Upon opening the black box and finding it Empty: Social Constructivism and the philosophy of technology

(Langdon Winner, 1993)

- Criticism of social Constructivism
- Using the metaphor Black box. You can see what goes in and what comes out, but not what is inside of it
Langdon Winner

• Professor in political science, New York since 1990. Known for articles about science, technology and society.

• Reporter and contributing editor in Rolling Stone Magazine for several years.
Social constructivism

• In science and technology studies (STS), science as well as technology contributes to construct our environments (socio-cultural interaction).

• Sociology of science. E.g. Bruno Latour, Actor-Network Theory

• Winner is questioning how this is being done asking ”what do philosophers need to know about technology?” and ”Where should a philosopher go to learn about technology?”
Social constructivism

- Winner held that it is important to look at the inner workings of real technologies and their histories to see what is actually taking place.
- And he argues that it is a need to talk more precisely about the dynamics of technological change.
"Relevant social groups"

• The same kind of artifact can be used for widely different purposes as well as the meaning attached to it.

• It is important to locate the relevant social groups involved in development of technological devices and its systems and processes and how people act towards them.
• To understand the place of technology in human experience, the arbitrary distinction between social sphere and technical sphere need to be broken down.
• Somebody has been thinking of this before
• ”They were great thinkers, but they were wrong and we are right!”
Consequences

• Winner held that the most obvious lack of social constructionist writing is a total disregard for social consequences of technical choice such as texture for human communities, qualities of everyday living, distribution and power in society
Consequences

• Narrowsness which springs from their basic orientation, the primary issues are the ones that have to do with the origins and natural phenomena

• Arrogance in using "relevant" and "irrelevant" social groups. Some groups have no choice but will be affected by the results of technological change
Irrelevant social groups

• Winner discusses how certain social groups are excluded from power and which decisions are not discussed (The society of scientist is conservative)

• The relevance of the social actors engaged in defining technical problems is controlled by some political bureaucrats.

Eks. in Usa, the perspective of labor have been eliminated from the research and development in manufacturing technology.
Irrelevant social groups

• Social constructivism doesn't notice the problem of elitism (The technical possibilities is skewed in a way that favors some social interests and excludes others)
Structure and culture

• They disregard the possibility that they may be dynamic evident change in technology beyond those revealed.

• Social class is a key condition that underly the social activities of technology making.

• The social constructivists choose not to reveal the cultural, intellectual or economic origins of the social choices about technology.
Structure and culture

• Social constructivists reject the notion of autonomous technology and discredit it as technological determination
What it all means

• No evaluating stance and no moral or political principles.
  – To help judge the possibilities that technology presents.

• Don’t: Attribute meaning to a device or its uses. - Do: Try to understand how opinions about a developing artifact differs.
  – This works especially well in cases where there is social agreement – but not so much when there are serious disagreements about the design or use of an artifact or technological system?
What it all means

• Neutral about:...
  – ...whether scientific discoveries/theories are true or not.
  – ...the ultimate good or ill attached to the technical accomplishments.

• No position on technology and human well-being.

• Interpretive flexibility - moral and politically indifferent

• What it is, what the name is, how people judge it’s properties – it can matter.
  – Example: Photo from Gulf War in Iraq 1991 – baby food factory or chemical weapons plant?
What it all means

• Winner want to see more about:
  – The place of technology in human affairs.
  – Underlying patterns that characterize the quality of life in modern technological societies.
  – Right and wrong about social choices in energy, transportation, agriculture, computing ++

• Rather than viewing a technological society as a whole, focus is on particular cases.
  – ”Technologies are socially constructed”
Conclusion

• The black box revealed by the social constructivist is a remarkably hollow one.

• No judgement on what it all means.

• Compared to major philosophical discussions of technology – no envisioned prospects.

• "Choices are available. Technological development a product of complex social interactions." – repeating themselves.

• Crucial point in time, academic approach not enough. Need to reconstruct our technology based on democratic and ecological principles.
Conclusion

• Philosophers, political theorists, and social activists.
• Much to learn, but also need to criticize, reformulate, and refocus.

“In sum, the search for a meaningful theory of technology has by no means achieved "closure." It must begin anew”
Questions / Discussion

• What do philosophers need to know about technology and where should a philosopher go to learn about technology?

• How would the social constructivists comment Winner’s critics?

• What about science, society and ethics?