

Women and Technology Studies in Germany

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Questions of Institutionalization

When the "Gesellschaft für Technikgeschichte" (GTG = Society for the History of Technology) was founded in 1991, as a both scientific and professional lobby for German-speaking technology historians, women's and gender history had already been subjecting the historiographical traditions and scientific interpretation patterns of the German historians' fraternity to critical review for several years. This also influenced the new society. Already at the constituent meeting, women technology historians established the working group "Women and Technology", with the dual intention of creating a scientific and lobby-oriented sphere for communication between women within the GTG. The women are pursuing this double objective through working group meetings at the annual conferences of the society and through the organizing of workshops dealing with approaches of women's and gender studies of relevance to the history of technology.

Six workshops have been held to date, discussing the role of artifacts in the definition of male and female occupations, reflecting on conceptional issues surrounding access to the relationship between technology and gender, and considering the subject of knowledge forms in technology from the perspective of gender, as well as raising the question of the gender dimension in technical competence and debating repeatedly on organizational, structural and interest-based problems of the working group. The working group has registered notable success in ensuring appropriate involvement of women in the committee work of the society and in supporting the presence of women in a scientific capacity at the annual conferences. The group has been somewhat less successful, however, in its efforts to break up the ignorance towards gender-historical issues in the mainstream of history of technology.

The proposal to look into gender relationships and masculinity in technology as a topic of an annual conference of the society has already twice been rejected in favor of other topics by the votes of a majority of technology historians in the society. And in lectures and seminars on the history of technology, gender is treated as a "useful category of historical analysis"(Joan W. Scott) at only few colleges and universities, generally where women belong to the teaching staff or where individual professors inspired by the Anglo-American discussion of gender and technology have taken up the intellectual challenge. An overview of the research scene shows, however, that history of technology is beginning to open itself to gender-specific approaches.

Topics of Major Interest

The research topics of gender and technology studies in recent years have concentrated primarily on three areas, which are recognizably further developments of topics of the 1980s:

1. The discussion of women's work in recent years has concentrated on processes of the devaluation and revaluation of women's occupations through new technologies. It was above all the gendering of conceptions of technology and definitions of the technical competence of men and women which attracted attention, investigated by way of practical comparisons, e.g. the female radiology assistant and the male radiologist, women and male pilots, etc. The basic assumption of the studies is that social definitions of gender identity are extremely variable in their application, whereby it would appear wise to pay similarly greater attention to definitions of masculinity.
2. Treatment of the phenomena of household mechanization, which has in the meantime become almost a "classic" theme, is not only considering the contrasting histories of consumption in East and West to a growing extent, but has also been channeled increasingly into fundamental investigations of the implementation of the most varied fields of technology. Above all the following questions are to be answered: By which means, through which media and via which mediating instances are new technologies brought to their potential users. In return it is to be clarified, to what extent habits, social agreements and the inertia of everyday life form new technologies to allow them a realistic chance of propagation. One of the last numbers of "Technikgeschichte", the main journal for history of Technology studies in Germany, was attended to explore those questions.
3. Consideration of technical modeling of the human body, and of the influence of such models for the formation of identities and the representation of male and female bodies in politics, are occupying an ever broader range in the work of women technology historians in Germany. At the same time there is a growing interest in the history of technical control over other spheres of living nature, e.g. over flora and fauna, in the history of foods, and soon.

In summary, the situation of women and technology in Germany can be described as ambivalent: On the one hand most of the colleagues would find gender a useful category for historical studies. On the other hand the field is only explored by women researchers. However, their positions at universities are not satisfactory at all.

(Bibliography is available on request from authors.)