

Sedimented Scales and Systems



LATE INDUSTRIALISM SEDIMENTED SCALES AND SYSTEMS

deutero	capacity to learn
meta	dominant discourses,
macro	law, political economy
meso	organizations, communities, networks
bio	health, exposures
micro	practices, labors
edxo	education and expertise
nano	language, subjectivity
techno	built infrastructure, industry
data	data infrastructures, cultures, capacities
ecoatmo	air, water, soil, sea ice
geo	toxic load on the landscape

Design Statement

I created this visualization by mixing schematized text with an image that has literal and figurative importance in my project. It is a methodological argument, telling the viewer how to conceptualize what I study. Visualizations of this sort -- often as diagrams with arrows -- are regularly used in the natural sciences but rarely in anthropology.

Project Statement

Vitalism has provided a way of thinking about how systems are discontinuous with themselves -- constituted through the operation of more than one set of laws. Historically (and controversially), vitalism points to ways living systems are more than the result of physicochemical forces and laws, for example. Vitalism also highlights the liveliness of systems -- the way systems can take on a life of their own, so to speak, often beyond what experts planned or expected. I also want to highlight ways vitalism is also, often, toxic, producing injurious outcomes, often unevenly distributed. "Vital systems" can thus be read in multiple ways -- referring to systems on which bodies and societies depend, which have both functional and frightening capacities. In the visualizations that I'll present in this essay, I hope to convey the nature, dynamics and cascading effects of such vital systems -- systems encoded with many sets of laws, almost inevitably producing unexpected, even run-away reactions -- especially when tightly coupled to other such systems (as when atmospheric systems tangle with ecological, technical and social systems, for example). My visualizations will be drawn from extended ethnographic study of industrial and environmental disasters, fast and slow -- reaching to convey "late industrialism" in motion.

Caption

On the left are ribbons of coals in Utah, USA. Such formations have powered industrialism but have now been sidelined by the shale formations that underpin the so-called unconventional energy boom, with forceful economic and environmental effects. On the right is a textual schema that draws to the foreground many scales and types of systems in play in the making of the contemporary real -- which I have conceptualized as "late industrialism."

"Late industrialism" points to both a temporal shift and an analytic framework that draws out ways risk and vulnerability are produced through tight coupling of historically sedimented sociotechnical, political economic, eco-atmospheric, cultural and discursive systems. Like conceptualizations of Risk Society, the Anthropocene, and a just transition from Brown to Green Economies, late industrialism is both empirical and evaluative, drawing out system dynamics and harms -- with special attention to cultural dimensions. Late industrialism is also creative and capacity building, providing structural support for interdisciplinary and international collaborative effort to shift paradigms and directions, linking people, places, variegated domains of activity, and scales of governance.

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In "Toxic Vitalism." In Visualizing Toxic Subjects, curated by James Adams and Kim Fortun. The Center for Ethnography. May.

<https://tinyurl.com/y6bh3add>



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toxic
vitalism