



SPT newsletter

Volume 23, Number 3 (Autumn 1999)

Message from the President

SPT Members,

Below is an update on the activities of the Society. The update will give you a good sense of what I hope to accomplish this year. But more than anything, I seek your suggestions and ideas about what the Society could and should be doing.

San Jose Conference

For those of you who did not attend the 11th Biennial Conference in San Jose, I am pleased to report that the conference was a great success! Attendance at sessions varied, but overall there were approximately seventy attendees. Highlights of the conference included the Presidential Address given by Paul Durbin, a keynote address by Erich Dietrich, a visit to the Tech Museum, a special session on the future of SPT, and lots of good restaurants! The papers were good and the discussion was robust!

One especially nice thing about the conference was the increased number of graduate students in attendance. This year the Board voted to use \$1,000. of our small budget to support the travel expenses of graduate students. We gave five students \$200. each based on the quality of the abstracts they submitted.

Revised versions of the conference papers are now being sent to me and I am reviewing them. I promised to get back to those who sent papers by November with a plan for publication.

Board Meeting

The SPT Board met late one afternoon during the conference. The minutes of the meeting will appear in the next issue of The Newsletter. You'll notice in Davis Baird's article in this issue, he has taken over as editor of our electronic journal. Davis has lots of ideas for the journal and I am confident he will do a great job. After the Board meeting, using a straw pole, we also agreed to give Paul Durbin an honorary appointment/title as a founding member of the Society. You'll hear more about this in the future.

New Treasurer

In late summer Edmund Byrne resigned as treasurer of the Society, though he agreed to stay on in a pro tem capacity until October. After discussing this with the Board and considering a number of possibilities, I contacted Diane Michelfelder at Idaho State. Miraculously, Diane was interested and willing, so last month, with the unanimous and enthusiastic support from the Board, I appointed Diane to the position of Treasurer of the Society. The transition is now nearly complete.

I understand that Ed Byrne served as Treasurer of the Society off and on for many years. Ed

did a great job and we can't thank him enough. Board positions are, in many ways, a thankless task, so those who serve have a generosity of soul that is to be admired.

Upcoming Election

As Past-President, Paul Durbin heads up the nominations committee for the next election. Paul is working with Eric Higgs and Noam Cook to put together the ballot. We are running late on the election, but I believe the ballot is close to being ready and will be sent to you soon. We will elect a Vice-President Elect (who will serve as program chair of the next conference) and become President in 2 years. In addition one Board position is up for election. Board members serve four year terms and the tradition of the Society is that Board members can serve a second term without standing for re-election, if willing. Two of the three members whose terms are up have indicated a willingness to stay on.

Next Conference: Edinburgh 2001

The next conference of the Society is scheduled to take place in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2001. Normally, the Vice-President Elect would begin the planning for this conference now. In the absence of such a person, I have made contact with the host for the Edinburgh conference. Nothing has yet been decided but we will try to zero in on some dates and then a conference theme.

When the arrangement was originally made, the idea was to do something with the theme of cloning since Scotland was the location of the successful cloning of Dolly. During the San Jose conference, someone suggested that the theme be "Synthetic Life" or "Synthesized Life" which could include cloning as well as artificial intelligence. Nothing has yet been decided but there is movement in that direction.

If any of you have ideas for the conference and/or would be willing to serve on the program committee, please let me know. We can use all the help we can get.

Sessions at Meetings

As you all know, we regularly schedule SPT sessions at the APA sessions. At the San Jose conference, someone suggested that we also sponsor a session at the 4S meetings (the Society for the Social Studies of Science), so I went ahead and did this. In case any of you are attending the 4S meetings, our session will be the morning of Friday, October 29th as follows:

Author Meets Critics: Andrew Feenberg's Questioning Technology
(This session is sponsored by the Society for Philosophy and Technology)
Session Organizer: Deborah G. Johnson, School of Public Policy, Georgia Institute of Technology
David J. Stump, Department of Philosophy, University of San Francisco
Fernando Elichirigoity, Palmer School of Library and Information Science Long Island University
Andrew Feenberg, Department of Philosophy, San Diego State University

Membership Dues

One of my hopes for the coming year is to increase membership in the Society and to regularize the dues collecting process. It appears that many members are in arrears of their dues, and, more than anything else, this probably has to do with us not nudging or billing members. At the Board meeting in San Jose, we agreed to raise membership dues from \$10 to \$15 a year, with two exceptions. Dues are \$5 for students and gratis for people in developing nations. (Personally, I believe we could raise the dues even higher without much loss of membership and it would allow us to do a lot more.)

One thing that would help the Society enormously is for each of you to pay your membership dues. The address label used to send you this Newsletter should contain information on when you last paid your dues. There is also a form in the back of the Newsletter for updating information about you and sending in your dues. Please fill it out and send in your dues!

I would be delighted to hear from those of you who have ideas for the Society and/or are willing to do some work. One idea that emerged from the special session in San Jose was to appoint a publicity czar, someone who would help to advertise the Society's activities, journal, and conferences, as well as promoting membership. If any of you are interested in serving in that capacity, please let me know.

Deborah G. Johnson

Changes at the Electronic Journal: A New Name and a New Editor

The Electronic Journal for the Society for Philosophy and Technology is changing its name to *Techne: Journal of the Society for Philosophy and Technology*. The Newsletter for SPT (previously *Techne*) will take the name Newsletter for the Society for Philosophy and Technology.

At the same time, Paul Durbin, whom we all owe many debts of gratitude and many thanks for years of editorial work for the Society, has passed the editorship of the journal on to Davis Baird. Davis, currently on sabbatical and a Dibner Fellow at MIT's Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology, while not on sabbatical, is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC. He comes to the editorship of *Techne* with broad interests in the philosophy of technology. His own work has focused on the philosophy of scientific instrumentation.

Plans for Techne

This is a good time to reexamine the mission, policies and procedures of the journal. *Techne* is the only journal exclusively devoted to work in the philosophy of technology. For this reason it needs to be the primary center for the exchange of ideas in the philosophy of technology. In order to better fulfill this mission several changes are in store for the journal in the coming year. These will include:

- short informative book reviews
- longer critical reviews
- connected commentaries by several authors focusing on a new book or article with a reply by the author
- theme issues, in some cases put together by guest editors

In addition to these editorial changes, other changes at *Techne* are planned. These include:

- better publicity for the journal
- a larger editorial board
- an examination of the wisdom (or not) of pursuing print publication for the journal

Other changes are possible and suggestions are welcome. Send them to Davis Baird at db@sc.edu. Suggestions for specific theme issues (or if you would like to guest edit such an issue) or for books to review are welcome. Again, contact Davis Baird at db@sc.edu.

Of course, while all these changes are underway, *Techne* urges you to submit your best work for consideration for publication in *Techne*. We are your journal to promote and disseminate high quality work in the philosophy of technology.

Davis Baird

SPT at the APA Eastern Division

The APA/Eastern/SPT session is entitled "Questioning Technology and the Environment." It's an author-meets-critics session focused on Andrew Feenberg's new book, *Questioning Technology* - but with an even more specific focus on environmental issues. The meeting is at 11:15 Tuesday, Dec 28, in the Cape Cod room.

Book Review

Andrew Feenberg *Questioning Technology*. London; New York: Routledge Press, 1999.
by Tyler Veak

In his trilogy of books on the philosophy of technology, Andrew Feenberg has provided one of the most sophisticated theories of the technology/society nexus. His most recent work *Questioning Technology* demonstrates forcefully the shortcomings of traditional theories of technology, which either characterize technology as neutral, or essentialize technology as some kind of autonomous/deterministic/homogenizing force acting on society. The observed constraint on design choice is not some "essence" of technology, but can be explained by the hegemonic control of the design process by privileged actors. Feenberg suggests that a "radical democratic politics of technology" can thwart this hegemony and open up space to steer the face of modernity from within.

Questioning Technology should appeal to academics as well as activists. While some parts (e.g., where Feenberg draws on critical theory and cultural studies) are heavily theory oriented, Feenberg supports his argument with real world examples (e.g., AIDS activists successful by-pass of the standard FDA drug approval process). In addition, his lucid critique of traditional theories of technology makes the book useful as a textbook for upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses in technology studies.

The book has nine chapters divided into three parts. In Part I, using examples from social movements such as the May events of 1968 in France, and environmentalism, Feenberg demonstrates that technology has become politicized. Part II outlines Feenberg's proposal for a "democratic rationalization" of technology design through an analysis of the "limits of technological rationality," and "the problem of agency." The final section brings together "theories of modernity" with "empirical work on technology."

To formulate his micro-politics of technology, Feenberg offers a two level critique: one focusing on the local level of technological design, and the second focusing on the meta-level of cultural worldview, or hermeneutic (i.e., the presuppositions and biases inherent in our present relations with technology) (202). Feenberg argues that the social construction of technology, which he broadly conceives to include social constructivists, contextualist historians of technology such as Hughes, and actor-network theorists, such as Callon and Latour, has established convincingly that the technology-society relationship is not unilinear (78-83). These theorists have demonstrated through their analysis of particular technological artifact designs that the design process is not deterministic. There is a significant degree of contingency, difference, or, as Feenberg terms it, "ambivalence" in society's relationship with technology (76). The essentialist characterization of technology as an autonomous rationalizing force acting on society is thereby vitiated by social constructivist studies of technology development.

However, while constructivism offers a serious challenge to essentialist philosophies of technology, Feenberg rightly points out its deficiencies, namely, that it is too narrowly focused on the development of particular technological artifacts/systems (11). The problem that constructivism ignores is the larger question of how particular design choices are made over other choices, which, as Feenberg argues, is an inherently political question. The design choice process must be liberated by what he calls "democratic rationalization," where

subjugated actors intervene in the technological design process to shape it toward their own ends.

To this end, Feenberg draws on the work of Critical Theorists Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas. Marcuse explains how privileged actors maintain a hegemony over the design process (as well everything else in the "one-dimensional" society). However, Feenberg disagrees with Marcuse's appeal to "outsiders" to overthrow this hegemony.

Instead, Feenberg adopts Habermas' conception of the democratic community as the context for liberating technological design choice from hegemonic constraints. Feenberg, however, argues that Habermas is mistaken in his conception of technology as neutral and instrumentally rational. The neutrality of technology is no longer debateable technology can not be separated from a cultural context. In regard to Habermas' claim that technology equates to instrumental rationality, the constructivist studies of technology have demonstrated that actors are able to successfully shape design choice for their own non-instrumental ends. Nevertheless, since the struggle over design choice is centered around technology, Feenberg claims that it is "rational" but not instrumentally rational (105). He thereby brings rationality into Habermas' vision of a democratic community to arrive at his suggested "democratic rationality." The possibility exists to choose rationally more liberating technological designs that further the various interests of the community of actors, as Feenberg states "there are ways of rationalizing society that democratize rather than centralize control" (76).

For the meta-level critique, Feenberg draws on a number of intellectual traditions, hermeneutics from Heidegger, cultural theory from Foucault and Baudrillard, and philosophy of technology from Gilbert Simondon to reveal how the interests of certain "strategic" actors achieve and maintain control of the design choice process. "Strategic" actors, as Feenberg calls them, are able to concretize their particular biases as the given "technological code" (113). And because they intentionally choose technological designs that maintain operational autonomy the centralized-hierarchical power structure is perpetuated. Subjugated tactical actors are thereby excluded from the design choice process unless resistance is successful, which Feenberg obviously believes is possible. What is needed, according Feenberg, is a theory of cultural change: "A new culture is needed to shift patterns of investment and consumption and to open up the imagination to technical advances that transform the horizon of economic action" (98).

Although Feenberg does offer examples of the "democratic rationalization" of technology where actors are able to steer technological design toward their own interests, I would argue that he has exaggerated the significance of these victories in light of the larger context of global capitalism. Given time and space the logic of the market remains the prevailing force shaping the face of modernity.

This is not to say that modernity cannot be significantly changed for the better. Nor am I suggesting that the "successes" of the developed world directly result in the oppression and exploitation of the non-developed world. My point is that emphasizing the local successes of technology relations (which are in themselves questionable) may not only leave us far short of the goal of a more democratic-egalitarian modernity, it may, in fact, blind us to the head-long plunge into an ever increasing disparity that is the plight of so many in the world today. Even more significant, in celebrating the "democratization" of technology in these limited contexts, Feenberg largely ignores the fact that we are becoming increasingly embedded in technological systems (which are characterized by fetishized consumerism) that remove us further and further from the real world in which many still face crucial life threatening problems.

Despite these criticisms, Feenberg's analysis remains extremely valuable. His critique of essentialist philosophies of technology alone is a significant step toward clarifying the future direction of technology studies. Moreover, his application of constructivism, critical theory and cultural studies brings some of the most sophisticated theories to bear on technology, and

has thereby opened up new ways of perceiving the technology/society relationship.

The Editors of The Newsletter are Proud to Announce:

Amy C. Crumpton has been appointed the 1999-2000 History of Science Society Dibner Postdoctoral Fellow. Since March 1998, she has been a program associate and research archivist with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, responsible for the reorganization and maintenance of the association's archives... As a History of Science Society Dibner Postdoctoral Fellow, Dr. Crumpton will investigate AAAS' role in defining and redefining the concept of "science and society" that has influenced the association's educational and programmatic missions to advance science. Particularly, she will develop a brief critical history of the AAAS Committee on Science in the Promotion of Human Welfare, chaired by notable scientists such as Barry Commoner and Margaret Mead, and the committee's attempt during the 1960's to infuse the association with more socially active policy positions.

Upcoming Conferences

The First Southern California Colloquium in the History of Science, Medicine and Technology will be held at UCLA on Saturday, October 23, 1999: "Science and Medicine as Contested Knowledge: The World beyond Europe." Speakers include Steven Feierman (U of Penn); Bridie Andrews (Harvard); Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Berkeley). Three other sessions will be held on January 22, April 29, and November 4 in the year 2000. They are as follows: "Science and Magic in Early Modern Europe: Revisited," "The American Symbiosis of Politics and Science," and "The Effects of Political Revolutions on Science, Medicine and Technology." For more information please consult: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/jacob/colloquium>. Papers will be precirculated and reservations are required. All are welcome.

1999 marks the 75th anniversary of the History of Science Society. Plan to be a part of the Society's Semisequicentennial Celebration by attending their conference November 3-7. Travel Grants are available for this year's conference. A list of abstracts for those papers to be presented is available at the HSS website. Consult the HSS web site - <http://depts.washington.edu/hsexec> - for more information. If you have any further questions, please contact the HSS Executive Office at: Robert J. Malone, Ph.D., History of Science Society - Executive Director, University of Washington Box 351330, Seattle, WA 98195-1330; Phone 1-206-543-9366; E-mail: hsexec@u.washington.edu

Second Annual University of South Carolina Comparative Literature Conference, entitled History, Technology, and Identity: After Foucault, March 16-18, 2000, is a follow-up to the two-year international conference, Cultural History After Foucault, held in 1997 and 1998 at the universities of Amsterdam and Aberdeen. It seeks to examine both the limits and contributions of Foucault's thought in the three interrelated topics of history, technology, and identity. Inquiries and one page abstracts for 20 minute papers should be sent to Paul Allen Miller, Program in Comparative Literature, Welsh Hall, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, (803-777-0473); pamiller@sc.edu. Abstracts must be received by December 1, 1999. This conference is sponsored in part by the College of Liberal Arts, The University of South Carolina. For updated information, see their web page at: <http://www.cas.sc.edu/CPLT/activities/2ndannualc.html>

The Society for the History of Technology will hold its next annual meeting in Munich, Germany, from August 17-20, 2000. The program committee invites proposals for individual papers and sessions on topics related to all aspects of the history of technology. Proposals that attempt to use the history of technology to inform other disciplines or subdisciplines of history are encouraged. Proposals must be sent by surface mail. Those for individual papers must include 3 copies of (A) an abstract of not more than one page, and (b) a one-page curriculum vitae, including current postal and e-mail address. Proposals for complete sessions should include 3 copies of (A) a description of the session's general topic and how each of the papers is relevant to the topic at hand, (B) a list of the presenters' names and

paper titles, (C) a one-page abstract and a one-page c.v. for each of the presenters, and (D) a c.v. for the commentator, the chairperson and the session organizer (if s/he is not participating in the session), including current postal and e-mail addresses of the all participants. Proposals for post sessions are also encouraged. E-mail proposals will not be accepted. All proposals shall include indication of any required AV technology. In accordance with the society's rules, since the SHOT annual meeting in the year 2000 will convene in Munich, Germany, those who will be giving a paper in Detroit are also eligible to submit proposals for the Munich meeting. Send completed proposals (in triplicate) bearing a postmark or equivalent indication of submission date by February 10, 2000 to Dr. Michael Allen, SHOT Program Chair, Zentralinstitu fur Geschichte der Technik, Deutsches Museum, Museuminsel 1, D-80306 Munchen, Germany. Phone int+089 21799 402, fax int+089 2179 324, e-mail: t7911@mailin.lrz-muenchen.de

Newsletter affairs

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