

## **Off-grid technologies in the history of urban services (18th-20th centuries): a reappraisal**

### **Call for papers for the journal *Flux***

This themed issue of *Flux* examines the history of non-networked technologies, their role in the supply of urban services (e.g., street lighting, energy and water supply, wastewater treatment, food supply...) and their relations to networked systems between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in Europe, North America and other regions in which networked technologies became dominant during that period.

Privileging a reflective historical approach, contributions will seek to reconstitute the course of diffusion or retraction of off-grid technologies, and their interactions with the development of large technical systems, which is often presented as a coherent and uniform, even hegemonic, process. They may emphasize the inertia (*momentum*) and the social, technological and/or territorial path dependencies at play; the forms of competition or complementarity and sometimes even symbiosis between networked and off-grid technologies the sociotechnical and urban *imaginaries* underpinning the observed dynamics; etc.

More generally, this themed issue will seek to add historical depth and a long term perspective to the work of urban scholars (geographers, planners, architects, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists...) who have sought to explore, conceptualize and at times anticipate the variegated figures and shapes of the post-networked city. Those researchers have questioned the dominant model – the modern integrated paradigm of the networked city – by confronting the ideal figure of the homogenous and homogenizing infrastructure to the diverse models of organization, management and servicing of urban spaces that accompany, often facilitate and sometimes indurate socio-spatially differentiated forms of urban development.

What were the historical conditions, modalities and spaces of deployment of off-grid devices? Did these technologies generate or facilitate forms of competition between spaces within given urban areas? Did they help maintain pre-existing socio-spatial differentiations? Did organizations in charge of networked and off-grid technologies systematically compete or did they develop links – industrial, commercial, technological, financial, territorial or otherwise? And from a more future-oriented perspective: can Western and other long-industrialized societies emancipate from a

historical heritage characterized by the sociotechnical *imaginary* of the network, and if so how? Can they at least deal with its material, social and political ubiquity?

As regards street lighting, for example, the history of the rapid development of the oil lamp and stearic candle industries in the middle of the nineteenth century and the history of the increase in organic light consumption as late as the early twentieth century are still poorly known. They tend to challenge the widely held view of a linear transition from off-grid organic lighting devices (candles and oil lamps) to networked fossil-fuel based technologies (gas lighting). The history of lighting rather shows a long period of overlap and intermeshing in the use of those technologies.

Flux therefore welcomes submissions to an “alternative history” of urban services (the essential services of everyday life) through the study of the trajectory of off-grid technologies and devices. As with the recent historiography challenging the notion of linear energy transitions, contributions may help question the validity of periodizations based on successive dominant sociotechnical systems and underestimating the importance of “alternative” technologies for the societies concerned.

### **Coordination**

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### **Deadlines & practicalities**

Deadline for submissions: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021

Envisaged publication date: issue #4 (Sept.-Dec.) 2022.

Proposals may be submitted in English or French.