MORE WORK
FOR MOTHER

The Ironies of Household
Technology from the Open Hearth
to the Microwave

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Basic Books, Inc., Publishers
New York
For

Betty Schwartz

and

Louis E. Schwartz

with love
Contents

PICTURE ESSAYS ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS x

Chapter 1
An Introduction: Housework and Its Tools 3

Chapter 2
Housewifery: Household Work and Household Tools under Pre-Industrial Conditions 16

Housewifery and the Doctrine of Separate Spheres 18
Household Tools and Household Work 20
The Household Division of Labor 26
The Household and the Market Economy 31
Conclusion 37

Chapter 3
The Invention of Housework: The Early Stages of Industrialization 40

Milling Flour and Making Bread 46
The Evolution of the Stove 53
More Chores for Women, Fewer for Men 63

Chapter 4
Twentieth-Century Changes in Household Technology 69

The Shift from Production to Consumption 71
THE FOOD SYSTEM 71
THE CLOTHING SYSTEM 73
THE HEALTH-CARE SYSTEM 75
CONCLUSION 77

A Shift in the Other Direction: Transportation 79
The Household Utility Systems: Water 85
The Household Utility Systems: Gas, Electricity, and Oil 89
Conclusion 99
Contents

Chapter 5
The Roads Not Taken: Alternative Social and Technical Approaches to Housework
Commercial Enterprises 103
   THE COMMERCIAL LAUNDRY 105
   THE BOARDING HOUSE AND THE APARTMENT HOTEL 108
   THE FAILURE OF COMMERCIAL ALTERNATIVES 109
Cooperative Enterprises 111
   The Domestic Servant 119
Failed Machines 127
   THE REFRIGERATOR: GAS VERSUS ELECTRIC 128
   THE PROFIT MOTIVE AND THE ALTERNATIVE MACHINE 143
Conclusion 145

Chapter 6
Household Technology and Household Work between 1900 and 1940
The Golden Years (1900–1920) 154
   MATERIAL CONDITIONS FOR THOSE WHO LIVED COMFORTABLY 154
   MATERIAL CONDITIONS FOR THOSE WHO WERE STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET 160
Between the World Wars (1920–1940) 172
   MATERIAL CONDITIONS FOR THOSE WHO WERE STILL LIVING COMFORTABLY 173
   MATERIAL CONDITIONS FOR THOSE WHO WERE STILL STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET 181
Conclusion 190

Chapter 7
The Postwar Years
The Diffusion of Affluence: The Changing Face of Poverty 193
The Diffusion of Amenities and Appliances 195
Homogenizing Housework 196
The "Working" Mother 201
   WOMAN'S "PLACE" 203
   THE "BACKWARD SEARCH FOR FEMININITY" 205
   THE ROLE OF THE MACHINE 208
Conclusion 210

Postscript: Less Work for Mother 217

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAYS 220
NOTES 234
INDEX 250

Picture Essays

From Housewifery to Housework following page 46
The Transportation System following page 82
Washday following page 150
The Rich and the Poor following page 194
Chapter 1

An Introduction:
Housework and Its Tools

INDUSTRIALIZATION transformed every American household sometime between 1860 and 1960. For some families, this transition occurred very slowly: each generation lived in homes that were just a bit “more modern” than the generation immediately before it, and the working lives of the members of each adjacent generation were not so profoundly different as to leave unbridgeable communication gaps between them. For other families, the transition was more rapid; in these families, as the result of immigration or urbanization or sudden affluence, one generation of people may have been living and working in conditions that would have been familiar in the Middle Ages, and the very next generation may have been completely modernized— inhabitants, as it were, of a totally different world. Yet despite these differences in pacing, if we consider the broad spectrum of American households, from rich to poor, from the most urban to the most rural, a simple generalization can describe what hap-
pened in the century that was ushered in by the Civil War: before 1860 almost all families did their household work in a manner that their forebears could have imitated—to wit, in a pre-industrial mode; after 1960 there were just a few families (and those either because they were very poor or very isolated or ideologically committed to agrarianism) who were not living in industrialized homes and pursuing industrialized forms of labor within them.

Now usually, when we think of the word industrialization, we think in terms not of homes but of factories and assembly lines and railroads and smokestacks. In our textbooks of history and economics and sociology, the terms industrialization and home are usually connected by the word impact, and we are usually asked to consider what happened when one term (industrialization) caused some significant economic process (productive work or the manufacture of goods for sale in the marketplace) to be removed from the domain of the other term (home). Implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) we are given the impression that industrialization occurred outside the four walls of home. The popular imagination goes one step farther; industrialization is conceived as being not just outside the home but virtually in opposition to it. Homes are idealized as the places to which we would like to retreat when the world of industrialization becomes too grim to bear; home is where the “heart” is; industry is where “dogs are eating dogs” and “only money counts.”

Under the sway of such ideas, we have had some difficulty in acknowledging that industrialization has occurred just as rapidly within our homes as outside them. We resolutely polish the Early American cabinets that hide the advanced electronic machines in our kitchens and resolutely believe that we will escape the horrors of modernity as soon as we step under the lintels of our front doors. We are thus victims of a form of cultural obfuscation, for in reality kitchens are as much a locus for industrialized work as factories and coal mines are, and washing machines and microwave ovens are as much a product of industrialization as are automobiles and pocket calculators. A woman who is placing a frozen prepared dinner into a microwave oven is involved in a work process that is as different from her grandmother’s methods of cooking as building a carriage from scratch differs from turning bolts on an automobile assembly line; an electric range is as different from a hearth as a pneumatic drill is from a pick and shovel. As industrialization took some forms of productive work out of our homes, it left other forms of work behind. That work, which we now call “housework” (see page 17), has been transformed in the preceding hundred years, and so have the implements with which it is done; this is the process that I have chosen to call the “industrialization of the home.”

Households did not become industrialized in the same way that other workplaces did; there are striking differences between housework and other forms of industrialized labor. Most of the people who do housework do not get paid for it, despite the fact that it is, for many of them, a full-time job. They do not have job descriptions or time clocks or contractual arrangements; indeed, they cannot fairly be said even to have employers. Most of their work is performed in isolation, whereas most of their contemporaries work in the company of hundreds, perhaps even thousands of other adults. Over the years, market labor has become increasingly specialized, and the division of labor has become increasingly more minute; but housework has not been affected by this process. The housewife is the last jake-of-all trades in a world from which the jacks-of-all trades have more or less disappeared; she is expected to perform work that ranges from the most menial physical labor to the most abstract of mental manipulations and to do it all without any specialized training. These various characteristics of household work have led some analysts to suggest that housework (or the household economy) is the last dying gasp of feudalism, a remnant of precapitalist conditions somehow (miraculously) vaulting the centuries unimpaired, the last surviving indicator of what the Western world was like before the market economy reared its ugly head.

Perhaps this is true, but there are other sides to the coin; industr-
tialized housework resembles industrialized market labor in significant ways. Modern housework depends upon nonhuman energy sources, just as advanced industrialized manufacturing systems do. Those of us who regularly perform household chores may regard this as an erroneous, or at least an ironic, statement, but it is nonetheless true. The computer programmer turns an electric switch in order to power the tool that makes his or her labor possible—and so does the houseworker; we are all equally dependent upon the supply lines that keep these energy sources flowing to us. We may be thoroughly exhausted by our labors at the end of a day of housework, but without electricity or the combustion of certain organic compounds (like natural gas or liquid petroleum or gasoline), our work could not be performed at all. None of us relies any longer solely on animal or human energy to do our work.

Thus, even if the household is an isolated work environment, it is also part of a larger economic and social system; and if it did not constantly interact with this system, it could not function at all—not making it no different from the manufacturing plant outside the city or the supermarket down the street. The pre-industrial household could, if necessary, function without a supportive community—as is demonstrated, most clearly, in the settlement pattern of our frontiers. Individual families were capable, when need arose, of supplying themselves with their own subsistence and protective needs, year in and year out. Very few families are capable of doing that any longer. Very few of us, for example, would know how to make our own bread, even if our lives (quite literally) depended upon it; if we could find and follow a recipe for making the bread, it is highly unlikely that we could (1) grow the wheat, (2) prepare it properly for use in bread, (3) obtain and keep the yeast alive, or (4) build and maintain a suitable fixture for baking it. We live in isolated households and do our marketing for the tiniest of consumption units; but, to get our bread to the table, we still need bakers, agribusiness, utility companies, and stove manufacturers. This is the second significant sense in which household work and market work have come to resemble one another.

Finally, both household labor and market labor are today per-
More Work for Mother

How—and why—this situation came to pass is one of the great unresolved puzzles of Western history. Although the social arrangements to which we have become accustomed seem sometimes to have a rationale and a life of their own, there really is no a priori reason why things should have worked out in quite the way they did. Even if we assume, as the anthropologists tell us we should, that every society will construct some sexual division of labor for itself, there is no apparent reason why, for example, men’s work could not have been incompletely industrialized instead of women’s. We might then have had communal kitchens, to which we would repair for all of our food needs, but household metal goods that we forged in smithies in our own backyards; or perhaps electronic looms in every kitchen and communal nurseries in which children of our female physicians could be cared for and reared. Clearly we have the technological and the economic capacity to have constructed our society this way, but for some complex of reasons we did not do so.

This book is an attempt to discover some of those reasons and to describe the historical path that led us from one particular pattern of work to another. We all know that work is one of the activities through which we define ourselves as we mature; by analogy we might say that a society does the same thing, defining itself through the work that it does as it matures. Social scientists know that the industrialization of work has been one of the most traumatic processes of recent Western history, and yet work has not been a particularly popular focus for historical attention—and housework even less so. I regard this omission as unfortunate, even tragic. In the last decade or two, some historians have attempted to repair the damage and to write the history of work as it has altered for different classes of people in the last few centuries; but, as admirable as these studies have been, they have focused almost exclusively on market labor—work that is done in order to produce products or services to be sold. Yet in many ways housework is more characteristic of our society than market work is. It is the first form of work that we experience as infants, the form of work that the largest proportion of us (to wit, almost all women) identify as the work that will be the principal definition of our adulthood.

An Introduction: Housework and Its Tools

It is also the form of work that each of us—male and female, adult and child—pursues for at least some part of every week, and it is the occupational category that encompasses the single largest fraction of our population—to wit, full-time housewives. The absolute number of full-time housewives may be decreasing with every passing year, but more people spend their days in this “peculiar” form of labor than in either of the two more “standard” forms—blue-collar or white-collar work. If work shapes individual lives and social forms, and if industrialization has reshaped work in the past two centuries, then to fail to understand the history of housework is to fail to understand ourselves. If housework is a dominant social activity, and if it has been only incompletely industrialized, then, as a society, we may not be as industrialized as we think we are, or as “modern” as our pundits would have us believe.

In truth, however, this book has a dual focus. As its title is meant to suggest, it is a history not just of housework but also of the tools with which that work is done: household technology. Human beings are tool-using animals; indeed, some anthropologists believe that, along with speech, the ability to use and to refine our tools is precisely what sets us apart from other species of primates. One of the few generalizations that can be made about people living under vastly different social conditions is that they all use tools to do their work. Because of our peculiar set of cultural blinders, we do not ordinarily associate “tools” with “women’s work”—but household tools there nonetheless are and always have been.

Tools are not passive instruments, confined to doing our bidding, but have a life of their own. Tools set limits on our work; we can use them in many different ways, but not in an infinite number of ways. We try to obtain the tools that will do the jobs that we want done; but, once obtained, the tools organize our work for us in ways that we may not have anticipated. People use tools to do work, but tools also define and constrain the ways in which it is possible and likely that people will behave. Here is a simple example. In my house, we recently installed standard wall cabinets with doors above the counters in our kitchen; these cabinets are tools that we intended to use as con-
tainers for other tools (mostly notably our dishes), with the specific intention that they would make those other tools easy to locate when needed and would keep them clean between washings. Before we had the cabinets we kept our dishes on a remodeled floor-to-ceiling bookcase that did not have cabinet doors; we thought our new cabinets would make our housework easier to perform. Before we installed our new cabinets, the process of having our table set for dinner involved: (1) an adult’s decision that it was time to have the table set; (2) the communication of that decision to children—which communication needed to be repeated more than once and in increasingly insistent tones; (3) the removal of the dishes by the children and their placement, in appropriate order, on the table. The adults in the family functioned as managers and decision makers; the children, as workers—often workers under duress. Our new cabinets have changed all of our behavior patterns. Since the children are too small to reach the shelves on which the dishes are now stored, the adults must become involved in the work process. Not only must my husband and I make the decision that it is time to set the table, but we must also do part of the physical labor; we have ceased to be the managers of the work and have been forced to become unwilling participants in it. In addition, if we have erred in our labor (“But, Mommy, you didn’t give me the water pitcher!”), then we must be responsible for correcting our errors. The acquisition of this one new tool has temporarily (at least until the children grow taller) altered our domestic work process as well as the set of emotional entanglements that that work process entailed. At the very least, the acquisition of that new tool will now require us to acquire yet another tool (a stool) in order to return to the status quo ante—a behavioral alteration that was also unintended.

Multiply this small example millions of times, and you will have some sense of what it means to say that tools are not entirely passive instruments. This is precisely the lesson that the sorcerer was trying to teach his apprentice in the famous fable. Our tools are not always at our beck and call. The less we know about them, the more likely it is that they will command us, rather than the other way round.

Thus the history of housework cannot properly be understood without the history (which is separate) of the implements with which it is done—and vice versa. The relation is reciprocal, perhaps even dialectic. Tools have set limits on what could be done in households, but inventors have repeatedly broken through those limits by fashioning new tools. The tools have reorganized the work process, creating new needs, for which some people have attempted to provide new tools—and so on. What makes the history of household technology separate and distinguishable from the history of housework is the existence of social institutions that mediate the availability of tools to households. In times past, these mediators were institutions such as blacksmith shops and blacksmith guilds, peddlers, and international trade arrangements. As industrialization has progressed, the nature of the institutions has changed—we now have manufacturing firms and advertising agencies and market researchers; but the impact of the institutions remains structurally the same. They mediate the availability of tools by keeping some tools off the market and promoting others, or by organizing the pricing and distribution of tools. Just as the history of industrialization cannot properly be written without the history of housework, so the history of household technology cannot be written without the history of the social and economic institutions that have affected the character and the availability of the tools with which housework is done.

In order to make the complex task of writing this multifocused history less daunting, I have made use of two organizing concepts: work process and technological system. Both awkward phrases need to be explained before I proceed farther. The phrase work process is used instead of the simpler term work in order to highlight the fact that no single part of housework is a simple, homogenous activity. One might be tempted to say that housework can be divided into a series of separable tasks—cooking, cleaning, laundering, child care, et cetera. This analysis does not go far enough, however, because each of these tasks is linked to others that it does not resemble. Cooking, for example, involves the treatment of raw or semi-raw foodstuffs so that they can, or will, be consumed; that much is obvious. Perhaps not so obviously, cooking
also involves the procurement of those foodstuffs (by buying them or raising them), and their storage and prior preparation (by canning, salting, freezing, refrigerating, etc.) the maintenance of the energy source (stoking the hearth, damping the stove, adding the coal) that is used to do the cooking, the maintenance and cleaning of the tools that are used to do the cooking, and the disposal of the waste that results from the process. Similarly, laundering is a matter not just of washing clothes but of moving them from place to place, of drying them, perhaps ironing them and putting them away, as well as acquiring the chemical agents—most notably soap and water—that will assist in the process. The concept of work process reminds us that housework (indeed, all work) is a series not simply of definable tasks but of definable tasks that are necessarily linked to one another: you cannot cook without an energy source, and you cannot launder without water. This concept also becomes important when we try to discover whether industrialization has made housework easier. We must ask not only whether one activity has been altered, but also whether the chain in which that activity is a link has been transformed. If, for example, we view cleaning rugs as work, then we might reasonably argue that this work can be done faster and with less expenditure of human energy with a vacuum cleaner instead of a broom. If, on the other hand, we view cleaning rugs as a work process, then we might see that it is composed of several activities (moving the instrument, moving the rugs, removing the accumulated dust, and so on), and that at least one of these (moving the instrument) is much harder to do with the vacuum cleaner than with the broom. In addition, if it is more likely that the presence of the vacuum cleaner will increase the frequency with which the work is done (once a week instead of once a season or once a year), or will involve fewer people in the work (for example, by releasing the stronger members of the household from the obligation to move the rugs outside, or the younger members from the obligation of beating them), then the question of whether cleaning a rug has been made easier or faster by the advent of vacuum cleaners becomes considerably more difficult to answer. Easier for whom? Faster for whom? Under what conditions? The history of housework studied in the light of the concept of work process, turns up some surprises, and some of these surprises will be central to my analysis. Just as the activities of which housework is composed are complex, linked, and heterogeneous, so are the implements with which it is done—a situation that justifies my using the second of those awkward phrases, technological system. Each implement used in the home is part of a sequence of implements—a system—in which each must be linked to others in order to function appropriately. To put it bluntly: an electric range will not be much good if electric current is missing, and a washing machine cannot function in the absence of running water and grated soap. I have often thought that if the concept of a technological system were more generally understood, no one would have joked fun at the inhabitants of Appalachia who were reported (perhaps apocryphally) to have put coal in the bathtubs that were given them through federal largesse during the Depression. If you were obliged to haul your bathwater from stream or pump to stove and tub, what would you want with a four-footed, enamel-over-cast-iron bathtub on your porch? A stream, a pond, a lake, or a lightweight zinc tub would be infinitely preferable. Heavy bathtubs (indeed, recessed unmovable bathtubs) are part of a technological system that contains (among other things) municipal reservoirs, underground pipelines, hot water heaters, not to speak of soap-manufacturing plants and textile mills (would you bathe very often if you had no towels?). Some of those items could be dropped from the system without entirely altering it (one could make one's own soap if it came to that), but others (the drain-pipes, for example) are absolutely essential. The concept of a technological system becomes important in understanding the processes by which the American home became industrialized. On a superficial level, the industrialization of the home appears to have been composed of millions of individual decisions freely made by householders: the Jones's down the block decided to junk their washtub and buy a washing machine, and the Smiths around the corner fired the maid and bought a vacuum cleaner. On this level, industrialization of the home seems to have been the product of the perpetually rising expectations of American consumers—expectations that had been rising
from at least the 1830s, when de Tocqueville toured the country, if not before. But the matter is not as simple as that. The Jones's washing machine would not have done them a bit of good if the town fathers had not decided to create a municipal water system several years earlier, and if the local gas and electric company had not gotten around to running wires and pipes into the neighborhood. Similarly, the Smiths' new vacuum cleaner might have cost a good deal more than it did (and might have thus forestalled the Smiths' decision to replace a maid with it) if the managers of the company that made it had not earlier decided to shift to assembly-line modes of production. To put the case more generally: the industrialization of the home was determined partly by the decisions of individual householders but also partly by social processes over which the householders can be said to have had no control at all, or certainly very little control. Householders did their share in determining that their homes would be transformed (indeed, we have very few records of any who actively resisted the process), but so did politicians, landlords, industrialists, and managers of utilities.

These two concepts, the work process and the technological system, are the warp and the woof with which I hope to weave a description of the changes that occurred in the work that was done in American homes in the last one hundred years. The phrases are awkward, but the concepts that they denote are important. On one level, they seem to introduce complications that may be annoying; but on another level, they simplify descriptions and analyses so that certain essential features can emerge more clearly—to put it another way, they help us to see the forest through the trees. Housework is as difficult to study as it is to do. The student, like the houseworker, is hard pressed to decide where the activity begins and where it ends, what is essential and what is unessential, what is necessary and what is compulsive. If you are doing a time study of housewives, are you supposed to define the time they spend watching their children play in the park as leisure or as work? If you are trying to keep house yourself, is it really necessary to remove the chocolate stains from the front of a toddler's playsuit? The two problems have many conceptual similarities. I have found that the dual notions of a work process and a technological system have helped me to deal effectively with the scholarly problem of thinking and writing about the history of housework. The postscript contains, among other things, my insights about what might happen if these notions are also generally applied to the practical and emotional problems of doing the work itself.
Chapter 2

Housewifery: Household Work and Household Tools under Pre-Industrial Conditions

ETYMOLOGY can illuminate some of the muckier realms of social history. Housewifery has had a long history; in English the word can be traced back as far as the thirteenth century. Women have always cooked, laundered, sewed, and nursed children; but it was not until the thirteenth century, when the feudal period was ending and the capitalist organization of society just beginning, that some of the women who did these chores were given the name, and the very special social status, of "housewives." Housewives were the spouses of "husbands" and husbands, as the compound character of the name implies, were people whose work was also focused on the house (hus is the older spelling of our house) to which they were "bonded"—houses that they either rented or owned, houses that were, in some socially identifiable sense, their own. Thus husbands and housewives both derived their status from the existence of their house and its associated land—the man because he had some title to it, and the woman because she was married to him. Husbands and housewives were not aristocrats and did not govern large households that employed and gave shelter to dozens, even hundreds, of people; neither were they transient laborers residing, if they resided at all, under roofs that belonged to other people. Housewives and husbands were among the first occupants of that singular social niche—the middle class. They worked the land (hence the term husbandry for what we would now call farming), and they made independent decisions about the disposition of livestock and tools that were in their possession. Any economic security they had they achieved by working together and husbanding their resources. The success of these early independent agricultural families, the yeomanry, depended on the hard labor of both men and women, as this bit of doggerel from the introduction to a popular sixteenth-century domestic manual makes clear:

In jest and in earnest, here argued ye finde,  
That husband and huswife together must dowell,  
And thereto the judgement of wedded mans mind,  
That husbandrie eitherwise speedeth not well;  
So somewhat more now I intende for to tell,  
Of huswiferie like as of husbandrie told,  
How huswiferie huswife helps bring in the golde.

The labor that was called "huswiferie" from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries acquired a new name, "housework."

*This analysis is based upon the entries for housewife and husband in The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, England, 1933). The earliest date given for housewife is 1225 and for husband—in the sense of a spouse to a housewife—1290.
The Postwar Years

The social seeds planted during the 1920s and the 1930s came to fruition in the decades following the end of the Second World War, but with an ironic twist that no one had anticipated. The diffusion of affluence in the postwar years was accompanied by both the diffusion of appliances and the disappearance of servants. As a result, women who had been in comfortable circumstances before the war (and their children and grandchildren) were under increasing pressure (both economic and ideological) to shoulder the burden of housework alone; and women in families that were economically disadvantaged before the war (and their children and grandchildren) were ever more able to provide themselves and their families with basic amenities that their mothers could not have attained. The spread of affluence and the diffusion of amenities was accompanied not, as earlier commentators guessed, by an increase in leisure for housewives of both classes, but, rather, by increases in the amount of work that some housewives had to do, and in the level of productivity that others were able to achieve. In the first postwar generation, some women found that they were working harder inside their homes than their mothers had worked, because they employed fewer servants hours than their mothers had employed; other women found that they were working just as hard as their mothers, but were achieving greater results. As time wore on, their daughters, members of the second postwar generation, discovered that they were working even longer hours than their mothers had worked, because of the double burden of housework and outside employment. Either way, the end result of the long historical process that began when the shooting stopped in 1945, has been more work for mother.

Today men, women, and children continue to demonstrate through their behavior that household work produces both economic and social value. At the end of a day of housework, weary women know that, whether what they have been doing all day is called “consumption” or “purchasing” or “maintaining our social status,” it still takes time and energy. Infants still want to be fed when they are hungry, toddlers still want to be comforted in the middle of the night, and schoolchildren still want someone to be at home when the school day has ended. School nurses expect someone to be at home when a child becomes ill during the day, and plumbers expect someone to be there to open the door when a sewer has backed up or a radiator is leaking. Men still marry—and, if divorced, marry soon again—as if they knew (leaving aside considerations of companionship, sexuality, and affection, on the one hand, and of modern technologies, on the other) that the skills women possess are difficult to live without. The work processes of housework may have changed substantially since 1940, but the work itself has not gone away.

The Diffusion of Affluence: The Changing Face of Poverty

To say that the postwar decades have been decades of affluence is to say not that poverty has disappeared, but, rather, that its face has changed, as have the numbers of people afflicted by it. By
MORE WORK FOR MOTHER

1960, the American who could afford to live at a “decent” and "healthful" level had become the average American; decency, cleanliness, rudimentary nutrition, and rudimentary healthfulness were no longer the privileges of an elite. The minimum subsistence budget that was used to determine welfare payments in New York City in 1960 specified a set of material conditions for family life that would have been regarded as fairly luxurious in 1910 and even, for that matter, in 1930. A four-person family was permitted to rent a five-room flat, so that each member of the family who wanted to could be “alone in a room”—a luxury inconceivable to most poor families earlier in the century. The flat was to be outfitted with a complete bathroom (hot and cold running water, toilet, bath or shower, and a sink), a complete kitchen (sink with a drain, hot and cold water, refrigerator, and a gas or electric range), and central heat. Plain but adequate furnishings were allowed (each person was to have a bed and a complete set of eating utensils) as well as annual replacement clothing for the children (shoes that fit, dresses that were new and not made over from hand-me-downs). The diet for such a family was not to contain luxurious foods such as steak, but did allow meat, milk, fresh fruits, and vegetables to be served at least once a day. The family was also allowed an iron and a vacuum cleaner (although not a washing machine or a dryer) and linoleum (although not carpeting) to cover all the floors. That set of material conditions is doubly significant: first, because it was regarded as deprivation in terms of the general standard applying throughout the country in 1960; and, second, because it was luxurious in comparison to how people had lived in earlier decades.

As the standard of "minimum health and decency" has risen profoundly in the past forty years, the portion of the population that has been unable to attain that standard has fallen. The horrors of poverty have not disappeared, but they are not nearly as horrible as they used to be, and not nearly as many people are beset by them. When computed in terms not of a specific rate of wages, but of standards of minimum decency and health established in each decade, the proportion of the population living at or below the poverty level has fallen from 35 percent (44 million

194


The Rich and the Poor

If you were a poor housewife before the Second World War, the tragedy of your poverty was apparent every hour of every day (1). You had to cook and launder and care for your children in the same room in which people slept and labored (note the bed beyond the curtains (2)), while your more comfortable contemporaries had separate rooms (3) for these activities. Your children slept when and where they could (4), while other people's children had rooms and possessions all to themselves (5). Mealtimes in the homes of the rich were filled with ritual and grace (6), while in your house people were grateful just to be fed (7). Because their bodies and their clothes could be kept clean, people, who were rich (8) looked different from you and your family (9), and were healthier as well. (Note that the photograph on the wall (9) is of two very well-kept youngsters.) Whatever other problems we may now have, one of the saving graces of the postwar world has been the elimination of these profound differences between the rich and the poor: we cannot really tell, from their clothing, their furnishings, or the nature of their activities, whether the people in these photographs (10, 11) are rich or poor, working-class or middle-class. Having forgotten the abject poverty of the "good old days," we try to re-create them in the same way.


(7) Syracuse, New York, c. 1905, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Phoebe Hoss.
people) in 1940 to 27 percent (41 million) in 1950, to 21 percent (39 million) in 1960, and to 11 percent (23 million) in 1970.\(^2\) Although those who remain poor are justifiably angry that the so-called affluent society cannot provide more for them than it does, “those who remain poor” are a much smaller part of our population than ever before in history. Thus, when viewed in terms of the entire contemporary world and our own immediate past, the vast majority of Americans are staggeringly well-off. As we struggle to make ends meet from one paycheck to the next, we forget how really luxurious is the life to which we have become accustomed. Even if our minds forget, however, our behavior remembers, for the memory of poverty is enshrined in the habits of our housework.

The Diffusion of Amenities and Appliances

For many people the diffusion of affluence meant the diffusion of toilets, refrigerators, and washing machines, not Cadillacs, stereos, and vacation homes. In 1940, just as the Depression was drawing to a close and the economy was shifting to wartime production, one out of every three Americans was still carrying water in buckets, and two out of three Americans did not enjoy the comforts of central heating.\(^3\) Forty years later, there were roughly eighty-seven million “year-round housing units” in the country: only one million of these did not have running water (1 out of 87). In 1940, only 53 percent of all households had any sort of built-in bathing equipment; thus forty years ago, taking a bath for just under half of all Americans involved a lot more work than just turning on a faucet. In 1980, only three million housing units did not have a complete bathroom. Similarly, in 1941—roughly thirty years after they had first come on the market, and twenty years after the prices had fallen to more or less reasonable levels as the result of mass production—only 52 percent of the families in the United States owned or had “interior access” to a washing
machine. Thus, just under half the families in the land were either still hand rubbing or hand cranking their laundry or using commercial services. About the same percentage of families had mechanical refrigerators as had washing machines in 1941 (52 percent); but ten years later, this proportion had increased to 80 percent; and by 1980, access to mechanical refrigeration was virtually universal. Before the United States entered the Second World War, one third of the households in the country were still cooking with wood and coal, so that there was both back-breaking labor on someone’s part to provide fuel and equally intense labor to provide cleanliness. By 1980, gas and electric cooking was common everywhere. Conversely, only one third of all the dwellings in the country had central heating in 1940. In 1980, however—even after the energy crises of the 1970s had sent millions of people out to buy coal stoves and kerosene heaters—only sixteen million of the eighty-seven million dwellings lacked central heating, and the vast majority of those were in parts of the country where such comforts were not necessary. In the forty years since the end of the Second World War, the amenities that were once reserved for just part of the population have become the basic standard for the lives of almost everyone.

Homogenizing Housework

Over, under, around, and through those statistics about the technological systems with which we live, lies a daily reality about the work processes of housework that we often forget. If the basic material conditions of life have become homogenized for all Americans (the fact that the less-than-basic material conditions have not is another matter, relevant to another book), so have the work processes of housework. In times past, housewives of the “uncomfortable” classes were manual laborers in their own homes, but housewives of the “comfortable” classes were both managers and laborers. Nowadays, the general expansion of both the economy and the welfare system has led fewer people than ever before into the market for paid domestic labor; and the diffusion of appliances into households, and of households into suburbs, has encouraged the disappearance of various commercial services. The end result is that housewives, even of the most comfortable classes (in our generally now comfortable population) are doing their housework themselves. Similarly, the extension of schooling for those who are young, the proliferation of school-related activities, and the availability of jobs for those who have finished their schooling has led to the disappearance of even those helpers upon whom the poverty-stricken housewife had once been able to depend. Hence, in almost all economic sectors of the population (except the very, very rich), housework has become manual labor: the wife of the lawyer is just as likely to be down on her hands and knees cleaning her kitchen floor as is the wife of the bricklayer or the garbageman. In 1914, the wife of a college professor had, as I described in chapter 6, two different kinds of household assistant (a laundress, who washed and did heavy cleaning; a student who cleared after meals, did light cleaning, and supervised the children when their mother was away) and did much of her marketing over the telephone. Forty years later, the wife of another college professor described her typical day this way:

I get up at 6 a.m. and put up coffee and cereal for breakfast and go down to the basement to put clothes into the washing machine. When I come up I dress Teddy (1–½) and put him in his chair. Then I dress Jim (3–½) and serve breakfast to him and to my husband and feed Teddy.

While my husband looks after the children I go down to get the clothes out of the machine and hang them on the line. Then I come up and have my own breakfast after my husband leaves. From then on the day is as follows: Breakfast dishes, clean up kitchen. Make beds, clean the apartment. Wipe up bathroom and kitchen floor. Get lunch vegetable ready and put potatoes on to bake for lunch. Dress

*Between 1940 and 1980, the number of households in the United States more than doubled, from roughly 35,000,000 to roughly 79,200,000 but the number of domestic servants fell from 2,400,000 to 1,200,000.
both children in outdoor clothes. Do my food shopping and stay out with children until 12. Return and undress children, wash them up for lunch, prepare lunch, feed Teddy and put him to nap. Make own lunch, wash dishes, straighten up kitchen. Put Jim to rest. Between 1 and 2:30, depending on the day of the week, ironing (I do my husband’s shirts home and, of course, all the children’s and my own clothes), thorough cleaning of one room, weekend cooking and baking, etc.; 3 P.M., give children juice or milk, put outdoor clothes on. Out to park; 4:30 back. Give children their baths. Prepare their supper. Husband usually home to play with them a little after supper and help put them to bed. Make dinner for husband and myself. After dinner, dishes and cleaning up.

After 8 P.M., often more ironing, especially on the days when I cleaned in the afternoon. There is mending to be done; 9 P.M., fall asleep in the living room over a newspaper or listening to the sound of the radio; 10 P.M., have a snack of something with my husband and go to bed.6

And just as striking were the comments of another housewife in the same decade—a twenty-four-year-old woman living in the newly built Levittown, Pennsylvania; she was described by those who interviewed her as a member of the "working class." This housewife, whose grandmother might well have been grateful to have bread and soup on the table at night, described her day in terms virtually identical to those of the college professor’s wife:

Well, naturally, I get up first, make breakfast for my husband and put a load of clothes in my washer while breakfast cooks. Then I make him up, give him his breakfast and he’s off to work. Then I make breakfast for the children. After the children eat I dress them and they go out to play. Then I hang the clothes up and clean lightly through the house. In between times I do the dishes—that’s understood of course. Then I make lunch for the children and myself and I bring them in, clean them up, and they eat. I send them out to play when they’re done and I do the dishes, bring the clothes in and iron them. When I’m done ironing it’s usually time to make supper, or at least start preparing it. Sometimes I have time to watch a TV story for half an hour or so. Then my husband comes home and we have our meals. Then I do the dishes again. Then he goes out to work again—he has a part time job—at his uncle’s beverage company. Well, he does that two or three nights a week. If he stays home he watches TV and in the meantime I get the kids ready for bed. He and I have a light snack, watch TV a while and then go to bed.6

In the 1950s (and the 1960s) the housewife of the “professional classes” and the housewife of the “working classes” were assisted only by machines. Few such women had paid household help, and fewer still had food or milk or clean laundry delivered to their doors. The differences between these women were no doubt profound—differences in levels of education, in families of origin, in annual household income; but those profound differences did not produce, as they would have done in the past, equally profound variations in the ways in which the women did their work.7

Apparently, also, there were no significant variations in the time that women spent at that work. One sophisticated statistical analysis of time-use data collected from a large national sample of households in 1965 found that the average American woman spent about four hours a day doing housework (or twenty-eight hours a week) and about three and one-half hours a day (or twenty-six and a half hours per week) caring for children (a fifty-four-hour week).8 These figures were startling in two respects. First, they were not strikingly different from what Leeds had found for affluent housewives in 1912 or from what other researchers had reported for rural and urban housewives in 1935.9 Second, these averages were not markedly affected either by the income level of the household or by the educational attainment of the housewife: women who managed on less than four thousand dollars a year in household income spent 245 minutes per day at housework and 207 at child care; while, at the other end of the income scale, housewives who could dispose of over fifteen thousand dollars put in 260 and 196 minutes at housework and child care, respectively. Housewives with college educations were logging in 474 minutes a day of housework and child care (a little under eight hours); and housewives who had not completed grade school put in almost equally tiring days of 453 minutes (or seven and one half hours).

Neither the working-class wife nor her middle-class contemporary could have expected her husband to help much with this
work. For a while, in the 1950s, there was a hullabaloo in the popular press about “new husbands” in suburbia who were diapering babies and drying dishes and cooking barbecues and otherwise becoming “feminized.” Again, in the late 1970s, a spate of books and national magazine articles appeared touting the virtues of “househusbandry,” most of these articles written, it turned out, by free-lance writers and journalists who had decided to stay home for a while with their children when their wives went back to work. If the results of sociological studies are to be trusted, not much lay behind either one of those journalistic epistles. Men do very little housework; and the few “househusbands” there have ever been seem not to have stuck to it for long. Whether men are asked to estimate the time that they spend at housework, or wives are asked to estimate their husbands’ time, or outside observers actually clock the amount of time that men spend at it, no one has ever estimated men’s share of housework at anything higher than one and a half hours per day.10 Housewives who are not employed in the labor market spend, roughly speaking, fifty hours a week doing housework; housewives who are employed outside their homes spend, again roughly speaking, thirty-five hours on their work in and for their homes. Men whose wives are employed spend about ten minutes more a day on housework than men whose wives “stay home”, and men who have small children add yet another ten—a grand total, for these particularly helpful husbands, of just under eleven hours of housework a week.11 Men who do housework tend not to do the same work that their wives are doing: they take out the garbage, they mow the lawns, they play with children, they occasionally go to the supermarket or shop for household durables, they paint the attic or fix the faucet; but by and large, they do not launder, clean, or cook, nor do they feed, clothe, bathe, or transport children.12 These latter—the most time-consuming activities around the home—are exclusively the domain of women. In households that are particularly well equipped with appliances, men do even less housework, partly because they believe that the work simply cannot be onerous, but also because some of the “extra” appliances actually relieve them of sex-related, or sex-acceptable chores. In homes where there are garbage disposals, men give up removing the small quantities of garbage that still need to be carried to the curb; and in households where there are dishwashers, men cease providing whatever help with the dishes they had formerly proffered.13

Thus, there is more work for a mother to do in a modern home because there is no one left to help her with it. Almost all of the work that once stereotypically fell to men has been mechanized. Families tend to live a considerable distance from the place where the male head of the household is employed; hence, men leave home early in the morning and return, frequently exhausted, late at night. Children spend long hours in school and, when school is over, have “after-school activities,” which someone must supervise and from which they must be transported. Older children move away from home as soon as they reasonably can, going off to college or to work. No one delivers anything (except bills and advertisements) to the door any longer, or at least not at prices that most people can afford; and domestic workers now earn salaries that have priced them out of the reach of all but the most affluent households. The advent of washing machines and dishwashers has eliminated the chores that men and children used to do as well as the accessory workers who once were willing and able to assist with the work. The end result is that, although the work is more productive (more services are performed, and more goods are produced, for every hour of work) and less laborious than it used to be, for most housewives it is just as time-consuming and just as demanding.

The “Working” Mother

The modern technological systems on which our households and our standard of living depend were constructed on the assumption that women would remain at home, that they would continue to function as pre-industrial workers (without paychecks, time clocks, or supervisors), and that, as a corollary, they would not be tempted to enter the labor market except under
percent of the total workforce was female (up from 25 percent in 1940), women with children at home constituted almost 20 percent of the labor force, and more than half of the nation's children under the age of six had mothers who were working full time. Even though different women achieved the status of being "homemakers with jobs" at different times, very large numbers of them did achieve it, and if present trends continue unabated, even more of them will do so in the future.

WOMAN'S "PLACE"

It is hardly surprising that, in the immediate postwar years, many women struggled mightily with the decision to take a job, since cultural pressures of the most extraordinary kind were being brought to bear against the employment of wives and mothers. If many husbands and children opposed that decision even before they had had a chance to discover its consequences, they, too, can barely be blamed, since the public debates on the subject gave them not the slightest reason to believe that the venture would end successfully. In the 1950s and the 1960s, psychiatrists, psychologists, and popular writers inveighed against women who wished to pursue a career, and even against women who wished to have a job, and referred to such "unlovely women" as "lost," "suffering from penis envy," "ridden with guilt complexes," or just plain "man-hating." Mass-circulation magazines almost never depicted a working wife, unless to paint her in derogatory terms: working mothers were blamed for the rise in juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, for the soaring divorce rate of the 1960s, and for the rise in male impotence in the 1970s. Women's magazine fiction of the day was populated by "glowing" pregnant women and "barren" working women, whose "hunger was not yet appeased, whose destinies were not yet fulfilled;" by children who felt abandoned when their mothers were not there to greet them on the day the teacher had finally given them an "A;" and by husbands who, while tempted by the career women in their offices, always returned to their less glamorous, but more feminine wives with a warm smile and a rose
behind their backs. Betty Friedan, who worked for and wrote for some of those magazines in the postwar years, recalls:

When you wrote about an actress for a woman's magazine you wrote about her as a housewife. You never showed her doing or enjoying her work as an actress, unless she eventually paid for it by losing her husband or her child, or otherwise admitting failure as a woman.16

Friedan might well have added that newspaper and magazine profits depended upon the sale of advertising space to manufacturers and retailers of consumer goods; and that in the postwar years, many advertising specialists and market researchers—who advised the manufacturers and the retailers, viewed the working woman as someone who was either too poor or too preoccupied to spend time and money in the stores.17 Hence, profit-conscious editors, and the writers who desired their custom, were not inclined to enhance the image of the working wife, even if they happened to be one themselves.

Sociologists and other academic social scientists, rather than be left on the sidelines, joined in the debate about women's proper place by adopting what has come to be called the "functionalist" interpretation of the recent history of the family and then by broadcasting that interpretation in countless textbooks and lectures.18 As I have explained in chapter 4, this argument suggested that since industrialization began, households have been deprived of their essential productive roles in the economy and, consequently, housewives have been deprived of their essential productive functions. Modern women are in trouble, the analysis continued, because modern technology has either eliminated or eased most of their earlier burdens, but modern ideologies have not kept pace with the change. One solution to the problem, the social scientists noted, would be for women to take their place in the market economy; but this solution, many of the experts argued, would be contrary to female instincts and biological needs and would interfere with the few remaining functions that housewives still perform at home—namely, socialization of young children and tension management. A better solution would be to create a new ideology, one that would rationalize the woman's situation and diminish the likelihood that she would suffer "role anxiety."

THE "BACKWARD SEARCH FOR FEMININITY"

Ironically, the ideology that became popular in the years when functionalism dominated sociology constituted a symbolic (but only a symbolic) reflection of the very set of conditions that had made it possible for many Americans to have the comfort both of indulging in ideological pursuits and of attending lectures in sociology. One perceptive observer referred to this ideology as the "backward search for femininity."19 If women who lived before the Industrial Revolution had led happy, fruitful, and productive lives (as the sociologists were suggesting), then it seemed reasonable to assume that modern discontents could be wiped away if women would return at least to some of the conditions that had pertained in Martha Washington's day. In communities across the land (especially in those that were particularly affluent and, therefore, farthest removed from the horrors of pre-industrial conditions), people were acting out the sociologists' prescriptions by bearing numerous children (the baby boom appears to have been a result of a deliberate decision on the part of affluent couples to have more children than their parents had), by breastfeeding those numerous children, raising vegetables in their backyards, crocheting afghans, knitting argyle socks, entertaining at barbecues, hiding appliances behind artificial wood paneling, giving homemade breads for Christmas presents, and decorating their living rooms with spinning wheels. "I interviewed a woman," Betty Friedan reported,

in the huge kitchen of a house that she had helped build herself. She was busily kneading the dough for her famous homemade bread; a dress she was making for a daughter was half-finished on the sewing machine; a handloom stood in one corner. Children's art materials and toys were strewn all over the floor of the house, from front door to stove: in this expensive modern house, like many of the open plan houses in this era, there was no door at all between kitchen and living
The Postwar Years

spend a lot of time dipping chocolates and growing string beans.

In any event, even if these ideological props for full-time housewifery had not existed, historical experience itself would have militated against widespread enthusiasm for the entry of married women into the labor force. The adults who were worrying about these matters in 1950 (and even in 1960) had been children of the Depression; hence, they had good reason to remember that in their youth a "working mother" had been a person to be pitied, and her family had quite possibly been a family to be shunned. If "mother worked" during the 1920s and the 1930s, her family was more than likely to be poor, the father more than likely to be unemployed, the children more than likely to be dirty, the house more than likely to be in disrepair; when "mother worked," there were children who had no one to nurse them through illnesses, meals that were hastily thrown together from whatever could be found ready-made in the markets, poor teeth, clothing that did not fit, dirty floors, skin rashes, and bad breath. It hardly mattered that only a few of these symptoms of poverty were likely to have been directly attributable to the mother's employment, because the fact of her employment served as symbol for all of them. Similarly, at the other end of the economic scale, the presence of a full-time housewife served as symbol not just for the status of the family, but also for its degree of good health and for its decent living standards. Whether she actually did the work or whether she directed the work that was to be done, the presence of a full-time wife and mother meant careful supervision of the family's health, a well-appointed living room, white stockings, ironed hair ribbons, regular church attendance, Sunday dinner, birthday parties. All those small (and large) comforts both helped to demonstrate the family's status and to ensure that it did not fall. The postwar working-class husband who complained that he would be embarrassed in front of his friends if his wife went out to work, was as much a product of this historical experience as his middle-class contemporary who claimed that two well-organized dinner parties a month would do more for his family's annual income than the salary his wife would be able to earn at a job.22
THE ROLE OF THE MACHINE

In the end, whatever the complaints of husbands may have been (and there were many of them), and however ambivalent wives and mothers may have felt (as many of them did), by the time the children of the baby boom had come to maturity, the "working mother" had become the "normal American housewife"; and many people believed that the widespread diffusion of modern technology was, in and of itself, responsible for this transformation. On common-sense grounds alone, a causal connection between the washing machine and the working wife seems justified: if it takes less time to do the wash with a Bendix than it did with a washtub, and to cook a meal since the advent of Birdseye, then housework must take less time (and certainly less energy) than it used to, and women must thus be tempted to fill their free time with paid employment.

The only trouble with this argument is that one empirical investigation after another has failed to find evidence for it; common sense, in this case as in many others, is not a reliable guide to the truth. As we have seen, even with washing machines and frozen vegetables, housewives do not have much free time; 50 hours per week is ten hours more than what is now considered the standard industrial week. Housewives began to enter the labor market many years before modern household technologies were widely diffused; and the housewives then entering the workforce were precisely those who could not afford to take advantage of the amenities that then existed. Even in the postwar labor market the sociological variable that correlates most strongly with a married woman's participation in the labor force is her husband's income. And the correlation is strongly negative: the housewives who are most likely to enter the labor market are the ones who are least likely to have many labor-saving devices and household amenities. Indeed, in the early postwar years, some married women were entering the labor force precisely in order to acquire those attributes of affluence.

Where the sociologists and economists have failed to find a causal connection, the historians may be able to suggest a substitute. The washing machine, the dishwasher, and the frozen meal have not been causes of married women's participation in the workforce, but they have been catalysts of this participation: they have acted, in the same way that chemical catalysts do, to break certain bonds that might otherwise have impeded the process. Most American housewives did not enter the job market because they had an enormous amount of free time on their hands (although this may have been true in a few cases). Rather, American housewives discovered that, for one reason or another, they needed full-time employment; and subsequently, they discovered that, with the help of a dishwasher, a washing machine, and an occasional frozen dinner, they could undertake that employment without endangering their family's living standards. The symbolic connection between "working wife" and "threatened family" was thus severed, not by ideologues but by housewives with machines. Working mothers discovered that, although they were weary when they left the office or factory, they could still manage to get a decent dinner on the table that night and clean clothes on everyone's back the next morning. Husbands discovered that they had been deprived of few, if any, of the comforts to which they had become accustomed, and that additional comforts (namely, ones connected with having more cash on hand) had appeared. Children discovered that they could, if need be, make their lunches and their breakfasts themselves.

Viewed from a national perspective, American housewives entered the labor market without destroying either the level of health or the level of comfort to which they and their parents had become accustomed. If the movement of married women into the labor force proceeded with what some social critics regarded as unseemly speed, it did so because many members of the generation that had been raised in the affluent society (those who were children of the baby boom, not of the Depression, and who came to maturity and began forming their households in the 1960s and the 1970s) saw little reason to worry about the various social ills that might result from cold cereal for breakfast, from an occasional meal in a restaurant, from slightly dirty bathroom sinks and unironed sheets. Modern household technology facilitated married women's workforce participation not by freeing women from household labor but by making it possible for women to
maintain decent standards in their homes without assistants and without a full-time commitment to housework.

Conclusion

The work that women do when they are being paid to do it is easy to recognize, because there are so many standard indicators that allow us to account for it—personnel records, time clocks, pay sheets, and the like. On the other hand, the productive labor that is still being done in American homes is difficult to recognize, because the reigning theory of family history tells us that it should not be there, because the reigning methodology of the social sciences cannot be applied to it, because ordinary language has a penchant for masking it, and because advertisers have had a vested interest in convincing us that it has evaporated. Economists and sociologists do not consider housework to be "productive work," at least in part because they cannot measure it. They can easily quantify what people are consuming (how many cans of peas? how many dollars' worth of stockings?), but they cannot place a dollar value (to chose a particularly simple example) on a nutritious meal—and they cannot begin to estimate how many such meals are prepared in households throughout the year (in part, because the workers who prepare them are not paid nor are their hours timed). People who write advertising copy for microwave ovens, toilet bowl cleaners, and paper towel ads seem to believe that they will lose their jobs if they confess that it still takes time to prepare food for the oven, scrub the brown stains out of the toilet, and wipe down counters after dinner has been consumed. Virtually every lecture on the history of the family, and every textbook on the sociology of the family, and every new inquiry into the state of the family begins with the sentiment that "households do not produce anything valuable any more." And, in our everyday conversations, we cannot even refer to housewives as "laboring" or as "working" or even as being "employed," without confusing our listeners, even though we all know that housework is work.

The technological systems that presently dominate our households were built on the assumption that a full-time housewife would be operating them, since very few people in the last one hundred years (when the foundations for these systems were being laid) wanted adult women to leave their homes in order to work in the labor market, or believed that adult women themselves would ever want to go out to work. In the earliest stages of industrialization, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as some of men's work in the home was eliminated (fuel gathering, leather working, grain processing), some men were thereby freed to work (at least part of the year) in factories and offices. Some of women's housework was eliminated at that time also (principally spinning and weaving), but no one then expected or desired women to leave their homes to work for wages elsewhere (unless the women were single or exceedingly poor) because so much of what had always been considered women's work still remained to be done at home: cooking, sewing, laundering, cleaning, child care. In the next stages of industrialization, even more of men's household work was eliminated, as was much of children's work, but, again, no one expected or desired women to leave their homes in order to go out to work because, whether rich or poor, a family's sustenance and status still depended on the presence of a full-time homemaker. In this stage of industrialization (roughly from 1880 to 1920), the foundations for the modern household technologies were laid: municipalities began to supply households with clean water and ample sewers; gas and electric companies figured out how to bring in modern fuels; merchandisers and retailers developed new techniques for selling durable goods to households. Almost no one who participated in this process—whether rich or poor, whether female or male, whether producer or consumer—seems to have doubted that the individual household would be the ultimate consumption unit, and that most of the work of that household would be done by housewives who would continue to work, as they had in the past, without pay and without timeclocks. If the utility companies had had any reason to believe that households would stop function-
investments (consumer durables); and the technological systems of which they were a part (houses, roads, telephone lines, gas mains) were built to last for more than one lifetime. The transition to the two-income family (or to the female-headed household) did not occur without taking a toll—a toll measured in the hours that employed housewives had to work in order to perform adequately first as employees and then as housewives. A thirty-five-hour week (housework) added to a forty-hour week (paid employment) adds up to a working week that even sweatshops cannot match. With all her appliances and amenities, the status of being a “working mother” in the United States today is, as three eminent experts have suggested, virtually a guarantee of being overworked and perpetually exhausted.  

The technological and social systems for doing housework had been constructed with the expectation that the people engaged in them would be full-time housewives. When the full-time housewives began to disappear, those systems could not adjust quickly. Not even the most efficient working wife in the world can prepare, serve, and clean up from a meal in four minutes flat, and even the best organized working mother still cannot feed breakfast to a toddler in thirty seconds. Homes cannot automatically be moved close to a job or even close to public transportation, so someone still has to be available to drive the man of the family to the train or a child to the soccer field or to a party; and day-care centers cannot quickly be built where they have not existed before, so someone still has to leave a career behind for a while when babies are born—or find a helpful grandmother.

Indeed, given the sacred feelings that most Americans seem to attach to meals, infants, private homes, and clean laundry—and given the vast investment individuals, corporations, and municipalities have made in the technological systems that already exist—our household technologies may never evolve so as to make life easier for the working wife and mother. In the generations to come, housework is not likely to disappear. Barr ing a catastrophic economic or nuclear disaster, the vast majority of today’s children will form families when they grow up, will buy houses, and will outfit those houses with tools for doing housework. Home computers may be added to the repertoire, but
there will still be at least functional equivalents of cooking stoves and refrigerators, telephones and automobiles, washing machines and dishwashers. However much trouble these technologies may be, however much they may cost to obtain and then to maintain, and however much they may induce us to engage in amounts or forms of work that are often irritating and sometimes infuriating, the standard of living and the way of living that they make possible is one to which many Americans aspired in the past and that many are unlikely to forsake in the future. The washing machine may not save as much time as its advertisers might like us to believe, and electricity may not bring as many good things to living as the manufacturers of generating equipment would like us to think, but the daily lives that are shaped by washing machines and electricity are so much more comfortable and healthy than the ones that were shaped by washtubs and coal (or, before that, dirty clothes and open hearths) that we will probably not give them up.

Still, while enjoying the benefits that these technological systems provide, we need not succumb entirely to the work processes that they seem to have ordained for us. If we regard these processes as unsatisfactory, we can begin to extricate ourselves from them not by destroying the technological systems with which they are associated but by revising the unwritten rules that govern the systems. Some of these rules—to change our sheets once a week and keep our sinks spotless and greaseless, to wipe the table after every meal, to flush the toilet, brush our teeth, change our clothes and wash our hair, to give music lessons to our children and keep our dirty linen literally and figuratively to ourselves—generate more housework than may really be necessary. These rules were passed down to us by members of an earlier generation (our parents) and sprang from fear of the deprivations that poverty engenders and from a desire either to rise above those deprivations or to stave them off. Now that profound poverty has ceased to be an imminent threat for most of us, the time has surely come to re-evaluate the amount of time that we spend maintaining the symbols of our status.

Others of these rules—that, for example, men who dry dishes or change diapers are insufficiently masculine, that only women can properly nurture infants, that young girls should help their mothers in the kitchen and young boys assist their fathers in the garage, that husbands can undertake long commutes but wives cannot—ensure that the work processes of housework will be confined to members of only one sex, not only in this generation but in generations to come. These latter rules, connected as they are to aspects of our sexuality and our self-conception, are not easy to revise. Even those brave members of the postwar generations who learned to sever the bond between “working mother” and “social disaster” could not erase more than one social stereotype at a time, and when they chose spouses and formed households, they adopted virtually the same sexual division of household labor with washing machines and microwave ovens as had their ancestors with washtubs and open hearths: the men responsible for fuel and for lawns (those symbolic remnants of fields of waving grain) and the women responsible for cooking, cleaning, laundering, and child care. If centuries upon centuries of social conditioning have led us to prefer the private household and the individual ownership of tools, then centuries upon centuries of social conditioning also prepared these young women to be housewives and these young men to believe that the work of cooking, cleaning, and caring for infants would threaten their masculinity. Indeed, when the children of the baby boom were still children, when they were forming their sense of “what it means to be a woman” or “what it means to be a man,” all the adults upon whom these adolescents might have been modeling themselves—their parents, the people down the block, celebrities, creators of plots for movies, authors of magazine articles and textbooks—were still engaged in the backward search for femininity and still suggesting (in the strongest affective terms) that dishwashers and diapers were objects to be manipulated by females, and that wrenches and lawn mowers were objects to be manipulated by males, and that the manipulation of inappropriate objects was, to put it anthropologically, sexually polluting.

The rules that stem from a fear of poverty, and the rules that stem from fear of sexual pollution, were the product of specific historical periods, with social and technological constraints of their own. The widespread diffusion of modern household tech-
ology and the widespread entrance of married women into the labor force have markedly loosened those constraints; and thus the time has come to begin changing the rules. We can best solve the problems that beset many working wives and their families not by returning to the way things used to be (since that is probably impossible and, in view of the ways things really used to be, hardly attractive), not by destroying the technological systems that have provided many benefits (and that much of the rest of the world is trying, for fairly good reasons, to emulate), and not by calling for the death of the family as a social institution (a call that the vast majority of people are unlikely to heed)—but by helping the next generation (and ourselves) to neutralize both the sexual connotation of washing machines and vacuum cleaners and the senseless tyranny of spotless shirts and immaculate floors.

Postscript:

Less Work for Mother

As art mirrors life, so does scholarship; and a thoughtful scholar opens his or her life to the insights of scholarship. I am a scholar who has studied the history of housework, and also a working mother and housewife who lives in the suburbs and has three children. People frequently ask me—indeed, I frequently have asked myself—how my experiences as a housewife have shaped my research, and, conversely, how my research has shaped my behavior as a housewife. I think that these are important questions, deserving of an answer, because they are but special cases of the more general question, Can the study of history teach us how to live better? Unlike some other historians, I think that the answer to this question is Yes; and I can try to explain why I think so by telling a story, somewhat abbreviated but nonetheless true, about myself.

A few years after I had begun the research on which this book is based, I caught myself in the act of following one of the unwrit-
Chapter 1. An Introduction: Housework and Its Tools


Chapter 2. Housework: Household Work and Household Conditions Under Pre-Industrial Conditions

1. Thomas Tusser [1577]. The verse comes from a poem by Tusser, "The Author's Delight Betweene two Ratchets, of wiving and thriving by Affirmation and Objection," which Tusser used as the introduction to a work, "The points of Hudefwarse," that he added to his earlier work, Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry [1573]. I have quoted it from the edition edited by W. Payne and Sidney Heritage (London, 1878), p. 158.


Notes to pages 21-43

in the Nineteenth Century (Columbus, Ohio, 1976); and Susan Strasser, Never Done: A History of American Housework (New York, 1982), chap. 10.


6. On the early history of domestic service, see Luci Maynard Salmond, Domestic Service (New York, 1897). The topic is discussed in more detail in chapter 3.


14. The probable date on which this section is based comes from the archives of Suffolk County located in Riverhead, N.Y. I am indebted to Nancy Matt, a graduate student at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, for supplying me with copies of these records.

15. Suffolk County, Surrogate's Court probate file no. 1806.

16. Suffolk County, Surrogate's Court probate file no. 2028.

17. Suffolk County, Surrogate's Court probate file no. 1279.

Chapter 3. The Invention of Housework: The Early Stages of Industrialization


3. Letter, 6 February 1888, from Mary Hallow Foote to Helena Gilder, Mary Hallow Foote Papers, Stanford University Library, as quoted in Degler, At Odds [1], p. 54.


Chapter 7. Postwar Years

1. This description of the New York City minimum standard budget is from James T. Patterson, America’s Struggle Against Poverty, 1900–1960 (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 86. The same point about the high standard of living that had been achieved by working-class families in the years after the Second World War is made in Lee Rainwater, What Money Buys: Inequality and the Social Meanings of Income (New York, 1974), p. 122.

2. Patterson, Struggle Against Poverty [1], pp. 79, 160.


4. “Prices, and Cost and Standards of Living,” Monthly Labor Review 61 (December 1955): 2220–21. The decennial census did not begin reporting on ownership of household appliances other than refrigerators until 1970, hence, data for decades prior to that is often difficult to find, except as estimates based on production figures. These data, from 1941, are based on samples that were part of the Survey of Spending and Saving in Wartime, conducted by the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture.


7. For detailed evidence on this point, see Joan Vasek, “Household Technology and Social Status: Rising Living Standards and Status Differences in Housework,” Technology and Culture 19 (July 1978): 361–79.

8. John P. Robinson, How Americans Use Time: A Social-Psychological Analysis of Everyday Behavior (New York, 1977), pp. 61–78. I have used Robinson’s data here because the analysis is particularly useful and because the sample was particularly large and particularly well selected. Robinson’s results are consistent with all time studies of housework that have been performed since the end of the Second World War.


11. The specific figures cited in these sentences are from Robinson, How Americans Use Time [8]. Note that my analysis is consistent with the findings of other studies cited in notes 8 and 10.

