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Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology and European Users

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How many of us would happily make do without a fully equipped modern kitchen ? even if it sometimes beats like a transplanted artificial heart at the centre of an artisan cottage stripped back to its original organic floorboards and fireplace? Some might take this present-day dependence as testament to the irresistible appeal of American domestic technology, an appeal that guaranteed its spread during the second half of the 20th century. If any find this story plausible, they would do well to study this handsomely produced and well-illustrated edited collection on the attempted transfer of the American ?modern kitchen? to Europe during the early Cold War period of the 20th century.

At the outset, editors Oldenziel and Zachmann position themselves at the cutting edge of the historiography of technology. Following Langdon Winner?s classic lead (1), they see politics as embodied in the modern kitchen, helping to bolster traditional women?s roles at time of challenge by feminism and other historical forces. Rebutting any presumed unilinear account of the transatlantic diffusion of this particular set of innovations, they define the modern kitchen as a culturally and ideologically laden technological artefact in its own right ? one moreover that needs to be set within an array of large technological systems: electrical grids, gas networks, water systems and the integrated food and transport chain. They insist that a ?host of

social actors? shape all these technological components: ?kitchens are as deeply social as they are political? (p. 3). They invite us to view the kitchen as a ?mediation junction? between producers and consumers, extending Ruth Schwartz Cowan?s influential call to attend to the ?consumption junction? in any analysis of the social relations of a given artefact.(2) In the work as a whole there are frequent citations of the notion of the ?co-construction? of artefacts by producers and users, an analytical framework introduced by Oudshoorn and Pinch (3); and also references to Madeleine Akrich?s concept of ?scripts? of users embodied in artefacts (4); and Steve Woolgar?s idea of the ?configured user?.(5) The contributors also explore intersecting planes of analysis that are specific to the chosen topic. They examine the Cold War geopolitical confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union ? in particular, the ideological debate over the economic and social significance of consumer goods. Cutting across the superpower divide, they also distinguish between the market-driven US approach to housing provision and more state-led European solutions to their own post-war housing crisis, on either side of the Iron Curtain.

The substantive chapters break much new geographic ground: in addition to studies on the Netherlands, the two German states and the UK, they reach out to the relatively unexplored periphery of Greater Europe: from Finland in the north down though the Eurasian hybrids Russia and Turkey to Yugoslavia. These chapters are organized into four sections. The first focuses on the presentation of a range of US exhibits ? model kitchens, a model home and supermarket ? at a variety of European trade fairs and exhibitions. There are chapters about a Dutch exhibition on ?The Atom? (by Irene Cieraad), and a trade fair in Zagreb (by Shane Hamilton), both mounted in 1957; but most attention is directed to the 1959 trade fair in Moscow?s Sokolniki Park (contributions by Greg Castillo, Cristina Carbone and Susan E Reid). Here four model kitchens gleamed in the American National Exhibition, which is variously likened to a ?Trojan Horse? in a ?Nylon War? waged by American economic and cultural imperialists against Soviet Communism. One such kitchen was the futuristic RCA/Whirlpool ?Miracle Kitchen?; and another ? this time sponsored by General Electric ? was installed in the X-61 or ?Splitnik? prefabricated home. The GE kitchen was to stage a classic Cold War debate between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice-President Richard Nixon. These artefacts, and the debate they inspired, are analysed as part of an ideological struggle between the USA and the Soviet Union over the importance of consumer goods and the way of life they represented. Here the emphasis is on producer discourses: whether the propaganda battle among the superpowers; or US corporations? marketing strategies, which sought to establish and exploit the place of the modern kitchen and its technological content as the hub of a technical megasystem embracing refrigerated transport, domestic fridges and freezers, supermarkets and private cars.

In the second part, the authors uncover the real kitchens behind the propaganda, and weigh the contribution of local users and cultures to their design and equipment. The underlying message is that the American dream kitchens on show were nothing like as influential in Europe as contemporary hype and subsequent iconic status might suggest. Written out of a master narrative foregrounding the American ?fat kitchen? was the European lean equivalent, notably the *Frankfurter Küche* devised by the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky ? though she herself was inspired by American proponents of the scientifically managed household, such as Lilian Gilbreth and Christine Frederick. The Frankfurt kitchen itself also turned out to be contested terrain, not least in Frankfurt itself, when user behaviour failed to measure up to the rational calculations of the designer/producers (chapter by Martina Heßler). The author of this chapter also gives a telling paragraph or two on residents? reasons for rejecting of electrical appliances: sometimes because of unsatisfactory performance, but also because of the sheer cost of electricity (p.176). Subsequently, on its transfer to Turkey, the modern European kitchen pitched Kemalist modernism against traditional gender roles - largely coincidentally, it was in Turkey that the Communist Schütte-Lihotzky herself found temporary refuge from the Nazis during 1938-1940 (contribution by Esra Ackan). In the Netherlands, kitchen manufacturers, with the input of user groups such as the Dutch Housewives Association and Women?s Advisory Groups on Housing, designed minimalist kitchens that were far removed from the ?gadget-filled? products of American ?hedonistic corporate modernism? (Liesbeth Bervoets). There is no doubting that the examples in this section effectively illuminate various gulfs between producer and user, donor and recipient, in the period of the collection; but Bervoets herself near the end of her discussion mentions that rising Dutch incomes led to US style mass-consumption from the 1960s. In the mind of this

social historian of technology, the question therefore arose whether we need a longer perspective to make a proper assessment of the transfer of American domestic technology to Europe.

While the second part offers a European ?counternarrative? to the American kitchen, the third ostensibly considers how the American kitchen was appropriated and adapted to European contexts, and purports to examine the complexities of technology transfer. In fact, there is some blurring of the boundary between the two middle sections, and some doubt about the fulfilment of the third section?s remit. The chapters by Karin Zachmann on the GDR and Kirsi Saarikanga on Finland reinforce the conclusion of the second part that the modern American kitchen was inappropriate to these national contexts, whether to the socialist ideology of the GDR, or to established traditions of Finnish housing. Even in his piece on the relatively high-tech British Ministry of Works kitchen installed in the post-war prefab, Julian Holder argues that what was properly British modernist design was often mistaken as American. Incidentally, like Liesbeth Bervoets in the previous section, Saarikanga briefly refers to the rapidly rising adoption of domestic appliances in Finland during the 1960s and 1970s.

In the fourth and final part, two papers by Ruth Oldenziel and Matthew Hilton in very different ways seek a wider perspective on the kitchen debate. Oldenziel?s chapter serves as skilful summing up and conclusion to the subject-matter of the volume. She easily debunks the American dream kitchen, and uncovers its main purpose as a marketing tool for US corporations looking to switch from wartime to peacetime production, and exploit European markets prepared for future profitable business by the injection of Marshall Aid. Hilton?s chapter, for all its intrinsic merits, is a little harder to place for this social historian of technology, coming to the topic with some expectations ?configured? by Ruth Schwartz Cowan?s classic *More Work for Mother*.(6) In other words, rather than extend beyond the tight focus of the collection on the Cold War kitchen to consumer politics in a later global context, it might have served the subject-matter better to conclude with a look ahead to the take-up of domestic appliances as wartime austerity lifted, and Europeans took a more American consumerist path. In these changed circumstances, it would surely be of interest to explore issues tantalisingly raised in the volume. Was the modern kitchen the ?gilded cage? that some feminists saw as women were domesticated anew on the men?s return from battle? Or in a service economy that increasingly recruited women as paid employees, did the appliances of sheer necessity begin to save some of the domestic labour promised by the hype, instead of creating ?more work for mother??

It would be unreasonable in view of its provenance in conference sessions and workshops, to expect a unified view on the relations between technology and society, despite the lead given by the two editors. Professors Oldenziel and Zachmann are, it seems, the only out-and-out technology specialists among the authors, the largest group being architectural by affiliation. The interdisciplinary composition of the authorship is a splendid thing in itself, and entirely appropriate given the chosen topic, but since ?technology? is given special emphasis, both in the title and the introduction, it seems reasonable to ask how much of the collection is really about technology.

To start with, the hoary question: What does ?technology? mean? If one follows the editorial lead, then the ?kitchen? in all its facets is by definition a technology, including layout and surface design (noteworthy in this respect is the preference of the Finns for the colour white rather than blue, which had Russian associations): consequently, the entire volume is about technology. The well-rehearsed problem with such a broad definition ? I don?t have the answer! ? is that it tends to reduce the explanatory power of the social construction of technology by blurring the boundaries between technology and society. Technology in the popular sense of hardware gets short shrift in many of the articles. There are exceptions, notably Karin Zachmann?s chapter on the GDR, which among other mechanical devices includes discussion of certain failed East German multi-purpose kitchen machines. Another exception is Irene Cieraad?s chapter on the late inclusion of General Motors? Kitchen of Tomorrow in a Dutch exhibition of 1957 on the atom. There is at last some detail offered on a kitchen exhibit, in a section titled ?Atom and Eve?, though the main thrust of the piece is the Netherlands? shifting attitudes to American nuclear technology. Shane Hamilton?s chapter on the Supermarket USA exhibit looks at technology in its widest sense of a technical megasystem, the emphasis here being the contrasting motivation of the US and Yugoslav sponsors: the one seeking extended markets, the other to encourage the collectivization of food production. This is story of failed aspirations, of

the inability of a transferred component of a technical system to conjure up the changes associated with that system in its entirety and its homeland.

The point here is not to argue for a narrow definition of technology, reducing it to machines or hardware. It is rather that in a collection on a contested technology that makes so much of its mechanical content, one might expect a bit more close description and analysis of the appliances. As it is, much of the discussion of the kitchen as a complex ensemble dwells on features that might be of rather more interest to my erstwhile colleagues on the *Journal of Design History* than to readers of *Technology and Culture*. It is at times difficult to avoid the conclusion that some of the contributors regard the mechanical content of the American kitchen as a little unworthy of critical, historical analysis. At any rate, many seem happy to echo Khrushchev?s ideologically-heavy disparagement of American domestic appliances, in his historic debate with Nixon, as ?gadgets?.

The historian of technology is likely to note that two programmatic approaches to the technology studies of recent times helped beget this stimulating and valuable collection. First, it adds to MIT Press?s prestigious and by now voluminous and wide-ranging ?Inside Technology? series, under the general editorship of Wiebe E Bijker, W Bernard Carlson and Trevor Pinch. Bijker and Pinch were the founders of the *social construction of technology* tradition that took off in the mid-1980s. The bugbear of social constructionists was ?technological determinism?: that is, grandiose claims or assumptions that technological innovations have acted as the main driver of historical progress.(7) Whether in their actual or presumed guises, technological determinists enjoined the view that social changes have their roots in the ultimately autonomous realms of science and technology. It was this supposed autonomy that social constructionism set out to refute: and indeed, it got right ?inside technology? to do so. For social constructionists science and technology are essentially social in nature. Any technological artefact or design is always the outcome of negotiations between the social groups that produced or used it. The finalizing or ?closure? a given technology results from the resolution of these groups? varying interests. Thus, the innovations that technological determinists privilege in their historical explanations are themselves the product of prior social change.

A contingent feature of social constructionism has been the aspiration to consider technology from the consumers? rather than the producers? perspective (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003) ? contingent, because one could, as perhaps some did in the early days, have a social constructionist view of technology that privileged powerful social actors, and portrayed the consumer as generally impotent and manipulated. The editors make it clear that the kitchen is ?ideal entry point? for this kind of analysis. This is laudable and often enlightening - but (to play devil?s advocate) might the project be tinged with optimism about consumer power to shape artefacts? The ambition to unmask technological determinism as an ideological construct intended to render the user/consumer uncritical of the controlling/manipulating agendas of producers is salutary; however, overplaying consumer power could have a similar masking function. Perhaps technology specialists need to encourage users to be more critical of the powerful sponsors of technology, rather than celebrate their unsuspected contributions (a rather old devil?s advocate here, it might be thought). To be fair, the editors recognize that the power of consumer representatives is very much a contingent feature of the politics of the kitchen in the period and space considered in the volume, and at times question whether supposed user representatives really do represent all users. As Oudshoorn and Pinch make clear, there has been much debate of late about the balance of power between producers and users in the shaping of artefacts, with fears again raised by the spectre of technological determinism. These are somewhat misplaced fears in the opinion of this reviewer, as the meaning of the term is thereby shifted to autonomous technology (one its premises) - in any case, shouldn?t autonomous technology be beyond the control of its producers, as well as its users?

One wonders to what extent the viability of the ?co-construction? model adopted by some of the contributors relies on the choice of suitably supportive examples. How well does it apply in other technological domains? One thinks of military technologies, large civil engineering projects, and so on. Even in this collection, which surely has homed in on a very fruitful technology, period and location for user-producer analysis, there are real doubts implicitly raised in Karin Zachmann?s chapter on the GDR as to whether ?co-

construction? can be applied when users have so little say in the production of artefacts ? and Professor Zachmann speaks with considerable authority, not just as a historian of technology, but also (I understand) as a citizen of the former GDR. In addition, one wonders if the user herself or himself can be a little romanticised, or perhaps better, ?socially constructed?. In the their very helpful review of recent thinking about user-producer relations, Oudshoorn and Pinch point out that the latter emphasis on the user is due in no small part to the efforts of feminist historians and sociologists of technology to counteract the writing of technological history about, by, and for men. Such users are in clearly need of rescue; but if the project is to assert the voluntary agency of the user against the force of American corporate power as embodied in the dream kitchen, what do we then say if they acquiesce in it? If we see this as a weak submission to the seductions of technology as corporations cleverly ?fan consumer desire?, is there not the risk of an ontological and moral double standard? Is there some beatification of the user and demonization of the producer implicit in the analysis? This is surely very often plausible, but is it always so? One thinks, for example, of well-intentioned segregation of pedestrians from potentially lethal modes of mechanized transport, and the subsequent exploitation of underpasses and walkways by muggers and rapists.

The second programmatic view on the history of technology associated with this volume is the European Science Foundation?s Tensions of Europe programme on technology and the making of 20th-century Europe. Its declared starting point is that economic, social, cultural and political histories have paid inadequate attention to technology, despite its ?pivotal? role in the making of contemporary Europe. This aspiration is far removed from the early days of social constructionism, and its definitive attack on the quarry of technological determinism? Which programme does this collection under serve better? The choice of subject-matter and period clearly lends itself to the social constructionism approach. It was a time when technological hubris reigned, and producers could readily be identified as pushing economic and political interests, often at odds with recipient cultural values. There was also a clear gulf between donor aspirations and those of many European users. The general message of the collection is that the iconic American dream kitchen was hype. Its relatively affluent homeland failed to adopt it, and it was even less likely to be affordable, let alone culturally acceptable, in the context of a war-ravaged and ideologically divided Europe ? and even here, both sides arguably had more common economic and social ground than they had with their transatlantic creditor. But how much of this scenario of technological weakness and cultural power was a question of timing? As argued above, a much longer historical perspective is surely needed to decide just how much of the analysis in this collection serves a full assessment of the transfer of this set of technologies.

For practitioners of the social history of technology, rather than its sociology ? or so it seems to this journeyman looking back on a couple decades of collective teaching of the subject to more than ten thousand Open University students ? there seems in retrospect to have been a professional downside to the intellectual hegemony of the social shaping or social construction of technology. (I speak here as the last, soon-to-depart teacher of the history of technology at the Open University, whose senior policymakers have taken the view that the history of science, technology and medicine ? unlike the history of art, music, literature and religion ? is insufficiently distinct from mainstream history to justify its separate existence). It is the underlying feeling that to emphasize the importance of technological innovation in the course of human history would appear decidedly uncool to specialists in technology studies. I suggest that this inherently modest, self-critical stance has hardly helped to advance the cause of the history of technology in Britain, which already had a rather low profile with its traditional orientation to internalist accounts of hardware, industrial archaeology and the engineering professions. It would be silly to blame this on the pioneers of social constructionism, who have done so much to lift the credibility of technology studies at a time of theoretical ferment in history and the social sciences. That said, if historians of technology themselves have suspected as tainted with technological determinism *almost any* suggestion that fundamental social and historical change might be causally linked to technological innovations, why should social, urban and other historians give them more than the customary cursory attention?

In my view, social historians of technology need to learn from the practical work and theoretical insights of the sociology of technology, and then revisit traditional technological-determinist territory. We need to transcend the crudities both of technological determinism, and of wholesale accusations of technological

determinism, and also to go beyond a preoccupation with the social relations of technology. To me, the notion of the ?mutual shaping? of technology and society could help resolve the Hegelian thesis of technological determinism and the antithesis of social constructionism. Though in sore need of honing, it could well turn out to be a sharper tool of analysis than the prevailing multi-factorial contextualization. It could bring into the mix the constraints and possibilities that are surely inherent in the material reality of any technology, as well as the scripts of its designers. ?Co-construction? goes some considerable way towards this goal, though the focus appears to remain on the artefact itself, rather than on its social consequences and historical significance. The concept of the ?mutual shaping? of science, technology and society is wider than the co-construction of artefacts, and points to a synthesis in which science and technology are recognized as being socially shaped, but would in their turn be given their due weight in explanations of subsequent social change. The end-point could be an enriched account of the reciprocal and mutually reinforcing historical relationships between science, technology and social and historical change.

Notes

1. L. Winner, ?Do artifacts have politics??, *Daedalus*, 109 (1980), 121?36.Back to (1)
2. R. S. Cowan, ?The consumption junction: a proposal for research strategies in the sociology of technology?, in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, ed. W. E. Bijker, T. P. Hughes and T. Pinch (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 261?80.Back to (2)
3. *How Users Matter: the Co-construction of Users and Technology*, ed. N. Oudshoorn and T. Pinch (Cambridge, MA, 2003).Back to (3)
4. M. Akrich, ?The de-scription of technical objects?, in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. W. E. Bijker and J. Law (Cambridge, MA), pp. 205?44.Back to (4)
5. S. Woolgar ?Configuring the user: the case of usability trials?, in *A Sociology of Monsters: essays on power, technology and domination*, ed. J. Law (London, 1991), pp. 57?99.Back to (5)
6. R. S. Cowan, *More Work for Mother: the Ironies of Household Consumption from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, NY, 1983).Back to (6)
7. *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, ed. M. R. Smith and L. Marx (Cambridge, MA, 1994); L. A. White, *The Evolution of Culture: the Development of Civilization to the Fall of Rome* (New York, NY, 1959).Back to (7)

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