

Interesting Worlds to Come. Science & Technology Studies Facing More-than-Human Challenges

Simone Arnaldi ^{ORCID}
University of Trieste

Paolo Giardullo ^{ORCID}
University of Padova

Annalisa Pelizza ^{ORCID}
University of Bologna and
University of Aarhus

Corresponding author

Paolo Giardullo
University of Padova
Department of Philosophy,
Sociology, Education and Applied
Psychology, Section of Sociology
Via M. Cesarotti, 10/12, 35123
Padova, Italy
✉ paolo.giardullo@unipd.it

Submitted: October 20, 2023

Accepted: December 20, 2023

Abstract

This editorial by the board of STS Italia (The Italian Society for Social Studies of Science and Technology) introduces a Special Section of the Journal collecting a set of contributions to the IX STS Italia Conference, held in June 2023. The Special Section features an invited Lecture by Huub Dijkstra followed by a short commentary by Annalisa Pelizza. In addition, the Section includes the Crossing Boundaries “Drawing Bruno Together” and the Scenario “Bruno Latour and Artificial Intelligence” dedicated to Bruno Latour and both written by long-term colleagues, friends and exegeses of his work.

Keywords

STS Italia Conference; interest; more-than-human challenges; Bruno Latour.

1. Introduction

The IX STS Italia conference was held in Bologna, Italy, on 28-30 June 2023. It gathered scholars from Science & Technology Studies (STS) and related disciplines in a collaborative intel-



Figure 1.

Conference entrance and registration desk in Bologna.

Source: 9th Conference STS Italia photo report by Chiara Dazi.

lectual endeavour to explore “Interesting Worlds to Come”, as indicated by the conference title.

These future worlds are interesting to us primarily as humans, holding promises of joys and challenges that await our engagement. However, the term *interesting* harbours an inherent ambiguity, its meaning being contingent upon the perspective of the observer. Recognizing this ambiguity prompts us to acknowledge that what we find interesting and why it matters are inextricably linked to the perspectives of those invested in the subject. Acknowledging this necessitates relinquishing a human-centred viewpoint and embracing a more comprehensive and diverse perspective as we navigate these impending worlds. The need to adopt this de-centred viewpoint has been underscored by events of the recent past years, demonstrating how our current and future challenges engage a myriad of interconnected entities that crucially extend beyond humanity to include non-human realms.

The emergence of a new viral life form, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, has impacted various species. Recent outbreaks of conflict serve as reminders not only of the ongoing global wars but also of the devastation they bring to future generations of living beings and their environments, demanding extensive resource extraction to sustain them. Droughts and floods, witnessed in various parts of the world, including near Bologna a few weeks before the Conference, unveil not only the interdependence of distant regions but also the distinct, context-specific implications of climate change for diverse species, environments, and generations.

As these future worlds hold significance, they beckon us to take action, seizing opportunities and addressing challenges. This call to action resonates with a second meaning of the notion of interest, familiar to us as STS scholars. From this perspective, interest goes beyond mere awareness and acknowledgment, taking on the dimensions of agency, involvement, and intervention. Nevertheless, if we look at the outcomes of our interventions, history demonstrates the inadequacy of relying solely on humanity to address challenges that inherently are more-than-human. Humans, acting alone, struggle to meet the goals set by the IPCC, mitigate ongoing conflicts, and prevent future pandemics. We need help: the very essence of these challenges necessitates the formation of alliances that extend beyond humanity, alliances that facilitate enhanced understanding and more impactful intervention.

Evoking the concept of interest points distinctly to the intellectual lineage of the conference and this reference in the conference title is indebted to the concept of *interessement*, which Actor-Network Theory (ANT) illuminated approximately forty years ago. On one hand, ANT enlightened us about how both human and non-human entities participate in shaping the world we inhabit. On the other hand, ANT demonstrated that this world takes form only when these entities coalesce through processes of translation, involving their continual transformations, negotiations, and adjustments to the conflicting definitions of the issues at hand. In this context, alliances materialise through the acknowledgment that their alignment around a question, a piece of knowledge, an infrastructure, or an institution serves the interests of each involved party and can prove advantageous for all. However, achieving this alignment is the outcome of a protracted and costly process: *interessement* entails the active involvement of concerned parties in promoting specific perspectives on the issue at hand, thereby establishing devices that exist “in-between” these entities, in a way that is preliminary for the successful emergence and consolidation of these heterogeneous, more-than-human networks.

The conference unfolded within this conceptual framework, against the backdrop of the

current manifestations of the numerous geopolitical, health, and environmental challenges it aimed to explore. Over four hundred participants enlivened the 44 panels of the conference, delving into the diverse facets of these interesting processes. Discussions spanned from governance and participation in science and technology to artificial intelligence, from medical practices to epistemic authorities, and from border studies to energy and environmental issues. Not to forget the nexus between STS and art. The diverse origins of the participants contributed to a broader international spectrum of opinions and perspectives, too. While the majority came from European universities and research institutions, scholars from thirty-six countries in different continents shared their insights on the global challenges we all face and discussed the significance and urgency of advancing research and reflection, also directed towards intervention at the governance level.

The conference program was enriched by three plenary talks and three special thematic sessions. In the plenary talks, Huub Dijkstra delved into a specific aspect of climate change – climate migrations. Noortje Marres explored the public role of scientific expertise in governing the Covid-19 pandemic, while Paul Edwards discussed the temporal patterns of our current “techno-metabolism”, focusing on the processes of energy and material resource consumption that drive the future evolution of the Anthropocene. Among the special sessions, a first one session aimed to support early-career scholars in publishing in high-quality journals. This was complemented by two thematic sessions: a Roundtable on *Taking Time, Shaping Time: Pacing Urban Climate Transitions*, which focused on the temporal dimensions of the new climatic regime and connected policy interventions at the urban level, and a Roundtable in memoriam of Bruno Latour, titled *Drawing Bruno Together*¹.

This issue of *Tecnoscienza* showcases some of these contents, featuring Huub Dijkstra's insightful lecture and a *Crossing Boundaries* section based upon the Roundtable titled *Drawing Bruno Together*.

While climate change is widely recognized as a transformative force, Dijkstra specifically examines its role in generating social inequalities in human (im)mobility. He argues that addressing these consequences non-deterministically becomes urgent due to the limited capacity of traditional institutions, such as the nation-state, to cope with the resulting pressures. Traditional institutions, designed for a more stable and predictable world that has nearly disappeared, struggle to apply strategies like border enforcement to manage the significant demands of human migration. Current national state apparatuses are ill-equipped to handle the diverse, more-than-human actors involved in adapting our planet to the reality of climate change. In this context, Dijkstra underscores the strength of STS as a comprehensive body of knowledge well-suited to tackle issues of mobility and immobility in climate hotspots. Drawing on Latour's *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime* (2018), Dijkstra links the overarching threat of the ecological crisis to the new climatic regime. His exploration, woven throughout the lecture, aims to propose directions for a renewed research agenda on human mobility, deconstructing elements that contribute to the tensions between mobility and immobility and challenging traditional perspectives on states, borders, and sovereignty. Ultimately, it fully acknowledges the interplay between humans, mobility and immobility, and the Earth itself.

The *Crossing Boundaries* section of the journal draws instead from the Roundtable titled *Drawing Bruno Together* organised during the Bologna Conference and from a preceding



Figure 2.

Huub Dijstelbloem during his lecture.

Source: 9th Conference STS Italia photo report by Chiara Dazi.

panel held during the 4S/ESOCITE conference in Cholula (Mexico) in December 2022. It gathers reflections and voices from those who collaborated with Latour extensively, those who had direct interactions with him, and those whose work was profoundly influenced by his thought. Instead of merely summarising or reporting on these events, the collection is geared towards delineating an intellectual platform that connects with Latour's enduring intellectual legacy. The text opens with Madeleine Akrich sharing memories of her extensive collaboration with Latour. Over two decades, she closely observed the development of groundbreaking contributions in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. Following this, Huub Dijstelbloem delves into Latour's "magmatic" thinking, highlighting its transformative impact beyond STS. Annalisa Pelizza traces two crucial links in Latour's intellectual journey. The first one connects his thought back to his early engagement with the French semiotic discourse in particular with the "École de Paris" and Greimas' theory of enunciation. The second link explores Latour's connection with technofeminism and Donna Haraway's material-semiotics, emphasising a global dialogue emerging in the late 1980s. Finally, Paolo Landri underscores Latour's conceptual framework's transformative potential in education, emphasising interdisciplinary connections fostered by embracing Latour's ideas.

Acknowledgments

As members of the STS Italia Board of Directors, we express our gratitude to the many STS Italia members and volunteers who helped make the conference a success, particularly the Scientific Committee (Attila Bruni, Claudio Coletta, Stefano Crabu, Paolo Magaudoa,

Alvise Mattozzi, Federico Neresini, Manuela Perrotta, Assunta Viteritti, Paolo Volonté), the Local Organizing Committee (Agnese Cretella, Marco Giacomazzi, Francesco Mazzucchelli, Lorenzo Olivieri, Barbara Saracino, Wouter Van Rossem), and the dedicated students who volunteered during the three days of the conference (Ahsan Syed, Giusy Grieco, Beatrice Ferrigno, Alice Fubini, Giulian Melani, Francesco Nasi, Beatrice Superbi, Dominik Tkalcic, Michele Veneziano, Chiara Vigolo). Our thanks go to the University of Bologna, and especially the Departments of Philosophy (formerly Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies), the Department of Political and Social Sciences, and the Centro Polifunzionale Unione for their financial, logistic and organisational support. Scientific support in the design of the two roundtables was offered by the Infratime Marie Curie Action, and by the Processing Citizenship ERC project. Finally, we would like to gratefully acknowledge the contribution of each, single participant to the conference: by convening panels, presenting new ideas, sharing reflections and asking questions, they made the conference the success it was.

Notes

¹ The full conference program and abstracts are available on the conference's website: <https://eventi.unibo.it/stsitalia2023/>.