

## **Technofeminism**

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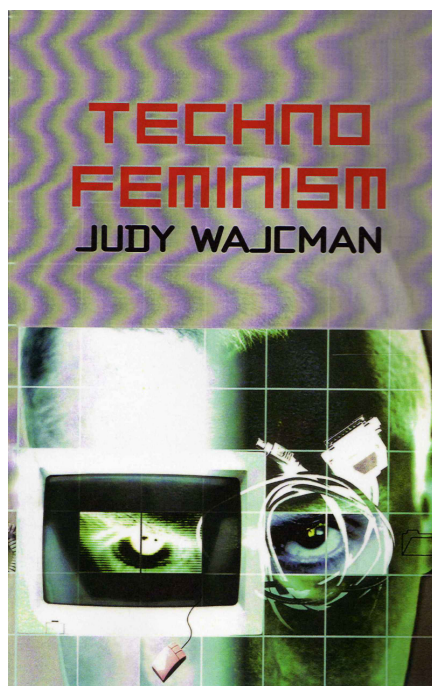
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A lot has been written about the idea of technology as a liberating or constraining force. Utopian, post-industrial, optimistic and pessimistic analyses produced by different theoretical persuasions emphasize that technology can free us from the rules of the world of work and the domestic world or that, on the contrary, science and technology perpetuate unequal gender relations.

In the field of gender relations, feminist analyses of technology still appear in an emergent and exploratory form, beginning by delineating their scope and consolidating their analytic frameworks primarily by emphasizing technology's negative aspects. Studying technology from a gender perspective implies stressing how technological artefacts are designed and shaped by gender relations through their uses and meanings, thereby perpetuating differences and relations of power.

In 1986, in a review of the pioneering work of authors such as Evelyn Fox Keller and Ruth Bleier, writing in the journal *Signs*, Anne Fausto-Sterling highlights three factors explaining the gap between Women's Studies and feminist analyses of the sciences (and technology). These factors still apply today, demanding a re-examination of the situation of this field of studies. From 1960 to 1986, Women's Studies had diversified, deepened and multiplied to such an extent that in some disciplinary fields, like history, retrospective summaries and 'state of the art' analyses of field research started to emerge. The 1980s was the period in which authors like Joan Scott systemized the area's production with texts beginning to be translated in Brazil in the 1990s.



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Likewise, the debate within the feminist movement inspired Wajcman to undertake a study of what the movement thinks of technoscience, from the beginnings of the post-industrial era to the present. Her opening observation is that the advent and dissemination of microelectronic technologies, the internet and the virtual world, biotechnology and biomedicine do not necessarily change gender relations – or more precisely, technological artefacts continue to contain dominant gender relations both in terms of their design and their usage.

In the first part of the book, 'Male Designs on Technology,' Wajcman discusses the literature on hybrids, highlighting authors like Donna Haraway and her cyborg theory. For Haraway, feminist theories and the social construction of the sciences argue for the destruction of the idea of science as a discoverer of universal truths for subsequent technological application and proposes, instead, the idea of science as a social construct. She proposes to introduce what she calls situated knowledge: "feminist objectivity simply means situated knowledge," in contrast to the idea of universal knowledge. Hence, it makes sense to speak of producing knowledge on the basis of the experiences, life histories and backgrounds of the scientists involved. Allied to Haraway's approach is the idea of building a 'gender-free' science. However, for this to be possible, the feminist perspective has to be included in science.

In response to these kind of claims, Wajcman brilliantly reconceptualizes the relationship between technology and feminism in the book's second and third chapters. To this end, she develops the idea of technofeminism, revising the feminist theory that stresses women as victims of technology. The inclusion of the feminist perspective does not mean asserting that objectivity in scientific investigation must be discarded. Keller and Longino have already pointed out that "scientific objectivity needs to be reconceived as the function of a communal structure and never as an individual property of scientists."

This concept emphasizes the idea of contingency and technological heterogeneity, rejecting technological neutrality on the grounds that it is socially constructed, although she highlights the absence of the issue of gender in actor-network theory. This absence, the author argues, represents an exclusion since an indispensable dimension of understanding the process of constructing networks involves including and mapping all members and relations, including the gender relations present in the evolution of networks.

Wajcman also reviews the idea of virtual gender through a reading of texts by Plant, an exponent of cy-

berfeminism with an optimistic view of the future role of women based on the cultivation of identity, empowerment, agency and pleasure. According to Wajcman, a tension exists between an essentially feminine vision of cyberspace and its potential definition as a privileged space – that is, the metaphor of cyberfeminism articulated as an alternative to the construction of female identities. On this point the author questions the concept's potential to change gender relations.

Chapter 4, 'The Cyborg Solution,' demonstrates Wajcman's optimistic view of Haraway's cyborg theory and cyberfeminism as a positive antidote against the negativist determinism of feminist analyses, although the author has reservations concerning what she identifies as the limits of cyborg theory.

The idea of the cyborg can, Wajcman argues, cause a return to the flaws of traditional feminist theories, especially dualism: in other words, the euphoria derived from hybrids and the defeat of essentialism can also be associated with a global elite, despite the fact that science can be comprehended as a set of constructivist practices.

Although the book is partly confined to the debate within the feminist movement, it is possible for a reader little familiar with this debate to apprehend aspects of the technology/gender relations issue, especially in terms of its political and social dimensions. This enables a fresh look at the political question and the transformations of social relations and demonstrates the possibility of reframing this debate within a new feminist project.

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