Review of 'Technology, Culture, Family: Influences on Home Life'. Author: Elizabeth B. Silva

Reviewed by

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PUBLICATION DETAILS

REVIEW

Elizabeth B. Silva is a well-known and respected Professor of Sociology at the Open University, UK. She is an accomplished and prolific author in the field of technology, households, family, gender and everyday life concerns. Her previous work *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu's Legacy: Settling accounts and developing alternatives* is derived from the **Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion** project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2003-2006).

Technology, Family, Culture is based on archival research of technology and gender relations since the early twentieth century (ESRC funded 1996) and an ethnographic study of uses of household technologies (ESRC funded 1998-2000 OU/Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) funded).

Silva's work focuses on the mundane and ordinary home setting. She wishes to bring the stillness of the home and family life into focus and to feature it more prominently in academic research. She argues technological change and family relations have been overlooked and taken for granted for too long. Her work is timely and sensitive to the shaping effects of technology in the everyday setting of the home and personal routines and habits.

The key aim of the book was the production of knowledge about technologies in family life drawn from Silva's extensive body of academic work. The personal histories and testimonies of the individuals reflect the technological materiality of the contemporary world. Our everyday actions and interactions with technologies have become so embedded and invisible that they have been taken for granted. Silverstone et al (1992) and Berker et al (2005) frame this 'taming' of technologies as Domestication, and while these authors have particularly focused on media technologies, the concept can be applied in a more general sense. In this book, a broad sociological questioning of ordinary life and the role technology plays were brought together both theoretically and empirically.

Silva engaged both Bourdieu (in particular his framing of social hierarchies in a non flat world/cultural taste/and social shaping) & Latour (actor network theory with the focus on family) in a wider social theoretical context of the home and family and the realm of the feminine. Thus, Silva creates a research framework that posits technology as crucial resource for contemporary living and subjects that relationship to a critical analysis of how the use, value and meaning of technology actively makes, acts and transforms the social world around us. Silva particularly emphasises the active operation of cultural and technological fields in the definition of contemporary materiality of the household as site of academic research.

The methodological approach here is key to opening up the rich complexities of life history narratives. Silva introduces and engages us with narratives of the private realms of life trajectories incorporating the choices and experience of people living together. Her work features narratives of biographical trajectories and timelines, stories of the family, daily routines of normal days, accounts of activities and roles of technologies in the home and how the values and morals of the household are shaped.

Each chapter is given over to the exploration of Silva's three main areas of investigation: (1) the significance of ordinary home experiences, (2) the relation between the material and the social, and (3) the resources involved in relationality.

Chapter 1, *Relations,* is a theoretical review of the concepts of materiality, subjectivity and everyday cultures featuring the work and writings of feminist academics from various fields and philosophers of science. Here the work of Bourdieu and Latour is critically discussed.

In Chapter 2, *Homes and Selves*, we are introduced to empirical work featuring a number of households and the configuration of the technological environment. The context of home, technology and social change underpins the chapter.

Chapter 3, *Time*, features people's routine practices and relative uses of time. Silva contends that relative uses of time reveal the interrelation of both subjective and materially informed bases of social life.

Chapter 4, *Cooking,* applies the theoretical approach Actor Network Theory (ANT) to the process of cooking and the preparation of meals. Here Silva discusses the implication of gender roles and technology in social processes. She employs Scott's four levels of analysis - these are (1) 'culturally available

symbols that evoke multiple (and often contradictory) presentations'; (2) 'normative concepts' that fix the dominant meanings of such symbols; (3) institutional complexes in which these are articulated; and (4) ways in which the relevant symbols, norms and institutions are implicated in the construction of subjective gender identities (Scott , 1988:42-4) - combined with an ANT approach to trace the technological biographies of the ordinary family cooker and microwave. The chapter is informed and illustrated using empirical evidence from a study of cooking and use of appliances.

Chapter 5, *Cleaning,* features social histories and insightful empirical evidence to peek behind the statistics and veneer of traditional roles in the activities of house cleaning. The lack of scholarly and academic knowledge about contemporary domestic cleaning practices is of concern here especially in relation to technological developments. Silva utilises contemporary cleaning practices to open up and reveal inequalities between different social groups and to challenge commonly held assumptions about the transformative powers of technologies in everyday life practices. She uses case study material to challenge whether technologies are used to save time or do they in fact use up more of our time, do technologies sustain or change traditional roles, and how the role and the functional capacities of the machine shifts according to one's cultural capital.

In Chapter 6, *Consuming and Caring*, Silva employs Bourdieu's threefold characterisation of capital (economic, social and cultural), ANT scripts and the concept of habitus to introduce and inform the concept of emotional capital - the capacity to connect involving acts, sentiments and intentions.

Chapter 7, *Domestic Dilemmas*, contains a fascinating insight into the private lives of her respondents in relation to a number of domestic dilemma vignettes. The hypothetical vignettes were read out to the research participants and their responses and opinions were invited on a range of moral and conflict scenarios. For example, the daily conflict about the unequal share of housework or use of shared spaces.

In Chapter 8, *Sexual Lives*, technology and people's sexual lives are the central concern. Silva traces how the reproductive technologies of IVF and the use of communication technologies to sustain a husband's S&M fetish provides the source of intense emotional fractures and conflicts in the lives of ordinary people.

The strength of this book lies in its ability to unpeel the metaphorical onion of the home and strip it back to uncover the complexity of the functions and routines of the home which have been far too long taken for granted. Silva achieves this and has carefully collected a wealth of empirical domestic life biographies in each of the book's chapters.

The book is heavily situated as a sociological text and, as such, only briefly mentions the large amount of work that has been done in the field of technology and everyday life, in particular the Domestication of Technologies. Silverstone and Hirsch's (1992) seminal work of 'Consuming Technologies' is referred to, but a deeper investigation of the roots and later projects and studies by EMTEL (European Media, Technology and Everyday Life Network) researchers would

have strengthened the book. The concept of Domestication, a key concept from EMTEL, its extrapolations and critiques were recently collected in a book by Berker et al (2005).

I would have found this book to be an extremely valuable resource in my doctoral research while researching the meaning of technology in everyday life in Ireland in the early 2000s. As a lecturer and researcher in the field of new technologies in everyday life, such a collection of rich qualitative case studies provides a valuable teaching resource especially for those researching issues surrounding the role of technology in everyday life and the situated context of the home. The book is essential reading for students and researchers in the field of feminist studies, sociology and cultural studies, anthropology and technology and science studies (particularly to those studying uses, audiences and the social shaping of technology in everyday life). The book will complement and strengthen existing theoretical contributions through its empirical material and sound rationalising. The book will serve those looking for rich descriptions of the experiences of household interactions (with and without technology).

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