

### **Cold War Politics of the Kitchen – Americanization, Technological Transfer, and European Consumer Society in the Twentieth Century**

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On the first weekend of July 2005, more than twenty scholars from across Europe and the United States gathered at the Kerschensteiner Kolleg in the Deutsches Museum in Munich for a conference on the 'Cold War Politics of the Kitchen – Americanization, Technological Transfer, and European Consumer Society in the Twentieth Century.' In the course of the conference, every term of its title – 'the Cold War,' 'the kitchen,' 'Americanization,' 'technology,' 'consumption'—came under scrutiny, as participants worked to develop a model for addressing of the Cold War that would encompass a wide spectrum of academic fields and theoretical approaches. The question uniting all of those present was how to understand the economic, political, and symbolic function of the kitchen throughout the Cold War years. Previous historical research has revealed multiple ways in which kitchens were tied to the struggle between consumer capitalism and state socialism, but this fact has never been considered as a separate topic of analysis. This gathering was meant to be a first step in formulating a model for approaching this fascinating and little-explored intersection between international politics and the heart of the domestic sphere, the kitchen. The impressive diversity of the participants, covering a range of more than 10 nations, and a rich assortment of disciplines, from political science to the history of technology, anthropology, architectural studies and art history, and gender studies, resulted in a stimulating environment for exchange and critique, if, as ever, ultimately more questions were posed than were answered.

The opening comments of conference organizers Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann established the goals of the conference. Zachmann singled out technology, tracing the shifts in cultural and political meanings of the kitchen in terms of developments in private and industrial technology, while Oldenziel problematized traditional understandings of the term 'consumption.' Presenting a critique that was to be relevant throughout the week-

end, Oldenziel emphasized the multiple fields of consumption, in particular singling out the contrast between individual and collective consumption, between state and private consumption, a distinction that in the context of the Cold War has particular ideological significance. For both organizers, the meaning of America as nation and as abstraction was central to the development of postwar Europe in general, and in particular for shifts in kitchen design and use. In general, the mediation between production and consumption within various forms of capitalism and socialism was an overall topic of the workshop. In general the organizers encouraged the participants to open up their definitions of this relationship, and to search for the multiple actors, places and forms of this mediation.

Of course, one of the central concerns of the conference was to more critically engage with the impact of the Cold War on the domestic sphere, and of course vice versa, and in that vein, several papers engaged directly with the theoretical and historical meaning of the kitchen during the Cold War. Focusing on the event that most famously highlighted this relationship, the 1959 Kitchen Debates in Moscow between Richard Nixon and Nikita Krushchev, Christina Corbone analyzed the architecture and spatial politics that lay behind this famous intersection of public and private sphere. Greg Castillo's paper (unfortunately Castillo himself was not able to personally attend the conference) was a provocative and wide-reaching analysis of the shifting ideological meaning of the kitchen from 1945-1989, examining the international clash between the United States and the Soviet Union as it was realized in the landscape of postwar divided Germany. By linking the kitchen intimately with the sphere of private consumption, the United States spent an enormous amount of energy persuading the West Germans of the benefits of the American Fat Kitchen, a project that proved central to the 'Americanization' of postwar West Germany. Susan Reid's discussion of the mythology of the happy Soviet housewife offered a provocative complement to Castillo's story of the 'fat kitchen.' Focusing on Soviet readings of the kitchen as a space of Cold War conflict, Reid explored both state and individual responses to the Fat Kitchen, illustrating the significance of the 'housewife' for Soviet politics.

These larger scale discussions of the symbolic function of the space of the kitchen were balanced

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by several presentations that focused on the concrete design and construction of the private kitchen in various countries and time periods. Functioning as a reference point for almost all of the papers, the Frankfurter Kitchen, designed in the twenties by the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, was the topic of Martina Heßler's contribution. This remarkably influential inter-war kitchen model, emblematic for the modern desire to rationalize housework and redefine the role of women in society, was adapted and modified in strikingly different ways in various countries during the Cold War. Art Historian Paulo Scrivano focused on shifts in the model of the ideal Italian kitchen in postwar Italy. By referencing both America and old Italian traditions, domestic architects sought to negotiate a space for national Italian-ness while simultaneously aligning their country with the modern consumerism of the United States. Similarly attempting to craft a viable national identity against the backdrop of Soviet-American tensions, Finland occupied a unique place between 'East' and 'West.' As Kirsi Saarikangas explored in her paper, the shifting trend toward functionalism in kitchen design from the 1920's to the 1950's expose changing ideas of the relationship between public and private, and the appropriate role of women in Finnish society. Karin Zachmann's contribution focused on the kitchen as a site of negotiation between women citizens and the East German state, asking how this nationalized economy tried to resolve the contradiction between centralized production decisions and individual consumption decisions. Her project focused on the short-lived but influential Central Working Group on Household Technology, created as a way for 'normal women' to have an influence on the design of kitchen projects, illustrating that in the socialist GDR 'mechanization of the home had become an issue of essential social and political importance.' Ultimately the group failed, however, because it modeled consumer behavior in terms of the measurable use-value of products, rather than acknowledging them as signs imbued with cultural meaning.

Not only the space of the kitchen, but the objects within it, were the subject of several presentations. For example, Lavinia Popica's interview-based discussion of Romania explored the ways in which individual kitchen appliances and designs were assigned specifically American meanings, ultimately playing a role in structuring a Romanian sense of having a special link to the United States.

Katherine Pence's detailed exploration of the rhetorical meaning of the refrigerator in East and West Germany during the 1950s uses the 'Cold War Icebox' as both a symbol and a very real weapon of conflict between the two halves of Germany. Focusing specifically on the ways in which both sides of the ideological battle constructed a gendered model of consumption, Pence showed how the purchase of a fridge helped the FRG 'to make the transition into the social market economy's vision of modern consumer culture.' Providing a welcome shift in the conference from the technological to the biological aspect of consumption, Justyna Jaworska discussed the political and highly divisive subject of food in the popular Polish magazine *Przekroj*. Jaworska's paper argues that writings about food provided a vital space of political critique and social satire. As she put it, 'cooking, better than any subject, depicts the dream of adding some taste to a bland life in post-war Poland.'

While the majority of the papers focused on the kitchen as a concrete space of tools, technology, and architectural design, the psychological, political and cultural significance of the kitchen and domestic space was central to some of the papers as well. With a powerful theoretical model of the cultural ramifications of the kitchen in Bulgaria, Rayna Gavrilova argued that the shared kitchens of communal apartments during Communism was central to crafting an unhealthy and subservient relationship between the populace and the state. Focusing on a 1957 kitchen display included in a larger Dutch exhibition on the peaceful use of atomic energy, Irene Cieraad's case study showed the ways in which, at least in the Netherlands, debates over nuclear energy were brought into the domestic sphere. Despite initial popular enthusiasm for the 'kitchen of tomorrow,' shifts in national politics and increased Cold War tensions ultimately led the women in the Netherlands to adopt a kitchen more in tune with their specific desires and political aspirations. In Britain, families experienced state-imposed housing in the postwar years very differently. Julian Holder discovered a surprising level of satisfaction with postwar prefabricated housing amongst housewives, something that he attributed to their association of this style of temporary housing with the United States.

The first and last papers of the conference, though very different in structure and content, both revolved around the use of the Cold War as a theoretical framework for historical analysis. The first

paper, Joy Parr's commentary on the contemporary relevance of Ruth Schwartz Cohen's groundbreaking *More Work for Mother*, was also one of the few that explicitly addressed the category of gender as a field of analysis. Cohen's book, which revolutionized the field of the history of technology by tracing the actual impact of household technology development on the lives of women, was however embedded in the Cold War context within which it was written. Parr called for a reassessment of the overdetermined binary categories of the USA and the Soviet Union, and a more critical analysis of the ideology behind Cohen's ideal of 'America.' On the other hand, the final paper of the weekend, Matthew Hilton's essay on the global development of consumer protection, set out to challenge the primacy of this particular narrative of the twentieth century. As Hilton put it, 'the Cold War narrative is turned on its head when one asks questions not so much as to how different political regimes spoke for the consumers, but how consumers spoke for themselves.' Although the participants were not all convinced by Hilton's desire to shift focus away from the chronological framework of the Cold War and towards longer global trends, the final round-table discussion picked up this discussion. Ultimately, while the Cold War seemed too crucial for our discussion to abandon, there was a general consensus that our vocabulary should be dealt with more critically. In particular, the term 'America' evoked a great deal of debate, the group finally settling on 'Amerika' in order to reference the basic fictionality of this construction in Cold War European development.

In conclusion, all participants agreed that this was a stimulating and diverse collection of papers, which as a group brought up many issues that demand further attention, including: the location of the kitchen between public and private spheres; the multiple meaning of America in the postwar years; the role of international exhibitions in creating the desire to consume; the use of architecture and technology as propaganda; and the unstable location of the kitchen between future-oriented technology and the nostalgic intimacy of family tradition. In general, larger theoretical questions received less attention than a comparative discussion of the multiple narratives presented over the course of the weekend. In addition, questions were raised about the geographic and chronological boundaries of the presentations. Neither Asia, South America, nor Africa was considered in the papers, and they

primarily focused on the fifties and sixties. Future conferences could potentially address these limitations. On the whole, however, this was a remarkably successful conference, one of the first to seriously consider an important and little-discussed aspect of Cold War history.

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