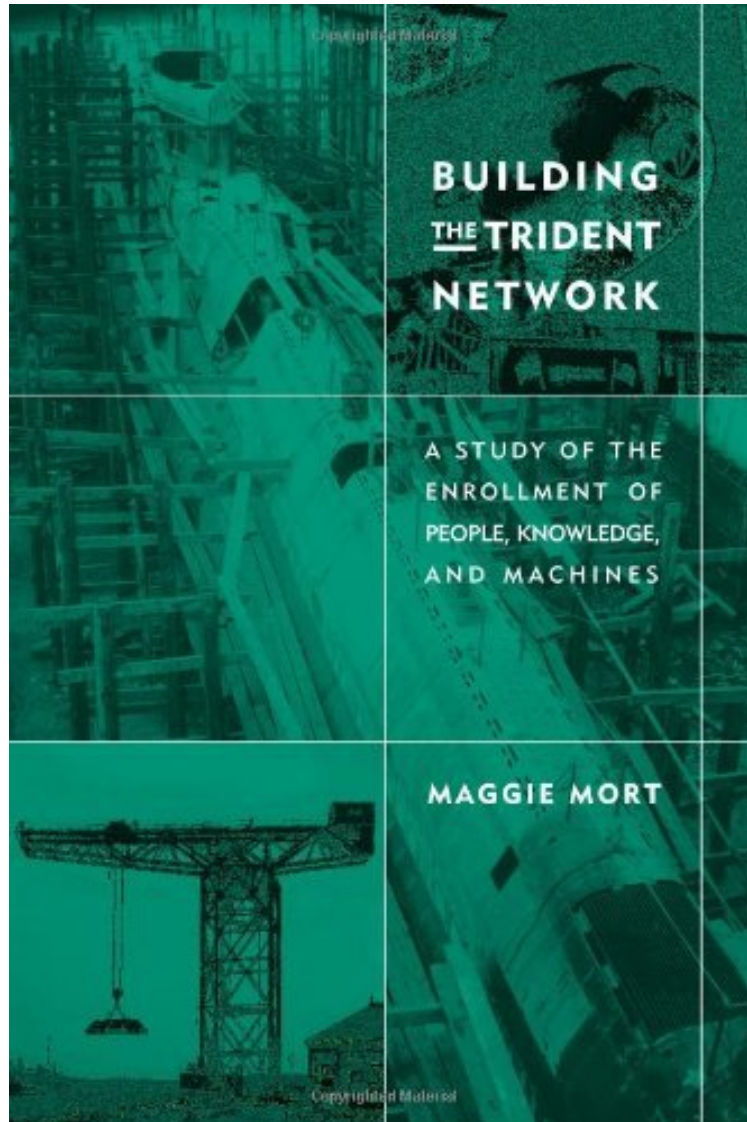


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Building the Trident Network: A Study of the Enrollment of People, Knowledge, and Machines (Inside Technology): A Study of the Enrollment of People, Knowledge and Machines

Maggie Mort

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Maggie Mort's Building the Trident NetworkBy Jeffrey HartIn this book, Maggie Mort examines the history of the Trident submarine program in Britain from early 1980s to 1998, focusing on the management and workers of Vickers Shipbuilding and Engineering Ltd. (VSEL) and particularly the shipyard operations in Barrow. The Trident is a large submarine designed to carry eighteen submarine-launched ballistic missiles tipped with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) nuclear warheads. Tridents would replace the smaller Polaris submarines in the 1980s to provide a less vulnerable sea-based nuclear deterrent force for both the Britain and United States. Trident technology was complex and therefore very expensive. The idea of building the submarines in the early 1980s was attractive to the management at VSEL because of the potential for profit. They assumed, as most people did at the time, that the Cold War would not end soon. British equity investors endorsed this view by rewarding VSEL with a high and growing stock price. As a result, the management of VSEL progressively divested itself of other businesses to focus most of its efforts on building Tridents. A major argument in the book is that the closing of the Trident building program in 1998 brought considerable hardship to the workers of Barrow, but that this was not an inevitable outcome. A group of workers called the Barrow Alternative Employment Committee (BAEC) argued forcefully for the diversification of VSEL activities in order to avoid overdependence on defense contracts. Mort examines carefully in Chapter 3 the BAEC's claims that VSEL could have remained diversified by investing in non-defense technologies such as radomes and the Constant Speed Generator Drive (CGSD). The latter was basically a gearing system that allowed ocean-going vessels to generate their own electricity directly from the diesel engines that powered the propulsion system rather than using separate generating systems. Mort shows how this technology was jettisoned in a rather cavalier manner by a management not wanting to be distracted from its military mission by profitable commercial activities. The correctness of the BAEC's views and the stupidity of management decisions regarding CGSD in hindsight lead Mort to conclude that things did not have to work out the way they did. However, there are other aspects of the argument that are worthy of comment. One of the problems that Mort addresses in Chapter 4 is how the majority of workers (other than the BAEC members and their allies) were convinced not just to go along with the divesting of civilian businesses but also actually to invest themselves in the shares of the newly privatized and defense-contract-dependent VSEL. The British government under Margaret Thatcher was keen to privatize state-owned enterprises like British Shipbuilders, so it proposed a management/worker buyout of the Barrows works as one of the ways to convince the unions that they had a stake in the success of the Trident program. The government hoped that having a financial stake in the firm would reduce the propensity of the workers to engage in strikes. Ironically, the workers invested in the shares and then immediately went on strike for better wages and working conditions. They had purchased the shares for their potential appreciation and sold them when the price went up. Although the workers remained stakeholders in VSEL, they did not remain shareholders for long. However, even though this tactic failed to prevent strikes and other union activity, it succeeded in scuttling efforts of groups like the BAEC to get the rest of the work force to question the overdependence on defense contracts in Barrow. There is a brief but good theoretical discussion in Chapter 1 of the social construction school of thought in the science, technology and society (STS) branch of sociology. The influential writings of David Noble, Langdon Winner, and Bruno Latour are discussed briefly. Mort herself stresses the concept of "enrollment" by which she means the process of involving individuals in large technological projects. Her interest is not just in enrollment, but also in "disenrollment," as when workers are laid off when demand for a new technology declines or when they lose faith in or become marginal to a given project. In sum, this book represents a solid effort to understand the path not taken in a large and important technological effort. Its generalizability to other large technology efforts may be limited to some degree by the exotic nature of nuclear submarine technology and the importance of the sudden and rather unexpected end of the Cold War for the events described in the book. Nevertheless, there are all too few books on technology that adequately consider the importance of the views of the workers who are part of the overall effort and particularly of the potential role of dissident labor groups like the BAEC.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Military-industrial network and its alternativesBy CooperMaggie Mort's actor network analysis of the history of Britain's participation in the Trident submarine program is an important book. It is a slim volume of only 217 pages and I hope its manageable scale will encourage its wide circulation. I suspect Ms. Mort will be surprised to learn that my first reaction to it is to wonder just how we have come so far from John Kenneth Galbraith's New Industrial State. Firms in Galbraith's analysis were oligopolistic, autonomous institutions vying for market share (and not profit maximization) which wrested power away from owners (entrepreneurs/shareholders). What has happened to his view, extremely plausible in 1967, that the large corporation had evolved beyond the "fictional person" created in the act of incorporation to become a genuine "organism" for which the prime imperative was institutional survival? Unfortunately, the answer is perhaps captured in that most famous line of the philosopher of my generation, Pogo; "We have seen the enemy and he is us." The ownership of capital by pension funds, insurance companies, and public institutions such as universities and hospitals has submerged Galbraith's evolving organisms in a sea of share trading based on quarterly reports that nourishes the institutional needs for cash flows and endowment growth. This cannot be more clearly demonstrated than it is by Mort's analysis showing the concern for corporate health that coming from the labour force in and clashing with a management interest limited to shareholder value. The story of the construction of

the Trident network is the story of the destruction of a complex corporate organism by a "successful" management that did, in fact, increase shareholder value and create an image of the inevitability of the path followed. Of course, enrollment into networks depends on translating many interests, so Ms. Mort's book also brings many other issues into focus. The book chronicles the progressive narrowing of a formerly diverse, creative, and complex marine engineering operation at Barrow into a single purpose tool of cold war nuclear confrontation capable only of building submarines to carry Trident missiles. Mort explores the logic of "core business" versus diversity, an issue that much recent industrial strategy makes crucial. Her story proceeds mainly through analysis of network construction by workers at Barrow who were attempting to preserve diversity and technical capacity in the face of the "baroque technology" of nuclear submarines. In this, she demonstrates clearly and forcefully how much labour history has to contribute to the analysis of large-scale sociotechnical systems. The story of the Barrow Alternative Employment Committee is fascinating and its intersection with the nuclear disarmament movement intriguing. A further important theme is analysis of technological roads not taken. The constant speed generator drive and the VSR3 radome are significant actors in this story.

In *Building the Trident Network*, Maggie Mort approaches the United Kingdom's Trident submarine and missile system as a sociotechnical network. Drawing on the sociology of scientific and technical knowledge and on actor-network theory, Mort recounts how the Trident program was stabilized in the United Kingdom and brought into "successful" production. She uncovers the nature of this success by retelling unofficial histories of Trident, of production roads not taken, and of potential technological "distractions." The production of Trident, she shows, was not inevitable but contingent and problematic. Using material from interviews and local texts, Mort explores the emergence of a counternetwork in the form of a workers' campaign for alternative technologies. She develops concepts of "disenrollment" and "absent intermediaries," in which redundant workers and marginalized technologies serve to discipline and reinforce the dominant network as production shrinks. She also examines the maintenance of the barrier between the technical and the social/political in this context. The management of uncertainties within the Trident production program emerges as critical to its successful completion.

Exploring with great subtlety the hidden history of a major weapon system, Mort adds a new moral and political dimension to the sociology of technology. (Donald MacKenzie, Department of Sociology, University of Edinburgh) Maggie Mort tells the fascinating and unusual story of the development of a high-tech submarine from the point of view of workers on the project. (Michel Callon, Professor, École des mines de Paris) [An] important and timely contribution to the sociology of science and technology. (American Journal of Sociology) This pioneering work constitutes a lucid, nuanced, and convincing introduction of labor history into the analysis of large-scale sociotechnical systems. It should be read by all who are interested in the interplay of politics, society, and technology. (Geoffrey Bowker, Department of Communication, University of California San Diego) About the Author Maggie Mort is Reader in the Sociology of Science, Technology, and Medicine in the Department of Sociology and Division of Medicine at Lancaster University in the UK.