politics today, such as racial violence, social justice, settler colonialism, and climate crisis.
- o **Second,** it will offer opportunities to hone essential skills for doing political research, such as critical reading, collecting data, crafting arguments, and presenting your findings. Each week a part of the seminar will be dedicated to the discussion of these skills.
- o **Finally,** the course will help you choose a particular thing, object or technology and build your own research project around it. In the final two weeks each student will have the opportunity to present their work in progress.

III   Course Format

This is an in person class that meets weekly throughout the term. It will also involve offline work, mainly in the form of students making regular forum posts on Brightspace.

IV   Learning outcomes

By the end of this class students should be able to:

- o Explain the distinctive contribution that a focus on objects and things brings to political analysis
- o Understand different ways of studying the politics of things
- o Read scholarly texts with a critical eye
- o Use key concepts and themes from the course to make sense of developments in wider political and social life.
- o Conduct a research project of your own on a particular object of interest.

V   Texts
There is no textbook for the course. All required readings will be available either open access or through ARES and/or the University's library system.

VI   Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment	Description	Due date	%
1. Attendance & participation	You are expected to do the required readings and come to class ready to discuss them. Your grade will reflect not just how often you attend but the quality of your participation. There are many ways you can participate meaningfully in class including asking questions; making observations; drawing connections with other readings or themes in the class; engaging with your colleagues.	ongoing	15
2. Forum posts	Six times during the course you should upload to the Brightspace forum a post commenting on one of the readings. Among the things you can do with a post are: ask a question; highlight a strength or weakness in the reading; make a connection to an event or story in the world; or respond to someone else's post. You will receive a progress report on your posts by Feb 16th.	11pm the night before class.	15

3. Quizzes	There will be two quizzes during the course. These will be 'closed book' (ie, no books, screens or study aids). Each quiz will combine multiple choice, short answers and short essays. *Duration: 50 mins.*	Feb. 16 & Mar 23 (in class)	15 per quiz.
4. Project proposal	You will write a proposal for your research paper. This will provide the basis for your presentation at the miniconferences. Details for constructing the proposal will be posted on Brightspace. *Length: 500 words.*	Due by: Mar 16, 11.59pm.	10
5. Completion of IU plagiarism awareness certificate	Learning how to avoid plagiarism is an essential part of your university career. Learn how to avoid plagiarism by taking this online course (https://plagiarism.iu.edu/index.html). It takes about two hours to complete. Upon completion you will receive a certificate. You must upload this to Brightspace to show you have passed the course. [*]	Due by Mar 30th, 11.59pm	Pass
6. Mini conference presentation	This will be a 10 minute (no more, no less!) presentation of your work in progress in one of the miniconference weeks. Further details will be posted on Brightspace.	Mar. 30th or Apr 6th	10
7. Research paper	The proposal and presentation will lay the groundwork for this research paper. For the paper you will identify an object, device or thing and explore some aspect of its politics. As the seminar progresses we will discuss various aspects of the project such as choosing a topic, method, data collection, and analysis. *Word length: 3500* (not including bibliography). Submit in Word format to Brightspace. Use this format to name your file: Yourfamilyname_researchpaper_FYSM1611 (Note: this should be original work, not already written for another class).	Due by Apr. 12th 11.59pm	20
Late penalties: you will lose half a grade if your assignment is handed in the day following the deadline, another half on the second day, and so on.			

VIII   Course schedule

Wk	Date	Topic or Theme	Required readings	Skills / Assignments
1	Jan 12	Introducing the politics of things		What makes a good forum post?
2	Jan 19	What is carbon democracy?	Mitchell (2008); Chen (2021)	How do you read academic texts?
3	Jan 26	Wires, cables and worldmaking: on the power of ductile metals	Netz (2000); Müller (2016)	How do you choose a research topic and develop a research question?
4	Feb 2	Technologies of contraception and the biopolitics of population	Olszynko-Gryn (2018); Mann & Grzanka (2018)	How do you do a literature search?
5	Feb 9	Megaprojects in the making of state and society: The case of Ottawa's light rail transit (LRT)	Flyvbjerg (2014); Chianello & Pritchard (2022)	How do you cite your sources in an academic paper?
6	Feb 16	The repatriation of Indigenous artifacts: Unsettling settler colonialism?	Weiss (2021); Bernstein (2021); Cuno (2014)	*Quiz #1 (on weeks 2-5)*
7	Feb 23	Reading week		
8	Mar 2	Hashtags and memes: digital objects and racial politics	DeCook (2018); Bonilla & Rosa (2015)	How do you write a research proposal?

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[*] Thanks to Prof. Achim Hurrelmann for this idea.

9	Mar 9	The UFO: the secretive politics of quasi-objects	Geppert (2012); Wendt & Duvall (2008); Politico (2022)	How do you find data and how do you analyze it?
10	Mar 16 On Zoom	Pandemic technologies: from sanitary passports to ArriveCan	Abi-Rached (2021); Malone (2022)	How do you give a presentation? *Project proposal due by 11.59pm.*
11	Mar 23	Objects of protest, resistance and counter surveillance	Flood & Grindon (2014); Electronic Frontier Foundation (2014); Beyerstein (2016)	*Quiz #2 (on weeks 6-10)*
12	Mar 30	Miniconference I		*Last day to upload plagiarism awareness certificate.*
13	Apr 6	Miniconference II		

1. Introducing the politics of things (Jan 12)

No required readings. But if you want to do some background reading, here are some classic essays on politics and things:

Donna Haraway, 1991, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' in her *Simians, Cyborgs and Women,* London: Routledge, 149-82

Wiebe Bijker, 2007 'Dikes and Dams: Thick with Politics', *Isis* 98(1): 109-123.

Judy Wajcman, 2006 'The Gender Politics of Technology' in Goodin et al (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 707-721.

Langdon Winner, 1999 (1980) 'Do Artifacts have Politics?' in MacKenzie, D. and Wajcman, J (eds) *The Social Shaping of Technology*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 28-40.

2. What is carbon democracy? (Jan 19)

Timothy Mitchell, 2009, 'Carbon democracy', *Economy and society* 38(3): 399-432

Sibo Chen, 2021, '"Blockadia" helped cancel the Keystone XL pipeline – and could change mainstream environmentalism', *The Conversation,* March 10. https://theconversation.com/blockadia-helped-cancel-the-keystone-xl-pipeline-and-could-change-mainstream-environmentalism-155276

3. Wires, cables and worldmaking (Jan 26)

Reviel Netz, 2000, 'Barbed wire', *London review of books* 22(14), July 20. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n14/reviel-netz/barbed-wire

Simone Müller, 2016, 'From cabling the Atlantic to wiring the world: A review essay on the 150th anniversary of the Atlantic telegraph cable of 1866', *Technology and culture* 57(3): 507-526.

4. Technologies of contraception and the biopolitics of population (Feb 2)

Jesse Olszynko-Gryn, 2018, 'Technologies of contraception and abortion', in Nick Hopwood et al (eds), *Reproduction: antiquity to the present day*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 535-552.

Emily Mann and Patrick Grzanka, 2018, 'Agency-without-choice: the visual rhetorics of long-acting reversible contraception promotion', *Symbolic Interaction* 41(3): 334-356.

5. Megaprojects and the remaking of state and society: the case of Ottawa's LRT (Feb 9)

Bent Flyvbjerg, 2014, 'What you need to know about megaprojects and why: An overview', *Project management journal* 45(2): 6-19.

Joanne Chianello and Trevor Pritchard, 2022, '"Egregious violations of public trust": LRT rushed into service, commission finds', *CBC News*, November 30. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/lrt-inquiry-final-report-ottawa-problems-recommendations-1.6668152

6. The repatriation of Indigenous artifacts: Unsettling settler colonialism? (Feb 16)

Joseph Weiss, 2021, 'The era of endless repatriation: respectful relationality and the reconfiguration of colonial authority', *Anthropologica* 63(2): 1-26.

Jaella Bernstein, 2021, 'Canada's museums are slowly starting to return Indigenous artifacts', *Macleans*, June 22. https://www.macleans.ca/culture/canadas-museums-are-slowly-starting-to-return-indigenous-artifacts/

James Cuno, 2014, 'Culture war: The case against repatriating museum artifacts', *Foreign Affairs* 93(6): 119-124, 126-129.

7. Winter break (Feb 23)

8. Memes and hashtags: racial politics and digital objects (Mar 2)

Julia DeCook, 2018, 'Memes and symbolic violence: #proudboys and the use of memes for propaganda and the construction of collective identity', *Learning, media and technology* 43(4): 485-504.

Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, 2015, '#Ferguson: digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States', *American Ethnologist* 42(1): 4-17.

9. The UFO: The secretive politics of quasi-objects (Mar 9)

Alexander Geppert, 2012, 'Extraterrestrial encounters: UFOs, science and the quest for transcendence, 1947-1972', *Technology and culture* 28(3): 335-362.

Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, 2008, 'Sovereignty and the UFO', *Political Theory* 36(4): 607-633.

[For Wendt's argument minus the political theory see Sean Illing's (2020) interview: 'It's time to take UFOs seriously. Seriously.' Vox.com, July 24th. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/5/8/21244090/pentagon-ufo-report-navy-alexander-wendt ; or his TEDx talk at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_RquOChJuE]

Politico, 2022, 'Pentagon getting more UFO reports now that "stigma has been reduced"', May 17th. https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/17/pentagon-dod-ufos-00032929

10. Pandemic technologies: From sanitary passports to ArriveCan (Mar 16 – ON ZOOM).

Joelle Abi-Rached, 2021, 'Sanitary passports and the birth of the immunized self', *Comparative studies of Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, 41(3): 300-311.

Matt Malone, 2022, 'Can we trust ArriveCan?', *CIGI online*, August 10. https://www.cigionline.org/articles/can-we-trust-arrivecan-not-without-transparency-and-accountability/

11. Objects of protest, resistance and counter-surveillance (Mar 23)

Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon, 2014, 'Introduction' in Flood and Grindon (eds) *Disobedient Objects*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, pp. 6-25 (but look at the other images as well). http://gavingrindon.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Grindon-and-Flood-Introduction-Disobedient-Objects.pdf

Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2014, 'New behind the scenes video: airship flight over the NSA data center', August 5th. https://www.eff.org/press/releases/new-behind-scenes-video-airship-flight-over-nsa-data-center

Lindsay Beyerstein, 2016, 'Tracking Blackness: A Q and A with Dark Matters author Simone Browne', *The Public Eye*, June 7. https://politicalresearch.org/2016/06/07/tracking-blackness-a-qa-with-dark-matters-author-simone-browne

Appendix

Covid-19 Pandemic Measures

It is important to remember that COVID is still present in Ottawa. The situation can change at any time and the risks of new variants and outbreaks are very real. There are a number of actions you can take to lower your risk and the risk you pose to those around you including being vaccinated, wearing a mask, staying home when you're sick, washing your hands and maintaining proper respiratory and cough etiquette.

Feeling sick? Remaining vigilant and not attending work or school when sick or with symptoms is critically important. If you feel ill or exhibit COVID-19 symptoms do not come to class or campus. If you feel ill or exhibit symptoms while on campus or in class, please leave campus immediately. In all situations, you should follow Carleton's symptom reporting protocols.

Masks: Masks are no longer mandatory in university buildings and facilities. However, we continue to recommend masking when indoors, particularly if physical distancing cannot be maintained. We are aware that personal preferences regarding optional mask use will vary greatly, and we ask that we all show consideration and care for each other during this transition.

Vaccines: While proof of vaccination is no longer required to access campus or participate in in-person Carleton activities, it may become necessary for the University to bring back proof of vaccination requirements on short notice if the situation and public health advice changes. Students are strongly encouraged to get a full course of vaccination, including booster doses as soon as they are eligible and submit their booster dose information in cuScreen as soon as possible. Please note that Carleton cannot guarantee that it will be able to offer virtual or hybrid learning options for those who are unable to attend the campus.

All members of the Carleton community are required to follow requirements and guidelines regarding health and safety which may change from time to time. For the most recent information about Carleton's COVID-19 response and health and safety requirements please see the University's COVID-19 website and review the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Should you have additional questions after reviewing, please contact covidinfo@carleton.ca.

Student Mental Health

As a university student you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. Here is a list that may be helpful:

Emergency Resources (on and off campus): https://carleton.ca/health/emergencies-and-crisis/emergency-numbers/

- ***Carleton Resources:***
  - Mental Health and Wellbeing: https://carleton.ca/wellness/
  - Health & Counselling Services: https://carleton.ca/health/
  - Paul Menton Centre: https://carleton.ca/pmc/
  - Academic Advising Centre (AAC): https://carleton.ca/academicadvising/
  - Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS): https://carleton.ca/csas/
  - Equity & Inclusivity Communities: https://carleton.ca/equity/

- ***Off Campus Resources:***
  - Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: (613) 238-3311 or TEXT: 343-306-5550, https://www.dcottawa.on.ca/
  - Mental Health Crisis Service: (613) 722-6914, 1-866-996-0991, http://www.crisisline.ca/
  - Empower Me: 1-844-741-6389, https://students.carleton.ca/services/empower-me-counselling-services/
  - Good2Talk: 1-866-925-5454, https://good2talk.ca/
  - The Walk-In Counselling Clinic: https://walkincounselling.com

Requests for Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request, the processes are as follows:

Pregnancy accommodation: Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For accommodation regarding a formally-scheduled final exam, you must complete the Pregnancy Accommodation Form (click here).

Religious accommodation: Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details [click here](#).

Accommodations for students with disabilities: If you have a documented disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) at 613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation or contact your PMC coordinator to send your instructor your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term. You must also contact the PMC no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, reach out to your instructor as soon as possible to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. For more details, [click here](#).

Accommodation for student activities: Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who engage in student activities at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf.

For more information on academic accommodation, please contact the departmental administrator or visit: students.carleton.ca/course-outline.

Sexual Violence Policy

As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated. Survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit: carleton.ca/sexual-violence-support.

Plagiarism

Carleton's [Academic Integrity Policy](#) defines plagiarism as "presenting, whether intentional or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own." This includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include, but are not limited to: books, articles, papers, websites, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, art works, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams,

constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms, formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another's data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgement;
- submitting a computer program developed in whole or in part by someone else, with or without modifications, as one's own; and
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another's work and/or failing to use quotations marks.

Plagiarism is a serious offence which cannot be resolved directly with the course's instructor. The Associate Deans of the Faculty conduct a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They may include a mark of zero for the plagiarized work or a final grade of "F" for the course.

More information on the University's Academic Integrity Policy can be found at: https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/.

Intellectual property

Student or professor materials created for this course (including presentations and posted notes, labs, case studies, assignments and exams) remain the intellectual property of the author(s). They are intended for personal use and may not be reproduced or redistributed without prior written consent of the author(s).

Submission and Return of Term Work

Papers must be submitted directly to the instructor according to the instructions in the course outline. The departmental office will not accept assignments submitted in hard copy.

Grading

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor, subject to the approval of the faculty Dean. Final standing in courses will be shown by alphabetical grades. The system of grades used, with corresponding grade points is:

Percentage	Letter grade	12-point scale	Percentage	Letter grade	12-point scale
90-100	A+	12	67-69	C+	6
85-89	A	11	63-66	C	5
80-84	A-	10	60-62	C-	4
77-79	B+	9	57-59	D+	3

| 73-76 | B | 8 | 53-56 | D | 2 |
| 70-72 | B- | 7 | 50-52 | D- | 1 |

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by an instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

Carleton E-mail Accounts

All email communication to students from the Department of Political Science will be via official Carleton University e-mail accounts and/or Brightspace. As important course and university information is distributed this way, it is the student's responsibility to monitor their Carleton University email accounts and Brightspace.

Carleton Political Science Society

The Carleton Political Science Society (CPSS) has made its mission to provide a social environment for politically inclined students and faculty. By hosting social events, including Model Parliament, debates, professional development sessions and more, CPSS aims to involve all political science students at Carleton University. Our mandate is to arrange social and academic activities in order to instill a sense of belonging within the Department and the larger University community. Members can benefit through our networking opportunities, academic engagement initiatives and numerous events which aim to complement both academic and social life at Carleton University. To find out more, visit us on Facebook https://www.facebook.com/CarletonPoliticalScienceSociety/.

Official Course Outline

The course outline posted to the Political Science website is the official course outline.