History of electricity

- **Electrocultures: Electricity Wild and Domestic**
- **And Total Electric Light Too**

These e-resources represent a preview of student research undertaken as part of a Science & Technology Studies course on Topics in the History of Physical Sciences at UCL. This course continues an ambitious didactic experiment, originally developed by Prof. Hasok Chang, in which undergraduate students undertake original research projects, which they inherit from students who took the course in previous years. Through this inheritance mechanism, results of original research can accumulate from year to year. All students in the course work on related projects, so that the class, and the group of students that take this course over the years, form a real community of researchers.

The first phase of this project, resulted in the publication of a research monograph: Hasok Chang and Catherine Jackson, eds., An Element of Controversy: The Life of Chlorine in Science, Medicine, Technology and War (British Society for the History of Science, 2007). This was an extraordinary achievement: a scholarly book containing original research, all carried out by undergraduates.

We are now in the second phase of the project, which began in the academic year 2007-08. We are investigating the history of electricity from a variety of angles: philosophical, sociological, political, economic and cultural. The common theme is innovation through "domestication". Electricity has been instrumental in shaping the modern world as we know it, and we now take for granted its presence in our daily life. The dizzying array of electrical innovations that have changed our lives range from the humble light bulb to the electric chair, from the invention of the electrical battery to the discovery of the electron. Our research projects get behind the coming of these innovations and ask a variety of questions: how they were possible; why anyone bothered with them; which factors helped or hindered their acceptance; who promoted or resisted them, and why; what their impacts were, and so on.

There is much to be gained from doing a series of interconnected studies that deal with various aspects of one material object or substance; each study will enrich others, often prompting unexpected insights for them. And in order to give our project

coherence we will have a focus on innovation: how does something new arise and become accepted? The path of progress may look easy and straightforward in retrospect, but a closer look at the history of science often reveals great challenges and obstacles in the creation and dissemination of novelty even if it is considered obviously true or beneficial later.