Fortieth Symposium of the International Committee for the History of Technology: ICOHTEC at the ICHSTM, Manchester, UK, 21–28 July 2013

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Technology and Culture, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2014, pp. 211-219 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/tech.2014.0029

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The International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC) hosted its annual symposium under the auspices of the Twenty-fourth International Congress of History of Science, Technology and Medicine (ICHSTM), which was held in Manchester, UK, during 21–28 July 2013. This massive gathering, one of the largest to date in the history of the field, featured nearly 1,400 papers, 411 sessions, and 1,758 registered delegates. For those ICOHTEC members arriving in Manchester, Monday the 22nd was particularly significant because the fortieth symposium was being celebrated since ICOHTEC’s founding forty-five years ago.

Three anniversary sessions dealt with different features of past symposia, starting with the first one held in Paris in 1968 to last year’s in Barcelona. It was most interesting to trace how the agendas of our annual symposia have evolved over the past four decades as ICOHTEC has kept pace with a profoundly changing world. Yet, ICOHTEC has remained committed to enhancing scholarship in the history of technology by bridging the barriers among researchers from different cultures and political systems. The collegial atmosphere at ICOHTEC meetings throughout the years has helped foster this goal (figs. 1, 2).

The first anniversary session, organized by Hans-Joachim Braun (Germany) and Timo Myllyntaus (Finland) with the theme “Get Socialised:

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0040-165X/14/5501-0006/211–19
ICOHTEC in the Big Picture,” consisted of four papers. Opening the session, Myllyntaus reminded the audience that ICOHTEC was founded to help reduce the cold war divide and to foster collaborations among historians of technology from both sides of the Iron Curtain. He argued that ICOHTEC not only accomplished this goal, but also managed to adjust to the changing conditions of the modern world. Myllyntaus referred to the years surrounding the end of the cold war, roughly 1986 to 1995, as a turning point in ICOHTEC’s history, when its focus transitioned from internationalism to transnationalism.

The next speaker, Vasily Borisov (Russia), considered the success of collaborations between East and West during the cold war. He emphasized the role played by Semyon Shukhardin, one of ICOHTEC’s four founding fathers, examining how Shukhardin’s prominent position among Soviet historians of science and technology, coupled with his dedication to ICOHTEC, led to the USSR hosting two symposia (in Moscow [1971] and Kaluga [1976]). Breaking the ice during the cold war was easier when people warmed up at the meetings—this was the general conclusion of the third speaker in this session, Slawomir Lotysz (Poland), who spoke on “After Work Hours: Excursions, Receptions, and Social Atmosphere.” He argued that various events, such as pre- and post-conference tours, welcome receptions, and farewell banquets, greatly contributed to closer relations among members. While these events may not have always led to scholarly collaborations, they certainly created more trust and under-
standing among ICOHTEC members. The last speaker in this session was Susan Schmidt Horning (U.S.), who provided an overview of a unique feature of the ICOHTEC meetings: the jazz evenings, at which musically inclined members played together at international symposia. The musical group has been known as “Email Special” since its inception in 1996, when Hans-Joachim Braun organized a jam session during the symposium in Budapest. Since then, the jazz evening has been a regular offering to conference-goers as both entertainment and a unique opportunity to communicate across cultures through the universal language of music. Horning traced the history of music at the ICOHTEC meetings back further, to the late 1980s, and attributed its beginning and ongoing presence at the annual symposia to the collegial atmosphere of our society (fig. 3).

The panelists in the next two sessions examined how ICOHTEC’s research agenda has changed over the past few decades. They discussed topical threads that have been apparent in the programs of past meetings, with each panelist often being responsible for originally bringing the particular topic to the ICOHTEC forum. R. Angus Buchanan (UK), for example, opened these sessions by recalling the theoretical and practical components of technological education. He noted that ICOHTEC has been dealing with this topic since the symposium was held as a part of the Congress of the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science/Division of History of Science (IUHPS/DHS) in Berkeley in 1985.
The next speaker was Barton Hacker (U.S.), who has organized what is now known as the “Social History of Military Technology Symposium” at ICOHTEC since 2006. He stressed that the social and cultural context of military history is not often as recognized as other aspects, and that he will continue to promote the importance of considering military history with these perspectives in mind. James Williams (U.S.), who took the floor after Hacker, referred to ICOHTEC’s almost thirty-year engagement with the issue of energy, and, more broadly, the relationship between technology and the environment. The theme of “Energy in History” at ICOHTEC’s symposium in Lerbach, near Cologne, in 1984, was highlighted, as well as the evolution of important sessions focusing on technology and the environment in Lisbon (1998), Belfort, France (1999), and Prague (2000).

The relation between play and technology was discussed next. This topic has been present at most of the recent ICOHTEC meetings, usually under the guidance of Stefan Poser (Germany). An overview of the issues connecting technology, music, and sound was outlined by Braun, who spoke about the origins of this topic, with widespread attention becoming apparent only during the 1990s. The next speaker was Reinhold Bauer (Germany), who recalled that “failed technologies” was one of the oldest topics at ICOHTEC meetings. He noted that it was the main theme of the 1989 Hamburg/Munich ICOHTEC symposium jointly held with IUHPS/DHS. Brenda Buchanan (UK), who traditionally organizes sessions on the history of gunpowder in an international context, was the next speaker. She celebrated the outcomes of several previous symposia, including two favor-
ably received volumes on the topic. The last paper in the anniversary sessions dealt with the science–technology relationship from a historical perspective. Alexandre Herlea (France) recalled that this topic has been present in ICOHTEC’s research agenda since the organization’s beginning, and it was recognized as the main theme of several symposia, such as those in Dresden (1985) and Paris (1990).

At the ICHSTM, delegates from ICOHTEC did much more than discuss the organization’s history with one another; they had to decide which sessions to attend, choosing from twenty-three parallel tracks. Hacker’s “Social History of Military Technology Symposium,” now in its eighth year, was particularly well-attended. Contributors delivered papers on a range of topics over the course of four chronologically grouped sessions, from early modern guns and forts to cold war technology. Notable presentations included Steven Walton’s (U.S.) examination of the role that geometry played in the construction of sixteenth-century Italian fortifications, Timo Vilén’s (Finland) assertion that Finnish science during World War II fosters an appreciation of the contributions of “little science,” and Liz Tynan’s (Australia) provocative and long-overdue telling of the history of nuclear-testing fallout in Australia.

Elsewhere, over the course of three sessions, as part of the general ICOHTEC symposium “The Invisible Bicycle: New Insights into Bicycle History,” presenters called for further research. While bicycles have been examined as technological artifacts and social histories of cycling have been written, participants argued that current debates on mobility make this topic more relevant than ever. Peter Cox (UK), in “Rethinking Bicycle Histories,” asserted that historians should move past periodized and nationally centered histories of bicycles, arguing that we might uncover interesting narratives when considering the bicycle as a symbol of, say, conspicuous consumerism or perhaps as a threat to entrenched power. For the cyclists in the audience, the trip to Manchester during the last week of July was fortuitous, as the city’s monthly Critical Mass ride took place on the 26th. Occurring in cities around the world on the last Friday of each month, this grassroots movement brings riders to the streets to promote cycling awareness for both prospective riders and motorists. At least one attendee at the symposium (Layne Karafantis) rented a bicycle and participated in the approximately seven-mile tour of Manchester.

Another important ICOHTEC session was “Enforced Specialization in Computing Technology: Debugging the History of Cooperation and Competition in COMECON Countries,” which showcased a series of papers about the development of computers, fiber optics, and network technologies within and on the borders of the Iron Curtain. The influence of the cold war on computing technology is well-documented and accepted in the West, but now we are starting to see rich narratives emerge from elsewhere in the world, as evidenced by the presentations of Pierre Bouillon (France),
Slawomir Lotysz, Petri Paju (Finland), and Frank Dittmann (Germany). Perhaps the most ironic thread running throughout the papers was that for all the talk of camaraderie, competition among COMECON countries was fierce. Conversely, the highly competitive West seemed to cooperate more effectively despite its lack of a rhetorical “brotherhood.”

Other ICOHTEC sessions included “Everlasting Bath: The History of Sauna Technology and Culture,” organized by Myllyntaus; a session on early developments in the modern oil industry, organized by Francesco Gerali (Italy); and some special-topic sessions. ICOHTEC participants, however, had hundreds of other sessions relevant to their research interests to choose from, which were part of ICHSTM. On Tuesday, a special session, “Victorian Science Spectacular,” lived up to its billing. Congress delegates were treated to wonderful demonstrations by Aileen Fyfe, Iwan Rhys Morus, Katy Price, and Tim Cockerill (all from the UK), who donned alternative nineteenth-century personas to amaze their audience with feats of modern science. Salvaged period instruments and equipment, audio recordings, electricity, and the telegraph were just some of the technologies on display for a bemused and amused twenty-first-century audience. The presenters were particularly engaging when humorously confronting the audience with facts of nineteenth-century life to describe how technology alleviated the difficulty of everyday tasks. While designed for a broad audience, it went over very well with the scholars and provided many of us with new ideas for inspiring our students to think about technological changes within their contexts.

On Wednesday the 24th, the Roscoe Building was the scene for “Space at Work: Space Programmes, the Environment and Nuclear Technology.” Organized by Roger Launius (U.S.), William Macauley (Germany), and Robert Poole (UK), this forum sought to uncover the novel relationships among three major movements during the second half of the twentieth century: spaceflight, nuclear development, and environmentalism. Approaches ranged from discussing the impact of nuclear power and radioactive materials on space probes to an examination of the adoption of the “Spaceship Earth” concept by counterculture environmentalists in the 1970s American West. The panel on nuclear technology examined the subject from a variety of media perspectives, with government, industry, and civil society all well-represented. The standout presentation in this panel was by Joseph Masco (U.S.), who revealed the existence of a rich library of materials about the cold war U.S. nuclear-weapons industry. Highlighting the complexity of the industry and the struggles of historians to uncover sources, Masco shared his success in obtaining access to a small portion of a large volume of educational and training materials and films designed for people with security clearances in the nuclear-weapons industry. He also discovered a powerful and persuasive connection among Hollywood, the nuclear-weapons industry, and cinematic technology.
The panel “Cornucopia or Pandora’s Box: Digital Working Methods, Web Portals and Virtual Research Environments (VREs) in the History of Science and Technology,” with one of the organizers, ICOHTEC’s Klaus Staubermann (Scotland), addressed the use of technology to assist preservation and provide access to materials. The first two presenters, Claudia Kroker and Ursula Zängl (both from Germany), offered projects on the digitization of documents and scientific illustrators. They reported on the challenges inherent in the construction of their respective databases to track many different fields of information, asserting that these challenges were very difficult. Nonetheless, reflecting on the complexity of databases in the modern world, one wonders: If these pioneers reached out for more expertise, would they have found willing and eager partners interested in helping solve their problems in more direct and efficient ways than imagined? This point was brought home in the third presentation, by Carlene Stephens of the Smithsonian Institution (U.S.), who described the surprising discovery of original sound recordings in the Smithsonian’s archives, including the only known recording of Alexander Graham Bell. To recover and preserve these recordings, the Smithsonian partnered with NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which had developed a laser system for mapping surfaces. This system was used to map the surfaces of the fragile, early recording cylinders discovered in the Smithsonian’s vaults, subsequently running these maps through audio software to reproduce the sounds without ever physically playing the medium. Stephens also took the opportunity to solicit ideas and partners to continue the project, which is still in its early stages.

A small auditorium in University Place was packed for a special session on Wednesday afternoon: “Of Music, Engineers and Drugs: When Cottonopolis became Madchester.” The session aimed to explore how the traditional birthplace of the Industrial Revolution morphed into an internationally acclaimed space for postpunk and electronic music, as well as a site of conspicuous recreational drug use during the 1980s and ’90s. The provocative subject matter was not the sole reason for increased attendance at this session: the panel promised attendees an intimate conversation with local celebrities. Most notably, Peter Hooke, bassist for renowned Manchester postpunk band Joy Division and for its later incarnation, New Order, held court for dozens of admiring fans, answering questions with brutal honesty. When asked whether he had hoped that the success of his bands would positively impact Manchester’s economy, he replied that hardly anyone (besides Factory Records founder Tony Wilson) had an interest in making Manchester “a city again,” and that those few musicians who attained success went to London. For his part, Hooke declared: “I didn’t form a band to make music. I did it to tell people to fuck off!”

The session eventually moved away from Hooke’s stories of times past, and other panelists considered the sociocultural and economic impacts of
Manchester’s burgeoning music scene during the late twentieth century. Dave Haslam, one-time DJ extraordinaire for Manchester’s Haçienda nightclub, noted that in the 1960s and ‘70s, Manchester was a bleak place. Much like other declining industrial centers of the era, it suffered from a high vacancy rate and unemployment. This disenfranchisement set the scene for an emerging youth culture, one that appropriated old warehouses for do-it-yourself projects and lo-fi music collaborations. With the panel rounded out by Horning and James Mills (UK), the speakers endeavored to comprehend how technological innovations in music production and the availability of new drugs brought about sociocultural change in Manchester.

Attendees had far more to do over the course of the week than simply attend sessions. Organizers took every opportunity to convince visitors that the University of Manchester was the ideal venue for the conference. Excursions and special sessions highlighted Manchester as a historic hotbed of science and technology, from its pivotal role in the Industrial Revolution through the city’s more recent innovations in electronic music. The opening reception took place at the university’s Manchester Museum, where conference-goers sipped wine while exploring the museum’s archaeology and natural history exhibits. On Tuesday the 23rd, the group reconvened in the Great Hall of the historic Manchester Town Hall. Opened in 1877, its walls are decorated with murals depicting the history of the city, and its ceiling is covered with glass panes depicting the mayors, lord mayors, and chairs of the council of Manchester. To further highlight Manchester’s appropriateness as host city for the symposium, a third reception was held at the Museum of Science and Industry, where attendees viewed the first exhibition of Brains: The Mind as Matter outside of London, one day before it opened to the public.

Excursions also solidified Manchester as an ideal locale for historians of science, technology, and medicine. Symposium organizers arranged daily visits to the Lovell Telescope at Jodrell Bank, the third largest radio telescope in the world. This excursion also involved a pleasant bus ride into the surrounding English countryside. Later in the week, attendees were invited to take another short trip, to Quarry Bank Mill, located in Styal, a town south of Manchester. Those interested in the region’s Industrial Revolution legacy were treated to up-close encounters with milling technology dating from the early eighteenth century, including the largest waterwheel in Europe. The mill’s surrounding gardens and workers’ houses have likewise been preserved, and visitors enjoyed the scenery on an uncharacteristically sunny day.

For two nights, the Helsinki Ooppera Skaala opera company performed Turing Machine at the Capitol Theatre. Set to a mixture of IDM (intelligent dance music) and other genres of experimental electronic music, three actors portrayed the life and untimely death of Alan Turing in
a minimalist and whimsical production. Again, Manchester proved a relevant venue for this event, as Turing worked at Max Newman’s Computing Laboratory at the University of Manchester during the postwar years. (The university’s School of Mathematics is currently housed in a building named in Turing’s honor.) For after-hours offerings, the Jabez Clegg, a pub named for the eponymous hero of Isabella Banks’s novel The Manchester Man, proved a popular late-night meeting spot and hosted a number of special events for participants in the symposium. Entertainment offerings at the pub ranged from folk music and amateur comedy sets to the DJ stylings of Haslam and an evening with ICOHTEC’s Email Special. While partaking in the festivities, denizens were invited to sample the “Roy Porter,” a dark stout concocted specially for ICHSTM by the Tipsy Angel Brewery. Pubs were frequently chosen locales for informal networking events; for example, on Monday night, ICHSTM’s corps of tweeters met at the Dulcie Arms to introduce themselves to one another in the flesh while enjoying a few pints. This introductory mixer/tweet-up enabled Twitter enthusiasts to have a casual chat and encounter a range of scholars whom they might never have met otherwise.

Overall, ICOHTEC’s presence at ICHSTM contributed valuable scholarship in the form of papers, rewarded its members through opportunities to network with colleagues in related fields, and allowed attendees to explore the history of science and technology in the historic city of Manchester. While the Congress will not reconvene until the summer of 2017 in Rio de Janeiro, ICOHTEC will meet in Brasov, Romania, in the summer of 2014. The main theme of the conference is “Technology in Times of Transition,” and organizers aim to create a program that showcases major breaks and turning points in technological development within a multidisciplinary framework. The deadline for paper proposals is 3 February 2014; more information can be found on ICOHTEC’s website (http://www.icohtec.org/).