

Technoscience - Episode 1

Andrea Ballestero interviewed by Alison Kenner. Transcription by Teresa Hoard-Jackson.

See: <https://technoscience.zencast.website>

1	[0:00:00] Intro Music
2	Timothy Neale Welcome to Technoscience. Podcast recorded at 2019 Society for the Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting in New Orleans. Produced by Timothy Neale
3	Laura Foster and Laura Foster. This podcast is a new initiative to share the exciting work being done in Science and Technology Studies, or STS, with wider audiences who are curious about the field. It's here to offer an approachable way to learn more about interdisciplinarity and engaged field.
4	Timothy Neale: Before we begin, we would like to acknowledge that this podcast was recorded on unceded Indigenous land. We recognize the first peoples of Louisiana including the Chitimacha tribe, Coushatta Tribe, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Tunica-Biloxi Indian Tribe.
5	Laura Foster: [0:00:52] In this podcast series, you'll hear interviews with STS scholars about a range of issues including what the field means to them, some of its big debates, and what its future yet might be.
6	I: Timothy Neale To quote the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, "Technology is not neutral. We are inside what we make and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections and it matters which ones get made and unmade."
7	R: Laura Foster [0:01:17] With those guiding words, let's go to this episode's interview.
8	Intro Music
9	I: Ali Kenner [0:01:23] Hello. I am Ali Kenner - Associate Professor of Politics and STS at Drexel University and I am here with Andrea Ballestero - Associate Professor of Anthropology at Rice University. Many thanks for taking the time for the 4S podcast project while we're all here in New Orleans and especially considering you are the co-program chair of this year's meeting. So, let me take this precious moment [laughs] that we have here, and um, to thank you very deeply, for, um, your leadership and all of the work you've put in to making this year's meeting happen. Thank you so much.
10	I: Ali Kenner [0:01:56] Sure. It's been, it's been a great experience. I am very grateful that we've had the opportunity to innovate and maybe create new parts of the program that were not there before. And so, I am just very excited to see what people think and whether it worked and whether, uh, we are able to accomplish what we wanted which was, which was to really make the conference as inclusive as possible and to create <i>as</i> many spaces as we <i>could</i> so that people could interact and have great conversations and think about their

work and what's going on in the world as well which is not always, these days, a great thing to do, but uh also create space for that.

11 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:02:40] I'm *very* excited about the Innovating STS program here this year. But, this is has also been a very big year, big summer too with your book, [A] *Future History of Water*, coming out with Duke just two months ago?

12 **I: Ali Kenner** Mmmhmmm.

13 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:02:50] Yeah. So, congratulations on that.

14 **I: Ali Kenner** [0:02:53] Thank you so much.

15 [both laugh]

16 **I: Ali Kenner** So, what do you think you would've done had you not become an academic?

17 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:02:54] There's two ways to answer that question because I was preparing as if it was a test. It's a hard question. Uh, so one way to answer it is what would've I continued doing if I hadn't become an academic? And this, and this is important to say I think because not all of us had a linear trajectory, uh, from undergrad to grad school to being an academic. Many of us did many things in between and I was one of those *people*. I worked with NGOs in Costa Rica on issues related to conservation. So I think one trajectory, probably, is that. I would've continued doing that, but, if we're thinking of alternate worlds completely, I think I would've been a vet.

18 **I: Ali Kenner** Hmph. So tell me, how did you, uh, come to science and technology studies?

19 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:03:50] That's a great question because for me, science and technology studies and anthropology, I encountered both at the same time. And so, it's uh a story or history of the sisterhood of the disciplines, uh if you will, for me. Uh so, I was doing my PhD at UC-Irvine and I just took a class that was not called science and technology studies, it was on social theory. It was taught by Kaushik Sunder Rajan, so it evidently had a very strong STS approach to it. Not necessarily in terms of who the authors were, but definitely in terms of how we made sense of - the-the class was called Reading Social Theory. So definitely, the STS approach came through in the ways in which we worked with these authors and thought uh, what did they help us ask? What did they help us think about? And so, in these examples and the specific cases that we thought about, they was a clear STS influence and also my fellow grad students. It was one of those classes where people from many different years take the class together, so there were many projects that were STS-y, to say it that way. And then after that, I-I never taught/took an introduction to STS class, so I encountered it always in connection and in conversation with other fields and I think that uh another field in which I identify with is Law and Society or sociolegal studies. And uh I think that there is an important kinship there that maybe is not acknowledged often. But the way in which you think about the law from the sociolegal studies approach shares a lot to the ways in which we think about science and technology in STS. So, even if not in substance, there is an analogous uh form of asking questions coming from Law and Society - the legal profession has a very long, very strong tradition of producing knowledge about itself. And I was originally trained as a lawyer, so that capacity to open up the law and think about it as a process that is not

only shaped by society, but is shaping society constantly and think about that process as knowledge production. At the same time, that it is many things is something that was analogous for me that I found a very nice analogy with STS. And so, I think, to summarize, because I've (laughs) rambled a little bit, I think encountered less as a consolidated discipline and more as a problem space in the world and that-that's how I sought more of it as a discipline.

20 **I: Ali Kenner** [0:06:48] So, I'm wondering, uh, you know, we just interviewed, um, Max Liboiron, uh, earlier and uhh, and I think she mentioned also that she was teaching classes that we STS classes but were not called STS classes. And I know that I've done the same and then you've mentioned that you took this class that was like an STS class but not by that name, so I'm always curious how important do you think it is to name, you know, put STS on-on the things that we do? Is it important? Is it not important? Not in a kind of staking claims kind of way, but in a recognition kind of way, how important do you think it is for us to talk about STS? Is it necessary? Is it not necessary?

21 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:07:32] Mmmhmmm. My answer would be that it is deeply situational.

22 **I: Ali Kenner** Mmmhmmm.

23 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:07:37] For a couple of reasons. One, right now, for instance, at my university there is conversation for more institutional space for the study of technology, culture, and society. And so, I'm part of those conversations and I'm saying over there, "there is this field. This interdisciplinary field called STS that-that has this history so let's think carefully with what's happened in that area when you're thinking about the ethics of AI - which is the problem of the day." So, there's an institutional space in which it is important to claim it. At the same time, because my scholarship and my professional practice, even uh beyond academia, has always traversed these different spaces. Uh, I don't-I don't feel that claiming borders is helpful in some circumstances. Uh so I can imagine for instance, anthropological contexts in which there's uh a resistance to anthropology becoming too much like STS. So, in that context, is the job to claim, to plant the-the flag and say "this is STS" or is the job to think carefully about what question that we want to answer and what is the world demanding that we pay attention to in answering that question? In that case, I'm completely fine not claiming the STS category. There's different perspectives on this of course and-and I can see how there's an argument for the institutional histories uh and traditions that does important political work, but I don't uh, at least in my experience what is most important is the situational - getting the feeling for what it is that will get a certain research program or a certain politics across and sometimes categories get in the way of that.

24 **I: Ali Kenner** [0:09:39] So how do you explain or describe science and technology studies to people outside the discipline when it is important to do so - when it is right?

25 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:09:49] So, in the past couple of weeks, [laughs] uh what I have been emphasizing in my conversations with computer scientists and engineers uh at my institution uh it's really interesting because we are no longer at a time in which people, at least the ones I've been in touch with, where people bracket or ignore the fact that technologies or even science have worldly consequences. That is no longer something that we have to push as an argument, people are very aware of that. But what is less clear or has not been incorporated as much in their thinking is the fact that society is also shaping what society and technology *are* and how they imagine themselves. There is one exception, so the, I am speaking about the US

particularly, people are very aware of the idea of particular interests, corporate interests getting into the science and into the technology or interest-interest groups so people can speak about that. But a more diffused way which particular societies can value and understand as the world becoming something that shapes the very foundation, of which, of what science and technology are. That is still is not - has not circulated as much, recently, what I've been emphasizing is that STS allows you think not only the ways in which science and technology impact society, but also the ways in which the very foundations of communities or social groups shape what is possible and thinkable in science and technology. So, my my resource is address the circularity of the relationship in those interdisciplinary conversations.

- 26 **I: Ali Kenner** Mmmm. And what has the rece-, you know, as your, you know, and what has the reception been when you've had those conversations? That's probably situational too. But, are most people like yes, absolutely that makes sense?
- 27 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:12:00] They say yes. They go do a little research and then they come back with oh, science wars. So, that's the point at which the history and the legacy of a field, you know, catches up with you and then you have to do some work. So we are at the moment in which when yes science wars, yes that was a moment, but uh, today, the fact that you are aware that there are social implications of artificial intelligence or in the future of work, as I'm talking about at my university, of course, climate change. That awareness should remind you that 'science wars' is not the only thing that we can do as a field. There's many ways in which we can engage in turbulent ways, so it's not seeking simulism articulation is creating the space for the turbulence to happen, but staying at the table to figure out what-what to do with that turbulence rather than just putting it under the table and ignore it.
- 28 **I: Ali Kenner** Yeah. It's really interesting. I interviewed uh an STS scholar not too long and one of my questions asked about the science wars and the impact. And they were so put off um by the question because they really wanted to move on, they didn't want to deal with that. They'd dealt with it enough um and and I was thinking but this still occasionally uh gets brought up and so I think to figure out how to talk about it um is-is important even-even if in a truncated way. Um but what is a significant debate in STS that's influenced your own work?
- 29 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:13:46] Definitely, we can-we can call it a debate, we can call it tradition or a-or a form of doing STS definite-definitely feminist STS. Uh the ways in which feminist scholars have really pushed in sophisticate-sophisticated ways our capacity to grasp the ways in which, let's call them power relations, if we want are undergirding every interaction that we're a part of uh has been really fundamental. In the sense that it's not enough to just diagnose those, so, that becoming our starting point is what has been really impactful and meaningful for-for me if this is-this is where we're starting-starting from - ways what of knowledge production, and what categories, what concepts, what types of questions would we want to ask once we acknowledge that and uh not making that that the end point. Right? The diagnosis of the power relation not being the end point but the starting point and what are the creative ways in which we can produce knowledge and inhabit the world acknowledging that and generating new uh new trajectories for work and our colleagues. Another area uh is which sometimes people recognize us as STS-y, sometimes uh because it's much smaller, it is recognized of course as part of the official history but it's not the majority of

the work that we do, is the analysis of finance and capitalism and uh that part of STS. Absolutely critical for my thinking as well.

30 **I: Ali Kenner** [0:15:26] I love I think it's such an important point. Actually starting the conversation or the research with the power rather than making that the end diagnosis, it's such an important move to make. And I'm wondering, you know, is this something I'm very interested in the work that you're doing in the ethnography studio at Rice? And is that something that comes into this this power as a starting point, is that something that has come into your studio work there?

31 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:15:59] Yeah. Implicitly and explicitly. So what we do in the studio is uh and something that I like about it uh is that we do things once we don't do things many times. So, if we do a workshop in a particular kind of way, the next time we're not going to do the same thing. And why do we do this? One of the joys and the responsibilities and the luxuries that we have when we're doing scholarly work or when we're doing research in any in any context is to stop to think about how is it that we are asking that we are asking our questions? What are the what are the assumptions that we are making with our questions? But we don't often talk about the specific ways in which we can assess those two things. Um and so what we do in the studio is create exercise or experiments to do that and to put yourself in a situation that has very parameters that you have to follow to explore whether that is something that you would need to explore more systematically. Uh for instance, we've done things like we did uh a workshop on sensorial access. So what hap-so how is it that you think with access to the senses when you're doing a project that maybe is about lab practices or maybe it's about humanitarian interventions? So not presume that certain topics or certain things require a certain conceptual apparatus or methodological approach, but to try to shake things up so that sometimes you try experiments that seem to be completely disconnected from your work. It's a social space that involves grad students and undergraduate students. And another thing we do is we work with what we have. So we don't have big funding, we don't have like a huge, we have no bureaucratic or uh uh administrative infrastructure. It's just us getting together to run these experiments. So I like that part of it as well. That it's somewhat uh small, it's artisanal. It doesn't aim to create legacy, it's not about reproduction. It's about creating a space in which we can be experimental, rigorous, push each other, think about our politics without institutionalizing it too much.

32 **R: Andrea Ballestero** [0:18:38] Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk technoscience with us today. And again, thank you so much for organizing this year's meeting.

33 Music outro

34 **I: Laura Foster** You've been listening to Technoscience - a podcast recorded at the 2019 Society for Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting in New Orleans. And produced by Laura Foster

35 **R: Timothy Neale** and Timothy Neale in association with the Society and with support from Alison Kenner, Teresa Hoard-Jackson, Aadita Chaudhury, Konstantin Georgiev, Juan Francisco Salazar, and Duygu Kasdogan. The intro and outro music is by the Young Fellaz Brass Band from New Orleans, Louisiana. Find them on Instagram and gmail @youngfellazbrassband. That's Fellaz with a Z.

36 **I: Laura Foster** Thanks for listening and catch you soon for the next episode.

37 Music fades [0:19:27]