

Venturing Outside the Comfort Zone: The 20th Anniversary of STS Italia, a Project Born Out of Detachment, Torque, and Diaspora

Although none of us members of the STS Italia Steering Board is new to spokesperson challenges, it's difficult describing the mixture of anxiety and excitement that accompanies the writing of a piece for *Tecnoscienza* celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Italian Association of Science and Technology Studies. Anxiety is rooted in the awareness that any attempt at reconstructing the history of STS Italia since its inception would inevitably do wrong to many. If any, such an enterprise should be a collective one, and cannot be only consigned to a presidential address. On the other hand, excitement spreads from the possibility to share our vision of what STS Italia has meant for us over these twenty years, and how we see its future. In highlighting some aspects, we do not intend to make others invisible, but rather invite the whole community to connect the dots in a sort of serious game. We see these dots as emerging networks: constellations of possibility, waiting to connect. For these points to become actual networks, they must form arcs: links that spark communication, enable collaboration, and share ideas. With every new connection a node can sustain, attraction grows, trust deepens, and relationships strengthen. As any serious game, this is meant to strengthen a sense of belonging, while at the same time leaving space for including the underrepresented, the unexpected, the unnoticed. And it is intended to provide a space for reflexivity while inducing amusement.

If we had to portray what STS Italia has been for us (and – we dare to say – a few others) over these twenty years in one sentence, we would say it is a project born out of detachment, torque, diaspora. The Association was founded in 2005, when the project of raising a community that could study science and technology from a social and humanistic perspective was an act of detachment from the institutionalization of disciplines in force in Italy. It might be worth recalling that while the 2010 reform of higher education probably exacerbated the situation, such discipline-based scaffold – and in particular the sharp distinction between Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) – in Italy goes back to the Fascist regime and its 1923 educational reform. A disciplinary (and disciplining!) system that has represented a sort of “torque” and continues to constitute one of the reasons of the delays of the Italian research system vis-à-vis international debates.

In this institutional landscape, STS Italia has constituted for many in Italy and beyond an opportunity to connect through SSH sensitivities to those debates that in these last decades have spanned from nanotechnologies to blockchains, from biotechnologies to machine

learning, from energy transition to securitization, among others. We write “beyond”, as – being a response to a structural condition of torque – over the years STS Italia has provided with a pool of scholars who were trans-disciplinarily oriented, often unfit for the Italian academic system and thus affiliated abroad, especially at the early stages of their careers. The richness of involving national and diaspora scholars has nourished the community over these two decades and continues to do so.

STS Italia has indeed seen its network take shape and grow stronger at national and international level through the passion and work of individuals who have gathered and activated contributions. These contributions derived nourishment from two powerful and complementary currents: scientific insight and practical action. The STS scholarship is now recognised across Italy, and has fuelled trans-disciplinary dialogue. From organising events to opening conversations, from inspiring debate to sustaining dialogue, these efforts have woven a vibrant and generous intellectual fabric.

At the international level, this generosity is clearly revealed by the unexpected attention received by STS Italia conferences and summer schools over the last editions. An attention that positions our community as a focal point of a multi-faceted, international and renewed interest towards the social studies of science and technology. This year this journey has reached a milestone that reflects more than growth: transformation and collective achievement. The 10th STS Italia conference has constituted the most far-reaching expression of the network to date. When the Steering Board asked the META research unit at the Polytechnic University of Milan to organize the 2025 edition of the conference at the Department of Design, we thought we had already reached the crystal ceiling in 2023 in Bologna, with around 500 participants from Europe and beyond. However, with the 2025 edition we had to move that ceiling upwards, up to counting almost 700 participants.

We are of course honoured that our Society is becoming a reference for many scholars in and beyond STS. A network thrives not simply because it connects, but because it inspires others to connect. At the same time, STS reflexivity urges us to adopt a humble attitude and be aware that conferences’ gigantism raises questions that as STS scholars we cannot avoid. Such questions concern, for example, how our communities are changing, what is the role of scholarly work in society, and ultimately the valuation of research enterprises.

These reflexive questions ran transversally to the conference in Milan in the past month of June. As the title “Technoscience for Good: Designing, Caring, and Reconfiguring” recalled, straightforward and one-fits-all calls to morality cannot be deemed adequate to deal with contemporary dilemmas, and this also puts pressure on our own community. Technoscience for Good constitutes a call to address complexity, uncomfortable questions and even less comfortable attempts at reassuring. As the conference chair Paolo Volonté recalled in his opening address:

We are called to confront questions of what “good” certain sociotechnical developments are serving, who gets to define what counts as “good”, for whom technoscientific developments might be “good” (or not), how actors and institutions have historically worked towards defining and achieving the “good”, and how such a goal might be collectively accomplished in a democratic order.

The contributions to the conference that the following section features have addressed these questions. Ruha Benjamin challenges us to subvert an alleged realism that justifies the status quo to collectively produce imaginations that liberate. Karen Gregory displays workers' ability to foresee new connections and make them happen. Her contribution documents the challenges that platform workers face in drawing meaningful links between their own research, exploitation and discrimination, and broader policy regulation. Kylie Jarrett provides an intentional provocation about the positive experience of "good" platform work, with the goal of broadening our critical response. Finally, Emiliano Treré proposes a conceptualization of moral economy as emerging at the interface of designers' and users' moral frameworks.

All in all, these contributions speak of the power of performative thinking and acting. We suggest that what has characterized STS Italia over these twenty years is the ability to perform identities along ever evolving cuts. This could be explained against the diasporic origins of STS Italia, and its foundation as a response to institutionalized conditions of torque. What is key is that at several moments STS Italia has been able to avoid to resort to the reassuring strategies of identity politics, and has ventured outside its comfort zone. This is deeply ingrained in STS performative ontoepistemologies and methods, and is a richness we must continue to nurture even in these interesting times that seem to be losing an interest in becoming.

The STS Italia Steering Board

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