**Course Title:** The Philosophy of Urban History.

**Course Type:** Lecture.

**Instructor:** Manuel DeLanda.

**Course Description:**

This class introduces students to the branch of the philosophy of history that specializes in cities. Cities are social entities that exist at an intermediate scale between the micro-level of individuals and the macro-level of society as a whole. Social science (economics, sociology) has tended to focus at those two extremes, while the intermediate *meso-level* has been neglected by the mainstream schools. The philosophy of history, in turn, has been affected by these choices, becoming a theory of the dynamics of entire societies (and the ages through which they pass, such as agricultural, industrial, and information ages) or a theory of the decisions and actions of great individuals. The philosophy of urban history aims at remedying this situation, stressing not only the role of *cities as historical actors*, but also the role of other meso-level social entities: from local communities and institutional organizations, to urban regions and provinces.

**Pedagogic Objectives:**

The class aims at giving architectural students a more concrete sense of social context, stressing particular urban examples instead of vague generalities (such as “Western culture”). In addition, it introduces students to the work of a variety of contemporary historians who have revived meso-level social entities as part of the explanation of specific historical episodes: Fernand Braudel, William McNeill, Jane Jacobs, James Vance Jr. Finally, the class introduces one at a time all the necessary philosophical concepts and distinctions needed to frame these historical explanations: the distinction between symbolic and material cultures; the concept of assemblage, as a whole endowed with emergent properties, to think about communities, organizations, and cities in concrete historical terms; and the variety of specialized concepts needed to understand cities as economic, ecological, epidemiological, linguistic, technological, and military entities. Each class consists of a two hour lecture (divided into two parts) and an hour of discussion based on the contents of the class and the required readings.

**Completion Requirements:**

Students are required to write a 10 page essay on a specific city giving a concrete explanation of an episode in its history.
FIRST CLASS: Introduction to the Philosophy of Urban History.

Why not China? Why not Islam? Why did the power of Europe (and its ex-colonies) ended up prevailing in the past millennium?. The class introduces the philosophical distinctions needed to understand these questions: the distinction between fate and its necessary outcomes, and contingency as a probabilistic concept that does not imply either arbitrary nor inconsequential outcomes; the distinction between totalities in which the parts are fused into a seamless whole (leading to the idea that "society creates the individual") and assemblages of heterogenous and partly autonomous components; the distinction between symbolic culture (the culture of sacred texts and codes, and their interpretation; of political rhetoric; of conventions and standards) and material culture (the culture of masons, carpenters, metallurgists, doctors and pharmacist, soldiers).

Required reading for the discussion:


SECOND CLASS: Capitals and Metropolises.

How should we conceptualize cities?. Where in the continuum between individuals and societies should they be located? This class tackles this question by examining social entities smaller than cities (communities, organizations) as well as larger ones (provinces, nation states). It also introduces a basic typology of urban centers. Cities from ancient times have engaged in two quite different types of activities, one characterized by centralized decision-making, the other by multiple decisions made in a decentralized way. Those functions we associate with the government of cities are of the first type, while those related to trade are of the second type. Some urban centers tend to be dominated by one or another of these types of activities, becoming either the capital or organizing center of a hierarchy of towns, on one hand, or a gateway to foreign markets linked into a transnational network, on the other.

Required reading for the discussion:

Chapter 2: Systems of Early Cities.

Chapter 5: Cities and Countries.

The economic life of any city is vital to its performance and survival, but what concepts do we need to correctly conceptualize it? The notion of “the market” is too vague to serve as a guide in this class, so its is replaced by a history of trading areas, from the bazaars or marketplaces that existed in every town by the year A.D. 1000, to the national markets that came into existence in the eighteenth-century. The class also introduces a more detailed analysis of the different types of production systems that have animated urban life in the last few centuries: economies of scale, based on routinized labor and centralized management, and economies of agglomeration, based on distributed networks of small producers and the concentration of skilled labor in either cities or in the industrial hinterlands driven by cities.

Required reading for the discussion:


This class continues the exploration of economic dynamics with a few case studies. Two industrial hinterlands closely linked to cities, Silicon Valley and Route 128 (one animated by San Francisco, the other by Boston) are examined and their different dynamics contrasted. Then the ideas developed in a contemporary context are used to examine the rest of the millennium. Urbanist Jane Jacobs, for example, has explored the role of import-substitution dynamics in the rise of many of the cities which dominated the economic history of the West: Venice, Amsterdam, London, New York. Her theories provide historical evidence that economies of agglomeration have played a fundamental role in the transformation of backward cities into dominant centers. Finally, the history of economies of scale is examined to show the role that military organizations ( arsenals, armories) played in their rise and eventual domination of urban economics.

Required readings for the discussion:


FIFTH CLASS: The Biology of Cities 1.

Urban centers can be considered simplified versions of the ecosystems that they replace. In Europe, temperate forests had to be cleared at the start of the millennium to create enough agricultural land to feed them. Unlike the food webs in a complex forest, the circulation of food in cities is relatively simple: first and foremost, towns and cities have always been parasitic on their surrounding countryside for food. As European cities developed and outgrew this primary supply zone they reached out to other areas, some through trade, others through colonialism and conquest. But whether it was nearby or faraway land, farmers and their domesticated plants played the role of primary producers, as the most basic level in natural ecosystems is referred to. To shorten natural food chains and focus all their content into cities, domesticated animals also played an important role. Humans and their extended family of domesticated plants and animals worked as a team, as Europe colonized distant lands and planted its urban offspring there.

Required reading for the discussion:


SIXTH CLASS: The Biology of Cities 2.

Historians have recently begun to explore the history of human diseases and their impact on social institutions, and in these explorations the historical development of specifically urban infectious diseases has played a central role. The tight packing of people and domesticated animals characteristic of dense urban centers creates the conditions for the stabilization of the relation between microorganisms and their hosts, and for the evolution of new variants of those microorganisms. This makes cities into veritable epidemiological laboratories, creating the variants of the diseases (such as small pox or measles) that played a key role in facilitating colonialism. The impact of epidemics (or more exactly, of quarantine practices) on the architecture of hospitals, schools, factories, and prisons, will also be discussed.

Required readings for the discussion:


SEVENTH CLASS: Cities as Linguistic Laboratories.

Early in the millennium, as urban centers proliferated all over Europe, many current languages began to emerge. Latin, which had been imposed throughout the Continent by Roman rule, had already began diverged into many Romance dialects, but it was in the context of the acceleration of urbanization after the year 1000 that spelling and writing systems appeared and it was these that gave the vernaculars a more or less permanent identity. The dialects of dominant regional capitals (Paris, Madrid, London) then ascended to a position to challenge Latin. Later on, these urban dialects became standardized, in some cases through the mediation of official language academies, and acquired the form that they have today, spreading throughout countries in the nineteenth-century as elementary education in the standard became compulsory. This class examines the history of different languages and the role that urban dynamics played in their development.

Required readings for the discussion:

Chapter 5: The History of Middle English.

Manuel DeLanda. A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History.
Chapter 3: Memes and Norms.

EIGHTH CLASS: Cities and Transportation Technologies.

The distinction between maritime metropolises and landlocked capitals was intimately related to the speed of transport: for most of the millennium sea vessels were much faster than land transportation, and everything (money, people, ideas, diseases) moved faster by sea than by land. The viscosity of terrestrial motion was overcame by the steam engine coupled to the locomotive and that led to new urban forms, like the bead-like strings of towns that grew around train stations in the nineteenth century. The internal combustion engine and the spread of the automobile, in turn, gave suburbs the impetus they needed to overcome central cities as the fastest growing settlements by the 1920’s.

Required reading for the discussion:

James Vance Jr. The Continuing City.
Chapter 8: Urban Form in the Modern World.
NINTH CLASS: Fortified Walls and the State of Siege.

For a long time cities were the main target of war. Siege warfare, in turn, gave rise to the profession of the military engineer (and architect) who was concerned not only with the design of the engines of war but also with issues related to the defense of cities, particularly the design of fortified walls. When in 1494 artillery became mobile and more powerful, wall design mutated drastically from a principle of defense through height, to one of defense in depth, involving a complex system of bastions, ditches and low walls. In these century, when offensive technology evolved new ways of delivering destruction (the bomber plane) which made all material obstacles obsolete, walls literally “dematerialized” becoming the electronic curtains of radar.

Required readings for the discussion:

Chapter 3: The Business of War in Europe.

Christopher Duffy. Siege Warfare.
Chapter 2: The Origins of Permanent Artillery Fortification.

TENTH CLASS: Symbols and Connections.

For most of the semester we explore the social entities that exist at the meso-level. The previous class tackled the macro-level, since warfare and the rise of international law in which countries appear as legal subjects are closely intertwined. In this last class the micro-level, the level of the person or subject, is finally discussed. A discussion of the two main paradigms of subjectivity, the Humean and the Kantian, is followed by a look at two radically different approaches to Artificial Intelligence (Symbolic and Connectionist AI) that are the contemporary embodiment of those rival paradigms. Finally, this is connected to urban questions by looking at how computer simulations can be used to model city life.

Required readings for the discussion:

Chapter 2: Connectionist Architectures.