



“Summary of article by Juliet Schor: Overwork in the Household” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 333-336

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The chronic level of overwork that plague many American households is not merely a manifestation of our wage-paying jobs: we have typically spent nearly as much time working in the home as we have outside of it. Women bear the brunt of this housework. Although the long hours worked by housewives have a variety of causes, the underlying reason is fundamentally an economic one: the low cost of housewives' labor.

By looking at domestic labor in economic terms we can better see the economic structures that determine how household work is done. The household has traditionally been outside of the purview of economics, and domestic activity, because it does not generate income, is not included in the economic category of labor. The most convincing argument that the American household is really an economic institution, and that work done there is economic activity, is provided by the finding that, as the paid employment of women grows, more and more household services are purchased in the market.

CONSTANCY OF HOUSEWIVES' HOURS OF WORK AND THE UPGRADING OF STANDARDS

Despite the transformations of the twentieth century, one thing remained constant for decades: the amount of work done by the American housewife who does not have another job (outside of the home). The average number of hours worked per week stayed somewhat above from the beginning of the twentieth century. The odd thing about this constancy of hours is that it coincides with a revolution in household technologies. The amount of capital equipment in the home has risen dramatically, each innovation having the potential to save countless hours of labor, yet none of them did (except for the microwave oven, a relatively recent invention). The use of some appliances, such as freezers and washing machines, actually appears to have increased the amount of time dedicated to housework. An important proximate cause (though it is not the underlying reason) for the constancy of overall household work is that standards rose in step with technological sophistication.

The culture of cleanliness had no place in Colonial America because there were other, far more economically valuable uses for women's labor. However, with growing prosperity many women had more time to devote to housekeeping, and, as they did, higher standards of cleanliness emerged. As housewives achieved easier access to basic necessities, which were increasingly produced outside of the home, they put more effort into expressing values such as nutrition and aesthetics. All of these trends were supported and encouraged by a new class of homemaking

and childrearing experts and reformers, as well, of course, as by the corporations that had household products to sell.

The trend to "more and better" included all household activities, but the area where the upgrading was the most dramatic was in the care of children. Two or three centuries ago, before the social construction of modern conceptions of childrearing and motherhood, parent-child relationships appear to have been much less emotional, partly due to the high probability that children might not survive. Additionally, time for mothering was for many an unaffordable luxury. Attitudes changed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; by the twentieth century ("the century of the child"), increased affection and attention contributed to child survival (and, presumably, welfare), but with it came an immense time burden for mothers.

The Parkinson's Law of housework predicts that "work expands to fill the time available for its completion." Accordingly, "As the market economy produced low-cost versions of what women had made at home, they transferred their labor to other tasks... The most important explanation for the operation of Parkinson's Law in housework was the increasing isolation of the housewife from the market economy and the resulting devaluation of her time in comparison to what she could be earning in market work" [94] (the opportunity cost of her labor). The elimination of alternative uses for a housewife's time artificially deflated the value of her labor.

In addition to family responsibilities at home, outright legal prohibitions such as hiring restrictions, outright discrimination, job segregation, and social and cultural mores effectively excluded many housewives from the market. Possibilities for earning income inside the home were disappearing at the same time as the prosperity of the early 20th century made it possible for more and more families to afford a housewife. It became a status symbol to have a wife who "didn't work."

Even without the possibility of earning income, household work does have an opportunity cost: the leisure time of housewives. However, this possibility appears to have been neutralized by a combination of factors, including the power of the work ethic, the fact that husbands desire the free services that their wives' labor provide, and the sensitivity of women to the "fairness" requirement that their workload should be comparable to their husbands'.

THE PERPETUATION OF DOMESTIC INEFFICIENCY

The valuable products of the twentieth century housewife -- well-cared-for homes and children -- could have been achieved more efficiently. Many efficient technologies were ignored, discarded, or underdeveloped because the undervaluation of housewife labor created a strong bias against them. Some household services, such as the basic production of foodstuffs, woven materials and clothing, were taken on by the market. However, the complete socialization, commercialization, and professionalization of other household services such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, and child care, were never realized despite a turn of the century movement advocating communalization or commercialization.

There are several explanations for why this movement failed: businesses preferred the existing system; men preferred individual attention from their wives; and Americans put a high value on

privacy and family autonomy. Nevertheless, none of these explanations address the underlying economic issue:

"If the 'price' of each hour of domestic labor had been higher, families would have 'bought' less of it, and standards and services would not have escalated nearly as much. But discrimination and social mores prevented the true opportunity cost of women's labor at home from being taken into account." [96]

HOUSEWORK TODAY AND TOMORROW

Estimates of working hours indicate that things have started to change, especially for young people. Women are marrying later, unmarried earlier, having fewer children, and working outside the home more often. "Employed women do about two-thirds as much housework and child care as their unemployed sisters.... The processes that raised hours are now operating in reverse: standards are falling, and the range of household services [provided by the housewife] is contracting. The culture of cleanliness is in abeyance." [103] Women still do about twice as much housework as men, but men's contributions are increasing. This reflects a shift in attitudes and values for both men and women. However, the quality and variety of market substitutes for domestic services still lags, especially in a price range that is affordable for most Americans.