



# THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST TECHNOSCIENCE IN THE NORDICS

*Interview with Cecilia Åsberg*

by Maria Kirpichenko & Sofia Moratti

## Introduction

Our second interviewee for this special issue is Professor Cecilia Åsberg, a leading figure in Feminist STS. She is a professor at the Department of Thematic Studies (TEMA) at Linköping University (<https://liu.se/en/organisation/liu/tema>) and the founder of the Posthumanities Hub (<https://posthumanitieshub.net>). Her research revolves around the natural or non-human as opposed to

the human, in a world shaped by technoscience and environmental change. Her career narrative was incredibly engaging, prompting us to collaborate with her on editing the interview to give it a more cohesive and speech-like flow. Our pleasant one-hour conversation revolved around the themes of Feminist STS in the Nordics and academia as a community.

## The critique to scientism and the social impact of STS

We opened the interview by inquiring about her formative years in academia. This aspect is particularly enlightening for young scholars, as it illustrates the evolution of Nordic STS in the past two decades. Cecilia first joined the TEMA Department in 1997 and witnessed an era of exceptional scientific optimism.

*There was, of course, a lot of optimism, I would say, at that time. This optimism of the late 1990s was especially evident in the new Big Science projects in the USA, like the huge efforts to map out the human genome, which was said to be revealing the recipe of what makes a human. There were many dreams about big tech, about creating new marketable solutions at the intersection of Medicine, Science and Engineering, in the so-called Life Sciences.*

Cecilia was cautious, as were other feminist STS scholars.

*A lot of feminist STS scholars in the Nordic countries, in the UK and the US were apprehensive and critical to these new developments, having new reproductive technologies and "designer babies" in mind in a very ideological landscape.*

Simultaneously, a sense of optimism infused the field of STS. There was a belief in the capacity of STS scholarship to influence societal developments, empowering scholars with the confidence to actively participate in public debates and perceive themselves as catalysts for change.

*The idea was that the critique from STS would permeate society and have a real impact on the development of Medicine, Science, and Technology.*

## Pushing the theoretical and disciplinary frontiers of Feminist STS

Increasingly guided by her "passion for feminist theory and practice", Cecilia pushed the theoretical frontiers of Feminist STS. Strikingly for young STS researchers today, the work of certain scholars – now considered pivotal – was not accepted among academic circles at the time. One example is Donna Haraway, whose scholarly contributions have been central to shaping Cecilia's intellectual development.

*In some places within the Scandinavian and Nordic contexts, Haraway's work was barely accepted... many of my peers in*

*Technology Studies thought that Haraway's ideas were utterly suspect, even crazy. ... There were all kinds of preconceptions. ... These feminist theories had one thing in common that made them utterly intellectually suspicious in interdisciplinary Scandinavian scholarship: they all took the body very seriously.*

The arrival of Nina Lykke at Linköping marked a turning point in the reconfiguration of disciplinary boundaries.

*She positioned Gender Studies firmly within the Feminist Technoscience*



domain. ... I must say, much kudos is due to Nina Lykke for her generous intellectual legacy, which she created here through her integration of Cultural Theory, STS, and Feminist Theory.

In 1999, Cecilia and her colleagues founded Tema Genus, a section of TEMA. Genus is the Swedish word for "gender". Nina Lykke developed Tema Genus substantially. Cecilia makes fascinating

remarks about inter- and cross-disciplinarity.

*At Tema Genus, we embraced interdisciplinary to a larger extent than in other places... we have always been questioning the parameters of disciplinarity in our scientific practices. ... To me, it became clear over the years that feminist research can function as a scientific engine of discovery.*

## Witnessing times of growth

Cecilia feels "incredibly fortunate" to have witnessed the birth of Tema Genus and to get "one of the first jobs as a PhD student" there, as "there were so many applicants from all over". The new division had received much support at the political level:

*All the parliamentary parties in Sweden agreed that we needed an interdisciplinary Gender Studies unit at a Swedish university.*

Observing the emergence of a field where resources are dedicated to its growth, witnessing its early stages, and having the chance to contribute intellectually to its establishment is a significant and enticing opportunity. However, young researchers may find it challenging to access such opportunities, given the funding constraints in higher education, heightened reliance on external funding, and the necessity to assess and justify risks associated with research projects. Innovative ideas inherently involve risk and thrive on openness, rather than being confined to narrow assessments of industry applicability or profitability.

One of the indicators highlighting her pivotal role in the establishment of the field is the fact that the subject of her PhD thesis, very much avant-garde at the time, has since become a classic posthumanist motif in Feminist Technoscience Studies. Her work, developed under the supervision of Nina Lykke, is at the intersection of cultural media studies, STS and Feminist Theory:

*I wrote my PhD dissertation on the new Life Sciences and the "genetic imaginary" it created in public media, exploring the broad cultural fantasy landscape and visual culture surrounding the new genetics in popular science, in everyday media and science communication. ... For instance, the human genome and human diversity projects, were to a large extent, in their stories and phantasmic imagery, changing our ideas of our bodies, ourselves for a genetic sense of selfhood. The genetic imaginary of the time, at the turn of the millennium, was replacing biological racism as an explanatory model with a form of cultural racism.*

## Feminist Technoscience: the "wow!" machine

Cecilia describes Feminist Technoscience as

*a 'wow!' machine; it teaches us to be surprised – not just once, but many times. It harbours so many methodological opportunities, empirical studies and theoretically nuanced critiques of bodily determinism and scientism and of the objectification of bodies and disembodiment, challenging the idea that the body is passive, inert, modifiable at will.*

Cecilia highlights how feminist STS owes much to early feminist

scholarship, which laid the groundwork for what are now core principles of STS.

*Not everybody in STS remembers that this first was very much a feminist critique, stemming from, for instance, the eco-feminist philosophy of Val Plumwood. There exists a kind of undulating corpus of thought that is both speculative and extremely political (e.g. Deborah Bird Rose), rooted in an ethics of vulnerability and in 'worldings' and aligning well with the thinking styles of Haraway, Barad, and Braidotti.*

## Towards a feminist academia

Another key theme Cecilia explores is the academic environment as a workplace and its impact on the knowledge produced, with a focus on gender and class dynamics.

*Still today, in gender-equal Sweden, almost 80% of full professors are men, and they are asked to communicate their research in public. This*

*is why it was highly important to me, particularly as someone with no academics in the family, to work my way into the relative security of a full professorship. I became a professor at 41, and I am now 50. It is still challenging... to be taken seriously: I am still very much coded as feminine, and that inevitably detracts somewhat from the authority of what one says.*



While she was a lecturer at Utrecht University in 2005, Cecilia learned from Gloria Wekker about the importance of women scholars citing each other's work. Reflecting on her experience at Utrecht, where she collaborated with key figures in the Dutch feminist community, and Lancaster, where Sarah Franklin and Jackie Stacey supervised her work and Sarah Ahmed was the Head of Department, Cecilia highlights the significance of being exposed to different feminist perspectives and practices, and of

*internationalisation as opposed to methodological nationalism, new encounters, and bringing onboard the strange, the alien, the other within ourselves. This was incredibly transformative...*

She advocates for a future academia and feminist STS where

*Transversalism, connecting things, interdisciplinarity, even post-disciplinarity if you wish—thinking in terms of our embodied subjectivity as a process of coming together, and coming apart—is the name of the game.*

She argues that Swedish academia – and scholarship – are still largely organized into disciplinary silos rather than theme-based approaches. We believe that this might also be the case in other Nordic contexts.

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