

Keynote 3

The Master and Slave Redemption – Thinking Technology from a Social Justice Perspective

Gaston Meskens, Science & Technology Studies Unit, SCK•CEN, and Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry, University of Ghent (Belgium), gaston.meskens@sckcen.be

Science and technology have dramatically changed our world in the last centuries, albeit in conflicting ways. On the one hand, they have significantly contributed to the improvement of our individual lives, our collective well-being and the organization of our society. On the other hand, they have resulted in various threats to life and well-being and provided multiple tools to distort and even destroy our society and habitat. The development and application of modern science and technology in the various 'sectors' of our society (health, food, water, housing, energy, transport, communication, industry, ...) can be called one of the five evolutions that, in a historical perspective, made up modernity. The other four happened in the 'fields' of politics (the emergence of democracy, the nation state and international politics), economics (the emergence of globalized markets and the financial economy), culture (the emergence of popular culture and modern and postmodern art) and the social (the emergence of new lifestyles and new forms of communication).

Evaluation of how science and technology (might) affect our lives and co-existence in positive and negative ways cannot be done in isolation from the contexts within which they operate, which means they must take account of all aspects of the fields of politics, economy, culture and the social as mentioned above. The reason is that the potentialities and (possible) threats of science and technology affect the way we live but also our considerations on the way we want to live. Conversely, current political, economic, cultural and social dynamics affect the way science and technology develop and the way they are applied now and in the future.

Many researchers practicing technology assessment (TA) or science & technology studies (STS) aim to present an 'objective' sociological picture of the interrelation between science, technology and society. Other visions are normative-driven from the start. They present critical visions on how science and technology should be understood and governed taking into account the complexity of modern society, and they consequently formulate the ethical consequences of these visions. This presentation is done from a similar critical perspective. It argues for a deeper critical-ethical thinking about science and technology, from a social justice perspective.

Technology is in our hands. We will always be able to decide what to do with it, and it will never overtake us, if we want. But we need to do this 'together'. The fundamental problem with technology is not the health risk, the environmental burden, the commercial exploitation or the social control that might come with it. Technology is just technology. The real problem with technology is the problem of power: who owns the technology, and for what reason. Therefore, TA and STS should be inspired by deeper spiritual thinking about who we are as humans and humanity in relation to (our) nature as well as by critical thinking about the situations in which technology is nothing but a tool at the service of power and profit. TA and STS should generate critical-ethical reflections and advice on how to better deal with science and technology from a social justice perspective, in the interest of our individual and general well-being. The 'objectivity' and independency of TA and STS as policy-supportive research practices can simply be guaranteed by their participatory and inclusive character. But we will need to do this 'together', again.