

A Disparate Multiplicity: Response to “Where Is East Asia in STS?”

Casper Bruun Jensen

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“Where Is East Asia in STS?” contributes to the ongoing conversation about the distinctiveness of East Asian STS (see also, e.g., [Anderson 2009](#); [Chen 2012](#); [Fan 2007, 2012](#); [Fu 2007](#); [Tsukahara 2009](#)). The authors, Wen-yuan Lin and John Law, observe that consideration of this issue has an inherently reflexive dimension, since thinking about East Asian STS as a field is entangled with how the field is able to imagine its objects of study and its own knowledge practices as well as those it studies. Specifically, they suggest that studies committed to a universalistic understanding of science will also enact a universalizing STS, while studies oriented to differences will also enact differences in their own practices. They proceed to characterize several types of approaches: diffusion, distortion, circulation, localizing, translation, and softening. The latter half, they argue, are more adequately attuned to difference.

I begin by emphasizing that I fully share the authors’ view that such attunement is in many ways commendable. I would indeed also suggest that it is integral to an STS perspective. After all, though STS certainly arose in Western contexts and remains anchored there, the variability of science and technology, even in the West, has been one of the field’s central insights. Given that the world expands far beyond these contexts, it should thus be little surprise that technoscience appears even more heterogeneous if we look elsewhere—like to East Asia.

There are obvious empirical ramifications. However, novel, heterogeneous encounters also raise issues of conceptual implication. Is technoscience in East Asia, for example, indicative of limitations in the theoretical apparatuses of conventional STS approaches? Do analytical rubrics like translation and heterogeneity subsume empirical variability? As the paper explores these issues, certain tensions arise.

Lin and Law’s first mode of enactment is *diffusion*, which assumes and enacts a single world where facts and technologies simply flow from the center (West) to the periphery (East). Inversely, the second, *distortion* conceives of Western knowledge as a “power-saturated misrepresentation of reality,” which disfigures local knowledges. The third, *circulation*, enacts technoscience as a co-constituted patchwork. Here there are no centers and no peripheries, yet the one-world world ([Law 2015](#)) of technoscience

remains. In contrast, *localizing* emphasizes irreducible differences between different frames or contexts of knowledge, all of which are valid in their own terms. Thus, the one-world world fragments and is replaced by various spaces of contestation. Nevertheless, the fourth mode, *translation*, suggests the possibility of assembling fragile, temporary ontologies for working across difference (see Cussins 1998; Verran 2002). Finally, *softening* is about making explicit unavoidable misunderstandings between divergent worlds, thereby making it possible to “ponder” the “merits or otherwise of particular mistranslations.” Here, the rigid demarcations of STS dissolve as researchers become entwined with the practices they study.

These approaches, or “enactments,” are not at all treated symmetrically. And in some cases, this is indeed for good reason. Diffusion, after all, is hardly an STS mode of analysis at all. Actor-network theory (ANT) itself, for example, was defined in strict opposition to the diffusion model (Latour 1987), and skepticism to diffusion models of any kind is prevalent in the field. Rather more peculiarly, circulation, defined with a nod to Latour (1988) and exemplified with reference to traveling knowledges (e.g., Mohácsi and Morita 2013), is discussed as if it was fundamentally different from translation, even though practically all the cited literature view the two as mutually implied. Localization, similarly, is defined against what appears more like the kind of straw version of ANT usually held forth by critics than the real thing. Behind these somewhat forced contrasts, however, lurks a more important issue.

Attentive to the critique of STS for claiming to provide a set of all-purpose, and to that extent colonializing, theories, Lin and Law indicate their preference for the modes of translation and softening. Yet, it is not so easy to discern the extent to which either of these modes have themselves been translated or softened in consequence of encounters with East Asian technoscience. To be sure, softening is illustrated with analyses of the changing relations between Western biomedicine and traditional Chinese medicine. Puzzlingly, however, the key emphasis is on mistranslation and “betrayal,” both of which have been part of the ANT palette all along. So what kind of substantial modification is on offer? Come to think of it, what happened to the far more provocative argument for a correlative STS previously made by the authors (Lin and Law 2014)? If the aim is to open up STS to varied East Asian styles of thinking, we might indeed wonder whether creating a (somewhat strained) typology of largely standard STS orientations is really the best means. Why not experiment further with correlations, or with open-ended configurations and ever-changeable patterns (e.g., Jullien 1995), yin-yang geographies (Farquhar, Lai, and Kramer 2017), or Daoist oneness (Zhan 2012)?

At this point, however, another issue arises, pertaining to the relation between such (potential) *conceptual* reconfigurations and the more prosaic networks and activities that make up East Asian STS. As noted, Lin and Law argue for a kind of isomorphism between ways of conceiving technoscience and ways of doing STS. Thus, to repeat, universalizing understandings of science and technology are supposed to be mirrored in universalizing enactments of STS, while softening or localizing approaches are assumed to lead to enactments more attuned to difference. The clearest example is the authors’ suggestion that softening makes it possible to evaluate and select the most appropriate kinds of betrayals between worlds. But is that how translation works?

We Have Never Been Modern offered an image of science and technology as, so to speak, involuntarily hybridizing (Latour 1993). No matter their universalistic ambitions, scientists and entrepreneurs simultaneously made the world more heterogeneous and more homogeneous (e.g., Bowker 1994). In the realm of discourse a purified one-world world was certainly discernible, but purification at this level enabled a wild proliferation of new entities. In contrast, a mirroring of ambitions, concepts, ideas, and practical effects was nowhere in view. And if one begins with hybrid, localized, or softened discourse, the situation is similar. Their conceptual power or appeal is not equivalent to their practical effect.

The literary critic Stanley Fish (1989: 347) used the term *theory hope* to characterize the assumption that attunement to particular ideas—like translation or softening—would “provide us with direction for achieving the . . . state [they] describe.” Precisely because we are in a realm of translation rather than diffusion, they are unable to provide such directions, and it is always possible for purifications to generate hybrids as it is for “softenings” to lead to new purifications (e.g., Anderson 2008; Morita and Jensen 2017; Zhan 2009). Theory hope is always disappointed.

To exemplify, it is not very difficult to imagine STS scholars genuinely wanting to soften their own concepts and practices through interesting encounters with many other actors. Yet without institutional means, financial support, or external interest, this may not be practically feasible. In many cases, such aspirations can and do give way to reluctant or willing participation in one-world world projects and activities simply because these are the possibilities there are within the networks one finds oneself. Such involvements, of course, may in turn lead to yet other unforeseen and, indeed, even potentially generative translations (e.g., Jensen and Morita 2017; Verran 2002).

What this means is that engaging in theoretical discussions or reflexive deliberations about whether or not to “allow” particular mistranslations and betrayals or not will be beside the point in most cases. Rather than options, betrayals are constitutive of networked relations, something one is hardly ever able to control and, often enough, barely able to influence. Knowing how the world works is not the same as knowing how to work the world, and this is not least because the world works in many other ways than by being known. None of which is to say that one should give up trying (see Jensen 2014).

The philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers (2000: 98) once gave the following evocative definition of America:

What other definition can we give to the reality of America, than that of having the power to hold together a disparate multiplicity of practices, each and every one of which bears witness, in a different mode, to the existence of what they group together.

Given the overall tenor of this comment, I obviously feel in no position to say what East Asian STS (not to say “East Asia”) is or what it should be or do (cf. Anderson 2012). Possibly, however, it can be imagined along the lines of Stengers’s America, a disparate multiplicity of practices, each of which bears witness, in its own way, to particular dimensions of its existence. No general framework is likely to contain such a multiplicity. Which is precisely why there will always be plenty of room for experimenting with concepts, practices, and situated interventions (Zuiderent-Jerak 2015).

Such experiments, however, must be conducted in the knowledge that, for better or worse, their effects are always going to be liable to confound us.

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Casper Bruun Jensen is specially appointed associate professor at Osaka University and honorary lecturer at Leicester University. He is the author of *Ontologies for Developing Things* (2010) and *Monitoring Movements in Development Aid* (with Brit Ross Winthereik) (2013) and the editor of *Deleuzian Intersections: Science, Technology, Anthropology* with Kjetil Rødje (2009) and *Infrastructures and Social Complexity* with Penny Harvey and Atsuro Morita (2016). His present work focuses on knowledge, infrastructure, and practical ontologies in the Mekong River Basin.