Persistent Inequalities?:
Gender and Technology in the Year 2000

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The millennium encourages both reflection and speculation and we indulge in a little of both as we assess the state of gender and technology relations on the brink of the third millennium. We both began in academia, in the interdisciplinary area of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in 1980. We were also both involved in local feminist politics, including the Women's Centre and the Rape Crisis Centre. Even though we worked as researchers in a university, we were engaged in other forms of adult education. We were keen to integrate theory and practice. Together with other women, we offered a 'Women and Technology' course via the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) for a couple of years in the early 1980s. We wanted to empower ourselves and other women by extending our knowledge of the structural inequalities in gender-technology relations. How has feminist work on gender and technology developed? What are the most positive developments in gender and technology studies that we wish to take with us into the future? Can anything be left behind as historical curiosity, the product of its particular time and place? Are there any lessons that we need to relearn about the relationship between theory and practice?

Let us start near the beginning. In 1985, we wrote:

> in the context of a world where men hold most of the powerful positions and control the use of resources, we understand technology as being imbued with essentially male-centred values. . . . [A]ll men, regardless of race and class, benefit from their ability to control and dominate women. Access to and control over technological decision-making is one means by which this control is maintained.
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> (Zmroczek, Henwood and Wyatt, 1985: 121, italics in original)

How do we now feel about those claims? Has our thinking changed along with developments in both feminism and STS?

Like many of our sisters, we are excited by the challenges that postmodernist developments in the social sciences and humanities have brought to feminism in recent years. Similarly, we are encouraged by the ways in which more constructivist approaches in STS appear to be in the ascendancy. Both postmodernism and constructivism have played an important role in moving our analysis away from structuralist and deterministic theories of the gender-technology relation that dominated the literature to which we contributed fifteen to twenty years ago.

Women are no longer (or only very rarely) seen as passive victims of

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patriarchal domination and control of technologies, which are themselves inherently masculine in design and character. Rather, in line with post-modernist thinking more generally, women are understood as active agents, able to affect and shape, as well as be shaped by, the development and diffusion of new technologies. Similarly, from constructivist approaches in STS, we have learnt that technologies are best understood as flexible and always contingent (Bijker and Law, 1992; Latour, 1996), shaped in design but also shaped or reconfigured at the multiple points of consumption and use, giving rise to diverse interpretations and meanings (Mackay and Gillespie, 1992; du Gay *et al.*, 1996). One of the key insights of recent work in STS is the reminder that 'things could be otherwise', that technologies are not the inevitable and only result of the application of scientific and technical knowledge.

These theoretical developments have made room for greater optimism about human agency, which is clearly evident in the feminist literature. Some commentators now border on the 'technophoric', a position that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Sadie Plant's work is a good example of such technophoria: 'with recent developments in information technology, the relationship between women and machinery begins to evolve into a dangerous alliance. Silicon and women's liberation track each other's development' (Plant, 1997: 503).

Plant argues that new information and communications technologies are different; somehow, women are set free and men become subordinated to the machine. 'Hooked up to screens and jacked into decks, man becomes the user, the addict, who can no longer insist on his sovereign autonomy and separation from nature' (p. 505). She suggests that whilst early self-regulating machines were hailed as examples of man's ability to dominate and control nature, cybernetics – self-designing mechanisms, self-organizing systems, self-replicating machines – are examples of machines which have begun to exceed the control of those who believe themselves to be in charge. 'Every effort to build a world of man's own design has resulted only in the development of a planetary network with its own networks of communication, circuits of control, and flows of information. With the development of self-regulating systems, man has finally made nature work, but now it no longer works for him' (p. 508).

Plant's arguments are seductive and exciting in their ability to move beyond a focus on the negative aspects of information overload and increasing dependence on information and communication technologies in the so-called 'information society', and to emphasize the spaces available to women to direct and shape their technological futures. However, not all women are in a position to achieve this more utopian state. Women still

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earn less than men, are more likely to occupy positions at the bottom of workplace hierarchies and still have major responsibility for childcare and domestic work. For example, women largely staff the fast-growing 24-hour 'call centres', where shifts are designed to facilitate women's dual role as housewives and workers, and the tasks are repetitive and closely monitored via machines. In terms of their consumption of new information and communication technologies, women are catching up with men in terms of Internet usage, but they still lag behind to a significant extent, representing less than 20 per cent of users within Europe (www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu).

Clearly, new information and communication technologies present exciting new opportunities for identity reconstruction, innovative forms of learning and work organization. However, we wish to go forward into the new millennium with a renewed commitment to build on the insights of older social science and feminist theories, which were concerned to identify material disadvantage and structural inequalities, focusing on the collectivities of class, gender and 'race'. Following Giddens (1976, 1984) and Bradley (1996), we want to integrate structure and agency, to highlight what Bradley refers to as, 'the two faces of social reality' (p. 7). We remain convinced of the need to highlight human agency by identifying the individual and collective actions that shape the direction and experience of technological change. However, we fear that something valuable may have been lost in both our analysis and our practice if we continue to lose sight of the social, economic and cultural factors which constrain, structure and shape technological choices.

Notes

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From Absence to Sovereignty?: Psychoanalysis and Feminism

Amal Treacher

It is common knowledge that feminism is marked by multiple positions, which are inflected by similarities and differences in their understandings of women and our social, cultural and emotional formations. The turn to psychoanalysis, by some, has been part of the subsequent differences and consequent disagreement, which have focused on the desirability of theorizing female subjectivity through a psychoanalytic lens. The turn to psychoanalysis arose from different needs and wants, for as Margot Waddell describes, many have:

> turned to psychoanalysis not only as a refuge for their damaged selves, but also to seek enlightenment about the irrational, intransigent and destructive aspects of us all, those aspects which, forever, variously undermine efforts to move on, compel to repeat, propel towards accommodation to the status quo.
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> (Waddell, 1995: 129)

The shift to psychoanalysis is not unitary and smooth, for this turn is/has been marked by a cleavage which focuses on those who are influenced by object-relations understandings – that from the beginning of life subjectivity is gained through inter-relating – and those who are driven to theorize subjectivity and sexual difference through an adherence to Freud and Lacan, with the primary emphasis on sexual difference and the oedipus complex. These divisions are not necessarily so discrete. For example, Juliet Mitchell has, through her clinical experience, shifted to a Kleinian orientation.