Paul Graham Raven on Technology and Infrastructure

This panel had a lively mix of thinkers and doers, of scholars and activists, and thus found itself doing some of the work of getting the overall themes of the conference onto the table. Caroline Karp spoke of networked citizen oversight, and of "regulation by embarrassment"; Dorn Cox spoke of the ways in which our tools reflect our values, and the value of building tools which are responsive to a particular problem – a rejection of the general, which is also a rejection of the normal; Don Blair spoke of building tools for monitoring, but also of the challenges of building organisational structures around those sensors which will provide reliable interpretations of the data collected; Timothy Gorman spoke of the long contest over agrarian changes in the Mekong Delta, of the rock of the state and the hard-place of economic necessity, of dams torn down in defiance; Mark Healey spoke of acequias, the last remnants of communal irrigation-management systems inherited from (or imposed by) the Spanish colonists, a fading recognition that people are both part of the problem and part of the process; David Kinkela spoke of the challenges of regulating plastic wastes, which care nothing for the human fiction of borders, and the way in which the creators of a notorious pollutant can end up winning plaudits for supposedly lessening the impact of the pollutant they introduced.

Connections between these stories became more apparent as discussion continued, with some (perhaps predictable) dialectics lurking in the works: the tensions between institutional credibility and institutional ossification and corruption, between having the power to act and being held accountable, and between the technical and the social elements of infrastructural systems. These tensions manifest as a sort of double-edgedness — an anxiety born of, for instance, the internet's incredible promise as a platform for knowledge sharing, balanced against its role in sustaining the very businesses and supply chains against which that knowledge needs to be mobilised. Are we trying to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools, perhaps?

But I was particularly drawn to Mark Healey's description of interventions in water governance as "going up against institutions and ideas which are literally embedded in the landscape" — this is a vivid characterisation of the struggle for a new (re)configuration of infrastructure, which is in turn one of the conceptual frontlines in the struggle against the neoliberal model of capitalism. As destructive and extractive as our interventions into the landscape have been over the centuries, it must be recognised and acknowledged that we literally cannot survive without them; there is no going back to a time before infrastructure. As such, we are left with the requirement to work within the infrastructural metasystem, even as we struggle against it — a contradiction familiar in form, if not in phrasing, from Donna Haraway's manifesto for cyborgs. We are obliged to bite the hand that feeds, to fight against that which has empowered us to fight it… and until we can resolve that

contradiction to our own satisfaction, I fear we have little chance of convincing anyone else to take up the struggle.