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Book review: The Social Shaping Of Technology

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Donald Mackenzie’s and Judy Wajcman’s Social Shaping of Technology reached its second edition in 1999. As an example of that endangered species, the purpose-driven anthology, today threatened by the photocopied assemblages by individual lecturers, this book has achieved admirable success. The thirty chapters are divided into four parts. The first is introductory and general. The second concerns the technology of production. The third concerns reproductive technology, and the fourth military technology.

This book would be welcome in any communication scholar’s library, as the sociology of technology is a perennial topic. As to which specific courses would be most likely to adopt the text, all one can say is that the choice is wide. A group seminar where each student is required to participate seems to be the best fit, as the topics featuring the human-technological interface varying from contraception to infantry weapons covers a broad spectrum indeed.

This is a book for historians and abstract thinkers. The contribution on personal computing, for example, may evoke feelings of nostalgia in older readers, but it is no help in understanding the social effect of computers for any reader of current computer magazines. It is pretty much the standard, British Cultural Studies offering. It betrays its 1985 beginnings, and for teachers familiar with the companion Open University offering, Culture, Society and the Media anthology (Methuen, 1982) compiled by Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran and Janet Wollacott, there will be few surprises.

The authors explain their purpose in the preface and introductory chapters. Essentially, theirs is an activist plea, asking the readers not to simply accept Technological Determinism without doing something about it. Yet their examples, indeed their method, overwhelms the reader with the opposite message. While Karl Marx was the Economic Determinist, these neo-Marxists have simply replaced “money” with “technology”.

A representative sample of this trend comes from Chapter 9 by Cynthia Cockburn. Her topic is “Caught in the wheels: the high cost of being female cog in the male machinery of engineering”. On
page 127 she writes:

Technology is far from neutral. This is not a difficult concept to Marxists, who are, after all, used to understanding that our technology is capitalist technology and bears the marks and serves the purposes of the class that owns it. It needs only a little further broadening of the mind to understand that our industrial technology also has the imprint and the limitations that come of being both the social property and one of the formative processes of men. Industrial, commercial, military technologies are masculine in a very historical and material sense. They cannot readily be used in a feminine, nor even a sexless, mode. Women are not merely failing to enter technology. On the one hand we are being repelled, and on the other we are refusing.

Once one has got that simple message, then much of the rest of the book is repetition. Readers who may suspect that there are other factors intervening in the process may become impatient with the authors’ argument.

The paperback edition is within the price range of most students, and the book is nicely presented. With about thirty different authors (including Karl Marx), there is a wide range of examples for the overriding thesis. This style of multi-voiced anthology has the advantage over the single authored book, as it provokes the student in striving to understand different perspectives. While the underlying theme in this book, as mentioned above, is crystal clear, this is no Reader’s Digest condensed version, written down for easy reading.

In summary, this book would be welcome in your library for reading and reference. For adoption, the graduate seminar seems a better fit than the undergraduate tutorial. For students who are well prepared, and where tutors are willing to incorporate other ideas to challenge some of the book’s dogma, this book could be a good adoption.