

An Introduction to Sociotechnology

Excerpt from: Petrina, S. (2003). 'Two cultures' of technical courses and discourses: The case of computer-aided design. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 13(1), 47-73

Sociotechnical Theory

Sociotechnical theories generally attend to relations between humans and their technologies, and more specifically to the deployment of technologies and corresponding dimensions of organization and use. In conventional sociotechnical theories of the 1950s these dimensions were defined in terms of an *interface* between human (social) and non-human (technological) *systems*. Generally, through **cybernetic and systems theory**, a language and model of feedback, control mechanisms and design were developed to capture human and machine behaviour. Original cybernetic notions were quickly moved from narrow, micro concerns with behaviours to account for macro cultural and organizational climates within which technologies were deployed. Primary interests centred on relationships among components in a dynamic system, rather than components themselves. Here, the behaviour, goal or state of a particular system is dependent on cultural, social and technical *components* being 'directively correlated'. *Coproducers* of outcomes or states, these components have distinctive characteristics that must necessarily be respected or *variance* (unprogrammed events) is a result. *Complements* among each of the components are realized and the probability of variance is reduced, only when *compatibility* of components is respected. Making certain that components interact harmoniously requires that characteristics are respected and correlated in both initial *design* and in progressive *use* (Cherns, 1976; Grint & Woolgar, 1997, pp. 14-18; Pasmore & Sherwood, 1978; Trist, 1959/1978, 1981, p. 37). The aim was the 'joint optimisation of the technical and the social systems' of industry and the military (Herbst, 1974, p. 4). This required a knowledge of the 'way machines and technical systems behave and of the way people and groups behave' (Cherns, 1976, p. 784).

Inasmuch as sociotechnical theories attend to human-machine relations they are founded on the work of 19th century theorists such as **Karl Marx** and **Max Weber**. Marx theorized that machine systems for production were designed so that labour was a mere appendage to capitalist industries. Labourers were coordinated with the movement of machine systems and subordinated to machine processes. Historically, technology and social systems were dialectically related: technology and society changed together. Avoiding a priority problem, Marx argued that technology combined with labour relations to act as a determinant force. What Marx did for industry and technology, Weber did for bureaucracy and rationality. Here, rationality and

technology are determinants of the character of social relations and institutions. Critical theorists expanded on Marx's and Weber's theories of alienation, capital, labour, production and rationality (Feenberg, 1991; Leiss, 1990; Marcuse; 1964; Noble, 1984). Marcuse and the **Frankfurt School** may have been uneasy with the way that Fromm (1955) integrated **Freud with Marx**, but their conclusions were similar: The organization of labour and technologies produce desires and determine social character, *and* bureaucracies and technologies are in opposition to individual self-actualisation. The superstructure (character, institutions, norms) of a society is reducible and separate from the base (economics, technology). Other theorists of the 1950s argued that technologies do not determine human nature, relations or institutions; rather there are cultural, ecological, psychological and social factors independent of technology.

This humanistic, non-determinist notion was clearly articulated within the **Tavistock Institute of Human Relations** beginning in the 1950s. At Tavistock, Eric Trist and colleagues theorized that tasks could be arranged to promote psychological and social processes conducive to efficient, harmonious and productive relations (Herbst, 1976, pp. 3-8; Rose, 1989, pp. 87-101; Trist, 1981). In turn, the technologies could be manipulated to respond to ways that humans used these technologies. Humans could be made to adjust to technologies and technologies made to adjust to humans. At Tavistock, Trist and colleagues focused on the production of harmonious conditions, whereas critical theorists focused on conflicts necessary to overcome inequities already rooted in conditions of production. Where Marx argued that technologies in their very nature were political, Tavistock theorists worked to politically neutralize technology. Through the 1950s and 1960s, sociotechnical theories at the Tavistock Institute were extended from concerns with the dynamics of affordances and interfaces to concerns with adjustments to contexts and systems (Pasmore and Sherwood, 1978).

In the 1950s and 1960s, French theorists **Jacques Ellul** (1962, 1964) and **Louis Althusser** (1963) repudiated the humanism expressed at Tavistock and that of existential Marxists who countered determinism by privileging human agency over technology. Unlike Tavistock theorists, Ellul refused to privilege humans over technology. For Ellul, humans had given themselves over to technology, or technique, and agency was forfeited in the bargain. Human nature was unrecognisable in its total integration into technological systems. While much less deterministic than Ellul, Althusser also rejected existential theories of human nature (e.g., the desire to be free from determinism is a human essence). In rejecting essences of either humans or technology, Althusser argued that relations between humans and technology are defined in practice. Neither

culture nor humans were determined. Rather, in practice, the human and the cultural were 'overdetermined' (1963, pp. 170-186). Departing from Marx on this point, he argued that economy, humans, society and technology were constituted by the other. Humans and society are not determined by economy and technology, but neither are humans free to determine technology or their relations with technology. The overdetermination thesis leaves the determinism question open, but does not limit determinism to one force or another.

During the 1980s and 1990s, work in science and technology studies (STS) helped us to rethink conventional notions of sociotechnical systems or sociotechnology (Grint & Woolgar, 1997, pp. 6-38; Law, 1987). In what amounted to attempts to counter determinist notions of critical theorists and the interests of Tavistock theorists who saw technical systems as neutral and independent from other systems, contextualists took cues from Althusser and argued that varying contexts (e.g., economic, social, political) constitute the designs and uses of technologies (Bijker, Hughes & Pinch, 1986; Law, 1987). **Contextualism** underscores the idea that technology itself is overdetermined, as Althusser noted, and does not develop in a vacuum. The cultural, social and psychological factors that, generally prior to the early 1960s, were seen as either dependent on or independent of technical factors came to be seen as interdependent with technology. These approaches gave way to more interactive theories in which technologies constitute various contexts. Where Trist and colleagues fashioned sociotechnical systems in response to *given* or essential demands of specific technologies and organizations, interactionists such as Bijker (1995) problematised these givens. Representative of interactive theories are 'sociotechnical ensembles', which are viewed as collectives or systems of economic, political, social and technical elements (Bijker, 1995, p. 249; Hughes, 1986; Law, 1987). In contextualism, technologies shape contexts and contexts shape the technologies in return, more or less in tandem. In **interactionism**, technologies and other systems are shaped together, simultaneously. Contextualists and interactionists reason that technologies are neither as malleable as non-determinists argue nor are they as durable as determinists posit (Petrina, 1992; Smith and Marx, 1994). Where Tavistock theorists satisfied Snow's premise (i.e., separate economic, political and technological factors) and conclusion (limited interaction), contextualists and interactionists rejected Snow's conclusion. Yet rather than accepting contextualism or interactionism, which assume a division of cultures, the most recent STS theories contain a rejection of the very premise that inspired Snow's description of two cultures.

Contextualism and interactionism are theoretically yielding to notions of **actor-networks**, **hybrids** and **cyborgs**, which erase essentialist, predetermined notions of what counts as culture, nature, society and technology. These divisions between culture, nature and society are abstractions of outcomes of particular practices. The new theories remove any contingencies of technologies on context and remove inside (technology) versus outside (society) distinctions. Boundaries or ‘contexts’ that are natural, social or technical are seen as the outcome of a long process of modern practices, and often change. **Hybridity theories** turn a twist on the Frankfurt School’s position that technology is antagonistic to human nature and reject humanism. Here, human-machine relations are never fully harmonious nor antagonistic. Drawing from theorists such as Althusser and Ellul, this notion is underwritten by a radical attention to practice. Hence, it is misleading to theoretically differentiate between what, in contextualism and interactionism, are separate economic, human, natural, technical systems and so on. Instead, these systems lose their boundary distinctions in collectives such as cyborgs and hybrids (Gray, 1995; Grint & Woolgar, 1987; Haraway, 1985, 1995, 1997; Latour, 1987, 1993, 1999). Sociotechnical theories, ranging from the harmonious cybernetic relations of Tavistock to the disharmonious cyborgs of Haraway, have the express intention, albeit through different politics, of countering the alienation and apathy that developed in association with notions of technological determinism.

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