PHOEBE SENGERS

How to become modern: time, work, and infrastructure in rural Newfoundland

RHB 137
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All Welcome

In the 1950's the government of Newfoundland & Labrador began an ambitious project to transform this new Canadian province from an impoverished rural backwater to an industrial economy. Central to this plan was the organized movement of most of its population from isolated fishing villages to centralized settlements allowing easier access to services and infrastructures. Change Islands was one of a few villages that actively resisted this move and insisted instead on modernizing in place. Within a few years, the village was overrun with unfamiliar technologies, including electricity, telephone, television, cars, roads, and running water.

I will use the case of Change Islands to explore how modern ways of being are shaped, sometimes accidentally and sometimes intentionally, through the design of technological infrastructures and centralized forms of governance. Modernization both relies on and produces new cognitive habits, orientations to labour, experiences of time, requirements for accountability, and moral norms, many of which do not match well to the geographical and social requirements of remote, rural communities. Caught up in contradictions, Change Islands is today simultaneously experienced as a dying relic, as a cherished preserve for traditional practices, and as unrecognizably modernized. Change Islands is a place to recognize and reflect on the hopes invested in becoming modern, the technical mechanisms used to realize those hopes, their consequences, and their political stakes.

Phoebe Sengers is an Associate Professor at Cornell University in Science & Technology Studies and Information Science, and is currently a Visiting Scholar in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her work integrates technology design with cultural studies of technology by analyzing the political and social implications of current technologies and designing new technologies based on other alternatives. She has received a US National Science Foundation (NSF) CAREER award, been a Fulbright Fellow and a fellow of the Cornell Society for the Humanities, had 7 major NSF grants, and led the Cornell campus of the Intel Science & Technology Center for Social Computing. She received an interdisciplinary PhD in Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Theory in 1998 from Carnegie Mellon University.

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