

'The Swerve': A Modest Hint for Appreciating Tradition and Escaping Self-referentiality

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Abstract: The essay suggests 'the swerve' as an analytical metaphor useful for researchers and theorists engaged in building the future of STS studies. What is suggested is to shape one's own "swerving methodology", presented as a "reflective practice" adopted in the comparison with objects, with research questions and STS epistemologies.

Keywords: STS epistemology; methodology; displacement; interdisciplinary; community.

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1. Ten minutes. Ten minutes should give us more than enough time to play a round of 'the swerve'. However, before we play, we must understand the goal of the game, which is to avoid being unintentionally misguided by our STS assumptions... or prejudices, if we are speaking bluntly. The first rule for playing the swerve is to spend just ten minutes putting some distance between us and our research object as well as our research question. In other words, the swerve involves briefly suspending our next research activity so we can reflect on the almost certain reality that we are investigating an object and a research question to which someone has already dedicated her/his attention and time, in the more or less remote past. The move I suggest calling 'the swerve' sounds like a displacement, able to relocate our viewpoint to a position other than that which we usually assume. Actually, the concept of 'displacement' has already been discussed within the STS community, but it was introduced primarily to indicate one effect of becoming aware that technoscientific objects can be regarded from a vantage point other than the one usually

taken outside the STS perspective. By examining technoscientific objects from a new perspective, STS can illustrate how a technoscientific object, which is apparently the same for many heterogeneous actors, actually takes on as many meanings as there are actors having to do with it.

The swerve suggests considering objects and ideas in a new way, as they can be perceived differently from how they are usually interpreted by the current STS perspective or by the STS perspective as a whole. However, the swerve encompasses more than just this, as it will become clearer as this article develops. Nevertheless, this partial definition is all we need for now to begin our argument.

2. STS is now a consolidated academic field, with its own rules, theories, concepts and institutions: journals, conferences, doctoral programmes, undergraduate courses, handbooks, scientific societies, grants and prizes. This is not wrong, of course; in fact, the opposite is true, as the STS consolidation was necessary for their survival and development, especially within national contexts where they are still weak, as is the case in Italy. Indeed, we cannot maintain our research approach in a permanent state of original effervescence; we cannot continue to be revolutionary forever, unless we want to disappear into the oblivion of a perhaps exciting but inconclusive season.

Yet, at the same time, we should adopt every possible strategy and embrace all epistemological and methodological tricks to avoid becoming self-referential, able only to speak among ourselves. Moreover, we should not transform the original desire to change the way of looking at technoscience into the dictatorship of a taken-for-granted STS approach. We cannot advance by continuing to consume every new research object simply by applying, mechanically and rigidly, a bag of sensitising concepts and interpretative models and theories, or by assuming that our point of view is the best by definition.

We are now obliged to cope with this irreducible opposition: on one hand, we must not repeatedly restart at point A, as if STS had never existed; on the other hand, we should not take for granted the STS perspective nor its theories, notions or methodologies.

Each new research object has its own specificity but, for the most part, poses the same questions as those implied by other similar objects in the past. Let us think, for example, about neurosciences or synthetic biology – two emerging technoscientific objects that are presently attracting STS attention: should we completely disregard existing knowledge about biotechnologies or nuclear power? Are big data or machine learning so peculiar that we can forget all we learned about analogic scientific archives or about AI at the end of the last century? Can we look at the new phenomena through research questions radically dissimilar from those of the past? Is it enough to change our jargon – for example, using ‘engagement’ instead of ‘participation’ – when technoscientific controversies are analysed to arrive at new research problems?

To recognise that our research object is defined by questions much like those posed about other objects studied in the past means both that we must be aware that STS is a well-established research field and that what is now under inquiry has a history resulting from an evolutionary process. The swerve, then, can produce two effects: first, it can invite us to exploit the theoretical and empirical heritage accumulated by STS along its development; second, it can enrich our research with the historical depth that makes it even more interesting and full of theoretical implications, so that we are pushed to go beyond a mere descriptive level.

However, the swerve should also produce a third effect, namely, keeping us from becoming self-referential by taking for granted our point of view, together with its epistemological and methodological armamentarium. Creating distance between our research and ourselves – even if only by a measure of minutes – could, indeed, enable us to displace our perspective and illustrate that our viewpoint is neither obvious nor necessarily open to the standpoint of other subjects with whom it could be very relevant to interact. It is worth noting that dodging the bullet of self-referentiality is not only a problem in our relationships with people who appear distant from the STS perspective, such as the so-called ‘hard’ scientists or laypeople; we are also experimenting to an increasing extent with the difficulty of interacting properly within the field of social sciences. In some respects, in fact, it has become easier for a sociologist to engage with an anthropologist or a political scientist with whom an STS approach is shared rather than with another sociologist who is far removed from STS. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that, on the surface, the two sociologists share the same vocabulary; however, if the first talks about ‘network’, the second can easily recognise the word but understand it from a completely different line of thinking and, hence, attach an alternate meaning.

3. For the swerve to be effectively implemented, it should be positioned not only at the beginning of our research but also during its fulfilment, so as to ensure that we experience multiple benefits of its employment. What matters is that, just like each sudden shift made to avoid colliding with an obstacle, the process of implementing the swerve must be swift and abrupt; only in this way can the resulting cognitive jolt be strong enough to make us understand what we were risking: unconscious permanence inside STS commonplaces.

Of course, unlike what might happen if we were driving a car or walking on a sidewalk when confronted with an approaching obstacle and did not take quick action to keep from meeting it head on, without a hasty implementation of the swerve, the impact would not be so violent; however, the consequences could be equally powerful: a quiet self-referentiality, not even perceived because it is derived from an attitude considered ‘natural’.

Honestly, I have no idea how to make such a move with a sudden

force. Maybe we could randomly disseminate alerts in our digital calendar or rely on our capability to occasionally recall the need to swerve... I am not sure – we can all invent our own swerve methodology.

Regardless of the approach, an effectively incorporated swerve should produce highly remunerative results: spending only ten minutes should suggest that maybe it would be better to invest at least ten hours to deepen the hints and the questions raised as a consequence of this initial move. Ultimately, what can be gained will be more evident in the next ten months, even more in the next ten years: reducing the risk of being trapped in an STS taken-for-granted flatness.

Another relevant aspect that the swerve can bring to light is that deviating from a path implies having a trajectory. In other words, it is possible to practice a swerve only after a research question has been developed and a research object identified, so that our research can be oriented having a direction. This will allow us to realise that the redirection introduced by the swerve is something radically different from the changes of direction derived from a casual wandering around what sounds vaguely technoscientific. At the same time, it should be clear that having a research trajectory has nothing to do with ‘trajectorism’, as it has been depicted recently by Appadurai (2013, 223):

A deeper epistemological and ontological habit, which always assumes that there is a cumulative journey from here to there, or more exactly from now to then. [...] Trajectorism is the idea that time’s arrow inevitably has a telos [...]. Modern social science inherits this telos and turns it into a method for the study of humanity.

A research trajectory is no more than the sense of direction drafted by our question. Such a trajectory makes it possible to swerve but also to return to the path outlined for our journey after becoming cognizant that the trajectory could be another one and that the path we are following has already been trodden by others.

4. The swerve, thus, is a lateral move in relation to our research direction, thanks to which we can gain an alternative position that makes more evident the intrinsic *processuality* of objects and research questions. They have a history that entrenches them in a specific context, even if it makes them also fluid or, even better, shows that the stability of the first and the relevance of the second emanate from the fact that we are deeply and unwittingly plunged in the present, directly connected to the flow of events, to the *hic et nunc* of everyday life. Once we access this alternative viewpoint on our own research, we must measure the depth of its thickness and, therefore, the need to deepen its analysis by drilling into the layers that time has gradually deposited on it.

5. Finally, the swerve is a plea for interdisciplinarity as well. In fact, it

can help us to assume and cultivate an interdisciplinary attitude, providing the opportunity both to look at an object from a different perspective and to consider the STS approach as one among many. Feeding this kind of awareness is a useful premise on which to base transdisciplinary research, i.e. to fulfil the hybridisation among heterogeneous viewpoints and, hence, to acquire a new one, detached from what we tend to consider obvious.

In other words, the swerve can help us remain in the early wake of the STS tradition, which has always been genuinely interdisciplinary and sometime transdisciplinary too, while at the same time avoiding self-referentiality.

‘The swerve’ – ten minutes that could be well spent today, looking at the next ten years.

References

Appadurai, A. (2013) *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, London, New York, Verso.

