

ScienceFutures (STS Meeting Feb 2008, Zurich)

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CALL FOR PAPERS FOR THE SWISS STS MEETING 2008

SCIENCEFUTURES

A joint event of the Centre for the History of Knowledge (ETH Zurich and University of Zurich) and The Swiss Association for the Studies of Science, Technology and Society (STS-CH)

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The Swiss STS Meeting 2008 is an academic event tailored to the interests of junior scholars, in particular Ph.D. students, in science and technology studies in Switzerland and abroad. This is the fourth conference of its kind, and the institution has become an important interdisciplinary platform for the exchange and production of knowledge for a substantial number of young researchers. The general topic of the conference, ScienceFutures, does justice to this interdisciplinarity by alluding to interfaces between science, technology, sociology, history, cultural studies, literature, and other fields that are contributing to the rich area of science and technology studies. It is explicitly meant to bridge the gap between the two cultures of the sciences and the humanities, but also those between the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts.

ScienceFutures

ScienceFutures is a provocative reaction to the notion that with the millennium, utopian thinking has come to an end. While in early modern thought utopia was the site of happiness removed in space, it increasingly became a good place in the future in nineteenth-century progressionism. Subjected to *différance* in space and time, utopias acquired a technical and scientific makeup. Trust in the calculability of the future was also a necessary condition for the rise of the modern welfare state, leading to a heyday of social planning. However, in high modernism the future lost its character of being a 'storehouse of possibilities'. Rather, confronted with risks and uncertainties, the futurology of the 1960s tried to 'colonize' the

time ahead and reduce its openness, now conceived not as a chance but as a potential danger. The result was a 'defuturizing' of the present, and a technocratic stance towards social change. In the aftermath of the traumatic outgrowths of totalitarianism, the utility of prospective thinking remained fundamentally questionable, and the dynamics of scientific and technological innovation made it difficult to anticipate future developments with plausible certainty.

Where do we stand today? Organizational change management and environmental sustainability are future oriented. In economics, probabilistic prognoses have gained importance, with 'futures' as a new financial product that capitalizes on uncertainty. It has even been argued that the postmodern age has brought a revival of the utopian (and dystopian), built on the transforming power of science, medicine, and technology. Is the present characterized by chronotopes and heterotopias that force us to rethink traditional notions of time and space? What are the characteristics of the discourses on a posthuman age, presumably initiated by the 'revolutions' in biotechnology, nanotechnology, information science, and robotics?

Key Issues

The prospect of a brave new world with a deep structure that has been reorganized along tracks unfamiliar to the present through ruthless boundary crossing opens up many questions: How are the citizens of the glocal and virtureal worlds of the future imagined? Will fundamental dichotomies such as dead/alive, fictitious/real, female/male, animal/human, or artificial/natural dissolve? Which new forms of social organization will shape future collectives? Are new boundaries and new sources of conflict emerging?

Thinking the unfamiliar, not to mention to communicate and realize the unknown, creates problems. The difficulty of translation is associated with questions regarding the formal and representational: the media, genres, models, languages, narratives, vocabularies, and the iconographies through which future worlds become possible. How do the scientists and engineers, the science fiction writers, and cultural theorists deal with the problem of translation? How do they convey the strange, the other, and still make sense? What kinds of aesthetics and which rationalities are at work in these epistemologies of the future? Associated with these are further questions, such as in how far our visions of and possibilities for the future may be rooted in our present. How do our anthropomorphisms, and more specific contingencies, set boundaries to the strange? The role of the social past in future scenarios of societies, as well as the ways in which our bodies might be seen as checks to the possible, or to the contrary become the sine qua non for and site of projections into the future, are worth investigating.

Finally, as befitting a field that cultivates the virtue of

self-reflexivity, one may inquire after the role of science and technology studies in the creation of ScienceFutures. Are the above observations applicable to researchers in science, medicine, and technology, or does the old division between the natural and human sciences, on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences, on the other hand, loom in this kind of approach to ScienceFutures? How do scientific disciplines and investigators conceptualize the futures they see opened up by their work, its consequences for society, and how do they deal with problems of communication? How does the reference to future developments change the position of scientific experts within the social power games of their present? What is the role of envisioning models and scenarios in the production of knowledge itself? How are epistemic conditions rearranged by taking the future into account? And finally, what are the prophecies exponents make regarding the futures of their own disciplines, including science studies? In how far are 'a flattening of the world' and a 'democratization of science' creating unprecedented possibilities and problems?

The meeting encourages scholars to engage with futuristic science, and to address questions surrounding the prospects of science and technology, of estimated social, cultural, political, and economic implications. How are futures negotiated between the scientific practitioners and diverse publics? Do utopias (inevitably) envisage conformity, or are diversity and dissent built into visions of the future? Has science become the mythology of the scientific age? Or do the fears outweigh the hopes connected with science and technology? Is someone's desire another's nightmare? Are futures politically instrumentalized, and if so, how do they function as threats and/or as promises? In what kinds of genres and media are the visions of future worlds created and communicated? How are form and content related? Are the utopias and apocalypses free from bodies as we know them, or do they to the contrary aim at the apotheosis of the human?

Session and Abstract Submission

We invite submissions for organized sessions or individual papers that approach the topic of ScienceFutures. It is possible to submit session and individual abstracts electronically on the conference website at <http://www.zgw.ethz.ch/sts>. Sessions will be 105 minutes and should not exceed three presentations of maximum twenty minutes each. If five or six speakers address similar topics, two sessions may be submitted. The deadline for submissions is July 15, 2007, and abstracts should not exceed 500 words. Closer to the event important information on the program development, travel possibilities, and locality.

Enquiries may be addressed to sts08@wiss.gess.ethz.ch

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