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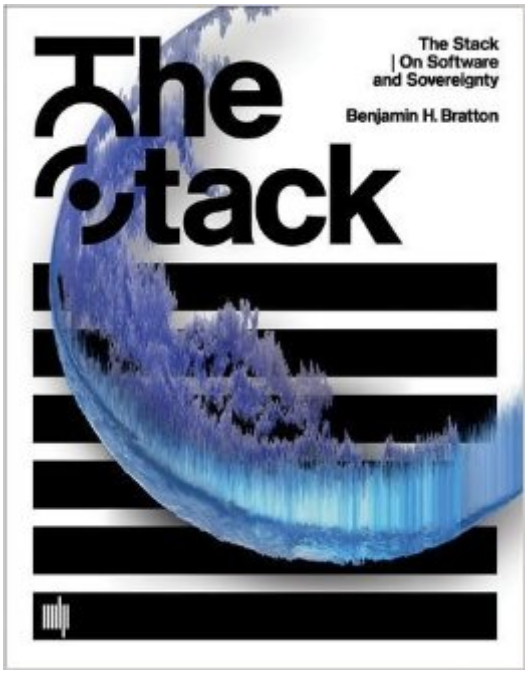
The Stack: On Software And Sovereignty (Software Studies)



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Synopsis

What has planetary-scale computation done to our geopolitical realities?Â It takes different forms at different scales -- from energy and mineral sourcing and subterranean cloud infrastructure to urban software and massive universal addressing systems; from interfaces drawn by the augmentation of the hand and eye to users identified by self -- quantification and the arrival of legions of sensors, algorithms, and robots. Together, how do these distort and deform modern political geographies and produce new territories in their own image?In The Stack, Benjamin Bratton proposes that these different genres of computation -- smart grids, cloud platforms, mobile apps, smart cities, the Internet of Things, automation -- can be seen not as so many species evolving on their own, but as forming a coherent whole: an accidental megastructure called The Stack that is both a computational apparatus and a new governing architecture. We are inside The Stack and it is inside of us.Â In an account that is both theoretical and technical, drawing on political philosophy, architectural theory, and software studies, Bratton explores six layers of The Stack: Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface, User. Each is mapped on its own terms and understood as a component within the larger whole built from hard and soft systems intermingling -- not only computational forms but also social, human, and physical forces. This model, informed by the logic of the multilayered structure of protocol "stacks," in which network technologies operate within a modular and vertical order, offers a comprehensive image of our emerging infrastructure and a platform for its ongoing reinvention.Â The Stack is an interdisciplinary design brief for a new geopolitics that works with and for planetary-scale computation. Interweaving the continental, urban, and perceptual scales, it shows how we can better build, dwell within, communicate with, and govern our worlds.thestack.org

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Nobody designed the Stack.It had no name, not until this book.Whether it exists is in question.But the oversized role the Stack plays in our lives is plain to see, and the consequences of this ongoing accident is at once inspiring and hair-raising.If that sounds compelling, then Ben BrattonÃ¢Â Â™s highly entertaining, densely packed tour de force of design thinking, social theory, architectural criticism, software studies, historiography might be for you.But what exactly is the Stack? How did it get here? And what do we do with it now that we know about it?The Stack is our planetary system of systems, fleshy and rocky, sleek and ethereal, which permits us to think and build.It’s an Ã¢Â Âœaccidental megastructureÃ¢Â Â• that cultivates equilibrium and emergence.Its multi-layered cybernetic landscape is every bit as powerful and consequential as other planetary systems such as climate.It begets novel, porous, user-centered political jurisdictions that are already upending relations among states and also between states and their citizen/users.The Stack is mostly geologic and biologic in nature, and while we humans created several of the StackÃ¢Â Â™s components and capabilities, nobody is anyone in charge of its uses, reach, and fate. Not yet at any rate.The Stack: a floor polish and a desert topping!Consciously and not, we have set the Stack in motion and it reciprocates by providing us (individuals and organizations political or otherwise) with power and pleasure, convenience and assurance. The forms and functions of the Stack are scarcely comprehensible. We are ignorant of its truths (if it has any) as much as we are of blind to its consequences (which include, among other things, our future as a species.)The Stack can be used by you and the Stack can make use of you, which is why Stack Anxiety is inevitable.The frequently elaborate, nonplanned, and cryptic qualities of this in/animate, anthro/geopogenic cellular/planetary cyborg-esque multi-instrumentalist configuration that Bratton calls the Stack has needed someone like him to come along and name the whole and describe its parts. With this book, Bratton makes possible (and so, now, necessary) for us to address the profound and protean implications of our reliance upon, and responsibilities for, the Stack... all notwithstanding (and because of) the intrinsic final unknowability of The Stack itself.The Stack doesn’t know that the Stack exists, much less what it is. So given our utter reliance on the Stack, how can we expect to know it? How much knowledge of the Stack is required to subject the Stack to design? Or is the Stack no more subject to design

than a hurricane is subject to our science and prayers? We buy sand bags, we duck and cover, we sweep up after, but it’s hubris to think these forces are subject to control, a fool’s errand that ends in ignorance or tears.Is you is/Is you ain’t my baby?This is a fun book. Ben BrattonÃ¢Â Â™s writing is agile, insightful, and clarifying. It’s also eloquent (sometimes in the mind-bending way Cirque de Soleil is eloquent) and humorous (coming in both waggish and wet varieties). ItÃ¢Â Â™s deeply erudite while also incredibly helpful as a means of understanding the current political/technical landscape and what we can do with it to cultivate a more livable planet. While Bratton’s main project is to explore matters of sovereignty (political and personal) he’s equally attuned to the Earth layer of the Stack from which the Stack itself draws life force to feed its hungersÃ¢Â Â| which are our own hungers... which may just wind up being our undoing.NOTE: This book is thick and heavy literally and figuratively. I bought the hardbound edition, which is luxurious. But other readers may choose to get themselves a digital version that wonÃ¢Â Â™t bury them alive. Using Brattonspeak, here are some instructions: The User engages the Stack itself by activating an Interface at a convenient Address wherever they be in the CityÃ¢Â Â| then download the book from the Cloud, which is on, sometimes below, but always of the Earth.

I have only read half of the first chapter. The subject matter is very important, but the book is quite dense and difficult reading. I will update as I get further in.

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