

Reply to Richard Hull

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Reply to Richard Hull

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The main thrust of Richard Hull's comments seems to be a warning not to forget about other work in the study of technology and society. Hull specifically mentions recent work by several "historians of the present" and of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the 1950s. I welcome his suggestions. He would probably also agree that work under the banner of "labor process theory" (following Braverman 1974) and studies related to labor unions in Scandinavia also deserve to be mentioned.

There is one issue where we seem to disagree. I do *not* think that it is "a minor point" that in these older technology studies "the social and the technical were still distinct." By upholding this distinction, these older studies did not subject the hard core of technology to analysis in the same terms as "the microstructures of organizations." They allow for the possibility that technical constraints are harder than social goals and, ultimately, they left the sting inside. The recent constructivist technology studies that I reviewed follow "the hard route." They first open up the technology to examine the construction of technical knowledge, practices, and artifacts, and then find it necessary to analyze the social, political, and economic conditions. The resulting concept of sociotechnical ensembles may seem similar to concepts used in some of the work mentioned by Hull, but the difference in how this result is reached is significant.

I do not want to dismiss Hull's suggestion to consider seriously this other body of work. Such studies would probably enrich analyses of the politics of technology implied in the "turn towards practice" that I advocate. Such a *politics of technology* would be different from technology policy studies: It would focus on the value-ladenness of technology, on the power relations embedded in technology, on how the technology is used to exert power on the organizational shaping of technology, and on the technical shaping of labor and social relations. It would problematize and politicize rather than solve and pacify. It would, in Hull's words, "tread a fine line between pessimism and optimism." Such politics of technology can become a fruitful

line of study only if we continue to look “inside technology” as the recent constructivist technology studies have been doing, while also drawing on the work cited by Hull.

Reference

Braverman, H. 1974. *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Wiebe E. Bijker is Associate Professor at the University of Limburg, Maastricht, the Netherlands. His Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Socio-Technical Change is forthcoming in 1994 as part of the MIT Press series Inside Technology.