

Three Books on the History of Housework: A Review Article

Deborah Gorham
Carleton University

When the feminist revival began, more than fifteen years ago, the irrationality and injustice of the cultural patterns that have made housework 'women's work' became a central issue for feminist analysis. The exploitation of women's labour in the areas of life that patriarchal society labelled 'the private sphere' was one of the main themes of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969). And many readers of this article will remember Pat Mainardi's witty and incisive paper "The Politics of Housework" which appeared in the pathbreaking anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970). Mainardi's point was that at the core of male opposition to women's liberation was a strong determination to hold on to male privilege in the allocation of work: men's refusal to share the work of maintaining home and family, Mainardi pointed out, limited women's opportunities to pursue creative work of their own. And men's refusal to take housework seriously meant that as work, it remained unacknowledged and undervalued.

Over the past fifteen years, feminists have done a lot of thinking about housework. Feminist theorists, sociologists and economists have formulated and proposed answers to a variety of questions, including how housework should be

defined in relationship to other kinds of work; how housework's relatively low status can be explained; and what the connection is between the low status of housework and the low status and pay that the majority of women receive in the labour force.

During the years that feminist analysis has been concerned with housework, there have been some significant changes in North American economic and social patterns affecting the issue. The most important of these is the great increase in the labour force participation of married, separated, and divorced women with children. Two decades ago, only 20 per cent of married women in Canada were employed in the paid labour force. Today the participation rate of Canadian married women is over 50 per cent. While this change in labour force participation has not, as yet, been accompanied by corresponding changes in the kind of work women do (they are still, for the most part, working as service workers) or in female rates of pay, relative to those of male workers (women still earn, on average, only 60 per cent of what male workers earn), nor has it been accompanied by a revolution in patterns within households (available studies indicate that, when men and women live

together, housework is still "women's work," even when the woman is employed for pay full-time). Still, it does constitute a revolution in family patterns. The woman who devotes herself to the maintenance of a home and the care of children as an exclusive occupation is now in a minority, and, if trends continue, the occupation of full-time homemaker will become one that is rarely pursued.

As feminist analysis has adapted to examine these changes, significant contributions to an understanding of those processes that have transformed housework, and women's relationship to it, have come from historians, who, in recent years, have joined feminist scholars from other disciplines in examining housework. Of this recent historical work, this article will focus on three books which, in my view, are especially worthy of discussion, not only because they offer explanations of the transformation that has occurred in women's work, but because they offer provocative and helpful analyses of the contemporary dilemmas that confront us as a consequence of that transformation.

The three books are **The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities**. Dolores Hayden. (Cambridge, Mass.: *The M.I.T. Press*, 1981); **Never Done: A History of American Housework**. Susan Strasser. (New York: *Pantheon Books*, 1982); and **More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave**. Ruth Schwartz Cowan. (New York: *Basic Books*, 1983).

All three books focus on the transformation in the nature and in the definition of housework that has taken place over the last two centuries, as a result of the growth of an urban industrial society. Within this general framework, each author has separate concerns, although each employs overlapping evidence.

Strasser's most important contribution is to provide a thoroughly documented account of the way in which technology transformed the types of work included under the heading 'housework.' The first nine chapters of *Never Done* discuss in detail changes in the work processes involved in food production and preparation; in home heating; in laundry work; and in the making of clothing. A reader who wishes to know, for example, when canned food was introduced, or when the cast iron stove came into widespread use, or when commercially-made soap replaced the home-made variety, will turn to this book and find an answer. And the richness of the descriptive detail has an effect that goes beyond the providing of information: this serious, sober, well-documented account does much, in and of itself, to give to housework the dignity it deserves as work, a dignity of which it has been robbed by the ideological assumptions of capitalism and of patriarchy. (Capitalism, because it regards domestic work as "consumption" rather than "production," does not perceive it as work, while patriarchy undervalues any endeavour seen to be the responsibility of women.)

Strasser uses her descriptive material as the basis for an analysis of both the positive and the negative features of the technological transformation she documents. She believes that throughout the transformation of housework by industrial technology, there has always been a balance between the two. Technology relieved women of the backbreaking toil, but it also removed the satisfactions associated with craftsmanship.

In the final third of her book, Strasser develops a cogent analysis of the way in which capitalism has influenced the direction of technological advances in housework, and she concludes that the developments of the mid and late twentieth centuries have been, on balance, harmful ones:

the married women who now enter the labour market join the men and the single women whose growing participation as

workers has expanded the money economy for the past 150 years, giving up the freedom of self-sufficiency and the pleasures of home production to work at stultifying jobs to make money to buy products that provide them with industrialized subsistence. For most of that time, industrialization clearly improved the quality of life at home, eliminating backbreaking labour, raising standards of health and nutrition, and freeing people from virtual slavery to natural cycles. More recently, that quality has begun to decline as the corporations manufacture food, child care, and emotional life in the form of purchased commodities and the market distorts daily ritual and the values of love and community. No better quality can be expected from an economic system that delegates decision-making power over daily life to private corporations that base those decisions on profit, wasting resources and blatantly ignoring human needs. (Strasser, 311)

Strasser's marxist-feminist conclusions imply the need for radical changes in our contemporary social and economic structure, so that technology may be made to serve human needs rather than those of capitalism. The purpose of Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution* is to demonstrate that reformers have been exploring alternatives to the capitalist manipulation of technology in the area of household work since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This reform movement, which Hayden calls "material feminism," "challenged two characteristics of industrial capitalism: the physical separation of household space from public space, and the economic separation of the domestic economy from the political economy." (Hayden, 3)

Hayden's discussion extends from the communitarian socialists of the early nineteenth century, through utopian schemes for socialist cities, to cooperative dining clubs, which not only existed, but flourished in the late nineteenth cen-

tury America. In Hayden's view, egalitarian cooperative housekeeping failed to become a lasting reality, partly because feminists and socialists did not recognise the validity of each other's respective positions. Material feminists, in focussing on gender inequality, and on the way in which the private home oppressed women, too often failed to recognize that there could be inequality between women, inequality that had its roots in the class structure and in racism. As a result their reform efforts often resulted, in practice, if not in theory, in the exploitation of poor, and often non-white women. For example, a dining club employing black cooks and waitresses did relieve its white, middle class organizers of the burden of their individual kitchens, but it did not create equality between women. But if the material feminists failed to recognize the validity of socialism, the socialists failed to recognize either the importance of women's labour in the family, or the fact that the private family exploited that labour. In short, Hayden concludes, "socialists and feminists...each had a piece of the truth about class and gender, production and reproduction." Their failure to put the truths together was "disastrous...for both movements." (Hayden, 7)

The failure was disastrous because business and government, working together, mounted an active campaign against both socialism and material feminism in the early twentieth century. The preservation of the nuclear family and the promotion of the single-family dwelling was ensured through government sponsorship, and propaganda from both business and government. The result has been that, in the twentieth century, not only has privatised domestic work—still done almost exclusively by women—retained its place in the economic structure, and in an ideology that perceives it as an essential feature of the 'American way of life,' but the expanding array of "professionalized" services that have arisen as a result of women's increasing labour force participation has been provided, not by

those concerned with genuine social reform, but by capitalists interested in making a profit.

Dolores Hayden and Susan Strasser share the same marxist-feminist point of view. Both believe that the history of housework in America is one in which the beneficial possibilities of technological advances, and of creative social thinking have not been realized. In place of genuine cooperation, and of a truly efficient use of technology, in the late twentieth century, fast food outlets, commercial day-care centres and rent-a-maid services proliferate. Such business ventures accentuate social inequalities—because it is poor, non-white women who for the most part work in the underpaid, exploitative service sector—and, at the same time, they contribute to the spiritual alienation of their consumers and of their workers.

Ruth Schwartz Cowan's book, like Strasser's, deals with the history of household technology. Like Hayden and Strasser, Cowan develops an analysis of the history of ideological and technological changes in housework since industrialization began, and offers an assessment of the gains and losses that these changes have brought with them, for women, and for men and children.

Cowan's picture of the relationship between the rise of technology and women's workload is very different from that of Strasser. Cowan acknowledges that Strasser's account of the way in which the work processes of housework were transformed by technology is thorough and accurate, and she agrees that the transformation lessened the amount of labour involved. But Cowan points out that Strasser's interpretation is incomplete when she assumes that these technological advances lessened the labour of women. The title of Cowan's book—*More Work for Mother*—is designed to emphasize her major insight, which is that while the process of industrialization did, indeed, lessen the labour involved in doing the tasks we all call housework, the labour of *adult women*—wives—was not thereby

lessened. The isolation of women in the home that occurred as a result of industrialization, was not only a social and emotional isolation. It also meant that women were left to do the work of the house themselves, without the assistance of husband or children, who left the home when it ceased to be the central productive unit, and in the end, without the assistance of servants, who left domestic employment in increasing numbers by the twentieth century, for work in the wider market economy.

The 'irony' of household technology, according to Cowan, was that "[l]abour-saving devices were invented and diffused throughout the country during those hundred years that witnessed the first stages of industrialization, but they reorganized the work process of housework in ways that did not save the labor of the average housewife." (Cowan, 45)

As an example, she discusses the cast-iron cookstove, which came into use in the middle of the nineteenth century and which figures in Strasser's account as an important saver of women's labour. Stoves saved work, says Cowan, "but the labor they saved was male. The important activity that was radically altered by the presence of a stove was fuel gathering...The labor involved in cooking, which was the female share of the work, seems barely to have been affected at all." (Cowan, 61) This pattern was repeated, says Cowan, in other aspects of household work: "What was true of cooking was true of other household chores...[I]n almost every aspect of household work, industrialization served to eliminate the work that men (and children) had once been assigned to do, while at the same time leaving the work of women either untouched or even augmented." (Cowan, 63)

In addition to saving male rather than female labour, technological progress in domestic work also produced more work for women because it raised standards. The twentieth-century homemaker has become more productive than her

grandmother. But while she produces a higher standard of living for her family, her own labour is not thereby lessened. Indeed, Cowan points out that if she is a middle-class housewife, her labour has increased. Middle and upper-class nineteenth-century families, could adopt that “most conservative of all alternative social arrangements for doing housework”—servants (Cowan, 119) but that option has disappeared for their twentieth-century descendants.

Rising standards have affected working class housewives even more than those of the middle and upper class: by the mid twentieth-century, the working class housewife had to work just as hard as her mother or grandmother, but her labours were more productive, and her family's standard of living was much higher. The result has been what Cowan calls the “homogenization” of housework: the middle-class housewife has been “marching down the road to proletarianization,” while working-class housewives' labours were producing a middle-class standard of living for their families.

Cowan's picture of the development and the effects of household technology, is similar to Strasser's in some fundamental respects. For example both historians wish to emphasize that the transformation of housework must be seen as part of the wider process of industrialization. Although an ideology of 'separate spheres' which saw the household as separate from the market economy emerged with industrialization, in fact, the household, as a workplace, always had links with the wider society, and these links increased as technological progress transformed the household, along with other workplaces.

But while Cowan and Strasser agree about this general point, Cowan disagrees with Strasser, as we have seen, when it comes to assessing the effect that technology had on women's work. Moreover, Cowan takes issue with both Strasser and Hayden when it comes to assessing both the benefits of technological changes in household

work, for women and for their families, and the reasons why alternative paths—like co-operative housework were not taken. Cowan, while she does support the goal of women's equality, also supports the nuclear family, on the one hand, and American capitalism, on the other, and the major purpose of her book is to present a challenge to the marxist-feminist interpretation exemplified by both Strasser and Hayden, and to defend twentieth-century consumer capitalism, even though she believes it has, so far, produced 'more work for mother.'

In her chapter entitled “The Roads not Taken: Alternative Social and Technical Approaches to Housework,” she takes up the question that forms the main theme of Hayden's book, and asks why it was that plans for co-operative housekeeping never gained acceptance in American society. She rejects Hayden's conclusions that the failure resulted from the determination of capitalist industry and government to resist it, and insists that the answer for the failure of all such schemes is a simple one: Americans rejected them not because of “government repression or censorship,” nor because of “the combined forces of capitalism and patriarchy...at least not in a conspiratorial sense” (Cowan, 146), but because of the great American commitment to privacy and personal autonomy:

The common condition that underlines their failure is the fact that most people prefer to live in their own homes, with their own relatives, rearing their own children... Americans have decided to live in apartment houses rather than apartment hotels because they believe that something critical to family life is lost when all meals are eaten in restaurants or all food is prepared by strangers...When given choices, in short, most Americans act so as to preserve family life and family autonomy. (Cowan, 150)

As an attack on the marxist-feminist critique of contemporary consumer society, and what it is

can life. Both the analysis in the book, and Cowan's references to her own family life make it obvious that she includes herself as part of this large majority.

These presuppositions affect her interpretation of the meaning of the significant increase in married women's participation in paid employment that has taken place over the past decade or so. She believes that the increase in the number of mothers taking paid employment is the result of a series of choices that women have made in which they have always put the welfare of their families first, before any other goals. There is a connection between technological improvements in domestic work and the increase in married women's labour force participation, but from Cowen's view, it is not a direct one. Technological improvements, Cowen asserts,

have not been *causes* of married women's participation in the work force, but they have been *catalysts* of this participation... Most American housewives did not enter the job market because they had an enormous amount of free time on their hands... Rather *they* 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... Modern household technology facilitated married women's work-force 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. (Cowan, 209-210)

Technological development then, in Cowan's view, has led to increased labour for women, and at the same time, to an increase in the well-being of the private family. While Cowan would like to

see the removal of the gender stereotyping that produces more work for women than for men, not only does she see such a transformation as an endeavor that is largely the responsibility of women, rather than of men (as women, we have to stop worrying about spotless houses; as mothers, we have to teach our sons that using a vacuum cleaner is not unmanly), she sees it as of secondary importance to the primary goal of preserving the family. Cowan almost appears to be accepting the idea that the gender division of labour is part of the natural order. One suspects that such an assumption is implicit, for example, in her statement about the fact that men have not appreciably increased the amount of housework they do, even when their mates work for pay. (Cowan, 200) She does not ask why this exploitation of women's labour within the family continues: she does not relate the question to sexual politics. She appears simply to accept its inevitability.

While I find myself more in sympathy with the marxist-feminist approach of Strasser and Hayden, Cowan's criticisms of that approach are often cogent, and add a useful perspective. Cowan's assumption that the co-operative vision failed because the American people rejected it is not satisfactory, but she does pour some needed cold water on the strain of romantic feminist socialism that runs through Hayden's book, and is at times, present in Strasser's as well. Indeed, fruitful and suggestive as Hayden's concept of material feminism is, there are problems with it. The tradition exists in her book only with some forcing: her attempts to link together such disparate figures as the anti-suffragist proponent of "separate spheres," Catherine Beecher, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, on the grounds that they shared a concern about rationalizing women's work in the home, are not entirely convincing. And, as Cowan is quick to point out, she exaggerates, and presents as more important than they actually were, some of the experimental schemes with which her work deals.

doing to women, and men, Cowan's comments are either naive or disingenuous. She misses the point, and trivializes the issues. First of all, her definition of choice is simplistic. She does not argue against, she simply ignores, contemporary marxist analysis, which insists that a major feature of modern, capitalist society is its manipulativity and that the old liberal democratic ideal of autonomy and personal choice has been corrupted. In many areas of life, and especially in our arrangements for clothing, feeding, housing and nurturing ourselves, we are in fact, faced with a series of choices between several varieties of the same thing, none of which are truly designed to satisfy our needs.

Cowan's criticisms of the marxist-feminist view are also unsatisfactory because she ignores, rather than confronts, the issues of class and ethnic inequalities. When Cowan insists that American families freely chose, and continue to choose, the private home over co-operative alternatives, she is speaking more for prosperous, white, America than she is for the poor (who in her account, seemed to have ceased to exist in the late twentieth century), or for black Americans, or members of other minority groups. It is because she ignores, rather than confronts, class and ethnic inequality, that she is able to be so sanguine about the benefits of technological developments, as they have unfolded in the American economy. Cowan dismisses the importance of class and ethnicity as producers of inequality because she is committed to the premise that American capitalism really does represent the best chance society has to produce the maximum amount possible of freedom of choice and well-being. Although she does believe that technology has caused some problems she is fundamentally happy with the way in which American society functions in the 1980s; and, moreover, she sees any problems that do exist as being inseparable from the benefits of technology itself.

Cowan simply dismisses the importance of inequalities of class and ethnicity. Towards gender inequality her attitude is ambivalent. Her position on the origins and the justice of the sexual division of labour is unclear. On the one hand, she does discuss perceptively the way in which the nineteenth century ideology of separate spheres has extended into the twentieth century: "in a backward search for femininity" we have vainly attempted to preserve some of the supposed values of the past, by associating their preservation with a continuance of the 'traditional' female role, and their destruction with new roles for women. She recognizes that there are 'potent cultural forces' that have created a false connection between certain kinds of household work, and emotional nurturance, and that false connection, in itself, has created more work for the twentieth-century middle-class American housewife: ("People who believe that family solidarity can be bolstered by hand-dipped chocolates and hand-grown string beans are bound to spend a lot of time dipping chocolates and growing stringbeans.") (Cowan, 206-207) She does believe that we should all be more aware of the ideological origins of both the gender division of labour, and unnecessarily high standards of housekeeping. In the next generation, she hopes, we will "neutralize both the sexual connotation of washing machines and vacuum cleaners and the senseless tyranny of spotless shirts and immaculate floors." (Cowan, 216)

But while she does accept these limited feminist goals, Cowan is fundamentally conservative on the issue of both family and gender inequality. Although she would like to see some "revising of the unwritten rules that govern the [technological] systems" she believes that the majority of women, like the majority of men, see the preservation of family life as a more important goal than sexual equality. She rejects the marxist-feminist interpretation which sees the nuclear family as inherently oppressive to women: instead she believes that a near universal consensus exists that the family is the cornerstone of Ameri-

Indeed, from the point of view of historical methodology, one thing to be learned from examining these three books together is that, in a field as young as the history of housework, historians can arrive at remarkably divergent interpretations of relevant evidence. Melusina Fay Peirce will serve as an example. Peirce, the wife of a Harvard professor, published five articles in 1868-9, in the *Atlantic Monthly* on co-operative housekeeping. In them, she presents a scheme for getting the work of the home into the marketplace: women as a group should organize household work as a commercial venture, selling their services to their husbands. Peirce believed that no domestic work should be performed in the private home: control over the co-operative enterprises should involve only women, and all women should be involved. Her plans also included a separate female legislature, to be elected by women only.

In Hayden's book, Peirce is a radical material feminist, who deserves a whole chapter; for Strasser, Peirce is an "obscure" but interesting thinker, who had some radical ideas, but who was, on balance, concerned to buttress the conservative ideology of separate spheres. And in Ruth Schwartz Cowan's book, Peirce gets a few short lines in the chapter on "Alternative Approaches to Housework." There she figures as an "ordinary upper middle class woman," an example of the kind of reformer "who could see some of the benefits that might accrue to cooperative housekeeping, but [was] not interested in giving [her] whole [life] to it." (Cowan, 114)

There are at least two reasons why Melusina Fay Peirce figures in such divergent ways in the work of these three scholars. First, there is the fact that, because the history of housework is only now beginning to be explored, little is known about a figure like Peirce: as a new discovery, there is no clear and generally accepted assessment of her importance, or of how she should be interpreted: thus, the same woman appears as a radical, a conservative, and a "fairly

ordinary" moderate. The second reason is that, given the malleability of the information, a little known figure like Peirce can be used to fit whatever general interpretation a particular scholar is trying to create. It does seem probable that, in this case, Hayden's desire to create a tradition of material feminism has caused her to make Peirce more important than she actually was, and to present her as more radical than she in fact was. Cowan's ideological bias against material feminism causes her to be more dismissive than is warranted of nineteenth and twentieth century ideas about co-operative housekeeping, but she is probably correct when she downplays the importance of Peirce.

While one can question both the interpretation and the conceptual framework of each of these books, each of the three, considered separately, makes a major contribution to our understanding of a subject of central concern to the history of women. Considered together, the books not only enrich our knowledge of the past, their contrasting interpretations of both past and present contribute to the contemporary debate about North American economic and social structures, and specifically about the role of women and the direction that feminism should take in the last decades of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank all the members of the seminar "Selected Topics in the History of Women and Family," which I taught at Carleton University, in 1983-4. This article owes much to several lively and fruitful class discussions we had in the course of reading the books reviewed here.