



TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE: CONFRONTING THE SHADOWS OF STS

Interview with Claudia Gertraud Schwarz

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Introduction

As part of the Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies' 10th anniversary, we want to end the anniversary issue by reflecting upon the future of the field. To do so, we invited a young scholar in the STS field to partake in an interview with us. We think it is fitting to end with a young critical voice, as it is the next generation who will shape the field and ultimately decide the future of STS. We had the pleasure of interviewing Claudia Gertraud Schwarz who earned her PhD from the University of Vienna in 2014. She currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences, where her research and praxis focus on generating and studying interventions to improve wellbeing in society, especially for young people. She is also one of the co-founders of the STS community known as the FeminiSTS Repair Team.

In 2022, November 4th, Claudia Gertraud Schwarz posted her testimonial on the Harvard STS programme during the programme's 20th anniversary celebrations on the website 'Medium'. Her post was also shared via social media and inspired an extensive online discussion on Twitter/X. The post sent shockwaves throughout the STS community as it brought to light her experiences with sexual harassment (she later added an addendum that this did not include physical infringement or unwanted touch—of course, this does not minimise her account in any way), abuses of power, and disillusionment at the Harvard STS programme and within

its network. In this interview, Schwarz brings attention to the STS community, the value of emphasising decolonial and feminist scholarship as theoretical perspectives and as tools to face field shadows and improve the living conditions within the research field of STS.

Growing up on a farm in the South of Austria, Schwarz introduces two storylines of her way into the field of STS. The first starts at university and is narrated as a stepping-stone approach from English and American studies, over media and communication studies to sociology, where she first was introduced to STS during a small seminar led by Karin Knorr-Cetina. The methodological approaches and empirical discussions drew her to the STS department at the University of Vienna where she embarked on her PhD.

An alternative storyline of being drawn to STS starts out much earlier. Here, she identifies the pivotal moment when an elementary school teacher asked her class to map out their TV consumption in the weekly TV-guide. Experiencing that her extensive consumption of TV was valued negatively sparked a realisation that entrenched practices around technology use are not a given, 'I learned for the first time to think critically about my own practices and the practices in my family', she states.

Challenging the orthodoxies of a field

When asked about which new developments within the research field of STS, she has found particularly exciting, Schwarz responds,

'For me, the question about exciting developments in STS is tough to answer because I've been quite disillusioned with STS due to my personal experiences. But of course, for survival reasons, I'm always looking for where there's still exciting things happening and developments I can contribute to or can start myself. In general, I think the most exciting developments in any field happen at the margins and are driven by those people who are trying to challenge the orthodoxies of a field. For me, broadly speaking, this includes all the critical STS

approaches that are not catering to the legitimization of state-driven, industry-focused, techno-scientific agendas and that embody critical self-reflection.'

Pointing to the evolution of STS over the last few decades, she continues,

'STS has become more integrated into the existing capitalist machinery and has lost some of its potential for a more fundamental critique of the Western techno-scientific progress narrative. This is why I find any fundamental critique more exciting. For me, this means looking



towards areas of decolonial, feminist scholarship and disability studies. These lenses allow for a deeper questioning of the more imperialist, patriarchal, and ableist underpinnings of knowledge creation and technology development in the Global North. I try to look more towards the epistemologies and histories beyond US-European regions and to do so with respect to avoid problematic appropriations. That is always difficult in these engagements.'

These perspectives have inspired Schwarz to dive into South American and other cultural practices with psychedelic plants and fungi throughout the world and question the novelty of currently emerging Western psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy in her research.

Risk of exceptionalism and the necessity to confront 'field shadows'

Developing the notion of orthodoxy in the field, Schwarz criticises how it seems increasingly necessary for STS researchers to subscribe to a single school of thought, adopt its concepts and research practices to achieve a sense of belonging or remain a legitimate member in the STS community. This streamlining and distancing from other research fields and scientific disciplines results not only in a reduced openness to other epistemologies, but also in, what Schwarz calls, attempts to claim epistemic superiority. She argues,

'I think it's really important for the field of STS to recognise what I would call a kind of 'epistemic superiority complex'. Just because you're going out and studying other research fields and gain a lot of knowledge on how the 'science game' is played in that process, you certainly are not exceptional. So, it's really time to usher out any sort of STS exceptionalism. We have to get rid of that to move to a new stage of reflexivity in STS.'

Schwarz points to a risk of hubris if STS scholars exploit the knowledge of how to 'play the science game', as this is then still about 'playing the game' within a field of epistemic hierarchical thinking, and that is countering STS ambitions to illuminate black boxing processes. She states,

'Because then you're still playing this 'game' where you try to make yourself feel better about yourself by dominating other fields by studying them. It's not seeing that the game itself is illusory because it's built on a distorted self-concept. Playing such a game is futile and leads nowhere, except to suffering. I find valuable advice in Audreya Lorde's famous phrase that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". Of course, the slaves are not happy, but neither is the master. For me, the master's house is a state in which your own self-worth is intrinsically built on external measures of success,

power, and status. My point is that if you want to use the master's tools in the best way possible, you first must leave his house, leave this understanding that external measures of power and so on will help you. In the end, it's not going to do that. I think the only hope lies in us recognizing this tendency that's active within each of us because we all grew up in this society. In STS, we must confront our own 'field shadow' to move beyond it.'

On the concept of *field shadow*, Schwarz elaborates,

'With this concept, I'm pointing towards all the disowned and neglected parts in a field that we often don't want to see because they counter our constructed self-image. I really want to highlight that it's essential to confront this shadow in terms of our evolution as a field and individually. We need to integrate the field shadow to evolve into better versions of STS and ourselves. I see that it's particularly active in those areas of the field where there's a lot of shining. Too much light focusing on outside appearance, so that this bright shining is covering up deeper, unresolved elements of the field. I'm now also interested more in looking at the work that is done in STS and in other fields to deny this shadow. I think we need to find new approaches, new ways, new tools to bring this shadow into the light, so we can grow as a community and as a field. That is also what I hope to achieve by sharing my own story of encountering the 'darker', let's put it like that, sides in STS. The research tradition I'm starting in STS is about studying field shadow work. I currently conceive this shadow work as two-fold: dark shadow work that is trying to cover up the shadow, and light shadow work that is illuminating it and in doing so allowing for the integration of the power inherent in any energy formation. Dark shadow work is of the past and light shadow work is creating a better future in the present. We need to know about the first and fully embody the second.'

Integrating field shadows and inspiring change

When Schwarz is asked to reflect upon the responses she got from the STS community after her Medium post, where she talks about her experiences at the Harvard STS programme, she tells us that,

'In general, the responses I got were very positive. For me, it was a big moment to again feel part of the STS community. I got the strong sense that there are a lot of people in the field who take these issues seriously now and don't want to sweep them under the rug.'



And I think you are part of that community of people actually, you inviting me to talk with you now is showing that. It's also helping me to reintegrate myself into the community and see myself as someone with a valuable voice and perspective on the community. So, I want to thank you for this opportunity. This is really important. So, you matter in my story a lot. So... Maybe first, yeah, there's of course continuing attempts to discredit me and my perspective from the programme I accused of committing these mistakes. The programme that I think is unconscious, that has an unconscious programme running that it's not able to confront, and that programme is continuing. So, it seems like within that programme and that subcommunity in STS, the capacity for integrating its own shadow isn't really there. This is a sad reality, but we need to accept it and focus on creating a better programme in STS.

Further, she highlights some concrete changes that have been happening (both prior to and after her Medium post) within the broader STS community,

[...] what I've seen mostly, and most notably, is that the STS associations have recognised the need for ethics policies and codes of conduct, so that we create STS ethically and make it a safe and inclusive space for all members and to not marginalize some groups of people. 4S already has an ethics and code of conduct policy in place for their events—that already was the case before I came out with my story and now after my going public this issue of creating these guidelines, policies, and codes has become more prominent for other STS associations. So EASST and several national associations such as stsing in Germany are now working on similar policies and codes of conduct. This can, hopefully, change the culture and what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable conduct within the community. Another change I see is happening also at the level of STS departments to change research culture there. The best example here is coming from my former academic home, the STS department at the University of Vienna, where I was employed when the Harvard incidents happened. There, a student group formed under the name of '#WeDoSTS_Vienna', after I came out with my story. They've been really pushing for institutional change to create a culture of accountability and more care-centred practices at the department. They were able to establish a student council to have a voice on important issues and have even started a research project on the effects of #MeTooSTS/#WeDoSTS among the students at the department.'

Schwarz also tells us that for her inspiring younger people is the most important aspect of her work as an activist-researcher,

[...] I see that what I did made a real difference already for some, especially younger people, and I'm mostly moved by younger people coming up to me and telling me that what I did showed them that you can do things differently and that you can be strong enough to speak out about powerful actors in our own field. This is for me the most important thing that I wanted to inspire a new generation of STS researchers to stand up for their own values and their own voices.'

Lastly, we asked her about her thoughts on what the future of STS may entail, Schwarz responds that there has been a recent push towards making STS a more established discipline. Doing so could potentially bring some benefits, however, for her, and undoubtedly many other scholars within the field, what made STS so interesting in the first place was its interdisciplinary, even undisciplined nature. The STS field has taken pride in not having a 'cannon' it adheres to, so streamlining the field too much would go against its very own principles. Therefore, Schwarz thinks it is imperative that STS does not shield itself from influences from outside its current field boundaries.

'I think we are at a bit of a juncture now. I notice a strong urge towards making STS a more established discipline and I see this urge running a bit up against its critical potential that I see rooted in an interdisciplinary, antidisciplinary movement. For me, this was what I found fascinating in STS. Of course, there lies some merit in making STS more institutionally stable, to have STS departments for instance, and to really ensure career tracks for STS scholars and getting more resources for doing research and so on. But I think there's also a danger here of streamlining what STS is, to say 'this is now our cannon, these are our research perspectives, and this is what we are about'. The main challenge here is to enable STS to remain open to influences from other fields and other communities, and to not close STS off from these other influences and become too rigid. That's also what from my own experience contributed to the problems I identified in the Harvard STS programme, where there is this strong urge to say, 'we are this and we are just that and everything that's not subscribing to this narrow understanding of what STS is supposed to be is unacceptable'. This is for me not something I want to subscribe to and consider as good STS. Again, what I said before, I see this strong need for reflexivity within our own community, to understand our own internal power dynamics and to integrate the field shadow. I think what it takes is that we STSers become more aware of our own practices and the unconscious biases that we hold and that then negatively impact others in our immediate environment. In particular, STSers in positions of power need to remain open to critique and not assume a special status for themselves. We must acknowledge that every one of us has biases, and we need to develop processes and mechanisms that can allow us to address and work on our own limits. Because if we don't do that there's a real risk here of drawing on tactics of shaming and using projection to avoid our own response-ability. You cannot say that other scholars with different opinions are 'crazy' to avoid engagement with their perspectives. Scholars who resort to such tactics just reveal their own epistemic limits. Enlightened young people don't fall for such cheap tricks. I mean STS of course is all about how science and technology are fundamentally social, this means for me that STS has this inherent potential to create and practice a new research culture in which what we see as good scientific practice is no longer seen as separate from good interpersonal conduct. This would be the ultimate improvement of any community. What is necessary now is to merge the public



image with what is going on behind the scenes and to not have this distinction between the public and the private anymore that allows scholars to present themselves as something in the public light that they are not living behind closed doors. This means to look behind the scenes in our own community and to address the problematic issues that we encounter head on. Of course, this is a hard problem, but are not these the most interesting ones to solve? If we manage

to do that, STS could actually model a more integrated scientific life, and this is something I would like to be and see. This is the #WeDoSTS ethos I stand for. In such a world, STS can serve as a positive example for how we can do science differently by being fully honest with ourselves. We then can look at ourselves in the mirror with a true smile. This is the world I want to live in and want to help co-create.'

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