

# III

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## ***What Next? Technology, Theory, and Method***



The contributors to this volume share a commitment to the heterogeneity of social and technical relations. They are also committed to the view that sociotechnical change should be seen as contingent, and that it is, at least in part, a product of mixed strategies. But these commitments raise a series of questions. One of these is the question about where (or how) society ends and technology starts. How, if at all, can we disintinguish between the two? On this question there is less agreement.

We consider a number of possibilities more fully in the conclusion. Overall, however, it is possible to distinguish two approaches to the problem. One of these is what we might call the *interactive view*—a position characterized by three points. First, it is assumed that there is, indeed, a fairly stable and matter-of-fact division between the social and the technical. Second, it is assumed that the social shapes the technical. And third, it is reciprocally assumed that the technical is also capable of shaping the social. This view avoids the reductionisms of either social or technological determinism by arguing the case for interaction and exchange between the two. In this volume the authors who come closest to this view are, perhaps, Misa, de la Bruhèze, and Carlson.

However, there is a second and more radical approach—let us call it the *seamless web view*. This resists the notion that the division between the social and the technical is either stable or matter-of-fact. To say this is not, of course, to deny that it is possible to point at, and distinguish between, machines and those who operate them. Rather it is suggested that this distinction should be seen as an accomplishment, rather than something that can be taken for granted. Accordingly, it is argued that analysis should start with a seamless web of elements and look to see how that seamless web is broken up under different kinds of circumstances to create different *kinds* of objects. This seamless web approach is counterintuitive, but it is well represented in this volume. Notions like technological frame and actor-network, together with Bowker's study of Schlumberger, all assume that the social and the technical are constituted and distinguished in one movement—though this assumption is perhaps most fully developed in Bowker's paper.

But if sociotechnology is indeed a seamless web, then what kind of a vocabulary should we use in our analyses? The problem, as we indicated in the introduction, is that the language of common sense pushes us to talk of “technology” or “society”—as we have, for instance, above. It naturalizes the very distinctions that should be avoided by building them into the analysis instead of treating them