

Homemade Economics: The Managerial Rationalization of Women's Everyday Life in America, 1820-1920

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Abstract

The paper sketches the nature and the logic of the discourse on household administration in America from 1820 to 1920. Using a hermeneutic approach, it reveals how this literature insists on measuring for efficiency rather than on accounting for profit, and thus unveils understandings of management science and economics different from the ones prevailing nowadays. Finally, this study invites to understand this literature not mainly as an instrument for the male oppression of women but as a way for them of escaping tradition.

Key words: household management, economics, accounting, women's emancipation

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, a blossoming domestic advice literature submitted the daily tasks of the American housekeeper to a methodical scrutiny. This systematization of an empirical economic knowledge contributed to shape the American housewife's way of thinking and to formulate principles of sound management and economy: efficiency, system, progress and calculation. Such a managerial ethos was not a creation of the first American professional engineers. On the contrary, if some thinkers of domestic administration could apply so easily Frederick Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) to the home in the 1910s, it is precisely because the home had been rationalized for almost a century (Furst, 1911; Leupp, 1911; Gilbreth, 1912; Guernsey, 1912; Bruere, 1912; Frederick, 1913; Child, 1914; Pattison, 1915; Frederick, 1919).

From the beginning of the nineteenth century onward, this outlook was conscientiously promoted to American home-makers through books, magazine, tuition courses and academic curricula. This discourse have certainly played a major role in turning nineteenth and twentieth century housewives into economically sensitive managers. By contrast, this way of thinking economics sheds light on the peculiar shapes taken by management and economic science in the nineteenth and twentieth century: that is, in the main, the concealment of the principle of care for the first and the emphasis on the pecuniary dimensions of human activity for the second. Finally, while reasserting women's subjection to their fathers and husbands, this prescriptive literature testifies for a will to bring home-makers into the light of science and modernity, and to invest the daily tasks of the housewife of some form of dignity by connecting these to the fate of the American nation and to the glories of industrialism.

No wonder this discourse remains, for a majority of scholars, no more than a curiosity or the occasion of gender-inspired acrimonies. Yet, we may assume that it popularized a certain managerial outlook throughout American culture in the last two centuries, and thus helped them to get rid of the heavy burden of custom and religion.

For this prescriptive literature had a tremendous success. Catharine Beecher's book presenting the first "systematic plan of domestic economy" (Beecher, 1841: 157) went through fifteen editions between 1841 and 1856. Similarly, Isabella Beeton's 1861 book, which popularized the expression "household management," sold over sixty thousands copies in its first year of publication and almost two millions by 1868. *The Englishwoman's*

Domestic Magazine, which was founded by Isabella Beeton's husband to be, attained a circulation of 50,000 by 1860 (Humble, 2000: xi). Founded in 1883, *The Ladies Home Journal* reached twenty years later a circulation of one million. In 1901, Robert Shaw's "Bibliography of Domestic Economy" listed 190 general works, 26 text-books, 30 dictionaries and encyclopedias, 63 periodicals, plus bibliographies, bulletins, syllabus, circulars, and charts for reference study (Shaw, 1901; cf. Lyford, 1919). The growing number of women's magazine dealing directly with managerial issues suggests the widespread acceptance of this peculiar outlook. In the twentieth century, this literature seems to remain an important source of economic advice for women, be they housekeepers or not.

Of course, large differences separated 1820's household environment and work relationships from their 1920's counterparts. The decline of the number of domestic servants and of children per family, the multiplication of household appliances, the availability of products to buy which were formerly home-made, the rise of industrial capitalism, the multiplication of job opportunities for women outside their home, all these phenomena contributed to transform the American household throughout the nineteenth century. And of course, immense discrepancies existed between rural America and the fast growing cities fueled by immigration and flight from the countryside. As such, for instance, late nineteenth century books of domestic advice looked more towards science than towards religion. And the "domestic problem" changed of nature between 1820 and 1900 (Katzman, 1978). But on the whole, common features can be underlined and hypothesis formulated regarding the definition of management and economics in the nineteenth century, and the positive role played by this literature in the symbolic and intellectual desegregation of American women.

Another view of management and economics

Today's historians of management rarely venture beyond the 1880s, and most of them never consider the house. Most of these thinkers assume that management is the invention of men working in for-profit institutions characterized by high division of labor, industrial mechanization and impersonal relationships. Yet, tracing back the uses of the term "management," we are led to consider the activity of home-making in nineteenth century America, i.e. the occupations of women working in non-for-profit institutions characterized by their little division of labor, their non-mechanization, and their highly personalized relationships (Richardson, 1929).

Similarly, today's thinkers of economics tend to consider that the central institution around which revolves their discipline is the market, and to a secondary degree the business corporation and the state. Yet, from Aristotle to Montchrestien, if such an historical short-cut has any meaning, the understanding of economic activities centered principally round the house, to which production and consumption activities principally belonged. For the early political economists and especially the Physiocrats, the *pater familias* served as a model for the statesman, and the state prerogatives were reflected in the language of the home. As late as 1821, a major political economist could characterize economy as "the law which regulates the household," *political* economy being the extension of this domestic rules to national affairs (Say, 1821, footnote p.xv).

From the late eighteenth century, the study of the state-level economy began to mobilize most of the distinguished thinkers' energies and overshadowed, on the stage of intellectual history, the discourses on the industrial and mercantile realities of the household. Developed on a practical ground from the 1820s through books and magazines of advices to middle-class women, this peculiar understanding of the *homo æconomicus* (or "*femina æconomicus*," should we say) awaited the beginning of the twentieth century to enter the hall of American academia under the name of "home economics." It remains hitherto a discipline of secondary importance.

By contrast, home economics sheds light on what has become mainstream economics in the twentieth century. From a nineteenth century domestic perspective, the term "economy" referred more to the thrifty management of the household resources than to monetary exchanges on a market. The insistence on the profitability of a farm or of a particular crop pointed out less to a potential pecuniary gain than to their productivity. By then, an economic housewife was, first and foremost, an efficient producer. In this perspective, noted for instance a regular contributor to the *Ladies Home Journal* at the end of the 1890s, economy in the home "means that everything is put to its proper use, and there is no waste," and most of all "that the most precious thing (*sic*) in it — the mother — shall not be misused or wasted" (Parloa, 1898: 258 and 352). As a consequence, household economic maxims were closer from managerial rules than from the capitalistic ethos.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century books of domestic advice were very distinct from the general treatises of political economy then circulating, which considered with a theoretical outlook the impact of laws on trade and agriculture as a national issue. Definitively practical, popular rather than elitist, more feminine than masculine, they focused on the home as a

single unit in a very empirical perspective. Most of these books covered an extremely wide range of issues, as their often paragraph-long titles suffice to prove. Founded in 1825, *The Economist and General Adviser* magazine contained for instance papers on the following subjects: markets, marketing, drunkenness, gardening, cookery, traveling, housekeeping, management of income, distilling, baking, brewing, agriculture, public abuses, shops and shopping, house taking, benefit societies, annals of gulling, amusements, useful receipts, domestic medicine – and the list is not complete.

Behind its apparent dissipation, this literature methodically promoted a set of fixed principles: industry and efficiency, education and progress, system and order, and finally measuring and calculating. We shall now focus on this last dimension of household management.

Measuring and calculating for efficiency rather than accounting for profit

Nineteenth century literature on domestic management contributed to foster a certain kind of non-for-profit economic rationality within American homes, largely based on the principles of measuring and calculating. On the whole, these two practices were given much more attention than the one of accounting, even in matters related to consumption.

More than the housekeeper as a producer, the housekeeper as a consumer had the obligation to acquire skills in measuring, calculating and accounting. Published in 1825, the first issue of the *Housekeeper's magazine* taught for instance that “it is moreover necessary for a woman, to acquaint herself with the value and quality of all articles in common use, and of the best times and places for purchasing them. A pair of scales and weights should also be kept for the purposes of domestic economy” (*The Housekeeper's Magazine*, vol. 1, n°1, 1825: 3).

From its very beginning, early in the nineteenth century, the literature on household management showed a vivid interest for “marketing,” understood as the art of purchasing on a market. The knowledge of the wholesale price of the commodity, the selection of the appropriate market, the quantity purchased, the time of the purchase as well as the choice of articles felt under this head and all required measuring and calculating skills. The second issue of the *Housekeeper's magazine* gave such an advice to its readers:

The first and greatest point [of economy] is, to lay out your general plan of living in a just proportion to your fortune and rank [...]. In order to settle your plan, it will be necessary to make a pretty exact calculation; and if, from this time, you accustom

yourself to calculations, in all the little expenses entrusted to you, you will grow expert and ready at them, and be able to guess very nearly, where certainty cannot be obtained. Many articles of expense are regular and fixed: these may be valued exactly; and, by consulting with experienced persons, you may calculate nearly the amount of others: any material article of consumption, in a family of any given number and circumstances, may be estimated pretty nearly; and your own expenses of clothes and pocket-money should be settled and circumscribed, that you may be sure not to exceed the just proportion. Regularity of payments and accounts is essential to economy: your house-keeping should be settled at least once a week, and all the bills paid; all other tradesmen should be paid, at farthest, once a year. [...] You must endeavour to acquire skill in purchasing: in order to this, you should begin now to attend to the prices of things, and take every proper opportunity of learning the real value of every thing, as well as the marks whereby you are to distinguish the good from the bad” (*The Housekeeper’s Magazine*, no. 2, 1826: 26).

Even during the early days of American settlement, self-sufficiency was never absolute. But it was only from the 1870s and 1880s that the task of the housekeeper evolved considerably – the home-maker being more and more deprived of salaried servants and family helpers, buying more and more products formerly home-made, and externalizing duties such as the education of children and the care for the sick. As American historian Ruth Cowan puts it:

Butchering, milling, textile making, and leatherwork had departed from many homes by 1860. Sewing of men’s clothing was gone, roughly speaking, by 1880, of women’s and children’s outwear by 1900, and finally of almost all items of clothing for all members of the family by 1920. Preservation of some foodstuffs — most notably peas, corn, tomatoes, and peaches – had been industrialized by 1900; the preparation of dairy products such as butter and cheese had become a lost art, even in rural districts, by about the same date” (Cowan, 1983: 78).

In 1899, the “prophet” (Bevier, 1911: 214) of home economics Ellen Richards noted that “housekeeping no longer means washing dishes, scrubbing floors, making soap and candles; it means spending a given amount of money for a great variety of ready-prepared articles and so using the commodities as to produce the greatest satisfaction and the best possible mental, moral, and physical results” (Richards, 1899: 103). Living more and more in urban areas by 1830, women had a greater access to consumable commodities.

In a book devoted to “the woman who spends,” June Richardson Lucas explained: “comparisons of the ways and means of women’s spending, a schedule of time, money, and effort, to establish a firm relation between these three to gain the best results for all, are most

needed in the woman's spending world" (Lucas, 1904: 17). According to Marion Talbot, Dean of Women at the University of Chicago, and to the politically and academically active teacher Sophonisba Breckinridge, the very adoption of a standard of living rested "on the basis of careful thought as to the pecuniary resources available for the group, the probable changes in the earning capacity of the man, the social claims upon the group, and the domestic and social capacities of the woman" (Talbot and Breckinridge, 1912: 12). The computing of these different "capitals," as Gary Becker will call them, was frequently promoted as the foremost task of the modern housekeeper.

Nevertheless, the principles of measuring and calculating were mostly applied to non-pecuniary objects, even at the beginning of the twentieth century. Accounting sheets, income charts, wages and income tables were part of the easy-to-handle techniques and tools developed to help the housekeeper in her daily chores. But they remained marginal compared to the houses' and kitchens' plans, schemes representing the disposition of the crockery and the cutlery on the table, or sketches of the proper arranging of a closet. Measuring and calculating principles were also applied to systems of rewards and punishments, to cooking methods, to the schedule of children's activities or to the servants' work. For instance, a popular handbook entitled *Domestic Duties* reads as follow: "As much time is saved, or rather gained, by a regular disposal of each division of the day, I recommend to you to plan the whole out every morning; and as far as you can command circumstances, to pursue that plan steadily. In what regards the business of your family, endeavour to arrange its performance as nearly at the same time of each day as can be conveniently done" (Parkes, 1825: 317). From the measuring of the temperature of the water for bathing and the temperature of their room to the measuring of their height and weight, the person managing infants and children had to constantly portion and scope. In household and farm management, measuring was indispensable for planning and arranging. As summed up a pioneer in the home economics movement, "the household manager should learn to think in percentages" (Terrill, 1905: 162).

As such, accounting was a secondary consideration in many of the books on household management here considered, often appearing at the very end of them, in the miscellaneous. Most of these books contained at least a few advices on the "management of income" and on the importance of not living on credit, of keeping accounts with exactness, and of keeping bills and receipts. The typical advice felt like this: "Those who are not in the habit of squaring their outlay to their income, by keeping regular accounts, and by laying down a rigid estimate of what they can afford to spend, for obtaining necessaries and comforts within their reach,

are not aware how much they must infallibly lose in the enjoyment of life, and in ease of mind” (*The Economist*, 1825, n°1: 359). But the subject often remained very remote. For instance, in their reference book, Catharine Beecher and her little sister devoted chapters to early rising and care of domestic animals, but none to accounting. Similarly, John Henry Walsh’s *Manual of Domestic Economy* dedicated eleven pages to fermented liquors but less than one to “housekeeping accounts and total ordinary expenditures” (Walsh, 1853: 618-619). No book seems to have been specifically devoted to the topic of household accounting before 1913 (Whigam & Frederick, 1913).

When considered, accounting was praised for its manifold usefulness. Firstly, a proper method of accounting was a major tool for keeping order within the house. Secondly, measuring, calculating and accounting were also considered as ways of gaining knowledge in order to make decisions. Catharine Beecher thus praised accounting for, “by comparing what is spent for superfluties, with what is spent for intellectual and moral advantages, data will be gained, for judging of the past, and regulating the future” (Beecher, 1841: 174). University teacher in home economics Bertha Terrill also stressed the importance of “a *Knowledge* as to how to perform the details of housework in a superior manner. Unless one understands what is necessary in the preparation of a certain dish, or the length of time it ought to require to clean a room properly, it is quite impossible to direct it so that the requisite amount of time and strength shall be expended upon it, and no more” (Terrill, 1905: 72). Advertising was similarly praised by Christine Frederick as a means of gaining knowledge of the different products available to buy (Frederick, 1913: 109).

Finally, accounting was also recommended as a method for training children. According to the authoress of a *Mother’s Book*, “from the time children are twelve years old, they should keep a regular account of what they receive, and what they expend. This will produce habits of care, and make them think whether they employ their money usefully” (Child, 1831: 132; cf. Beecher, 1841: 188). Accordingly, an American writer of children’s books advised parents to open and keep an account for each child of the family in a small book. One of the main purpose of such a “plan of appropriating systematically and regularly a certain sum to be at the disposal of the child” was to “train them from the beginning to habits of system and exactness.” (Abbott, 1871: 272 and 273).

Accounting was a matter of order, efficiency and regularity rather than a matter of profit-making. As writes the author of a “system of practical domestic economy,” much more than profit, “*regularity* is the very life and soul of economy” (Anonymous, 1827: 380). Even when

she became more of a consumer, the American woman seemed to retain the thinking habits of a producer. In today's word, she was more a manager than an economist or an accountant.

Reinforcing male domination while preparing women for emancipation

The fact that endured in industrializing America a stereotypical sex-role division of labor and of space does not mean that housewives were systematically oppressed by men. Both men and women were rather under the heel of a gendered tradition. By advocating freedom from tradition and furbishing tools to serve this cause, much of the literature on household management must have contributed to the empowerment of American women.

It is not management techniques that separated spheres for men and women in nineteenth century America. It was religious traditions first. From the 1860s, the industrialization of the home separated further the work of men and children from the work of women. "As the nineteenth century wore on, in 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, 1983: 63-64). Household management was in a large part an answer to this new organizing of the home, much more than its cause.

More than anything, this literature on household management played a major role in turning late nineteenth century home-makers into rational managers. Founded in 1869, the *Cassell's Household Guide* endeavoured "to set out accurately, and in something like scientific order, the laws which govern, and the rules which should regulate, that most necessary and most important of all human institutions, *the household* (*Cassell's Household Guide*, 1869, vol. 1: 1). Cooking schools, training courses offered by women's clubs, magazines of domestic advice, conduct books, and from the beginning of the twentieth century university curricula: the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American housewife was encouraged to reject the burden of tradition and to rationalize her household chores along the lines of modern-day science. As such, the very purpose of most of the early books household management was the education of their readers. A majority of them aimed conscientiously at being pedagogical and popular, sharing this common faith in the power of knowledge and in the benefits of mass education that had made its way through the Western world from the eighteenth century onward.

In her first best-selling book, Catharine Beecher, who envisioned the task of modern mistresses as a “profession”, recommended for instance that domestic economy should be taught “not *practically* but as a *science*” and not at home by the mothers, often ignorant of the true rules of this science, but as “a regular part of school education” (Beecher, 1841: 6, 63 and 5). The development of domestic science coincided with the expansion of education opportunities for women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Neuhaus, 2003: 22).

At the same time, we must admit that these attack on tradition might also have harmed women’s self confidence. The fact that the right thinking, the right acting and the right being were the result of teaching could disqualify the know-how acquired by almost every American women by watching and imitating their elders. And indeed, who can deny the disempowering effect on its readers of such a patronizing literature indicating the very way of peeling an onion, of organizing a diner given at home, of paying visits of condolence, of arranging closets and of conducting oneself in the street?

In many cases, homes were the kingdoms of women. On the one hand, the literature on household management might have limited women imagination to the walls of their houses (Walker, 2003: 746). On the other hand, books and magazines of domestic advice were always full of topics non related to housekeeping and thus offered a certain window on the world. The home was not seen as a private sphere but often as connected to the entire society. Meanwhile, as puts it a housewife who has become a scholar of American history, “the cult of domesticity created a new respect for the private sphere, and when certain of its exponents, male and female, began to carry domestic values outside the home, they also carried a rationale for private, 'indoors' people – that is, women – to be publicly active” (Matthews, 1987: 36). And indeed, this advice literature casted upon the housewife an extremely positive light.

In particular, this literature participated in the symbolic and intellectual desegregation of women. Forerunners of the domestic science movement such as Ellen Richards, Isabel Bevier, Marion Talbot, Helen Kinne, Helen Campbell, and Caroline Hunt, were among the first women to teach in American universities and institutes (on “home economics,” see Craig, 1945; East, 1980; Rossiter, 1982: 65-72; Matthews, 1987: 145-171; Women’s Studies Librarian, 1993). Admittedly, home economics remained a kind of ghetto where women had to confine their hopes of academic responsibilities (Rossiter, 1982: 69-70). But it can also be seen as a first move toward a growing recognition of women as university teachers in their own rights. As states Glenna Matthews, “home economics represented one the ways by which

women attempted to carve out a place for themselves in the male-dominated world of work” (Matthews, 1987: 159).

The fact that, as late as 1920, women were taught to sew and to cook in home economics departments should not be surprising. By then, the American society as a whole considered that it was what women were supposed to do. Meanwhile, learning to count, plan and organize, knowing bookkeeping and how to run a budget have certainly been means of emancipation for women: emancipation from poverty, from strictly manual labor, from tradesmen susceptible to cheat, and from their husbands’ supervision. It was also, as Stephen Walker recalls, “a means of acquiring public recognition” (Walker, 1998: 498). Comparing housekeeping to a business and making it an industrial occupation was also a way to dignify it (Katzman, 1978: 134-136; Margolis, 1984: 143). One niece of Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was both a leading figure of late nineteenth and early twentieth century feminism and one of the most dedicated advocate of professionalized housework (Matthews, 1987: 99; Hayden, 1981: 184-197). For sure, many women preferred to picture themselves as “managers” or “engineers” rather than as housewives or charwomen. Promoting the home as an economic institution and “a producing center” (Trowbridge, 1913: 20), or even depicting it as the seedbed of industrialism, was also a way to legitimize the development of home industries and the selling of home-made products on the market. The rationalizing of housework was then often seen by progressive reformers as a mean to lighten the load for women (Bellamy, 1888: 164-167).

Many books on household management, written by women for women, barely talked about men except as secondary characters. Such manuals featured pious self-disciplined women rather than stewards submitted to unremitting male masters, whether husbands, fathers or brothers. Logically, men often appeared as those you were to be contended; but their well-being was only part of the general happiness of the family, which was the true final purpose of household management. And this remote end often left home-makers in full charge of the means to attain it and granted them the control over their own work.

On the whole, most authors of advice books on household management remained ambiguous and could advocate women’s education while reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and strictly delineated separate spheres for the two sexes. That is precisely what Sarah Josepha Hale did, who was, for forty years, the editor of the highly influent magazine *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. The more women used the home as an argument, the more they tended to legitimate their confinement to the walls of the house (Ryan, 1982: 97-141). Yet, we can

risk the hypothesis that by challenging the separation of the household space from the public space and by confronting tradition, the literature on household management was paving the way for the early American feminists who appeared at the end of the Civil War (Hayden, 1981). As such, the literature on household management certainly participated in the advent of what was called in the first two decades of the twentieth century the “new girl”, more educated and less bound by tradition (Cowan, 1983: 83).

Conclusion

In nineteenth century America, “management” did not mean primarily “business management”, and “economic” did not referred mostly to a pecuniary profit. While being submitted to the religious ethos of work, this literature on household management promoted a rational outlook which must have contributed to the emancipation of women from the ruts of tradition. Of course, it is possible to explain the spread of management and accounting practices among middle-class people in terms of patriarchy (Walker, 1998 and 2003). But such an outlook tends to overshadow the positive role played by the literature on household management for the intellectual emancipation of women from tradition.

Of course, nineteenth century America did not see men and women in a perfect state of equality. Housewives often stood confined within their homes and had little or no access to education. But if household accounting was promoted and diffused within this general framework of male domination throughout the nineteenth century, it does not mean that it was necessarily a mean of reinforcing masculine authority. The movement for the rationalizing of household management did not revolutionized gender relationships in America, but it certainly contributed to dignify women’s daily tasks in their own eyes and in those of their husbands and children.

Rather than denouncing the gender-bias of our elders, perhaps should we question the gender-bias which make reassert that management is an invention of men inseparable from the industrial and capitalist sphere, while the simple tracking of the word “management” shows that systems and management were elaborated by women within the realm of the household before the birth of Frederick Taylor. The concealment of the influence of housework and of the family sphere over economic and management thoughts remains to be questioned. The thorough analysis of these family roots of management could be a tribute to the inventiveness of the early women thinkers of household administration. Such a

reassessment would call for another understanding of economy and management, and it would contribute to bring a feminine light on unjustly too masculine histories of management and economics. On a practical level too such a perspective seems very promising. For instance, rather than applying to the home categories proper to market, why not doing the contrary? Why not making the market more family-like, rather than making the family more market-like?

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