

Elizabeth B. Silva

Technology, Culture, Family. Influences on Home Life
New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 227

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Elizabeth B. Silva examines how changes in both technologies and family life form part of processes of socio-cultural change. The trilogy in the title – technology, culture, family – sounded as a promising one, but the risk to read a rearrangement of known concepts was real. My hope was to find an attractive approach to technological transformation, able to match Gender Studies and Studies of Science and Technology analysing the connections between objects, bodies and mundane practices evoked in the title.

Silva's book is articulated in eight chapters based on an archival research of technology and gender relations since the early twentieth century, and an ethnographic study of uses of household technologies.

In the Introduction, the author sheds light on her lines of argument that generate three main areas of investigation: (1) the significance of ordinary home experiences; (2) the relation between the material and the social; (3) the resources involved in relationality. The development of these arguments is pursued through a “conversation” between the empirical material of UK contemporary home life and the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour together with some of their critics. This is a first interesting contribute for readers, mainly because – as Silva recognises – personal and relational matters in home contexts are not areas of interest to Bourdieu and Latour. Yet – Silva continues – their ideas are productive as they provide a framework for exploring the connections between the material and the social, and for directing attention to how ordinary practices connect and constitute the social world. From Bourdieu's work she takes the notion of practice. To capture “practice” empirically, Silva uses Latour's approach, in particular regarding a view of the social world embedded in technologies and in our relations with them.

It is exactly in Chapter 1 that Silva introduces the issues of materiality and the subjective of everyday cultures and family practices. She discusses the relations between things and people showing connections between Latourian and Bourdieusian thinking. In Silva's words, these approaches share the desire to make visible what is hard to pin down: those relationships that concern complex, messy, hidden and heterogeneous realities. However, the key concepts and frameworks provided by Bourdieu and Latour need to be modified when they are used to focus on families. For this reason, Silva anchors to Feminist perspective her review of the two French academics, embracing the critique to Bourdieu's deterministic concept of habitus and the scant attention paid by Latourian actor-

network theory (ANT) to gendering and empowering of technological development.

In Chapter 2 Silva considers the materiality of homes and the identity processes of individuals in relationality, and addresses claims about epochal social changes related to technological transformations. She suggests a combination of statistics, descriptions and case studies as a productive way of accounting for refined processes of change where – echoing feminist analyses – the economic, political and social changes at large are seen to “impact” upon the family. Counteracting such position she emphasises the interdependence and circularity of the public and private spheres. Silva refines Bourdieu’s concepts of practice and the habitus endorsing the claim that individual practices can be a lens for seeing what becomes invisible within collective practice. This emphasis on Bourdieu’s approach moves the discussion of Latour’s insights to the background.

The issue of social and technological change is further pursued in Chapter 3, where Silva outlines the theoretical concerns and findings of “classic” studies on household technologies, mostly centred on the use of women’s time in their homes. She takes into account also the more recent research on gendered uses of time, accounting for cultural diversity and contemporary changes in the ways that lives are lived in the home. I have appreciated Silva’s discussion about “time” in terms of the most routine and material aspects (like body maintenance or emotional nurturing) that happen over time and also happen all the time. This concern takes Silva’s work away from the blindness of grand theories where routines matter though remaining somewhat abstract.

The ways in which household technologies are constructed in relation to certain dispositions and practices related to normative expectations of gendered everyday life in the home are explored in Chapter 4 in relation to cooking. I believe that this part of the book is quite dense of relevant references and concepts. While Silva shares the view espoused by ANT of technology as doing, not as being, she also follows a perspective which regards gender as “doing”, originally defined as such by West and Zimmerman (1987). In Silva’s book this perspective incorporates a notion of practices through which contexts for changing gender subjectivities are captured by examining relationships between technology and users over time. This involves seeing how gender “appears”, or how gender is performed, in cooking practices.

In Chapter 5, practices of cleaning are investigated regarding the change over time in the instruments available for laundering and dish-washing. This analysis echoes extraordinarily the “visible and invisible work” discussed in Star and Strauss’ (1999) article. At the beginning of this chapter Silva maintains that cleaning has involved large amounts of the mundane work of women, much of it invisible in the home and also to scholars. From my viewpoint there is a “noisy” continuum between the “shadow work” in Star and Strauss’s article and their analysis of design implications, and the “invisible work” in Silva’s book and their investiga-

tion into industrial policies. This cross reference – that is not mentioned – could work as starting point for a further analysis of what counts as work from a Feminist-STS perspective.

Centred on a discussion of consuming and caring, Chapter 6 addresses questions of which resources are felt to be necessary for everyday domestic life and where these can be drawn from. Silva considers not only time and money as core resources, but also personal connections, emotional states and abilities. She mentions the distinction between care as practice, and care as disposition, which is also constitutive of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. However, she stresses his limitation in understanding the contemporary home and the domestic where emotional aspects of social actions matter. Practices and resources for consuming and caring shape the material environment mutually and acts as a sort of "script for action" in the terms developed by ANT. Silva's reasoning outlines this environment as the set where social positioning takes place. Gender imbalance becomes clear in consumption practices, which are in narratives and performances of selves linked to differential access to goods.

Positioning is evoked at the beginning of Chapter 7 as it involves domestic dilemmas, that is classification and judgements about how to act morally. Silva's understanding of morality points firmly towards practices and concrete actions – as her ethnographic study testifies - in line with the feminist literature on gendered ethics. She considers "morality" as an activity grounded in the daily experiences and moral problems of real people in their everyday lives, contesting Latour's loose and flat conception of the social and the determining aspects of Bourdieu's ontology.

Finally, Chapter 8 focuses on sexual lives in our technologically-drenched everyday culture. Silva sheds light on ordinary sexual practices as invisible within a politics of pleasure that gives primacy to danger and transgression. This operation connects the final chapter to the first where she noted that only recently the researchers have begun to explore the processes of unravelling the taken-for-granted by applying more sophisticated methods of "defamiliarisation". It is interesting how Silva uses the concepts of "noisy" and "muted" sexuality aimed at capturing the different registers in the politics of pleasure and that are referred – in this chapter – to new reproductive technologies and new communication technologies. Reproductive technologies have contributed to create new conceptions of relationships in the procreative sense as in the case where homosexual "reproduction" takes place. Communication technologies have enabled the wide circulation of intimate acts in public spaces.

I think that this work of Elizabeth B. Silva shares with *Tecnoscienza* readers and STS audience the effort to incorporate the material world of technology into the study of social change, particularly at the micro level of individuals, ordinary life and human interdependence. She recognises this contribution of Studies of Science and Technology. Yet, in my opinion Silva joins with Feminist STS in interrogating "the conceptual and empirical grounds of the collapsing but still potent boundary between

those most foundational categories of science and technology, that is, nature and culture” (Suchman 2008, 142). In conclusion, this book could be an inspiring reading mainly for researchers interested to further understanding of the multidimensional interplay between technology and culture.

References

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Roberto Abadie

The Professional Guinea Pig. Big Pharma and the Risky World of Human Subject

Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 184

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They call it the new economy, the informational economy. And the other side of this informational economy is the mild *torture* economy [...] (Spam, cit. in Abadie 2010, 2).

The book written by Roberto Abadie Ph.D (Graduate Center, CUNY) starts with the reflection above and presents the results of an ethnography of voluntary participation processes by human research subjects in phases I (screening for drug's safety), II and III (screening for drug's efficacy) of drug trials.

The quotation recalls the utterance of Spam, a resident in West Philadelphia and “professional guinea pig”, which was an informant during the research conducted by Abadie. Spam is one of the many healthy human subjects that, for a long time, have lent his own body for clinical pharmacological trials. Spam's words are evocative, and they have led the book's author through a clear and effective itinerary of research to dis-