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# Finding a New Home (Economics): Towards a Science of the Rational Family, 1924-1981

Agnès Le Tollec

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Finding a New Home (Economics) :  
Toward a Science of the Rational Family,  
1924-1981

Thèse de doctorat de l'Université Paris-Saclay

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Thèse présentée et soutenue à Cachan, le 27 février 2020, par

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## Introduction

In the past few years, increased attention has been paid to the global ecological crisis. Modern societies are threatened by the depletion of natural resources, pollution, demographic explosion and climate change. An increasing number of people realize that the Western way of life, which is based on economic growth and unrestrained consumption, is unsustainable. In view of this, a renewed interest in the economic roles of the family has emerged. Consumption and household production are increasingly envisioned as means to satisfy basic human needs with a reduced environmental footprint. Thus, advice for home-made cooking, home-gardening as well as for healthy, economical and ecological purchases have proliferated.<sup>1</sup>

Family behavior has often been made the source of problems and the instrument of their solution so it is little surprising that the family as an economic unit would once again attract the attention of political actors. Social scientists have long been aware of the special status of the family in American society and they have been mindful of the political ramifications of their views. Economists are no exceptions and the vicissitudes of home economics throughout the twentieth century are testimony to the complex relationship between economics and politics when it comes to family.

### A History of Family Economics

This dissertation traces the history of family economics in the United States from the time it was a subfield of home economics in the 1920s to the early 1980s

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<sup>1</sup> A recent example is the book *We Are Weather, Saving the Planet at Breakfast* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2019).

when it was clear that it was part of economics itself. In the early twentieth century, home economics was a well-established field of research and teaching which focused on the home and family. It was the most important educational field for American women during the first part of the century, from primary to higher education (Rossiter, 1995).<sup>2</sup> In colleges and universities, home economics included studies on foods and nutrition, home sanitation (bacteriology, hygiene), textile and household management. It drew mostly on the natural sciences but from the 1920s onwards, it got closer to the social sciences. A new subfield emerged – variously called “family economics,” “consumption economics,” “economics of the home” or “household economics” – that drew on the social sciences and focused on the economic activities of families. Particular emphasis was given to consumer behavior, domestic work, housewives’ allocation of time and the relationships between families, corporations and government.

Following World War II, there was a renewed interest in family economic activities among economists. A wide range of new economic theories of consumption emerged, including Paul Samuelson’s revealed preferences approach (1948), James Duesenberry’s relative income hypothesis (1949) and Milton Friedman’s permanent income hypothesis (1957). In the 1960s, family economics became a proper field of economics with the development of the “New Home Economics” (NHE) which considered the family as an important center of production and consumption and modeled household decision making and intra-household resource allocation (Folbre, 1996; Woolley, 2001; Grossbard, 2013).

The term “new home economics” was coined by economist Marc Nerlove in 1974. Its use suggests that economists were aware of earlier work on the

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<sup>2</sup> Even in 1960, the two-thirds of the total number of women faculty in twenty-two science and social science disciplines were in home economics (Rossiter, 1995, 128).

economics of the family by home economists and wished to distinguish themselves from the “old” home economics (Nerlove, 1974). There were differences indeed. First, home economics and the NHE diverge in terms of content and method. By relying on economic, social and psychological factors, home economists claimed that the structural constraints facing families are crucial in explaining family behavior. In particular, they underlined the effect of advertising, lack of information, customs and emulation on consumption. In contrast, new home economists emphasized choice based on economic factors, like prices, income and technologies of production, while they neglected the effects of psychological and social constraints. Secondly, whereas home economists draw on methods from a variety of social sciences including economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology, new home economists used a strictly “economic” method—optimization. Thirdly, home economists had a strong concern for bettering family living/welfare; they considered home economics an art, that is, a systematic body of knowledge to formulate rules of behavior for individuals or government. Conversely, new home economists concentrated on positive economics, that is, presented their studies as dealing with “what is” and not “what ought to be” (Friedman, 1953).

On a different level, the gender composition of home economics and the NHE was very different, yielding distinct levels of recognition in the economics profession. From the 1920s to the 1950s, home economists working on family economics were all women, with Hazel Kyrk, Elizabeth Hoyt, and Margaret Reid as the leading figures, whereas most new home economists were male, including Gary Becker, Jacob Mincer, Theodore Schultz, Reuben Gronau, Michael Grossman, Robert Michael and Solomon Polachek. Besides, home economists were not considered as proper economists. They often had joint positions in a department of home economics and a department of economics or they worked



in federal government. Although they published a number of books and economic textbooks, as well as articles in economic, statistical, education, sociology and social science journals, their work was not frequently discussed by other economists. Only Margaret Reid was belatedly recognized by the economics profession as a pioneer in research on consumer and household behavior (Folbre, 1996, xi).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, as the NHE became part of mainstream economics in the 1970s and early 1980s, most of its practitioners enjoyed successful careers. The leading figure of the NHE, Gary Becker, even received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics Science in 1992.

### Scope of the Dissertation

The dissertation starts in the 1920s when women social scientists investigated consumption and household production within departments of home economics in American colleges and universities as well as in governmental agencies. It begins with Hazel Kyrk's *A Theory of Consumption* which was published in 1924. This book, which argued that consumption had become the main economic role of families, investigated the determinants of consumption using an interdisciplinary approach. Subsequently, Kyrk became a leading promoter of family economics. She trained many students while she had a joint position in the department of economics and in the department of home economics at the University of Chicago. 1924 is also the date of the creation of a Family Economics Division within the Bureau of Home Economics of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (Liston, 1993, 39). This Division welcomed three former students of Kyrk, namely, Day Monroe, Faith Williams and Hildegard Kneeland, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> In 1980, Reid was named Distinguished Fellow of the American Economic Association.

Kyrk herself in the late 1930s. Similarly, the American Home Economics Association set up a committee on “Economic and Social Problems of the Home” in 1923. That committee included, among others, Kyrk and Elizabeth Hoyt, another economist working on consumption (33-35). It was active in publishing articles in the *Journal of Home Economics* and organizing joint meetings with the American Sociological Society (in 1926) and with the American Economic Association (in 1927). It was transformed into a “Family Economics” Division of the American Home Economics Association in 1933, with Kyrk and Day Monroe as chairwomen. In a nutshell, 1924 represents the emergence of family economics within home economics.

After World War II, a number of economists, including Gary Becker and Jacob Mincer, precipitated the transformation of family economics. By the 1960s, the new home economics emerged, with strongholds at the University of Chicago and Columbia University, as well as in the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). The dissertation ends with Becker’s *A Treatise on the Family* (1981) which applies the “economic approach” to the family. Using NHE models, most family behaviors – like marriage, divorce, fertility and intra-household division of labor – were explained as rational reactions to economic variables. Becker’s (1981) volume had a huge success among economists and other social scientists. This illustrates the fact that economists imposed neoclassical framework/rational choice to the study of the family. Yet, Becker (1981) paradoxically marks the end of the NHE as an overarching framework to analyze household decisions. Afterwards, economists no longer considered the household a single decision making unit and resisted the idea that family members strive to satisfy the family welfare.

## A Literature Review

In general, home economists' contributions to family economics are often neglected. In *The Economics of the Family*, Nancy Folbre (1996) starts with NHE models from the 1970s. She identifies the beginning of the field with Schultz's (1973) *Economics of the Family*, an essay collection in which NHE models are applied to a number of family behaviors (Folbre, 1996, xiii). In the *Elgar Companion to Feminist Economics*, Frances Woolley (2001, 328) also dates back the beginning of family economics to the late 1960s and early 1970s because economists had not previously studied "how decisions are made in families." Similarly, in the *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Shoshana Grossbard starts her article on "household economics" with the NHE (Grossbard, 2013). Although she recognizes that in the early twentieth century, "mainstream economists" tackled consumption and labor supply and that "some agricultural and home economists studied household production," she argues that the NHE participated in the proper "reintegration of the household into economic analysis" (225).

There are, however, a number of commentators who have studied the contribution of old home economists to the study of consumption and household production from the 1920s to the 1950s: Elizabeth Hoyt's (Zuckerman & Carsky, 1990; Thorne, 1994; Parsons, 2013), Hazel Kyrk's (Zuckerman & Carsky, 1990; Hirschfeld, 1997; Beller & Kiss, 1999; Mason, 2000b; Rutherford, 2011; Tadajewski, 2013; Van Velzen, 2003), and Margaret Reid's (Yi, 1996; Forget, 1996; Jefferson & King, 2001; Rutherford, 2011; Trezzini, 2016; Hara, 2016). They regarded these works as isolated contributions to economic and marketing thought. Few studies have examined the intellectual and professional relationships between these women. In the thesis, following Margaret Liston

(1993), I show that they formed a close-knit group and participated in creating a coherent field on family economics.

A number of scholars have discussed the relationships between home economics and economics in the second third of the twentieth century. Thomas Stapleford (2007, 422) suggests that research on consumption was left to women in home economics in part because it was a female activity, making it a more suitable research topic for women. Nancy Folbre (1998), Therese Jefferson and John E. King, (2001), and Nobuko Hara (2016) argue that those who were embarrassed with economists' lack of interest in women's nonmarket work and consumption often joined the field of home economics. Evelyn Forget (2011) explains that academic opportunities for women in economics decreased during the 1920s whereas they expanded in home economics, thus encouraging women economists to join home economics departments. The dissertation explores why home economics hosted economic studies of the families. It also points out the originality of this separate economic field for women which had an uncommon concern for welfare as compared to other economic fields.

Finally, this dissertation offers a narrative that accounts for the intellectual and institutional forces that shape the transition between the "old" home economics – that is, family economic studies carried out by home economists – and the "new" home economics. Jefferson and King (2001) have underlined the role of Theodore W. Schultz in this transition. Schultz was acquainted with Reid and Hoyt, two leading figures of the "old" home economics, from Iowa State College. Subsequently, he got interested in household decisions and was involved in the emergence of the NHE during the 1960s. For Yun-Ae Yi (1996), Reid is the connecting thread between the old and the new home economics, but Reid's motivations and contributions remain inadequately known. On a different level, Margaret Rossiter (1995, chapter 8) relates the administrative

attacks against home economics in universities and colleges from the 1950s onwards, a move that should have undermined the institutional basis of the “old” home economics.

## Argument

This dissertation traces the displacement of family economics from the periphery to the center of economics. I show that in the early twentieth century, most economists viewed the family as ruled by social norms – tradition, customs and morals. Consequently, they did not regard the study of the family as coming within the scope of economics. Women economists who had an interest in family were able to create a separate family economics field within home economics departments in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This field explored the structural – psychological, social and economic – constraints on household behavior and was geared towards increasing family welfare. Because household behavior seemed so different from market behavior and because it was a female field, studies on the family remained marginal within economics. After World War II, economists began to interest themselves in consumption and from the 1960s they accounted for a wide range of family behaviors using a utility maximization framework. As family economics became mainstream, it was masculinized.

## Plan of the Dissertation

In chapter 1, I show that topics associated with the domestic sphere and women – women’s work and consumer behavior – were mostly marginalized by economists at the beginning of the twentieth century. With a few exceptions, they were addressed by women economists who were more willing to grant

economic value to household activities than their male counterparts. As they failed to gain recognition within economics, women economists undertook to join “female” disciplines (mostly home economics) or federal government during the 1920s. In a nutshell, this chapter considers the consequences of the construction of economics as a male discipline on women economists.

In chapter 2, I try to understand why home economics was so responsive to the intellectual ambition of women willing to develop economic studies of the family. I first explain that home economics was originally conceived as a subfield of economics, although it actually focused on the material basis of family life and left little room for economic investigations of the family. I then trace the development of teaching and research on family economics in home economics departments during the 1920s and early 1930s at the University of Chicago, Iowa State College, Cornell University and in the federal government. I argue that that development helped meet the growing popular and mainly feminine concern for family economic questions, which emerged in the 1920s and peaked during the Great Depression. Besides, the federal government supported and funded this new field with a view to controlling family consumer expenditures. Family economics was thus an economic field constructed by and for women outside economics.

Chapter 3 focuses on home economists’ efforts to educate women to rational consumption from the 1920s to the end of World War II. Using the publications of key home economists who were active in the field of consumer and family economics – namely Hazel Kyrk, Elizabeth Hoyt and Margaret Reid – I first explain the emergence of home economists’ interest in rationalizing consumption as an effort to offset the negative influence of corporations on consumers. I claim that

home economists proposed to direct consumer's spending – like advertisers did – but from a welfare standpoint. Then I trace home economists' institutional and intellectual influence in federal government, consumer organizations as well as in education from the early 1930s to 1945. I argue that home economists were instrumental in building a new image of the woman consumer as an individual who could be made more rational thanks to scientific and technical information.

It is widely held that home economists helped politicize women's domestic role during the Progressive Era before turning to a more individualistic approach to family problems (Stage & Vincenti, 1997). In contrast, I show in chapter 4 that home economists continued to entertain reformist ambitions in the 1930s up to the end of World War II by promoting greater economic, political and social roles for women consumers. I first consider the efforts of home economists to mobilize women in favor of an economic system that ensures consumers' freedom of choice. I argue that they contributed to the greater representation and protection of consumers' interests inside U.S. federal government during the New Deal and World War II. Finally, I show that home economists also encouraged women to use their purchasing power to protect family and social welfare. On the whole, freedom of choice was a means towards establishing a better society; and women, the main consumers, were key economic, social and political actors.

Chapter 5 focuses on the decline of home economists' "art of consumption" after World War II. I argue that home economists strove to sustain their approach to consumption and the family in the immediate afterwar but lacked institutional support to do so in colleges and universities as well as in federal government. Then, I show that the art of consumption was gradually crowded

out by new consumption theories emphasizing consumer rationality, which blended in the new dominant neoclassical framework.

Chapter 6 relates the development of a mainstream family economics, namely, the New Home Economics (NHE). I first argue that the application of the economic approach to the family emerged in a context of increased concern for the relationships between the transformation of the American family and postwar economic conditions. New home economists emphasized the role of the economic forces, notably higher women's earnings, in explaining most family behaviors. In so doing, they meant to show that the economic approach could challenge alternative approaches from other social sciences. I then show that the NHE had a lasting influence on economics as well as on sociology and demography. There were two reasons for that influence: (1) household decisions were increasingly viewed as resulting from deliberate choices, and (2) NHE models fit the scientific ideal of the era for it enabled the "verification" of the theory by empirical evidence.

## Sources

The University of Chicago appears as a leading center for the study of family economics. Chicago's home economics was institutionalized as soon as the late nineteenth century. It housed an important program on family economics from the 1920s to the 1940s following the work of Kyrk and her numerous students.<sup>4</sup> During the 1950s, there was a renewal of consumption studies in part due to the collaboration between Reid and Milton Friedman at Chicago. Then, during the

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<sup>4</sup> The University of Chicago granted Ph.D. degrees in family economics from 1923 to the early 1950s.



1970s, Becker developed the “New Home Economics” at Chicago as well. Therefore, the University of Chicago illustrates the transition between the “old” and the “new” family economics. I specifically used the archives of Kyrk, Reid and Schultz. Besides, in order to have information on the institutional structure of the home economics program at Chicago, I consulted the archives of the Office of the President and more specifically those of Robert M. Hutchins, the President and Chancellor of the University from 1929 to 1951.

The Iowa State College (ISC) was also an important center for family economics. ISC was the first institution to teach home economics in 1871. It became the biggest home economics academic institution in the U.S., reuniting a dozen of different departments focusing on the home and family. During the 1930s and 1940s, an important program on family economics was carried out by Hoyt and Reid. The ISC was the only college, along with the University of Chicago, to grant Ph.D. degrees in family economics. Although this program depended on the home economics division, it maintained links with economists, especially when Schultz headed the ISC Department of Economics and Sociology between 1935 and 1943. Consequently, I consulted Schultz’s and Hoyt’s papers, as well as those of the Office of the Dean of the College of Consumer and Family Sciences (formerly Division of Home Economics).

Other primary sources were publications related to family economics, mostly in the *Journal of Home Economics*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, the *American Economic Review*, the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, as well as NBER publications.

# Chapter 1

## The Uncertain Place of Family in Economics, 1912–1930

### I- Introduction

Gender has been belatedly included in the history of science and the history of social sciences (Rossiter, 1980, 1984, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 1990; Silverberg, 1998). Gender differences in science were strongly linked to the separate spheres argument which was prevalent in the United States during the nineteenth century and until World War I (Kerber, 1988). Men were associated with the public (political and market) sphere while women were associated with the domestic sphere. Science was defined as a rigorous, rational, impersonal and masculine enterprise (Rossiter, 1984). Science thus stood in contrast with women and the domestic sphere governed by morale. Yet, women had gained access to education because the need to train them for their domestic role as mother and wife was generally accepted (Rossiter, 1984). Higher education was widely feminized by the end of the nineteenth century (Rosenberg, 1982, 43). The strength of the separate spheres argument in public opinion prevented women from seeking academic positions of their choice but enabled them to seek subordinate positions (ibid.).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the construction of “women’s fields,” like social work and home economics, enabled some women to pursue academic careers (Matthews, 1987; Rossiter, 1998; Dzuback, 2003). These fields, presented as an extension of their domestic role, were said to suit women scientists. Besides, in these fields deserted by men, women did not threaten their male counterparts. Home economics, taken as the application of science to

the problems of the home, was then the most important and rapidly growing women's academic field in the United States.

The separate spheres idea had also major consequences on economics, its subject and boundaries (Folbre, 1998). Economists considered the market a male and competitive sphere while the family was regarded as a female sphere governed by values and customs. Men were thought as "economic creatures" motivated by self-interest and rationality whereas women were altruistic and non-rational, moral beings (ibid.).

By focusing on women's work (section II) and consumer behavior (section III), I show that topics associated with the domestic sphere and women were mostly marginalized at the beginning of the twentieth century. With a few exceptions, they interested mostly women economists, the latter being more willing to grant economic value to household activities than their male counterparts. But as they failed to gain recognition within economics, women economists undertook to join "female" disciplines (mostly home economics) or federal government during the 1920s (section IV). In a nutshell, this chapter considers the consequences of the construction of economics as a male discipline on women economists.

## II- The Invisibility of Women's Work

At the end of the nineteenth century, economists were mostly concerned with the development of industrial society and market economy. They showed little interest in household production. In comparison with paid work in factories, domestic work appeared underdeveloped and led by tradition. Consequently, major economists like John Stuart Mill and William Stanley Jevons equated productive labor with paid work and implicitly defined nonmarket work as unproductive – and housewives as "dependents," not economic agents (Folbre,

1998; see also Gouverneur, undated). In other words, domestic work stood outside the realm of economics (Dimand, Forget & Nyland, 2004).

At the same time, economists considered domestic work as morally crucial (Folbre, 1998, 37). They shared the nineteenth century “cult of domesticity,” which praised the home as a “haven in a heartless (capitalist) world,” and believed that domestic life had to be protected from the negative influence of the market. Several alternatives were considered for that purpose: the banning of factory work for women (Jevons), low wages for women (Alfred Marshall) or the implementation of a “family wage” which enables men to earn a sufficient wage to support “dependent” wives and children (Gouverneur, 2013; Folbre, 1991, 467; Folbre, 1998, 37).

Even though most economists thought of household production as ruled by morals rather than by economic forces, some of them refused to consider it as totally unproductive. For instance, the English economist John A. Hobson stated that household production was one kind of wealth that lacked money value but needed to enter into a “human valuation” (1914, v.). But most studies on household work were then carried out by women economists. Hildegard Kneeland (1925) was one of the first economists to include household production within the field of family economics. She was strongly influenced by Hazel Kyrk, her teacher at Chicago, who became the leader of the new field of family economics (see below). Both Kneeland (1925) and Kyrk (1933) traced the historical evolution of household production, its consequences on the status of women, and suggested ways to increase the efficacy of household work. Yet, it is Margaret G. Reid’s work on household production in the early 1930s which brought most attention. Reid wrote her dissertation — published in 1934 as *Economics of Household Production* — under Kyrk at the University of Chicago. Using historical, social and economic arguments, she demonstrated that

domestic work was an integral part of the economy and emphasized the importance of household activities for the achievement of family and national standard of living.

Household work remained understudied but it was unclear whether it was worthy of more attention. For instance, Ruth A. Allen described Reid's book as "futile" in the *American Economic Review* (AER) (1934, 762).<sup>5</sup> In her opinion, the domestic and the economic spheres were distinct since family decisions were ruled by moral values, not by price.<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, household production was not economically efficient as compared with market production.

In addition to neglecting household work, most economists ignored the increase of women's and children's paid work at the turn of the century (Folbre, 1998; Dimand, Forget & Nyland, 2004). Neoclassical labor analysis was ill-equipped to study these topics: it envisioned individuals offering their labor as long as the marginal utility of income derived from their work, which permits consumption, was higher than the marginal disutility of labor (or marginal utility of leisure) (Marshall, 1890; Hicks, 1932; Douglas, 1934b). That women's choice to enter the labor market resulted from a comparison between the advantages to be gainfully employed and leisure seemed unrealistic. Domestic work, which was the main occupation of women, necessarily mattered in their decision.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the neoclassical framework hardly explained why labor supply from women and children was increasing in the early nineteenth century. An increase in the marginal utility of income or a decrease in the marginal utility of leisure

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<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that only women economists wrote reviews of her book.

<sup>6</sup> "The reviewer feels that there is a certain futility in writing a book on the subject-matter discussed. Why attempt, by meticulous price calculations, to drag into the economic realm an institution whose greatest value lies elsewhere? In our homes we are neither slaves of the machine nor puppets of the price system." (Allen, 1934, 762).

<sup>7</sup> In 1900, there were 328 full-time homemakers for every 100 women in the paid labor force (Reid, 1947). This figure was decreasing: in 1940, they were 225 for 100 women gainfully employed.

seemed unlikely. On the whole, the neoclassical approach to labor focused on men “breadwinners” and deliberately left out women and children.

Widely informed by history, institutional economists seemed better equipped to outline the rise of women’s and children’s participation in the paid workforce. The institutional school of labor economics, which dominated economists’ study of labor until after World War II, emerged at the University of Wisconsin in part thanks to the work of Richard T. Ely (1886). This historical and descriptive approach to labor problems manifested itself in the widely-used textbook *Labor Problems* (Adams & Sumner, 1905). This textbook presented a collection of facts on immigration, the sweating system, unions and the labor movement, unemployment and poverty, laws regulating labor, distribution of profit and cooperation. It is noteworthy that a whole chapter, written by Helen L. Sumner, studied women’s and children’s paid work. Sumner obtained a Ph.D. degree in political economy and American history from the University of Wisconsin in 1908 and was particularly interested in historical and contemporary labor issues as they related to women and children. She was considered a figure of the new institutional approach to labor (Sumner, 1910; Sumner & Merritt, 1915; Sumner Woodbury, 1921).<sup>8</sup>

In the early twentieth century, the two other leading figures in the studies of women’s paid work were Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott. Both worked under the supervision of economist James Lawrence Laughlin at the University of Chicago. Laughlin, the head of the new Chicago Department of Economics (from 1892 to 1916), seems to have encouraged his students Abbott and Breckinridge in their institutional work on women’s labor, although he

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<sup>8</sup> In particular, she collaborated extensively with John R. Commons, one of the most important institutional economists. See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Helen-Laura-Sumner-Woodbury>, last consulted on November 19, 2019.

belonged to the marginalist school.<sup>9</sup> Abbott remembered him as helpful with women in economics, especially as he helped them publish in the *Journal of Political Economy* (JPE) which he edited from 1892 to 1933.<sup>10</sup>

Breckinridge was the first woman to obtain a Ph.D. degree in political science and economics from the University of Chicago in 1901. She worked on women in industries and in the legal profession as well as on child labor legislation (Abbott & Breckinridge, 1906; Breckinridge, 1909; Breckinridge, 1915). In a 1923, she challenged the theory of family wage, which was supported by a number of economists, and discredited the argument that lower pay for women was economically sound because they had fewer dependents (Folbre, 1998). More generally, Breckinridge (1933) documented the barriers women faced to enter the paid labor force. As for Abbott, after having earned a Ph.D. degree (1905), she studied women's paid work in specific industries, such as cigar-making, manufacture of boots and shoes, Chicago stockyards and cotton mills (Abbott, 1907; Abbott, 1908; Abbott, 1909; Abbott, 1911).<sup>11</sup> Abbott and Breckinridge thus documented and tried to raise economists' awareness of the economic importance of women's and children's paid work.

Their contributions achieved some recognition within economics. They published widely in economic journals (Madden, 2002). Abbott was the most productive women economist from 1900 to 1940 and Breckinridge ranked second. The former published 19 articles in the JPE, most of which on women's

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<sup>9</sup> Laughlin is also known for having been supportive to many economists with which he was strongly opposed both politically and in economics (he hired the radical and institutional economics pioneer Thorstein Veblen, for example).

<sup>10</sup> "[Laughlin was] extremely generous about helping women students, at a time when women students were not particularly welcome in many Departments of Economics" (Edith Abbott, quoted in Folbre, 1998, 45).

<sup>11</sup> Tracing the historical trends in women's employment over the nineteenth century, Abbott (1906) concluded that although women had been more economically productive than men in the past, their contributions had been made invisible by census categories.

employment and wages. In 1910, Abbott published *Women in Industry: A Study of American History* which was favorably reviewed in the *JPE* and *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (QJE) (Abbott, 1919). She was even appointed vice-president of the American Economic Association in 1918.

Yet, like domestic work, women's and children's paid work remained a peripheral topic in economics. It was exclusively studied by women economists, namely, Sumner, Abbott, and Breckinridge. Other (male) economists did not deign to study the question. Both neoclassical and institutional economists continued to think of the market and the family as separate spheres. They were concerned with industrial production and the market, as governed by efficiency and price mechanism. As a result, they felt uncomfortable with women's and children's paid work which stood at the intersection of the domestic and market sphere. To some extent, it can be argued that most economists deliberately left aside this topic because of their opposition to the development of women's and children's work, which they saw as a threat to the family. Similarly, as male economists were reluctant to consider consumer behavior as a part of the subject matter of economics, they left the door open for an unusual number of women economists to specialize in consumption studies.

### III- Consumption as a “Backward” Female Activity

In the late nineteenth century, consumption was overall depicted as a female and wasteful domestic activity.<sup>12</sup> Among economists interested in consumer

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<sup>12</sup> Until the last third of the nineteenth century, classical liberal thought was suspicious of consumption which was viewed as a female and frivolous destruction of wealth (see Donohue, 2003). At the turn of the century, neoclassical economists abandoned the moral condemnation of consumption and referred to a rational consumer maximizing his satisfaction under economic constraints. But the neoclassical theory of demand was criticized by many –



behavior, Veblen was one of the first economists to develop a careful analysis. Influenced by the German Historical school, evolutionism and pragmatism, he proposed a two-fold analysis of consumer behavior. On the one hand, he argued that consumers primarily aimed at showing their social status (Veblen, 1899). He chastised the elite as “idle consumers” whose status was based on “conspicuous consumption,” that is, consumption of useless and expensive goods and services; and who had imposed consumption as an instrument of distinction to all social classes (“pecuniary emulation”). Women, the main consumers, served as objects displaying the status of their husbands. On the other hand, Veblen (1904) argued that consumers were the victims of a profit-system. As corporations were seeking for profit, they were often led to waste and inefficiency in production, which goes against consumers’ interests. In any case, Veblen saw consumers as feeble individuals – mostly women– influenced either by social emulation/conformism or by corporations.

At around the same time, feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman defined consumption as the main economic role of women. A major intellectual of the first wave of American feminism, she grew up with her famous aunts—the suffragist Isabella Beecher Stowe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Catharine Beecher, who was also widely-known for her books on women’s domestic education.<sup>13</sup> In *Women and Economics* (1898), Gilman explained that as a result of evolution, consumption became a female activity whereas production was carried out by men. Like Veblen (1899), she claimed that production is the only “productive” activity which is source of

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including by Thorstein Veblen (1904), Wesley C. Mitchell (1910), John A. Hobson (1914) and Jacob Viner (1925) – for relying on outdated psychological theories (see Lewin, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Catharine Beecher is the author of the very popular *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1841) and with Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home, or, Principles of Domestic Science: Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (1869).

progress whereas consumption exclusively aims at showing family class status. The gender division of labor in industrial society led to larger inequalities between men and women. In addition to being “non-productive” or “idle” as consumers, women depended on their husbands’ wages. Gilman proposed to reduce domestic drudgery, including consumption, so that women can turn to more “productive” activities.<sup>14</sup> Feminist Gilman thus relied on the same bias against women’s role as consumers as those of contemporary economists.

*Women and Economics* was a public success. Translated into seven languages, the book granted Gilman a leading role in the women’s movement. Pioneer social worker Jane Addams called it a “masterpiece” and Florence Kelley, a feminist and founder of the National Consumers League, wrote that it was “the first real, substantial contribution made by a woman to the science of economics.” (cited in Hill, 1980, 295). Yet, economists did not pay much attention to the book (Dimand, Black, Forget, 2011; Folbre, 1998).<sup>15</sup> Having no academic appointment, Gilman also suffered from her activist stance. Challenging the institution of family and advocating women’s work outside the home was hardly acceptable to most economists at the time.

Prominent American institutional economist Wesley C. Mitchell also described consumption as a feminine and inefficient activity. Mitchell had studied at the University of Chicago where he met Veblen and Laughlin (his Ph.D. supervisor) before becoming a professor of economics at the University of

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<sup>14</sup> She mentioned cooperative domestic services and professionalization of domestic work. For Dolores Hayden (1982), this made her one of the “material feminists.”

<sup>15</sup> The only mention of Gilman’s work in the JPE was a review of her book *The Home, Its Work and Influence* (1903) by Caroline Hill published in 1904. Besides, Gilman took part in one American Economic Association annual meeting to discuss “The Extent of Child Labor in the United States.” The discussion appeared in the publications of the American Economic Association in February 1907. Gilman also participated in American Sociological Society in 1907 and published articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1908 (Dimand, Black, & Forget, 2011).

California at Berkeley in the 1910s. There, Mitchell showed a passing interest in consumption. He explained that with the development of industrial production and markets, the main economic activities were the “strictly correlative arts” of making money (i.e. production) and spending money (i.e. consumption) (Mitchell, 1912, 269). But whereas production became much more efficient through the generalization of wage-earning and (scientific) management, consumption remained a household activity, which Mitchell qualified as “backward.”<sup>16</sup>

To Mitchell, the “backwardness” of consumption had its reasons. After having alluded to the important role of women in spending, he conceded that it was the nature of domestic work which was at stake. First, as they face varied household tasks such as cookery, nursery, laundry and clothing, housewives cannot specialize in consumption. Secondly, there is a lack of knowledge on “bodily and mental development” of individuals, i.e. physiology and psychology, on which to base consumption choices. Thirdly, household management is more difficult than business management since it is not guided by pecuniary value. Women have a wide scope of aims in consuming, going from satisfying families and the “fair development” of children to “keeping up with the Joneses.” These aims can materialize in different ways through consumption. Structurally, consumption could not be as efficient as market production. Mitchell nonetheless argued that women consumers could be made more efficient/productive thanks to the development of “domestic science,” another name for home economics, which strives to popularize scientific knowledge in

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<sup>16</sup> “Meanwhile as a unit for consuming goods, for spending money, the family has remained substantially where it was in the colonial days... So long we cling fondly to home life, so long will the family remain the most important unit for spending money. And so long the family remains the most important unit for spending money, so long will the art of spending money lag behind the art of making money.” (Mitchell, 1912, 270-271).

cooking, domestic hygiene and sanitation through courses, demonstrations, and publications for women (Mitchell, 1912, 280).<sup>17</sup>

Economists interested in consumption mostly considered it a female economic activity which had a new social and economic importance. However, unlike market production, consumption was regarded as inefficient: spending was in a large part determined by customs, social emulation and advertisement rather than by prices and scientific management. Some, like Mitchell, believed in increasing the efficiency of consumption through a better management of family spending by women.<sup>20</sup> But it was not clear whether economists or “domestic scientists” had something to say on this. Finally, economists were uneasy with the study of consumption behavior: it was too feminine and wasteful to be considered as part of the subject matter of economics.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the skepticism of male economists, some of the first women economists strove to develop the study of consumption behavior. For instance, in *A Theory of Consumption* (1924), which was based on her doctoral thesis, Kyrk chastised economists’ “narrow interpretation of the term [consumption], and ... their failure to see all the modes of activity involved” (14). She further argued that “it would seem to be fairly clear that the way is open, and that the need exists for an inquiry into the nature and laws of consumption as it shows itself

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<sup>17</sup> Mitchell also mentioned the creation of consumer cooperatives and the use of collective services to help women consumers. It is significant that he subsequently wrote a review of *The Modern Household* (1912) written by Marion Talbot and Sophonisba Breckinridge (Mitchell, 1913).

<sup>20</sup> The English economist John A. Hobson shared the hope of Mitchell to rationalize consumption through the creation of a “social-economic art” which he detailed in his book *Work and Wealth: A Human Valuation* (1914). This art of consumption, which aimed at increasing welfare through science, education, collective actions and public policies, is strikingly similar to what home economists developed from the 1920s to the 1940s (see chapters 3 and 4).

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, no male institutional economist studied consumer behavior following Veblen and Mitchell.

under modern conditions and institutions. . . . Here is a virgin field never properly charted and explored” (19). Kyrk then developed a theoretical approach to consumption, arguing that consumption patterns stem from socially-determined standards of living that need to be measured and critically analyzed. Elizabeth Hoyt from Radcliffe College developed a similar approach to consumption based on standards of living (Hoyt, 1926, 1928). Both drew on sociology, anthropology, psychology, and economic history and theory.

Kyrk’s book of 1924 was acknowledged as a good institutional economic work on consumption, but paradoxically it had little influence on economics. She was awarded the prestigious Hart, Schaeffner and Marx Prize, whose jury included leading economists like Mitchell, Laughlin, J. B. Clark, and Edwin F. Gay. Two positive reviews of Kyrk’s book appeared in economic journals (Dickinson, 1924; MacGregor, 1926).<sup>22</sup> They both appraised her work for being informed by the “best modern social psychology” (MacGregor, 1926, 242) using factors such as “instincts, folkways, and social classes” to explain consumer behavior (Dickinson, 1924, 244). Besides, they emphasized that economics of consumption was a part of economics that needed to be further developed and that Kyrk’s work was “an important contribution to it” (MacGregor, 1926, 241). Yet, even though Kyrk’s theory of consumption appeared as an alternative to the widely criticized marginal utility theory, its influence in economics remained negligible (Mason, 2000b, 176-7).<sup>23</sup> It suffered from being associated with home

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<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Hoyt’s 1928 *Consumption of Wealth* had two positive reviews in the *Journal of Political Economics* (by Kyrk) and in the *American Economic Review* (by Joan S. Robinson) (Kyrk, 1930; Robinson, 1929).

<sup>23</sup> Kyrk’s work had more influence on the emerging marketing field which began to emphasize the importance for firms to take into account consumers’ wants (Mason, 2000b). For example, Columbia marketing economist Paul Nystrom quoted Kyrk as a major influence for his *Economic Principles of Consumption* (1929). Besides, home economists’ works on consumption had a lasting influence on education. See chapter 3.

economics. Indeed, from 1925 onwards, Kyrk had a joint appointment with the Chicago Department of Home Economics (see below). The agricultural economist Warren Waite, for example, claimed that economics was concerned with the study of the market whereas home economics was limited to the question of “how to administer the resources of the individual family” (Waite, 1933, 569).<sup>24</sup> Finally, Kyrk’s (like Hoyt’s) approach was too explicitly linked to the household and women to be properly economic.

However, women economists had a leading role in pioneering empirical studies of consumption expenditures during the 1920s.<sup>25</sup> Theresa McMahon (1925) at the University of Wisconsin, Jessica Peixotto (1927) at the University of California at Berkeley and Elizabeth Gilboy (1934) at Radcliffe College, all accounted for current family standards of living and their evolution using household budgets.<sup>26</sup> Peixotto headed the *Round Table on Family Budgets* at the 1927 annual meeting of the American Economic Association. Participants included economists Chase G. Woodhouse and John M. Clark as well as Columbia

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<sup>24</sup> “The home economist is largely concerned with the administration of the individual consuming unit. The economist largely concerns himself with a wider group, the market. Thus the economist talks about market behavior, market prices, market exclusion, marketing institutions, and so on. But these latter have a bearing upon the former group of problems and constitute in a large measure the contribution economics may make to home economics.” (Waite, 1933, 569)

<sup>25</sup> Stapleford (2007) emphasizes the gender dynamics of the new field of consumption economics: “Although a small group of men studied consumer behavior – including sociologists (such as Robert Lynd, Carle C. Zimmerman, and William F. Ogburn), agricultural economists (notably Warren C. Waite), and marketing professional (such as Paul Nystrom) – women produced the bulk of American quantitative research on consumption between 1920 and 1950” (2007, 422).

<sup>26</sup> Peixotto was the first woman to earn a Ph.D. degree in political economy at the University of California in 1900 and she subsequently became a professor of “social economics” at Berkeley (see Dzuback, 2009).

sociologist William F. Ogburn (Liston, 1993).<sup>27</sup> This round table led to a lengthy report on “Family Budgets” which was published in the AER in 1927 (Peixotto, 1927). Besides, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), a research organization at the forefront of interdisciplinary and empirical research, created a committee on consumption in 1931.<sup>28</sup> Committee participants included Kyrk and Hildegard Kneeland from the United States Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Home Economics (BHE), along with economists Frank H. Knight, Alvin Hansen, and Ronald Vaile and Harvard sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman. While the SSRC committee had put forward the pressing need of a state of research on consumption, Faith Williams (Ph. D. in economics, Columbia University, 1924) was charged with making an inventory of American consumption studies. This led to the publication of the first comprehensive review of studies on standards of living in 1935 (Williams & Zimmerman, 1935).<sup>29</sup>

Finally, women economists were at the forefront of consumer behavior studies during the 1920s and early 1930s. Male economists appeared reluctant to tackle this topic which, like domestic work, women’s and children’s paid work, was associated with the domestic sphere supposedly governed by values and customs. On their side, women economists argued that consumption, which in most cases was the responsibility of women, had a new economic and social importance. Thus, consumer behavior needed to be better understood. As their work did not find much support within economics, these women joined “feminine disciplines” like home economics or federal government which

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<sup>27</sup> Woodhouse came to be interested in consumption and standards of living in the late 1920s while she was senior economist at the USDA Bureau of Home Economics (Woodhouse, 1926; Woodhouse, 1929)

<sup>28</sup> The Social Science Research Council was created in 1923 to promote social science research.

<sup>29</sup> The study was funded by the BHE, the SSRC, the Harvard University Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and the Institute of Pacific Relations.

enabled them to continue to work on topics related to the domestic sphere.

#### IV- Women Economists: from Economics to Home Economics

Although women represented a small proportion of the economics profession in the United State at the beginning of the twentieth century (they were about 3% of the American Economic Association members until the late 1910s), their contribution to economic research was significant (May & Dimand, 2016; Groenewegen & King, 1994; Dimand, 1995; Madden, 2002; Forget, 2011). A growing number of them were granted Ph.D.s in economics, especially from the University of Columbia and the University of Chicago. Women get 6% of the Ph.D. degrees in economics in 1912 and up to 20% in 1920 (Forget, 2011). A large part of women's economic contributions were books and government publications, but they also published articles in leading economic journals. Women represented slightly less than 7% of all contributors and published about 5% of the articles in the *JPE*, the *AER*, the *Economic Journal*, *Economica* and the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* from 1900 to 1939 (Groenewegen & King, 1994, quoted in Dimand, undated, 3).<sup>30</sup> At a time when disciplinary boundaries were not necessarily marked, women economists also published in social science and statistical journals like the *Social Science Review*, the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, the *Journal of American Statistical Association* and the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

True, women economists were interested in a variety of topics, but they tended to write more extensively on “feminine topics,” that is, related to the domestic sphere. Madden (2002) conducted a quantitative study of women

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<sup>30</sup> In comparison, women were about 3% of AEA members in the late 1910s, a figure that steadily increased up to 6% in 1942 (May & Dimand, 2016, 5).



economists' publications classified by their subject matters from 1900 to 1940. She found that women's articles dealt in majority with (in decreasing order) labor economics, "economics and emancipation" including gender and suffrage, race, children and religion; and the "economics of the domestic sector," including housing, household production, reproduction, consumer economics, health and education, and public welfare issues. There were a few male economists who tackled "feminine topics." As a result, "Virtually all the significant books on women, children, and the family published between 1890 and 1920 were authored by women" (Folbre, 1998, 27). Other studies by George Stigler and Martin Bronfenbrenner also concluded that male economists wrote more than women (in percentage) in all economic domains, except in labor economics and in consumer economics (Madden, 2002, 21). Thus, there was a clear gender division of topics within economics.

The global presence of women in economics declined in the 1920s, a trend which accompanies a general decrease of female academic employment (Forget, 2011). Rossiter (1984, 194) points to the reinforcement of academic practices which proved detrimental to women during the 1920s and 1930s, including the tenure-track system, the antinepotism rules, the lack of advancement and the low salaries for women. Academic employment of women economists declined during the interwar era (Hammond, 1993; Dimand, 1995). The proportion of women's Ph.D. in economics peaked at 18.5% in 1920 to reach 10% afterwards (Libby, 1984; see also Forget, 1995, 26-27). Female representation in economic articles also reached a peak in 1920 (Groenewegen & King, 1994). As Barbara Libby (1984, 274) explained, "few [women] were represented in the [economic] journals, and many who had published earlier seemingly vanished from the profession."

Kyrk's trajectory during the 1920s illustrates the increased difficulties facing women economists. After getting her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1920, she struggled to find employment in an economics department. She did a short stint in the Department of Economics at Oberlin College but resigned in 1921. She wrote to her mentor, Chicago economist and Dean of the School of Commerce and Administration, Leon Carroll Marshall, to ask him if he could help find "opportunities for employment suitable for [her] sex and capacities", suggesting Oberlin was not a women-friendly environment (quoted in Beller & Kiss, 1999, 5).<sup>31</sup> Henry C. King, president of Oberlin, wrote a reference letter for Kyrk where he confirmed that "[s]he was not wholly successful in her teaching here, primarily, I believe, for the reason that any woman would have enormous difficulties trying to teach such subjects as banking and transportation to classes composed almost entirely of *men* in the upper years of the college course" (ibid., emphasis in original). Marshall also regretted that difficulties for women economists were widespread: "It is a funny job market this year. There has really been a very heavy demand for men though at rather low salaries and practically nothing for women".<sup>32</sup> He recommended Kyrk unsuccessfully for a joint position at Chicago with the Department of Home Economics. Kyrk then taught briefly at Bryn Mawr, worked at the Food Research Institute at Stanford (1923-1924) and shortly joined the Iowa State College (1924-1925). Eventually she went back to the University of Chicago in 1925 after Dean of Women Marion Talbot organized a protest against women's discrimination in 1924.<sup>33</sup> This mobilization put some

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<sup>31</sup> Kyrk had worked for Marshall's family as a domestic help during her undergraduate studies.

<sup>32</sup> L. C. Marshall to Hazel Kyrk, August 15th, 1921, Folder 9, Box 16, CDE.

<sup>33</sup> This protest led to the creation of a committee to investigate the alleged discrimination against women faculty. Its conclusion led to the promotion of Edith Abbott, Katherine Blunt and Sophonisba Breckinridge as full professors in 1925 (Silverberg, 1998, 47).

pressure on Chicago administration to treat women scholars with more regard. Thanks to this favorable context, as well as Marshall's support, Kyrk was hired with a joint appointment in the departments of economics and of home economics (Silverberg, 1998).<sup>34</sup> A joint position with a "feminine" discipline seemed the only solution for a woman to enter Chicago department of economics.<sup>35</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, the development of "feminine" fields like home economics and social work in American colleges and universities greatly contributed to reducing the number of women in economics (Forget, 2011). Rossiter (1982) traced the increasing "territorial segregation" of women in separate and less prestigious "women's work" fields: women seeking academic positions at this moment were most likely to find it in home economics, which became the biggest "women's field." Besides, they had opportunities for advancement in home economics departments that were nonexistent elsewhere: "It was the only field where a woman could hope to be a full professor, department chairman, or even dean in the 1920s and 1930s" (70). During the 1920s and 1930s, home economics served as the main refuge for women economists who worked on "feminine topics" like consumption and household production, and who lacked "mentors, recognition and employment" in economics departments (Thorne, 1995). This was the case for Kyrk at the University of Chicago, Hoyt and Reid at the Iowa State College, and Day Monroe (Ph.D. in family economics, University of Chicago, 1930) at Cornell University.

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<sup>34</sup> "Extensive correspondence between Kyrk and Leon Marshall during this period . . . provides evidence of Marshall's desire to assist her in obtaining a faculty position at the University of Chicago" (Beller & Kiss, 1999, 6)

<sup>35</sup> In spite of having requested to be formally recognized as a member of the economics faculty, Kyrk did not appear on its list until 1929-1930 (Folbre, 1998, 45).

Women economists also often pursued their careers in government institutions which extended their support to research and statistical analysis on social issues in the 1920s (Forget, 2011). Before 1925, the U.S. Department of Labor was the largest employer of women economists, who, like Sumner, joined the Women's and Children's Bureaus and/or the Bureau of Labor Statistics to conduct studies on women's and children's labor. Growing opportunities were also opened to women in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Bureau of Home Economics (BHE). After its creation in 1923, the BHE experienced a rapid growth from 2 employees in 1921 to 14 in 1938 (Rossiter, 1984, 224). There, women economists' focus on consumption and household production, as well as their empirical approach, statistical skills and concern for social welfare were appreciated (see chapter 2). Kyrk, Kneeland, Williams, and Monroe all joined the BHE in the 1920s and 1930s as family economics experts.

As they stood outside university settings or in home economics departments, women economists were often regarded as statisticians, "social economists" or "home economists" (Rossiter, 1982). This had important consequences on economic research as their contributions to the study of women and children working conditions, household production and consumer behavior were less visible in economic journals from the 1920s onwards. They were published in noneconomic journals like the *Social Service Review*, the *Journal of Home Economics*, in government printings or in the form of textbooks. Finally, the breakaway of women economists made clear the separation of economics from topics linked to women, children and the domestic sphere.

## V- Conclusion

It is commonly held that interwar economics was characterized by its pluralism

(Morgan & Rutherford, 1998). However, in this chapter I show that economic studies on the family, which used an empirical and cross-disciplinary approach resembling that of institutionalist work, were marginalized. I argue that most economists were uneasy with domestic work, women's and children's paid work as well as with consumption behavior because they associated them with the domestic sphere, supposedly ruled by values and customs rather than by self-interest and efficiency. Women economists found it easier to investigate these topics because they were more prone to view household activities as productive than their male counterparts. As a result, economic research on the family was confined to the "women's field" of home economics.

The lack of recognition of women's contribution to economics is common knowledge. Feminist economists have striven to redress this unfairness, starting with the reference book *Women of Value: Feminist Essays on the History of Women in Economics* (Dimand, Dimand & Forget, 1995) and *A Biographical Dictionary of Women Economists* (Dimand, Dimand & Forget, 2000). As these works show, the contribution of women to economics decreased in the 1920s as a result of the migration of women economists into government institutions and the emergence of "feminine" fields. Adopting a broader definition of economics and considering the history of neighboring disciplines like home economics show that the contribution of women is far from negligible.

What remains to be explained, however, is why home economics welcomed so easily women economists and enabled them to develop research and teaching on the economic role of the family. Chapter 2 investigates these questions by tracing the institutional development of family economics within home economics departments.

## Chapter 2

### Finding a Home for Family Economics, 1924–1935

#### I- Introduction

Though home economics was already recognized as an academic field in the 1920s, its main connections were with the natural sciences, not the social sciences. In the early twentieth century, home economists had made pioneering contributions to the study of foods and nutrition (Williams & Zimmerman, 1935; Eppright & Ferguson, 1971; Rossiter, 1982) as well as “sanitary science” and “household bacteriology” (Tomes, 1997). Yet, by 1941, economist Kenneth Boulding noted that “Under the stimulus of the emancipation of women and the development of faculties of Home economics, Consumption Economics almost threatens to become a separate science” (Boulding, 1941, 1).

During the 1920s and early 1930s, a subfield that drew on the social sciences and dealt with consumption and household production was created within home economics. Various called “family economics,” “consumption economics,” “economics of the home,” or “household economics,” it focused on the economic activities of families.<sup>36</sup> It was initiated by women economists Hazel Kyrk, Hildegard Kneeland and Elizabeth Hoyt in home economics departments and in federal government; then continued by their doctoral offspring, including Margaret Reid, Helen Canon and Day Monroe, who themselves “help[ed] produce professionals with masters’ and doctoral degrees” (Liston, 1993, 36-38; see annex 1). In this chapter, I wonder why home economics was so responsive to the intellectual ambition of women willing to develop economic studies of the

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<sup>36</sup> Following Margaret Liston (1993), I use family economics thereafter.

family.

I first explain that although home economics was originally conceived as part of economics, it actually focused on the material basis of family life and left little room for economic investigations of the family (section II). I then trace the development of teaching and research on family economics in home economics departments during the 1920s and early 1930s at the University of Chicago (section III), Iowa State College (section IV), Cornell University (section V) and in the federal government (section VI). I argue that it helped meet the growing popular and mainly feminine concern for family economic questions which emerged in the 1920s and peaked during the Great Depression. Besides, the federal government supported and funded this new field with a view to controlling family consumer expenditures. Family economics was thus an economic field constructed by and for women outside economics.

## II- Home Economics: Going Back to the Original Meaning of Economics?

The label “home economics,” which was chosen at the first Lake Placid conference in 1899, related this new field to the emerging social sciences, notably economics.<sup>37</sup> Home economics was then defined as “a distinct section of the general subject of economics” (quoted in Bane, 1928, 696). More specifically, it was classified as a sub-section of economics of consumption under political economy and sociology in the “Dewey Decimal Classification” in 1900. Melvin Dewey, then director of the New York State Library, was an early supporter of

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<sup>37</sup> The Lake Placid conferences (1899–1908) were organized by educated women interested in the new “domestic science,” as it was then often called. Participants defined the new field, devised curricula and looked for support and funding (Weigley, 1974). They sought to generalize home economics courses from primary school to college and university.

home economics and participant in the Lake Placid conferences. He described home economics as encompassing the study of family income and expenditures, food, shelter, clothing and administration. Early home economists thus considered home economics as part of economics.

The term “home economics” was explicitly coined in reference to the original Greek meaning of economics (“*oikonomia*”), namely “household administration, domestic management” (Richards, 1911, 117). According to Ellen Swallow Richards, known as the “founder” of the home economics movement, “political economists” usurped the word “economics” to equate it with “production of wealth” (ibid.). This resulted in the transformation of economics into the study of industrial production. Consequently, for Richards and other early home economists, it was necessary to create a “new science” of economics focusing on the efficient management or “rationalization” of household affairs. This meant to entice homemakers to satisfy their relatives’ needs while saving their efforts, money and time.

Home economics adapted to the great transformations brought by industrial development to the home. With the development of paid work and the rise of family incomes, families increasingly purchased goods instead of producing them. Homemakers faced new mass-produced goods and were disconcerted by frauds and unsanitary practices.<sup>38</sup> Besides, partly because of the war, the cost of living was rising. Between 1914 and 1920, prices rose by 130%, which eroded American living standards (Aldrich, 2013). Following these changes, home economics was increasingly concerned with consumption.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Public health concerns were awoken especially with Upton Sinclair’s book *The Jungle* (1905) which denounced the meatpacking industry at Chicago for exploiting masses of immigrants as well as for its unsanitary practices.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, Richards claimed: “The home has ceased to be the glowing center of production . . . and has become . . . a place of consumption not of production.” (Richards,



Before the 1920s, home economists mostly focused on the practical aspect of consumption, that is, on the characteristics and uses of food, clothing, and housing.<sup>40</sup> In particular, they produced studies on “sanitary science” (hygiene, bacteriology), nutrition, “food science”, and “textile science.” Home economics curricula in land-grant colleges and universities included basic courses in chemistry, physics, biology and bacteriology, which helped establish the scientific respectability of the field.<sup>41</sup> Flora Rose, head of Cornell home economics department and early specialist in nutrition, explained: “Chemistry, particularly, was believed to give the field of Home Economics a scientific foundation which placed it on a basis of equality with other college departments. It represented respectability” contrary to the social sciences that were “very far from any settled state and [even] in 1925 were still in great confusion” (quoted in Berlage, 1998, 195).

A new emphasis on social studies of the home emerged in the 1920s in some major research universities and land-grant colleges (the University of Chicago, the Iowa State College, Cornell University) as well as in the federal Bureau of Home Economics. This coincided with the entry of a number of women economists into the home economics field.

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1899, p. 25, quoted in Reid, 1934, 3). Similarly, Caroline Hunt, the first professor of home economics at the University of Wisconsin in 1903, stated: “[The homemaker] is the greatest consumer and as such holds greatest power over the producer. . . It is only her duty to spend her income for the best welfare of the family.”

<sup>40</sup> The three divisions of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) created in 1909 were devoted to food, shelter and clothing.

<sup>41</sup> The land-grant colleges were created in each of the American states following the Morrill Act (1862). They participated in the democratization of American higher education by expanding educational opportunities to a general public (Liston, 1993). They offered vocational and practical training in “agriculture and mechanic art” to rural young men. As land-grant institutions were coeducational, it was also a fertile ground for the development of home economics as a practical teaching for girls.

### III- Family Economics at the University of Chicago

The University of Chicago was a pioneer in home economics. Two departments were created at the beginning of the twentieth century: a Department of Household Arts in 1901 and a Department of Home Administration in 1904.<sup>42</sup> Both developed applications of science—especially natural sciences—to home problems, such as food chemistry, nutrition and sanitary science.

In the Department of Home Administration, Sophonisba Breckinridge (Ph.D. in political science and economics, 1901) also taught “social economy.” “Social economy” courses underlined the economic role of the family, as their titles make clear: “The Economic Basis of the Family,” “The Consumption of Wealth,” and “Public Aspects of the Family” (Goldstein, 2012, 41).<sup>43</sup> Drawing on her courses, Breckinridge published a textbook titled *The Modern Household* with Marion Talbot, a former student of Richards, in 1912 (Talbot & Breckinridge, 1912). The book was intended to teach women how to deal with modern household problems and it mostly concentrated on consumption. Early Chicago students in home administration were thus introduced to the economic centrality of the family.

Whereas Breckinridge left the Department of Home Administration in 1920, Katharine Blunt, head of this department from 1919 to 1929, was

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<sup>42</sup> The rapid development of home economics at Chicago is linked to the feminization of its student population at the turn of the twentieth century. Chicago scholars and administrators feared that this evolution would undermine their efforts to create a prestigious research center (Folbre, 1998, 44-45 and Rosenberg, 1982, 48-49).

<sup>43</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, the field of “social economy” or “social economics” was a female economic field focusing on local cost-of-living studies and other social topics. It was institutionalized in some women’s colleges as Bryn Mawr (with Susan Kingsbury) as well as at the University of California at Berkeley where Jessica Peixotto founded the Heller Committee for Research on Social Economics in 1923 (more on social economy in Dzuback, 2003 & 2009).

influential in further developing economic studies of the family. To Blunt (1923), home economics research was divided into three specializations, one of which concerned the application of social sciences to home problems. The latter specialization had to be further developed in order to cope with the new economic situation of families. Women's gainful employment and consumption were particularly important topics. Consequently, Blunt was instrumental in the hiring of economists Hazel Kyrk and Day Monroe to develop research in "Economics and Other Social Problems."<sup>44</sup>

In 1925, Kyrk was hired in the newly reunited Department of Home Economics and Household Administration (referred to as "home economics department" thereafter) with a joint appointment in the Department of Economics.<sup>45</sup> She had completed a dissertation – published as *A Theory of Consumption* (Kyrk, 1924) – at the University of Chicago. Monroe, a food consumption specialist, joined Kyrk at Chicago in 1927.<sup>46</sup> She was hired as a research assistant in family economics while completing her Ph.D. degree requirements under the supervision of Kyrk.

At the University of Chicago, Kyrk and Monroe focused on studying family expenditures. Monroe published one article and a report on family census data which permitted to relate consumer expenditures to family structure (Monroe, 1927; Monroe, 1932). These studies, supervised by Kyrk, were funded by the

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<sup>44</sup> Blunt's stance reflected a widespread enthusiasm for economic studies in the home economics field. For instance, a 1925 editorial of the *Journal of Home Economics* welcomed Kyrk's appointment at Chicago: "Dr. Kyrk, who received her doctorate in political economy, is particularly interested in the problems of women and the family. It is hoped through Dr. Kyrk to develop further the economic phase of home economics" ("News From the Field", 1925, 681, my emphasis).

<sup>45</sup> The Department of Household Arts and the Department of Home Administration were reunited in 1919 into a Department of Home Economics and Household Administration.

<sup>46</sup> Monroe had co-authored a book titled *Food Buying and Our Markets* (Monroe & Stratton, 1925).

American Home Economics Association and the Local Community Research Council of the University of Chicago (Monroe, 1927, 617). Besides, Kyrk and Monroe sought to investigate the effect of changes in income upon absolute and relative expenditures for various articles (clothes, food, etc.); and to study the changes in expenditures when the size and composition of family varied.<sup>47</sup> Chicago home economics department thus enabled women economists to carry out empirical research on consumption.

Economic studies of the home also influenced the home economics curricula. Whereas in 1919 three different specializations were proposed to home economics students (Home Economics Education, Food and Nutrition and Home or Institution Management), there were five of them available by 1930, including one in “Economic and Other Social Problems” headed by Kyrk (see figure 1).<sup>48</sup> In the latter Kyrk taught an economics of consumption course in which she focused on “The consumer’s three-fold problems and consumption as a three-fold process, choice-making, income-apportionment, and buying.”<sup>49</sup> Monroe also taught two economics courses.

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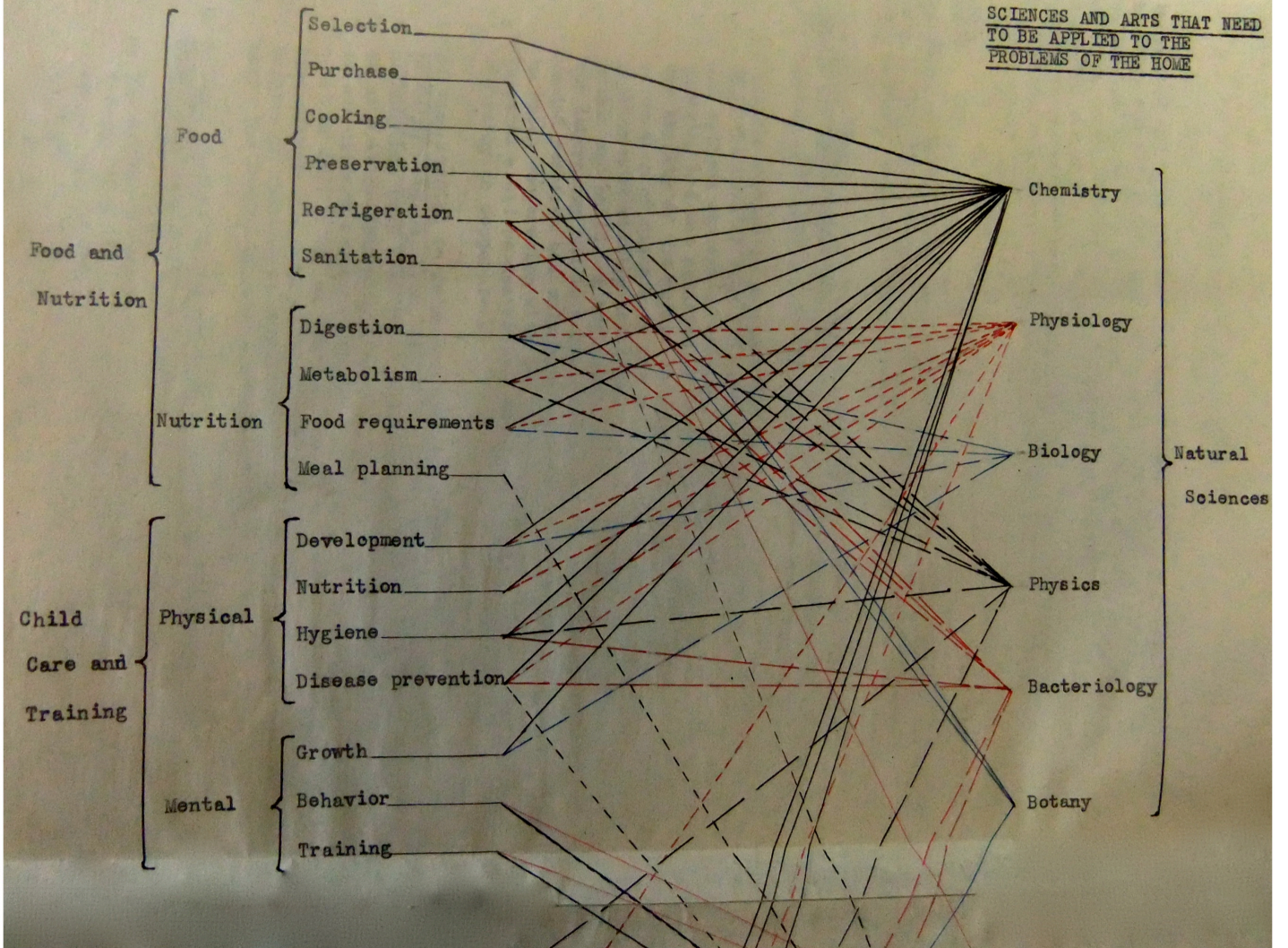
<sup>47</sup> “Plan for research in the field of consumption,” 1927, Box 16, CDE.

<sup>48</sup> Other specializations were Household Organizations and Equipment, Food and Nutrition, Child Development, Education and Clothing and Related Arts.

<sup>49</sup> “Consumption, Tentative outline of field,” Box 16, CDE.

PROBLEMS OF THE HOME

SCIENCES AND ARTS THAT NEED  
TO BE APPLIED TO THE  
PROBLEMS OF THE HOME





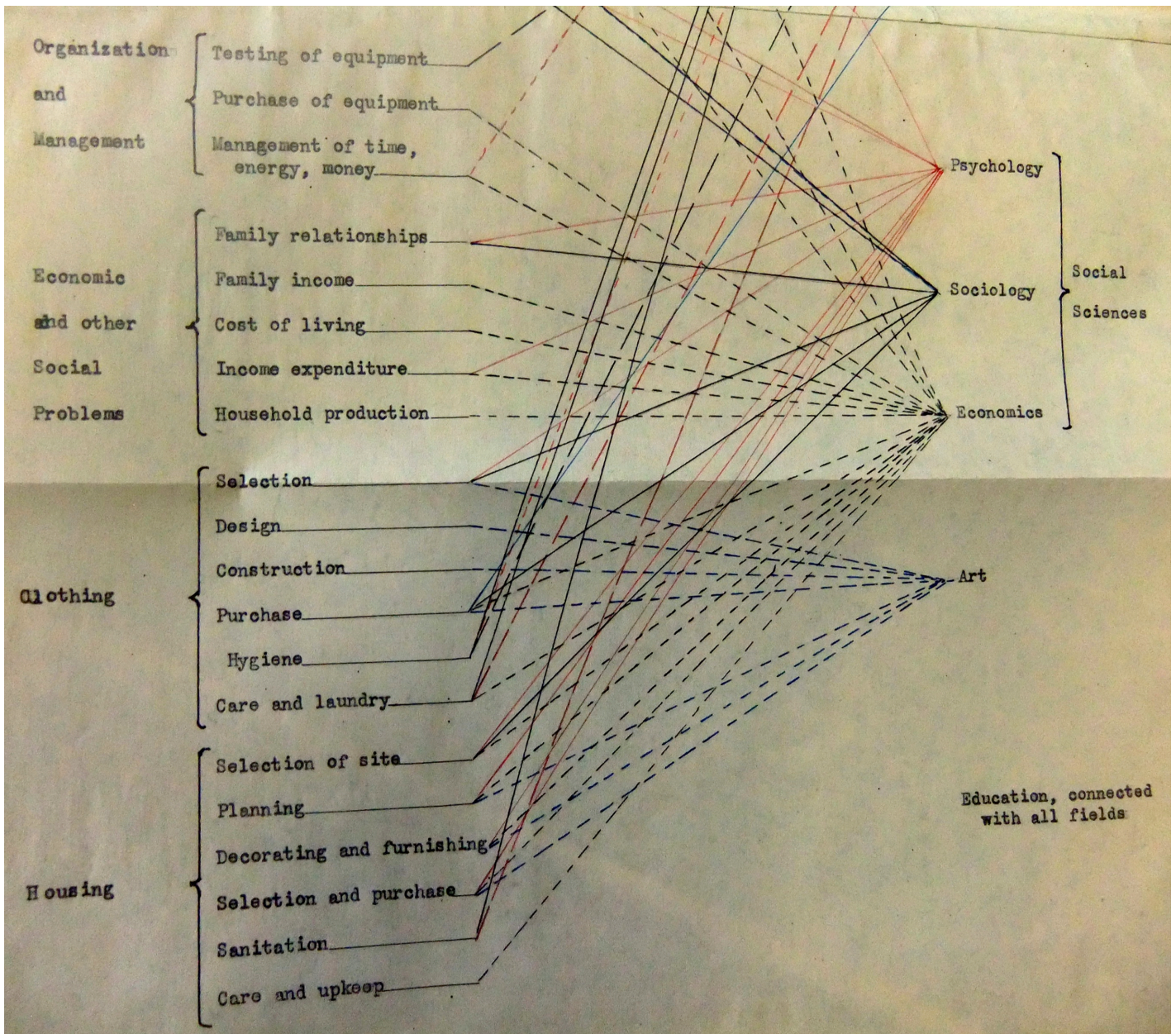


Figure 1: Sections of the Chicago home economics department in relation to existing disciplines

In "The Department of Home Economics at the University of Chicago: its history, its present status; and its needs," (1930), Folder 12, Box 103, RMH.

The administrative situation of the Chicago home economics department became more complicated, in 1929, with the arrival of the new President. Robert Maynard Hutchins reorganized the whole university into a college, four graduate divisions (physical sciences, biological sciences, social sciences and humanities) and five professional schools. The home economics department was not considered as providing professional training so it became part of the biological sciences division in 1931. Yet, because of its multidisciplinary nature, home economics kept important relations with the social sciences division. In particular, students specializing in “Economic and Social Relations” (then renamed “Economic Problems and Household Management”) were required to take advanced courses in economics, sociology, or social service administration. The Division of the Social Sciences was responsible for granting Ph.D. degrees in family economics.<sup>50</sup>

The relation of family economics to Chicago’s Department of Economics is unclear, however. Kyrk’s appointment at Chicago was mostly due to home economists’ mobilization, but Leon Carroll Marshall, the Dean of the School of Commerce and Administration from 1909 to 1924, helped to arrange her joint position with the economics department. Marshall was convinced of her abilities. He wrote to her just before she was hired at Chicago: “Of course, I have never been able to get out of my head the notion that *you would some day do a big piece of constructive work on the borderland of economics and home economics. . . .* The last string will be out when you go through Chicago on your way east.”<sup>51</sup> However, her affiliation with the economics faculty posed problems: she did not appear as a formal member of the economics faculty until 1929–1930 (Folbre, 1998, 45). Besides, Kyrk constantly tried to seek more support from

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<sup>50</sup> The University of Chicago awarded Ph. D. degrees in Home Economics only in two fields: Food and Nutrition and Family Economics.

<sup>51</sup> L. C. Marshall to Kyrk, March 24, 1924, Folder 9-10, Box 16, CDE.

economists and to raise their awareness of the importance of research in consumption with few results (see Box 16, CDE). Kyrk and Monroe remained at the margins of the economics department, especially as it put more emphasis on science and abstraction during the late 1920s and 1930s under the influence of Jacob Viner and Frank Knight.<sup>52</sup> They did not have enough recognition to get a full position in that department. Finally, it seems that students willing to specialize in family economics with Kyrk and Monroe were required to join the home economics department, which shows that family economics was considered as part of home economics rather than economics.

Although research and teaching on consumption and family economics had little (immediate) influence on the Department of Economics, they changed the home economics field. Citing the Chicago home economics department as an example, Kyrk stated that the economic and social problems of the home became the new “coordinating principle” of home economics while it had previously been organized around “a commodity basis,” focusing on food, clothing and furniture (Kyrk, 1929, 489). According to her, “an emphasis on the family [as a social unit] gives, incidentally, an opportunity for a synthesis of the home economics work in a way not possible before.” Kyrk and Monroe trained numerous women graduate students at Chicago. In particular, Kyrk supervised nine Ph.D. students from 1930 to 1945, some of whom contributed to further developing family economics research and teaching, like Hildegarde Kneeland, Alison Comish Thorne, Jessie Coles and Margaret Reid.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that there were some relationships between Kyrk and institutionalist economists at Chicago until the 1920s. James Field was Kyrk’s Ph.D. supervisor. Both Mitchell and James L. Laughlin were members of the jury which awarded Kyrk the Hart, Schaeffner and Marx Prize for her dissertation *A Theory of Consumption* (1924). Besides, Kyrk was heavily influenced by Wesley C. Mitchell, of whom she had been a student.

<sup>53</sup> Day Monroe, Hildegarde Kneeland and Alison Comish Thorne worked on consumption, Jessie Coles became renowned for her work on standardization of consumer



#### IV- Family Economics at Iowa State College

The first home economics department was created at Iowa State College (ISC) – an agricultural land-grant college – in 1872. It grew so much that in 1913 it became one of the three divisions of the college along with Science and Agriculture. It was then the biggest home economics academic institution in the United States as it included five departments in 1919.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1920s the ISC division of home economics emphasized the economic aspects of the home. Indeed, the Department of Household Administration included a sequence in home management which focused on the management of food, clothing, and housing. The management of time and money were important concerns. Ruth Lindquist, the dean of the Department of Household Administration from 1923 to 1928, noted that these were “doubtless two of the most vital problems in a large number of homes” (quoted from Eppright & Ferguson, 1971, 115). Accordingly, courses in elementary economics and business were required for students majoring in household administration.

Anna E. Richardson, the Dean of the ISC Division of Home Economics from 1922 to 1926, played a significant role in promoting the economic study of the home and in facilitating its development (Parsons, 2013). To her, consumption was the main current family problem: Elizabeth Hoyt recalled that “Dean Anna E. Richardson ... perceived that home economics must take account of the principles of economics as they relate to the use of goods and services, *the home*

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goods (see Coles, 1932, 1938), and Margaret Reid developed the household production part of family economics (women’s use of time, household management) (Reid, 1934).

<sup>54</sup> The home economics departments were : Applied Arts, Household Arts, Household Science, Household Administration and Physical Culture.

*economics itself is, to a large degree, applied consumption*” (Hoyt, 1939, vi, my emphasis).<sup>55</sup> Richardson supported the hiring of Kyrk and Hoyt at ISC to develop this new phase of home economics.

Family economics was institutionalized at ISC with the arrival of economists Kyrk, Hoyt and Reid in the late 1920s and early 1930s. All of them were young economists who joined ISC Department of Household Administration just after having completed their Ph.D. dissertations dealing with consumption (for Kyrk and Hoyt) and with household production (for Reid) (Kyrk, 1924; Hoyt, 1926; Reid, 1934). Kyrk only spent the 1924–1925 academic year at ISC before joining the University of Chicago. She was responsible for an introductory course in economics as well as for a graduate seminar and graduate research in household administration (Beller & Kiss, 2000, 30). She was replaced by Hoyt in 1925 who had a joint appointment in the Departments of Economics and Sociology, and Household Administration; thus becoming the first woman in the economics faculty. Reid joined her in 1931 with the same joint appointment.

Economic studies of the family took a new significance when the Department of Household Administration was split into the home management, household equipment and child development departments in 1929.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the newly created Department of Home Management, which was headed by Hoyt and Reid, was wholly devoted to the study of the economic aspect of the home, mostly consumption and efficient use of time. It helped “build the [home economics’] curriculum more firmly on the social sciences” (Eppright & Ferguson, 1971, 206).

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<sup>55</sup> Hoyt emphasized that “It was [Richardson] and not the economists themselves who in the first place made it possible for the study of consumption to have exceptional opportunities for its development at Iowa State College” (Hoyt, 1939, vi).

<sup>56</sup> The ISC Division of Home Economics thus included nine departments.

The new field of family economics, which overlapped the Department of Home Management and the Department of Economics and Sociology, also benefitted from the support of Theodore W. Schultz, an agricultural economist who had joined the ISC Department of Economics and Sociology in 1933 and became its dean in 1935. That department combined sequences on agricultural economics, home economics (that is, family economics), general economics and industrial economics. According to Alison Comish Thorne, a former student of Hoyt at ISC, Schultz supported family economics because it was close to institutional economics of which he had been acquainted during his graduate studies at Wisconsin University (Thorne, 1994, 2). With family economics, Schultz envisioned a new economic sub-discipline focusing on the home which would resemble agricultural economics. In 1941, Schultz wrote Reid that he was pleased "... Iowa State College ha[d] become an ideal laboratory for the social scientists interested in problems pertaining to agriculture, industry, home economics, and engineering."<sup>57</sup> The original cooperation between the Department of Economics and Sociology on the one hand and the Department of Home Management on the other permitted the ISC to become a leader in family economics (Kyrk, 1938).<sup>58</sup>

In the 1930s, a series of courses in family economics were credited in both the Department of Home Management and the Department of Economics and Sociology. Hoyt and Reid were its leading teachers. The series was comprised of three courses given in the Department of Home Management. Firstly, an introductory course to economics used the same textbook as other economic

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<sup>57</sup> Schultz to Reid, November 26, 1941 in Folder 3, Box 9, MGR.

<sup>58</sup> According to Kyrk (1938), the attendance of both Hoyt and Reid at ISC made it "the first institution where departments of economics and home economics gave wholehearted and intelligent support of this character [studies of consumption and of consumers' problems]."

students (Garver & Hansen's *Principles of Economics*). Secondly, a course on consumption economics used Hoyt's *Consumption of Wealth* (1928) as well as books which emphasized consumers' problems in the modern market and were concerned with family welfare.<sup>59</sup> Thirdly, Reid taught housing and household production based on her *Economics of Household Production* (1934). By the late 1930s, other courses completed this sequence. An economic history course approached the rise of modern industry and corporation, the labor movement and consumers' cooperative movement. Others dealt with consumer marketing, family finance, food economics and methods of social study.<sup>60</sup> Thorne, Schultz and Mary Jean Bowman taught in this sequence (Eppright & Ferguson, 1971, 226). Overall, family economics at ISC was empirical, institutional and historical. It dealt with current concerns pertaining to American families' standard of living.

Yet, family economics was not an integral part of economics. The home economics sequence was a separate economic curriculum meant for girls. Students came mainly from the all-female Department of Home Management. Other students coming from the Department of Economics and Sociology were mostly women. Their joint appointment with the Department of Economics and Sociology notwithstanding, Hoyt and Reid were spatially separated from their male colleagues. Their offices were with other home economists in Margaret Hall while male economists were in Ag Annex. They were also less paid than male economists (Thorne & Peterson, 2002). Thorne recognized gender discrimination and marginalization of women economists into home economics even if she also noted that it enabled them to have an academic position in which

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<sup>59</sup> These books, which included *The Tragedy of Waste* (Chase, 1925) and *100,000,000 guinea pigs* (Kallett & Schlink, 1932), were central to the emergence the consumer movement. More on the consumer movement in chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> "Certain facts concerning the teaching of Principles courses in Department of Economics, 1933-1936." Box 1, TWS.

they were respected as economists. Family economists participated in economic departmental seminars, “maintaining their identity as professional economists in good standing with their male colleagues in economics departments” (ibid.). Although women economists joined a separate “women’s economic field” within home economics, they benefited from stable institutional positions and visibility.

The recognition of these women as specialists in family economics was closely linked to their effort to develop research. In 1924-1925, Household Administration was one of the seven home economics departments which offered major and minor work toward the master’s degree. In 1925, the Purnell Acts made funds available for research on “economic and sociological investigations of the rural home and the rural life” in land-grant institutions, thus prompting a wide development of research in family economics. Some Purnell funds were managed through the Iowa agricultural experiment station for home economics research (Eppright & Ferguson, 1971, 221-222).<sup>61</sup> A home economics section was formed in 1926 in which Hoyt, along with other home economists, carried out a pioneer local study of food consumption which outlined the poor food habits of many Iowa farm families (Mabel Nelson, Hoyt, McLaughlin, Morgan, 1935). Facing the success of these first studies, the director of the experiment station, Dean Charles Franklin Curtiss, apportioned a substantial quarter of the Purnell funds of 1926-1927 (7,500 dollars) to home economics research (Eppright & Ferguson, 1971). In this context, too, Reid conducted a study on rural housing and equipment (Reid, 1935).<sup>62</sup> From 1935 to 1943, Schultz

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<sup>61</sup> Agricultural experiment stations were created after the Hatch Act of 1887 in order to foster research on agricultural problems in land-grant colleges.

<sup>62</sup> The study was sponsored by the Agricultural Economics and the Home Economics Sections of the Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, in cooperation with the Iowa Extension Service and the Bureau of Home Economics of the USDA. Funds for collecting and tabulating data came from the federal Civil Works Administration.

headed the rural social science section of the Iowa agricultural experiment station, which may have contributed to further fund family economics studies.

Finally, ISC became a hotbed for the development of family economics because of its strong emphasis on service and applied research, which enabled home economists to tackle current concerns of farm families for expenditures in food, housing, and household equipment.

## V- Family Economics at Cornell University<sup>63</sup>

A Department of Home Economics was created at Cornell University in 1908 as part of its College of Agriculture.<sup>64</sup> By the mid-1920s it became an independent college –the New York College of Home Economics– with nutrition specialists Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer as co-heads. It also made room for family economics.

In the early 1930s, Rose and Van Rensselaer pointed out that the role of economic analysis needed to be emphasized in home economics in order to respond to new economic concerns in the households, especially those about the “problems of consumption”.<sup>65</sup> The 1930 *Annual Report of the College of Home Economics* stated that the economics of the household, and in particular, consumption economics, was to be developed into a separate department. It

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<sup>63</sup> This section is based on chapter 3 of Pietrykowski (2009).

<sup>64</sup> Cornell University is both a land-grant college and an Ivy league university, thus combining private and public funding.

<sup>65</sup> “Study of the use of money by the household has resulted in the development within the department of a specific field concerned with economics of the household. *Interest in problems of consumption, and in the relationships that exist between the consumer-buyer and the producer, is an outcome of an industrial society in which production has been moved from home to factory. The homemaker has become a consumer-buyer. The goods that she buys, the understanding with which she apportions the family income in satisfying the needs of the family, and the demands she makes on the producer, are being recognized as having economic significance, not only in the home but in business as well.*” Rose, F. (1930), quoted in Pietrykowski, 2009, 37, my emphasis.

was considered as one of the major research projects.<sup>66</sup> Dean Van Rensselaer hired Day Monroe and Helen Canon in 1930 to head the new department in the “economics of the household and household management.”<sup>67</sup>

Monroe and Canon were pioneers in family economics. Monroe was a former student of Kyrk at Chicago while Canon had studied household and consumer economics at Cornell.<sup>68</sup> Both received a Ph.D. degree in 1930 and wanted to build an economic analysis of consumption and household activities. Home economics provided an institutional opportunity to do so. While Monroe remained briefly at the head of the new Department of “economics of the household and household management,” Canon stayed at this position until her

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<sup>66</sup> “While economics is only one of the fields of subject matter involved in household management, it is one of the most important, and strength in this field reinforces the sub-structure for building a fund of subject matter for management. *A vigorous new interest became evident in what was called ‘economics of the household’ or ‘family economics.’*” Canon, H. (1942). “Development of the Department of Economics of the Household and Household Management.” iv, quoted in Pietrykowski, 2009, 41, my emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> Van Rensselaer had previously considered hiring Kyrk in a joint appointment between home economics and economics. She wrote to President of Oberlin College (where was Kyrk) in 1924: “I am corresponding with Hazel Kyrk in reference to a position in research and teaching the subject, Economics of the Household . . . A person taking this position must have the ability to work with other departments, as for example, the Department of Economics and the Department of Rural Economics. She would not only be a good teacher but also have the qualifications for investigation and research.” quoted in Beller & Kiss, 2000, 29. Kyrk went to ISC instead.

<sup>68</sup> The Extension Service was created by the Smith-Lever Act (1914) to extend instruction beyond the campus borders of the land-grant institutions, in particular through home economics courses and demonstrations for farm housewives. Extension courses in home economics were given by “extension agents” or “home demonstration agents” who were employed either by the land-grant colleges or by the USDA. The Smith Lever Act was an answer to the Country Life Movement, a mobilization against the depletion of rural areas which sought to better rural living conditions. With extension education, it was hoped that rural homes – and more broadly, U. S. farms – will be more efficient, and that women will stay on farms.

retirement in 1952, helping the institutionalization of family economics at Cornell University.<sup>69</sup>

During the early 1930s, family economics spread via teaching and academic research at Cornell.<sup>70</sup> Monroe taught courses on “Problems of the Household Buyer” and “The Marketing System and the Consumer;” likewise, she wrote articles on consumer expenditures and national economic growth (Pietrykowski, 2009, 40). As for Canon, she taught a variety of courses in consumer economics throughout her career at Cornell, including "Management of Individual Resources for Financial Security," "Economic Problems of the Household," and "Economic Conditions in Relation to the Welfare of Families." These courses aimed at increasing women’s understanding of the importance of the economic structure of society and of their economic role as consumers and homemakers. This was envisioned as necessary to improve families’ economic situations. Finally, paralleling similar developments at the University of Chicago and ISC, a separate women’s economic field focusing on the family emerged at Cornell’s College of Home Economics in the early 1930s.

## VI- Family Economics in Federal Government

Because of its contribution to the war effort, home economists’ expertise gained increased significance in federal government in the late 1910s. As the population suffered from food shortage, food consumption became a key issue for federal government. The U.S. Food Administration, then headed by Herbert Hoover,

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<sup>69</sup> Information on Canon is available at: <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/homeEc/bios/helencanon.html>, last consulted on January 9, 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Monroe also joined the federal government, see part VI.



claimed “Food Will Win the War!” (cited in Nyhart, 1997, 137). In this context, a number of home economists joined the food conservation program of the U.S. Food Administration to promote a healthy and economical diet.<sup>72</sup> There they contributed to publication of “thrift leaflets,” in collaboration with the Office of Home Economics, the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), the Bureau of Education, women’s magazines, and land-grant colleges. In fact, they were valued for their expertise in nutrition as well as for their ability to pass messages to housewives which permitted to influence family expenditures. Eventually, the war enabled home economists to gain recognition as consumer experts especially in food consumption (Goldstein, 2012, 46-47).

Home economists’ place within federal government became even more important after the war as the U. S. Department of Agriculture’s Office of Home Economics, which had been created in 1915, was enlarged and renamed Bureau of Home Economics (BHE) in 1923. Although the intentions of the federal government in creating the BHE was to promote agricultural products and modernization of rural family living, the BHE became a research institution devoted to the study of consumption which was envisioned by home economists as the main contemporary home problem (Goldstein, 2012). The BHE was organized into several divisions – including the Foods and Nutrition (1923), the Textiles and Clothing (1925) and later the Housing and Household Equipment (1935) divisions – which tackled various types of consumer spending (Liston, 1993, 39-41; Goldstein, 2012, 88). Home economists gathered information on agricultural products, textiles and household equipment and conducted

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<sup>72</sup> Home economists involved in the food conservation program included Katharine Blunt (University of Chicago), Isabel Bevier (University of Illinois), Abby Marlatt (University of Wisconsin), Mary Swartz Rose (Columbia University’s Teachers College), Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer (Cornell University). The latter became head of the Home Conservation Section (Rossiter, 1982, 120).

technical studies on a few of them using a range of criteria (aesthetics, quality, economy, effect on consumers' health). Then, they disseminated information through publications and demonstrations (more on this in chapter 3).

Besides their expertise on consumption goods, BHE home economists also developed studies on consumption and household production behaviors in the "Family Economics Division," which was created in 1924. This division welcomed women economists, including Day Monroe, Faith Williams and Hildegard Kneeland, three former students of Hazel Kyrk at Chicago; as well as Kyrk herself in the late 1930s. It was sub-divided into "household production" and "consumption economics" sections. The studies on household production related to the allocation of women's time, the effects of using new technologies, and the quantification of household work (Kneeland, 1928; Kneeland, 1929; Woodhouse & Williams, 1933).

Family consumption habits, rather than household production, increasingly became the focus of the Family Economics Division. Kneeland, who became the head of this division in 1935, was greatly influenced by Kyrk. Like her, she wanted to broaden the study of household management beyond its traditional focus on "family budgets and accounts" and technical advice for housewives and toward an economic analysis of consumption, that is, a study of the determinants of family expenditures (Goldstein, 1994, 111). In fact, she promoted interactions between home economics and social sciences, mainly economics and sociology, and was herself a member of the AHEA as well as of the American Economic Association and the Sociological Society.

Consumption economics at the BHE mostly dealt with rural families' purchases and how the decisions about what to buy and what to make at home were taken. In particular, home economists with background in economics and nutrition developed studies on "food economics." For instance, Edith Hawley

launched studies on national food habits during the late 1920s, which were continued by Hazel K. Stiebeling in 1930. These women were particularly interested in the links between food purchases and health. More broadly, the BHE became a leader in studies on families' current standard of living. Williams, who had already worked on costs and standards of living (see Williams & Connolly, 1930), was responsible for the first recension of American consumption studies (Williams & Zimmerman, 1935). As concerns for consumption spread in federal government, home economists were on the front line.

The Great Depression and the implementation of the New Deal further enticed federal government to support consumption and income studies in its effort to control the market and to smooth economic cycles. The first comprehensive study of American family incomes and purchases – the Consumer Purchases Study (CPS) – was launched in 1935. The BHE had a central role in this collaborative study since its Family Economics Division, headed by Kneeland, was asked to collect and analyze data on rural families while the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics dealt with urban families. The CPS was the first detailed study of spending patterns according to different categories of expenditures. Besides, families were categorized according to income levels, occupations, family types and degrees of urbanization. Thus, it contributed to the understanding of the factors affecting family consumption of various goods and services.

Finally, as home economists broaden their institutional basis in federal government through the BHE during the 1920s and 1930s, their work shifted from nutrition studies to the economics of the home, and it focused on housewives' allocation of time, buying and use of consumer goods and consumer behavior. Home economists were henceforth recognized as consumer experts.

## VII- Conclusion

Home economics was greatly influenced by social demands and more generally external forces. The creation of a field of family economics in the 1920s and early 1930s was mainly due to the efforts of heads of home economics departments (Blunt at Chicago, Richardson at ISC, Rose and Van Rensselaer at Cornell) who believed that many of the current “home problems” were economic and social. Accordingly, they created departments and courses dealing with the new role of women and families as consumers and hired women with background in economics to run this subfield. Federal government also played a key role in the development of family economics by funding research on family economics in land-grant colleges through the 1925 Purnell Acts, and by creating the Bureau of Home Economics within the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), with the view to better understand and control family expenditures.

This new home economics field was more or less close to economics, depending on local academic context. At the University of Chicago and at Cornell University, family economists had few noticeable links with economists. In contrast, the proximity between family economists and economists at ISC is related to the development of an important agricultural economics program, led by T. W. Schultz, which had a number of similarities with family economics (see Banzhaf, 2006).

In chapters 3 and 4, I detail the content of the family economics field which thrived within academia and federal government until World War II. I argue that it should be seen as an art combining investigation of family behavior and commitment to improve it.

## Chapter 3

### Home Economics as Art: Creating Rational Consumers, 1924–1945

#### I- Introduction

In 1933, Elizabeth Hoyt, a professor of economics and of home economics at Iowa State College, set out the agenda of home economics as follows: “to raise the consumption of economic goods. . . to the dignity of an art” – the “high art of living,” to use her phrase (Hoyt, 1933, 303). That suggestion was in line with advice given to housewives in nineteenth century books.<sup>73</sup> But in a context of growing concern for the alleged irrationality of consumers, the responsibility of business in manipulating consumer choices and the rise of technocratic management, the art of consumption took a new meaning for home economists. It was conceived as an effort to raise family welfare which corporations were supposed to threaten.

American families experienced unprecedented affluence during the “Roaring Twenties.” The development of mass consumption permitted to absorb the massive amount of goods and services produced. In particular, the growth of advertising, of marketing and salesmanship – which all greatly benefitted from the development of new radio programs and women’s magazines – were used to increase and direct consumer demand (Donohue, 2003). The development of the market certainly brought new comforts for families but many also worried about the increasing influence of business. In the 1920s and 1930s, social critics, like Frederick J. Schlink, Stuart Chase, Paul Douglas, Rexford Tugwell and Robert

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<sup>73</sup> A famous example of this kind of literature is Catharine Beecher’s *Treatise on the Domestic Economy* (1841).

Lynd denounced the manipulation of consumers. For Thorstein Veblen (1904), who was increasingly popular in the 1920s, consumers were the primary victims of an industrial system ruled by businessmen. Similarly, home economists criticized the “exploitation” of the American public which was considered as “a great pool of suckers” by advertising and, more generally, by business (Busch, 1939, 438). A growing social movement of consumers, in which home economists were important actors, voiced these concerns during the 1930s (see Cohen, 2003; Glickman, 2009).

A number of solutions were contemplated to avoid consumers’ manipulation. Veblen (1921) pleaded for a technocratic management of firms by engineers who will be concerned with the efficiency of production rather than with profits. He had no faith in the possibility of changing consumers into rational individuals. By contrast, some consumer activists like Schlink wanted to produce a technical product-centered expertise in order to transform consumer spending into “scientific buying.” Home economists supported a mix of technocratic management and “empowerment” of consumers. They considered that consumers could be made more rational thanks to expert advice and education. Their studies on consumption were thus focused on a practical aim: to educate women – who were the main consumers – for their role (Miller, 1922).

Using the publications of key home economists who were active in the field of consumer and family economics – namely Hazel Kyrk, Elizabeth Hoyt and Margaret Reid, this chapter documents how context shaped home economists’ ambition to create rational consumers. It also analyzes home economists’ institutional and intellectual influence.

In section II, I explain the emergence of home economists’ interest in rationalizing consumption during the affluent 1920s as an effort to offset the negative influence of corporations on consumers. I claim that home economists

proposed to direct consumer's spending – like advertisers did – but from a welfare standpoint. In section III, I trace the institutional success of home economists' education to rational consumption in federal government and consumer organizations during the 1930s and World War II. In section IV, I relate how education to rational consumption permeated American high schools, colleges and universities during the 1930s and led social scientists to discuss home economists' view of the consumer.

## II- The New Art of Rational Consumption

A group of home economists trained in economics began to investigate consumer behavior in the 1920s. Among them, Hazel Kyrk, worked on a Ph.D. dissertation on “The Consumer's Guidance of Economic Activity” at the University of Chicago.<sup>74</sup> From 1925 onwards, she taught consumption and family economics in Chicago's Departments of Economics and Home Economics. Likewise, Elizabeth Hoyt became interested in consumer choice as she wrote her dissertation on “Foundations of Economic Value” at Radcliffe College (Hoyt, 1928). She had the same kind of joint appointment as Kyrk at Iowa State College. Both Kyrk and Hoyt were especially interested in the relationships between consumers and corporations.

Home economists worried about the increasing influence of corporations on consumers which led to “consumption wastes,” that is, purchases of commodities that were not really wanted or which were harmful to consumers. Family income had risen since the beginning of the twentieth century but most purchases were said to reflect social emulation and business manipulation and

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<sup>74</sup> Kyrk's dissertation was published as *A Theory of Consumption* (Kyrk, 1924).

were thus unsatisfactory to consumers.<sup>75</sup> In fact, home economists considered that a large part of the new abundance of commodities was wasteful since production was oriented toward profit, not toward welfare (Woodhouse, 1934; see also Kyrk, 1924, 104).

This concern for business influence on consumers led Kyrk and Hoyt to reject neoclassical demand theory as an explanation of consumer behavior (Kyrk, 1924; Hoyt, 1928). For Kyrk, the utility maximization framework, based on utilitarianism, was problematic because of its characteristics: its “individualism” (individual preferences were not influenced by others), its “intellectualism” (choice was the result of a rational process of calculation and deliberation) and its “hedonism” (deliberation rested on a balance between future pleasure and pain). Like the widely quoted economists Veblen (1909) and Wesley Clair Mitchell (1912), home economists doubted the rationality assumption could be applied to firms and to consumers alike. The assumption that consumers were maximizing their utility neglected the fact that most of the motives behind consumption choice were unclear, even to consumers themselves.<sup>76</sup>

Unsurprisingly, home economists advocated the “need of exploring the world behind the demand curve” (Kyrk, 1924, 19), that is, of studying the development of wants in order to explain consumption choices. To this end, Kyrk

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<sup>75</sup> For instance, Kyrk (1934, 18) wrote: “It is certainly true that the consumer could have vastly more health and less illness, more beauty and less ugliness, more usefulness and less trumpery, more amusement and less boredom, by a different expenditure of his dollars.”

<sup>76</sup> Hoyt explained: “The current expression of the consumer as a firm is familiar to all of you. The expression is misleading, however, in so far as it suggests that consumers have motivations as clear and as generally accepted as those which lead to a maximization of profits and that their choices are capable of being weighed against one another and their values measured similarly to the weighing and measuring of the inputs of production. The concept becomes fruitful only when motives are understood and means of weighing and measuring are developed.” in “Rise and Content of Consumption Economics,” undated, Folder 5, Box 13, EEH. Similarly, Kyrk (1924, 188) stated: “The spending of income which is the manifestation of consumers’ choices is truly, as Mitchell says, a neglected, backward, and conservative art.”



approached values through the concept of family “standard of living.”<sup>77</sup> Standards of living encompassed all that was considered necessities by families, the main unit of consumption (Hoyt equally defined standards of living as satisfactions considered essential by families). They were distinct from actual family purchases, called “manner,” “level” or “plane of living.”

As they took their source in individual’s psychology and personality, standards of living were explained by psychology and in particular, the new functional psychology.<sup>78</sup> For instance, Kyrk (1924) distinguished several individual “instincts” – such as the instincts of self-preservation, of workmanship and of distinction, the desire for ownership and the play instinct – which influenced standards of living.<sup>79</sup> These instincts were social constructs: they depended on the “cultural content” or “social values” from that time and from the group of belonging. For instance, the goods considered necessary for survival, for attaining prestige and welfare were products of customs and social interactions. Similarly, Hoyt (1938) distinguished different “basic cultural interests” that consumers sought to satisfy through their consumption: two primary interests (sensory and social) present in all cultures and four secondary

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<sup>77</sup> It is likely that Kyrk was influenced by pragmatist philosopher John Dewey on valuation, as noted by Susan Van Velzen (2001). Dewey had been chairman of the Chicago Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy from 1859 to 1904. This department had housed the newly created Department of Household Arts in 1901, later transformed into a Department of Home Economics and Household Administration (see chapter 2). Dewey’s influence may still have been significant while Kyrk was a graduate student in economics at the University of Chicago in the late 1900s (she completed her Ph.D. degree in 1910).

<sup>78</sup> Functional psychology relates human behavior and mental state to the external environment. It owes much to the work of John Dewey, William James and George Herbert Mead at the University of Chicago in the late 19th century. “[Functional psychology] emphasizes the causes and consequences of human behavior; the union of the physiological with the psychological; the need for objective testing of theories; and the applications of psychological knowledge to the solution of practical problems, the evolutionary continuity between animals and humans, and the improvement of human life.” See <https://dictionary.apa.org/functionalism>, last consulted on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> For the instinct of workmanship and the instinct of distinction, Kyrk relied on Veblen.

interests (intellectual, technological, aesthetic, empathetic) (Parsons, 2013, 8). Thus, family standards of living evolved according to individual psychology, family history and “folkways,” including habits, conventions, customs, and social emulation.<sup>80</sup>

Advertising, salesmanship and fashion were increasingly important in creating new necessities for consumers, which entered into their standards of living (Reid, 1934, 210; Hoyt, 1933, 304). Though corporations did not create consumers’ wants from scratch (since commodities occasionally did not find buyers), they strove to control and guide demand in order to increase profits (Kyrk, 1924, 105-7). Wants created by business, with the help of “the ablest psychologists,” were denounced as “wasteful,” “superficial” and “contrary to the interests of the consumer” (Williams, 1929, 730, see also Kyrk, 1924, 94-5). In particular, monopolistic firms practiced intense salesmanship and product differentiation through brands that permitted them to base their selling on the prestige of the buyer rather than on the performance of their commodities. More generally, advertisers and salesmen played on individuals’ feelings and interests (“sex appeal, snob appeal, fear appeal and success appeal”) rather than on their intelligence (Busch, 1939, 438; see also Reid, 1940, 136; Hoyt, undated). Fashion and social emulation, which were encouraged by business, were especially wasteful.<sup>81</sup> These business influences on consumers’ wants drove consumers constantly unsatisfied (Hoyt, 1928; Kyrk, 1930). Besides, unprofitable wants, such as aesthetic and intellectual wants for instance, were neglected.

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<sup>80</sup> Both Kyrk’s and Hoyt’s theories of consumption relied heavily on Veblen (1899) and Mitchell (1910, 1912).

<sup>81</sup> As Hoyt put it: “Millions and millions of dollars every year go out for fads which lose their attraction overnight. A large part of our income is spent in emulative copying of other people still more foolish than ourselves” (Hoyt, 1930 quoted from Parson, 2013, 9).

Overall, consumer wants were “wasteful” because they were directed by external forces rather than by a careful, well-reasoned decision.

Another source of consumer “waste” resulted from the poor, if not misleading, information on commodities spread by corporations. With increased affluence, new varieties and growing quantities of goods available, consumer had more choices to make. Besides, they faced unknown sellers while they had previously relied on trust and personal relationships (Kyrk, 1935). Most information on market goods and services came from business advertising and selling practices which were increasingly known for entailing a number of frauds, deceptions and misrepresentations. Finally, abundance complicated product choice even further.

Home economists hoped to overcome the negative corporate influence on consumption choices through the power of science and education. They sought to develop an “art of rational consumption” which would teach women how to attain welfare through consumption (see for instance Monroe, 1937, 670).<sup>82</sup> They proposed to direct and shape consumer’s spending for food, clothing, housing, furnishings, transportation and even recreation – like advertisers did – but from a welfare standpoint.

First, home economists argued that consumers needed an objective, disinterested guidance to remake their own valuations and to establish more beneficial wants. For them, consumer satisfaction stemmed from the capacity of consumers to attain what they considered necessary.<sup>83</sup> As a result, satisfaction

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<sup>82</sup> The phrases “art of consumption” and “art of spending money” were used by economists Wesley C. Mitchell (1912) and John A. Hobson (1914). Home economists often cited these authors, although they did not explicitly use the “art of consumption.” See note 19 above.

<sup>83</sup> Home economists’ “standard of living” framework emphasized the difference between one’s level of living (sum of goods and services purchased) and the satisfaction it procured. A same level of living could either lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction according to

could be more easily attained when “wasteful needs” created by customs, social emulation and “business manipulation” were eliminated. Home economists encouraged consumers to free themselves from external influences and to search for the satisfaction of the most pressing “necessities” (Hoyt, 1933; Williams, 1929, 730). Food, housing and clothing were “basic necessities” since they were necessary to “health and decency” (Monroe, 1937, 665). Conversely, the search for comforts and cultural items had to come afterwards.

In practice, home economists designed “scientific,” “standard” or “model” budgets to help families evaluate and modify their own expenditures. These budgets, which were based on actual budget studies, were geared towards satisfying basic needs with current income.<sup>84</sup> These basic needs generally included food, clothing, housing, furnishings, education, health, transportation, recreation as well as savings and taxes (Donham, 1929; AHEA Committee, 1932; Hoyt, 1933). Model budgets, with specific shares for each basic need, served as an “objective” criteria to define rational consumption.

Home economists made clear that the “one best budget” was impossible to devise since household budgets depended on the characteristics of families (AHEA Committee, 1932). Accordingly, they constructed different optimal household budgets taking into account the characteristics of families (Woodhouse, 1926; Marlatt, 1936; Comish, 1936). In particular, budgets were designed according to income level or professional status (poor families, wage

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one’s standard of living (appreciation of the essentials). If the level of living covered the essentials, that is, the standard of living, then it was satisfactory. Privation and dissatisfaction emerged when families lived below their standards. Even a high level of living could be unsatisfactory.

<sup>84</sup> Home economists used in particular the Consumer Purchases Study as well as Cost of Living Studies data.

earners, college faculty members).<sup>85</sup> Some studies investigated the influence of family size and tried to construct cost-consumption scales measuring relative expenses for different members of families. Such scales were either based “upon the energy or other nutritive or physical requirements of persons of different age and sex” or “upon expenditures made for members of families of different age and sex” (AHEA Committee, 1932). The latter was considered as the easiest way to develop guides for family expenses. Many other home economic studies focused on specific items instead of total expenditures.

One of the main interests of home economists were “scientific standards” for food expenditures.<sup>86</sup> Besides being a physical necessity, food was also a large part of daily family expenditure.<sup>87</sup> The significant development of nutrition permitted to assess the biological needs of family members. As a result, it was possible to devise food standards and thus to say whether “the family’s diet [was] adequate for health” (AHEA Committee, 1932). In fact, home economists believed that science in general and nutrition in particular could help define the most urgent and beneficial needs.

If shaping food needs toward a healthy and economical minimum was foreseeable, shaping other consumer needs toward welfare proved a difficult task. Indeed, home economists struggled to establish definite criteria to define needs for housing, clothing, household articles and recreation since such “criteria of adequacy lack[ed] the kind of scientific bases we have for dietary

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<sup>85</sup> The US Department of Labor was particularly concerned with wage-earning and low-salaried groups. For instance, a 1933 study jointly led by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the BHE focused on federal employees living in the District of Columbia (see Williams, 1934). See also the standard cost-of-living budgets proposed by the Heller Committee at Berkeley (Davis, 1945). In particular, Jessica Peixotto published two studies on cost of living of faculty members (Peixotto, 1927, 1929).

<sup>86</sup> On nutritional standards, see Kory (1945)

<sup>87</sup> According to Jacobs (2007, 42), an average wage-earning family spent 40% of its annual income on food in 1901 and 35% in 1940.

standards” (Dickins, Monroe & Greene, 1944, 505). These needs differed among individuals according to their social background (Hoyt, 1931; AHEA Committee, 1932). Besides, the notion of necessities had changed. Commodities that had been considered as non-necessities a generation ago – like bathtubs, radios, movies, telephones, and automobile for instance – entered the standard of living of many families in the 1920s, making it especially difficult to set a fixed level of necessities.

Yet, home economists defended the development of “model budgets,” not as definite standards for wise spending but as useful guides to compare with and to improve actual expenditures (AHEA Committee, 1932, 1049). Families could use these “model budgets” to question their own standard of living and perhaps to reorganize it by giving more importance to some truly important wants like food, housing, clothing; and by reducing others, especially items bought for distinction or fashion.

Besides their efforts to influence women to prioritize health and welfare over “superficial wants,” home economists provided a more technical expertise: they disseminated “objective” information on commodities to help women make informed consumption choices. In so doing, they hoped to enable consumers to have a greater return on the income spent and to better satisfy their wants.

Although home economists had helped women “to choose among the bewildering variety of goods competing for their dollars” since the beginning of the twentieth century, consumer buying education acquired greater significance in the late 1920s. Indeed, most home economists considered that objective information on commodities was needed as a “more adequate basis for purchases than beautiful pictures, appealing slogans, and the endorsement of movie actresses” in advertisements (Williams, 1928, quoted from Jacobs, 2007,

89; see also JHE Editorial, 1927; JHE Editorial, 1934). All the more so as families faced decreasing purchasing power as well as quality deterioration “in practically every line of goods” during the Great Depression (Nystrom, 1932, 872). Home economics courses in colleges and universities provided a product-centered technical expertise with the use of buying guides, the critical analysis of advertising statements, the search for technical information – like labels, grades, ratings – and knowledge to assess the quality, the economy and the effects of goods and services on health (Kyrk, 1941).<sup>88</sup>

Although home economists criticized business influence on consumers, they also sought to affect consumer expenditures through the promotion of “intelligence,” “rationality” and “welfare” in buying choices and the dissemination of technical information on market commodities. Like many contemporary social scientists, including John Dewey and Wesley C. Mitchell, home economists had faith in the ability of science and education to further social progress. Their art of rational consumption was their own expression of that belief.

### III- The ‘Rational Consumer’ Turn in American Society

Whereas the art of consumption was originally conceived as a response to problems caused by affluence, it flourished in the hardships of the 1930s. As their incomes dropped, American families were led to reconsider and eventually reduce their spending. The question of satisfying the most urgent family needs became a practical urgency. Likewise, the possibility of guaranteeing a minimum for the maintenance of families was a great political concern. The emphasis of

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<sup>88</sup> Buying education also compounded efforts to standardize and label commodities, which are detailed in chapter 4.

home economists on thrift as well as their efforts to prioritize wants appeared providential in that context. In retrospect, home economists' denunciation of the artificial stimulation of consumption by business appeared perfectly understandable. As a national Thrift Week was organized in 1931, the editorial of the *Journal of Home Economics* noted: "January, 1931 finds the advocates of wise spending no longer like prophets crying in the wilderness, but in general favor as public speakers and teachers ... let the upholders of old-fashioned thrift give heartfelt thanks" (JHE Editorial, 1931, 57).

Federal government popularized home economists' efforts to teach women how to prioritize basic needs. At the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Home Economics (BHE), Hazel Stiebeling and her group of home economists conceived healthy menus at four cost levels in 1933 (Goldstein, 2012).<sup>89</sup> As they were part of New Deal relief programs, these budgets were publicized by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and distributed widely throughout the 1930s. Besides, many home economists taught women about nutrition and emergency food budgets (see Stage & Vincenti, 1997). Home economists' efforts to shape family wants toward a suitable minimum thus benefitted from federal support during the 1930s.

The BHE strengthened home economists' expertise on market commodities. It conducted tests on food products (value of foods in terms of bodily needs), on textiles and clothing (fabric quality) as well as on household equipment (design and physical properties). More broadly, it gathered information on consumer commodities and operated as a "clearinghouse about consumer goods" (Goldstein, 2012, 64). President F. D. Roosevelt's National Emergency Council even asked Ruth O'Brien, the head of the BHE Division of

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<sup>89</sup> They used the data on food consumption from the Consumer Purchases Study, the first comprehensive study of family income and expenditure in the US.



Textiles and Clothing, to write a quality guide for ready-made items (Goldstein, 2012). The guide was later published as “Present Guides for Household Buying.” The BHE also contributed to the Consumers’ Guide published from 1937 to 1942 by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s Office of Consumers’ Counsel. Dealing mostly with food products, this guide was one of the most widely circulated periodicals during that period.

The BHE stood as a major source of information for consumers. It had a large communication network thanks to the publication of bulletins sent to individual households, home economics faculty, home demonstration extension agents, high school home economics teachers as well as firms and editors of women’s magazines (Goldstein, 2012).<sup>90</sup> These bulletins were appreciated for giving “technical information [about products] that was summarized in plain language, accessible, and easy to apply” (81). The BHE also conceived radio programs and exhibits to spread information on goods. Besides, it received letters from housewives, often dealing with purchasing decisions. BHE home economists answered each of them (15 000 annually throughout the 1920s). Yet, a strong limit to BHE buying education efforts was that home economists were not allowed to mention any specific brands. Consequently, they could not publish comparative product analysis but only general advice. Nonetheless, by the mid-30s, the BHE was considered as a “consumers’ bureau” providing the most “scientific” and “objective” information on commodities quality to consumers (ibid.).

Home economists’ expertise in consumption was soon imitated by several consumer organizations. In particular, organizations testing consumer goods like the Consumers’ Research (CR) and the Consumers Union (CU) proliferated and

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<sup>90</sup> The BHE bulletins circulated widely during the interwar period. It reached 2 million people in 1927 according to Goldstein (2012, 103).

were part of the “consumer movement” of the 1930s. CR was the first US subscribers-financed organization for testing consumer products. It was founded in 1929 by Stuart Chase and Frederick John Schlink - the authors of the best-seller *Your Money’s Worth* (1927).<sup>91</sup> The latter emphasized the “exploitation” of consumers by business: besides creating unnecessary wants, the profit motive led to production of hazardous and inefficient commodities and misleading advertising. According to Schlink and Chase, the solution was to provide consumers with results of objective technical and economic research so that they make informed choices. Consequently, CR staff gathered information on commodities either from private or public sources. They used these to evaluate goods according to several criteria: quality/efficacy, durability, cost and reliability (Rao, 1998). In so doing, they implicitly encouraged consumers to primarily seek convenience – that is, durability, quality and service – while buying a good or a service. Results were published in a bi-monthly bulletin, the Consumers Research Bulletin. CR tried to compete with BHE in providing a product-oriented technical expertise. It was increasingly popular: the number of subscribers increased from 25,000 in 1932 to 40,000 in 1933 (Donohue, 2003, 180). This success indicates that concerns for rationalizing consumption were increasingly shared among consumers.

The relationships between CR and home economists transformed with time. Originally, home economists welcomed “a new ally in consumer

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<sup>91</sup> Chase was an accountant who had worked for the Federal Trade Commission on corporate concentration and monopolies. He notably participated in an investigation on the meatpacking industry with journalist Upton Sinclair who famously reported it in *The Jungle* in 1905. As for Schlink, he was a physicist and an engineer who worked at the Bureau of Standards in the 1910s. While working on product tests, Schlink was shocked that the Bureau of Standards was using its scientific expertise on behalf of industry and refused to share results with consumers who would have taken great advantage of them. Schlink and Chase began to work together for a series for the *New Republic* journal to show “how defenseless the consumer is” (quoted in Jacobs, 2007, 89).

education” (McGovern, 2006, 189).<sup>92</sup> Indeed, CR method was quite close to home economists consumer buying education. It proposed a technical, independent and objective expertise to families, emphasizing the importance of standards, testing and science (Rao, 1998, 931). Home economists were early members of CR staff: Edith Copeland became the first employee of CR (besides Schlink and Chase). Other home economists were subsequently hired, as well as economists and consultants (mainly women) (McGovern, 2006).<sup>93</sup> Besides, “Schlink addressed home economists numerous times over the first few years of the organization’s existence” (McGovern, 2006, 189).<sup>94</sup> Yet, CR soon criticized the home economics profession for being too close to business. In particular, Schlink denounced the commercial influence on home economics education which impeded a truly “objective” guidance of consumers (McGovern, 2006, 202-203).<sup>95</sup> In an increasingly competitive environment between consumer organizations, each argued that they were more objective and scientific than the other.

CU was also a non-profit consumer organization. Like CR and contemporary home economists, it defended the idea of “wise buying.” It was created in 1935 by some of CR employees who were unsatisfied by CR lack of

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<sup>92</sup> “Home economists found [*Your Money’s Worth*] evenhanded and stimulating; its advocacy of scientific purchasing fitted the goals of the home economics movement, and Chase acknowledge a debt to Henry Harap, the home economist and educator whose work predated his own.” (McGovern, 2006, 179)

<sup>93</sup> CR rapidly grew: in 1932, they were 20 employees. (Donohue, 2003, 180).

<sup>94</sup> CR was also supported by well-known economists, namely Tugwell and Mitchell, who were interested in consumer and business unbalanced relationships.

<sup>95</sup> Indeed, cooperation between household product manufacturers and home economics departments was commonplace (Elias, 2008, 83). Manufacturers provided some devices to be tested by home economics students. This was a kind of advertising at little cost for manufacturers.

emphasis on labor conditions (Glickman, 2001).<sup>96</sup> For them, labor conditions were an important criterion for evaluating commodities. Consequently, they emphasized this topic in their “scientific” analyses and testing of commodities which were published in *Consumers Reports*.

The relationships between home economists and CU were not clear-cut. Home economists took their distance with CU which they regarded as too radical (Glickman, 2001, 124). Yet, some academic home economists (along with other social scientists) were close to CU. For instance, Kyrk left CR and joined CU at its creation (McGovern, 2006, 309). These home economists emphasized the social and economic responsibilities of consumers which were better considered by CU than by CR (more on this in chapter 4).

Business also turned toward the ‘art of rational consumption’ in an effort to adapt to a new type of consumers who were increasingly demanding regarding their spending. Through the creation of private testing institutes, which were often associated to women’s magazines, more emphasis was put on the quality and the usability of goods. Since the 1920s, many women’s magazines and newspapers had established “bureaus” and “institutes” aiming at conducting scientific research on household products (Goldstein, 2012). They continued publishing information on consumer commodities throughout the 1930s and the 1940s. In particular, the Good Housekeeping Institute (GHI), which belonged to the Hearst Corporation, a big media corporation, served as a model for other institutes such as the New York Tribune Institute and the Delineator Home Institute. GHI granted the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” to goods tested in the station and advertised in the *Good Housekeeping Magazine*. It also

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<sup>96</sup> CU members defended the idea of a convergence between consumers’ and workers’ interests. For them, the ultimate aim of both workers and consumers was a “decent standard of living.” This included high wages but also high purchasing power, satisfactory labor conditions and high quality consumer goods.

offered a two-years warranty to buyers, thus guaranteeing the reliability of goods advertised (201).

GHI drew widely on home economists' science of consumption (Goldstein, 2012, 201). Home economists were hired to work in the GHI because they were familiar experts in consumption and domesticity for housewives. At GHI, they tested consumer goods and evaluated their fitness for use in a domestic setting (the Institute replicated a "typical" American household). The GHI was a major source of information about manufactured household goods for consumers and it offered a great visibility to home economists.

Yet, GHI's proximity with business interests turned out to be harmful for the home economics profession who claimed to base its expertise on science and objectivity. Indeed, the Seal of Approval was highly prized by manufacturers since it permitted them to claim high quality. But this was a source of potential conflict of interest for GHI which was funded by corporations who wanted to publicize advertisements in the *Good Housekeeping Magazine*.<sup>97</sup> In fact, GHI's tests for evaluating the quality of goods were based on subjective criteria and lacked "scientificity" as compared to methods used in government (Bureau of Standards and BHE), academia or independent research organizations (CR and CU). GHI credibility was tainted in 1939 when the Federal Trade Commission launched an investigation into its activities, which concluded that GHI's claims were exaggerated and fraudulent. A small percentage of the products advertised were actually tested, and many errors subsisted (Hearst admitted 40% of error in its tests). GHI was forced to change its standards of testing, to remove some claims, as well as the mention "Tested and Approved" from its Seal of Approval. GHI had participated in blurring the distinction between service to consumers

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<sup>97</sup> In the early 1930s, CR criticized all the household institutes of magazines and newspapers (like the *Good Housekeeping*, the *Delineator* and the *New York Herald*) for their links with business, which impeded any independence in testing commodities.

and sales. It reinforced public skepticism in advertising and business. As for home economists, they came to be associated with deceitful attempts to manipulate housewives.

However, home economists' scientific discourse on consumption spread during the 1930s through federal government and consumer organizations. In particular, the idea that consumers needed scientific expertise to assess the quality of goods - which was not represented by market prices and was too complex to be discovered by an individual consumer - was increasingly popular (Stapleford, 2011). As a home economist recalled, "Consumers [were henceforth aware] that price itself mean[t] little unless we ha[d] definite facts about quality, size and fit, safety, and relative worth" (Moffett, 1942, 231).

As World War II spread, home economists continued to advocate thrift. Articles in the *Journal of Home Economics* made clear that "peacetime living standards cannot be maintained. Many comforts and some things which Americans have come to consider necessities must be sacrificed to the war effort" (Paul, 1943, 396). They encouraged women to "strip off unessential," to buy according to "standards of what is really vital to the good of the family" (Dodge, 1942, 720; see also Feller, 1942, 636). Home economists and their efforts to define "necessities" remained at the forefront of public debate.

Rationalizing food consumption became one of the main concerns of American families since food supply was rationed. The study of food and nutrition, which was already the dominant home economic field, expanded.<sup>98</sup> Significantly, the USDA was reorganized in 1943 to give more importance to food problems (Goldstein, 2012). The BHE was brought under a new agency, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and was renamed Bureau of Human

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<sup>98</sup> A study of the AHEA estimated that 46% of the 700 projects conducted by home economists in 1941 and 1942 tackled foods and nutrition topics (Dickins, Monroe & Green, 1944).

Nutrition and Home Economics (BHNHE). According to the administrator of the ARS, the BHNHE had a “unique and important role in the war, for nutrition problems became of paramount importance to the whole country, and home economists have been leaders in the field” (160). Indeed, political and economic leaders relied on it to popularize ways to improve the eating habits of families. In particular, the BHNHE created its own nutritional standard stating specific quantities of food for one week for each member of the family according to their sex, age and activity (Kory, 1945). Hazel Stiebelling contributed to establishing a standard for minimum nutritional inputs, the “recommended daily (or dietary) allowances” (Stanley, 1943).<sup>99</sup> Home economists also served on local nutrition committees where they circulated information on the relative economy of various foods in an adequate diet. Their ability to translate nutritional scientific information into practical recommendations for American homemakers was appreciated.

Besides, as quality deterioration and dishonest practices of producers, like frauds, increased in a context of strong pressure over resources, the BHNHE updated buying guides for ready-made clothing and household equipment, helping consumers cope with the limited availability of many consumer goods and new market conditions (Goldstein, 2012, 244).

Finally, home economists’ art of consumption greatly benefitted from the context of scarcity of the 1930s and early 1940s. Calls for moderation as well as technical expertise on commodities were supported by federal government through the BHE/BHNHE. Several private consumer organizations carrying more or less close relations with business imitated home economists’ “objective” or

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<sup>99</sup> Stiebelling became assistant chief of the BHNHE in 1942 and was made its chief in 1944.

“scientific” product testing. The American education system was also a powerful vehicle to spread rational consumption.

#### IV- The ‘Rational Consumer’ Turn in Academia

The art of consumption gained in importance in the American education system during the 1930s and 1940s. Consumer education became part of general education in high schools. Kyrk even stated that it was then promoted as “one of the objective that should guide school curriculum” since “everyone” was concerned about consumption (1944, 543). It was envisioned as a training to the new “home problems” complementary to vocational and professional education. In colleges and universities, especially in home economics departments, consumer education was spreading too (see below). In 1940, a professor at the University of Maryland estimated that the number of “consumption economics” courses was “ten-fold” that of the early 1930s (Marshall, 1940, 33). The publication of college textbooks is telling: while textbooks on the economics of consumption barely existed in the early twentieth century, they multiplied in the late 1920s and 1930s (Kyrk, 1939).<sup>100</sup>

Consumer courses were often envisioned as a new way to teach economics and to provoke students’ interest. For instance, Roland Vaile described his 1938 textbook titled *Income and Consumption* as an “experiment in pedagogy” (1940, 149). With his coauthor Helen Canoyer, they wanted “to know whether or not [they] could get greater interest, appreciation, and understanding of economic principles and problems among beginning students when [they] approached the subject mainly from the standpoint of [their]

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<sup>100</sup> In 1928, agricultural economist Warren C. Waite published *Economics of Consumption* whereas Hoyt published *Consumption of Wealth*. The following year, Paul H. Nystrom’s *Economic Principles of Consumption* appeared. In 1938, Roland Vaile and Helen Canoyer published *Income and Consumption*.



mutual interest as consumers rather than from the less intimate standpoint of the producer” (150). Similarly, approaching economics from the standpoint of students’ interests as consumers in economic process was thought by Kyrk (1944) as a way to appeal to students’ immediate interests.

The new consumption courses responded to widely held criticisms against economics courses in the 1920s and 1930s. These courses were said to be too abstract and not useful in daily life (Kyrk, 1928; Friday, 1928). Overall, students were not interested in conventional economics courses. In fact, there was a growing demand for economic knowledge which was left unsatisfied by existing courses (Kyrk, 1944). Many believed that economics needed changes in material and teaching methods. Consumer education, especially consumer buying education, was favored because it gave practical competence, namely, to “make wise choices and decisions” and to become “intelligent consumers” (Cooley, 1932, 586).

Although home economists offered most of consumption courses in colleges and universities, some departments of economics, business-administration, sociology, agricultural economics, finance and education also proposed such courses (Marshall, 1941). However, the content of consumption courses varied widely according to the instructor and the department which offered them (Marshall, 1940, 33-34; see also Hoyt, undated). Home economists were interested in consumption and home management as important levers to attain family welfare/well-being and health (Sanderson, 1930; Kyrk, 1930; Reid, 1934; Hoyt, 1938; Van Syckle, 1941). Conversely, some economists were interested in consumption from a theoretical point of view. They often stuck with the neoclassical theory of demand.<sup>101</sup> Other economists became interested

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<sup>101</sup> For instance Waite and Cassady (1939) used marginal utility as an explanation of choice.

in macroeconomic aspects of consumption. Although home economists also tackled national aspects of consumption, they emphasized “their significance in terms of family well-being” (Monroe, 1944, 66). For their part, the new marketing specialists were interested in the consequences of consumption for industrial and agricultural productions. Clearly, home economists’ approach to consumption was different from economists’.

A number of social scientists who developed an interest in consumption during the 1930s were led to consider home economists’ contributions. Though it was dominated by supply-side issues, the marketing field gave more emphasis to consumer behavior during the 1930s (Mason, 1998). Marketing specialists, like Paul H. Nystrom, Harry R. Tosdal and Theodore N. Beckman, who had often been trained as economists, criticized the lack of empirical relevance of the neoclassical theory of demand. For instance, Tosdal, a Professor at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Business, emphasized the “huge gap” between academic economists and the business community with respect to the study of consumer demand (Tosdal, 1939; see Mason, 1998, 145). Marketing specialists were looking for an approach to consumption which would be closer to market realities and accordingly discussed home economists’ view of consumption in some detail (Zuckerman & Carsky, 1990, 316).

In December 1938, at the annual American Marketing Association conference held in Detroit, a breakfast meeting gather people interested in consumption economics was organized under the leadership of Benjamin R. Andrews (Mason, 1998). Andrews was a professor of family economics at Columbia University and a pioneer of home economics.<sup>102</sup> The breakfast meeting

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<sup>102</sup> Andrews became the first secretary-treasurer of the AHEA in 1908 and the first director of the *Journal of Home Economics* in 1909. He published *Economics of the Household* in 1923.

resulted in the publication of a literature review of the field of consumption by Kyrk (1939) in the *Journal of Marketing*.<sup>103</sup> A year after, in December 1939, a session on “Recent Books on Consumption” was organized at the semi-annual conference of the American Marketing Association (jointly with the American Economic Association). That session was chaired by marketing professor Beckman and led to the publication of several book reviews, including contributions by home economists, in the *Journal of Marketing* (Kyrk, 1940; Hoyt, 1940; Cassady, 1940; Widener, 1940; Reid, 1940; Atkins, 1940; Vaile, 1940; Gordon, 1940). Another literature review of consumption economics, written by Beckman (1940), was published in the *American Economic Review*. By the early 1940s, home economists had thus participated in revitalizing the study of consumption in economics and marketing. In doing so, they contributed to popularizing a different vision of the (woman) consumer: thanks to scientific and technical advice, consumers were capable of “rational” behavior, i.e. deliberate and satisfying choices, and could overstep the influence of customs, social interactions and advertising.

However, economists’ interest in home economics was short-lived. Most economists failed to value the home economists’ work. Indeed, economics was often defined as the study of wealth or of the market. Conversely, home economists’ view of consumption distanced itself from a focus on the market and made room for household management, including use of time, division of labor within the household, and work method.<sup>104</sup> For instance, Warren Waite noted, home economics “is largely concerned with the administration of the

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<sup>103</sup> Kyrk noted that the number of books and research articles on consumption had risen since the 1920s: In 1933–1934, the number of research articles on consumers and their economic problems were eight times those published from 1900 and 1920 (Kyrk, 1939, 907).

<sup>104</sup> The inclusion of time as an input in family production will be used by Gary Becker (1965) to renew the study of family economics in the 1960s (see chapter 6).

individual consuming unit” whereas “the economist largely concerns himself with a wider group, the market. Thus the economist talks about market behavior, market prices, and so on” (1933, 572. See also Ward, 1940). Finally, for most economists, neoclassical theory of demand was a sufficient approach to consumption as it permitted to account for market changes.

Home economists tried to emphasize the importance of their art of rational consumption by using Lionel Robbins’ definition of economics as “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” (1935, 16). Hoyt (1940) defined consumer’s problem as the minimization of the spending of family resources to attain family members’ wants. Mary Jean Bowman, an economist who taught consumer economics at Iowa State College along with Hoyt and Reid, also used Robbins’ definition although she did not quote him directly (Bowman, 1939, 22). However, for home economists, the maximization of utility/welfare was not a theoretical hypothesis like in neoclassical theory of demand. Instead, it was a practical objective. Home economists sought the best means to attain private and/or social wants, such as the achievement of welfare or the satisfaction of basic necessities during wartime. In the mid-1940s, prominent economists like Oskar Lange and Joseph Davis, the former president of the American Economic Association, recognized that managing family resources on the basis of individual and social objectives was a significant issue for economists, which Lange classified as part of normative/social/welfare economics (Lange, 1945; Davis, 1945).<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Lange wrote “The administration of scarce resources empirically observed can be evaluated in terms of certain social objectives. Such objectives may consist in the best satisfaction of the wants of private persons according to their own preferences or in marshalling scarce resources for certain collective enterprises e.g. industrialisation of a country according to time-table, as in the Soviet Union, or successful prosecution of war, or

Yet, a number of economists criticized home economists' focus on family welfare because for them, economics aimed at describing the economic system rather than at improving the economic situation of individuals. For instance, economist Ralph Cassady claimed that economists "can throw light on our economic system, and indicate various economic phenomena which may affect the consumers' activities," but cannot "aid directly in improving consumption" since "direct[ing] purchases in any specific way . . . would be dictating choices" (1940, 123). Similarly, H. W. Widener attacked this "self-appointed group of consumer experts who are determined to spend the consumers' money for them" (1940, 131). For most economists, consumption choices should remain in the hands of individuals. Some home economists like Jessie Coles (1938) and Reid (1938) defended themselves by arguing that they did not want to direct consumer choices but rather help consumers choose with greater knowledge.<sup>106</sup> By providing scientific and technical information on market goods and services and on the determinants of wants, they hoped that consumers will better meet their objectives. Other home economists argued that welfare was not only an individual and subjective concept. Science and more broadly society had to take

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enactment of certain ideas of social justice- or, finally, a combination of all. The social objectives being given, rules of scarce resources can be found which are the most conducive to the attainment of these objectives. The use of resources which follows these rules is referred to as the "ideal" use. The rules of "ideal" use of resources provide a standard by which the actual use can be evaluated as to its desirability." (Lange, 1945, 22). Likewise, Davis claimed that "Improving the planes and content of living, with due respect to varied needs and preferences, is an eminently practical and wholesome overall objective of individual ambition and of national and international policy. Achievement of such improvement is not mere humanitarian dream. *It is basic to attaining fuller utilization of available resources, hence a serious concern to economists*" (Davis, 1945, 14, my emphasis).

<sup>106</sup> "In fact, the authors [Coles (1938) and Reid (1938)] take the reverse position, namely that freedom of consumers' choice is desirable. They do maintain, it is true, that this can be achieved only when consumers act with knowledge. The authors, in addition, point out that the power of advertising to regiment choice would be reduced somewhat if fuller information concerning products was provided to aid consumers in market selections" (Reid, 1940, 135).

part in its definition. Once “tentative goals” of consumption were set, home economists tried to influence consumers for their own good (Van Syckle, 1941, 82; Hoyt, 1940).

Finally, while science is often said to influence education, the art of rational consumption is an example of the opposite. The great success of consumer education led to a renewed interest for consumption among social scientists. Home economists’ vision of a “malleable” consumer provoked discussions, especially among economists close to the new marketing field, since it challenged the neoclassical explanations of consumer behavior. However, it failed to replace neoclassical theory of demand in part because of economists’ suspicion of attempts to modify the allocation of family resources.

## V- Conclusion

Home economists developed an original vision of the consumer as an individual – in most cases a housewife – influenced by customs, social interactions and advertising, but able to modify her buying choices thanks to scientific and technical information. This vision of the consumer spread during the 1930s and 1940s. Federal government, through the BHE/BHNHE, supported home economists’ efforts to rationalize consumption in order to help families satisfy basic needs especially in food. Business also copied home economics: advertising put more emphasis on the quality of goods and institutes for testing consumer goods were created. Besides, there was an explosion of consumer education courses which relied heavily on home economics in high schools as well as in several colleges and university departments. These courses were envisioned as another kind of economics education which was closer to students’ interests in enhancing their daily life.

The art of rational consumption developed by home economists is exemplary of the faith in science and expertise as vehicles for social progress which was common during the 1920s and 1930s. But it is also evidence of the active role consumers took in the development of the consumer society. Home economists both aroused and benefited from consumers' requests for information and expertise on consumption.

For many home economists, however, consumer education focusing on consumers' preferences and information on market goods did not suffice to improve the lot of consumers. Improvement of the market was needed as well.<sup>107</sup> In chapter 4, I explore the structural reforms home economists envisioned in order to rationalize consumption.

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<sup>107</sup> For instance, Kyrk made clear that : "Those who propose a program for consumer education designed only to improve tastes and preferences and to increase the information and rationality of the buyer either do not see, or want to ignore, the importance of market conditions as a factor in maximizing the results of expenditure" (1944, 139).

## Chapter 4

### Home Economics as Art: Building a Consumer-Oriented Society, 1924–1945

#### I- Introduction

During the Great Depression, public intellectuals, like economic historian Caroline Ware, sociologist Robert Lynd, economists Paul Douglas and Gardiner Means and home economist and educator Henry Harap, believed that economic reconstruction required that consumers be able to oppose the increasing influence of business and profit motive (see Jacobs, 1999). For Harap, for instance, consumer education constituted the first step towards a “consumer-centered society,” that is, a society oriented towards social welfare (Harap, 1938, 387). On that view, as leaders in consumer education, home economists could catalyze “social and economic progress” (Harap, 1933, 456).

Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti (1997) have pointed out the role of home economists in the progressive reform during the early twentieth century, especially the politicizing of women’s domestic role. They have also identified a shift towards a more conservative stance in the 1920s when home economists began to focus on individual more than on social ills, implying that home economics lost its ambition for reform. In what follows, I argue instead that home economists continued to entertain reformist ambitions in the 1930s up to the end of World War II. This they did by promoting greater economic, political and social roles for women consumers.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, most home economists, especially in academia, argued that consumers’ and business’ interests diverged and that the economic system needed transformation so that consumers could enjoy greater



freedom of choice.<sup>108</sup> Besides, they believed that consumers could use their purchasing power to increase social and family welfare by supporting fair labor conditions, combatting unemployment or inflation, bringing economic recovery and even eliminating business cycles. Freedom of choice was thus a means towards establishing a better society; and women, the main consumers, were key actors.

In what follows, I first consider the efforts of home economists to mobilize women in favor of an economic system that ensures consumers' freedom of choice (section II). I argue that they contributed to the greater representation and protection of consumers' interests inside U.S. Federal government during the New Deal and World War II. Finally, I show that home economists also encouraged women to use their purchasing power to protect family and social welfare (section III).

## II- Mobilizing Women Consumers for “Real” Freedom of Choice

From the early 1930s onwards, home economists devoted their efforts to “further the cause of consumers” (JHE Editorial, 1934; see also Howe, 1939, 10; Kyrk, 1944, 139). Indeed, they held that the economic role of families/consumers was to orient market production toward the satisfaction of their wants through their purchases. But consumers were in a weak position in the marketplace.

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<sup>108</sup> Within the home economics profession, there was a divide between home economists in business, who were eager to argue that they could reconcile consumers' and business' interests, and the rest of the profession who was more attached to the defense of consumers. Although the number of home economists in business had been growing constantly since the 1920s, it still represented a small proportion of the profession. In 1942, home economists in business were 650 among the 15,000 American Home Economics Association members (Sellers, 1942). Home economists worked mainly as teachers in primary, secondary or higher education or as home extension agents, consumer and education experts for federal, state and local government.

Their “freedom of choice” or “power to choose” was limited by high prices, insufficient income and the lack of accurate information on consumer goods (Kyrk, 1924, 23). This was partly caused by business’ quest for profit which was responsible for high prices, frauds as well as misleading advertising and selling practices. Some home economists claimed that the Great Depression, which exemplified the failure of a laissez-faire capitalist economy, was an opportunity to establish a “consumers’ economy, in which production would be treated not as the end but as a means to the good life” (Douglas, 1934a, 476). Consequently, they encouraged housewives, the main consumers, to go beyond “the four walls of the home” and to mobilize for an economic system which would guarantee the satisfaction of their wants (Nystrom, 1934, 748; see also Douglas, 1933; Kyrk, 1935). In fact, consumers needed a greater political role to properly perform their economic function.

Home economists considered that the first step toward defending the interests of consumers was to allow for a better understanding of their own interests through consumer education courses. They deplored that “The average man is producer-minded” (Harap, 1933), that is, he is more concerned with his producer’s interest (getting more income) than with his consumer’s interest (spending wisely). This was due to the widely-held liberal principle according to which furthering business’ interests was indirectly aiding consumers since more production also means more income for consumers. Home economists preferred to question this principle by emphasizing the limited influence of consumers over market production (Woodhouse, 1933, 183). Accordingly, they conceived consumer education as a “training which develops in the individual a consciousness of his real interest as a consumer” (Hadsell, 1937, 146) so that he “cease [his] naive identification with producers’ interests” (Kyrk, 1935, 203; see also Harap, 1933; Nystrom, 1936, 516).

Being aware of their mutual interests, consumers could form a pressure-group to demand “real” freedom of choice (Kyrk, 1924, chapter 2). For home economists, collective action was the only way to hope for a representation of consumers’ interests in the federal government to counter-balance business and labor’s interests (Douglas, 1934a; Kyrk, 1935). It could eventually compel policies and legislation that protect consumers on the marketplace (Reid, 1942, 656; see also Nystrom, 1932, 212; Kyrk, 1935, 203).<sup>109</sup> Home economists envisioned themselves – and were often considered – as the proper representatives of consumers’ interests (Nystrom, 1934, 492). Incidentally, the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) transformed itself into a lobby “promot[ing] the recognition and protection of consumer rights in the federal government.”<sup>110</sup>

Home economists were not alone in mobilizing consumers during the 1930s. Consumer organizations such as Consumers’ Research, the radical League of Women Shoppers (created in 1935) and the Consumers Union (created in 1936) tried to awake consumers’ consciousness. Besides, women’s organizations such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the American Association of University Women, the National League of Women Voters and the Women’s Trade Union League adopted a consumer agenda (Jacobs, 2007, 125). In December 1933, some of them gathered to establish the Emergency Conference of Consumer Organizations, a national representation of consumers’ interests meant to lobby federal government. It aimed at grass-root mobilization by sponsoring conferences and providing information and educational material on consumption (ibid.). Finally, all these consumers’, women’s and even labor organizations took up consumers’ interests as a way to buttress public welfare.

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<sup>109</sup> Kyrk argued that “the powers of the state have . . . ordinarily been exercised in the interests of producing groups or of occupational groups” (Kyrk, 1935, 203).

<sup>110</sup> Resolution of the AHEA adopted in 1934, reproduced in JHE Editorial, 1934, 516.

The representation of consumers' interests inside federal government, which was one of the main demands of consumer activists, came to fruition with the New Deal in 1933. Two governmental agencies provided consumers with an institutional role: the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), designed to address the problem of overproduction in the agricultural sector, and the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which was devoted to boosting industrial recovery. The AAA created an Office of Consumers' Counsel to "give equal consideration to the consumers' interests" according to its administrator George Peek (quoted from Donohue, 1999, 39). As for the NRA, it included three advisory boards representing business, labor and consumers' interests. Surprisingly, home economists with expertise in consumption economics and experience of consumer activists were quasi-absent from both consumer agencies.<sup>111</sup> However, the AAA and NRA marked the recognition by federal government of consumers' interests as an important component of public interest. For the first time, consumers were placed on the same footing as business and labor. They were now considered as an important constituency so that the effects of public policies on them were an area of concern for the government.

Besides the question of the representation of consumers' interests inside federal government, home economists defended specific public policies to strengthen consumers' freedom of choice. In particular, they emphasized the

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<sup>111</sup> AAA's Consumer Council staff was entirely comprised of male economists with an interest in consumption, including Rexford Tugwell, Gardiner Means and Mordecai Ezekiel. The NRA's Consumer Advisory Board (CAB) included only one home economist, Frances Zuill, the president of the AHEA, alongside women from civic and political organizations (like the League of Women Voters and the Democratic National Committee), consumer organizations and labor unions (Jacobs, 2007, 115). The CAB also included male social scientists: sociologist William F. Ogburn, the pioneer in the measurement of American cost-of-living became CAB first executive director, sociologist Robert S. Lynd, economists Gardiner Means, Walton Hamilton and Paul Douglas, as well as James Peter Warbasse, the philosopher of consumer cooperation.

necessity to control inflation and accordingly denounced monopolies. Many articles in the *Journal of Home Economics* supported the continuation of anti-trust laws which had been suspended during the New Deal (Douglas, 1934a; Kyrk, 1935; Nystrom, 1936; Marlatt, 1936). Tackling monopolies and distortions of competition was a continuing request of home economists until the end of World War II (see for instance Monroe, 1944). Besides, most home economists advocated federal price fixing and production control during the New Deal (Nystrom, 1934) and supported the Office of Price Administration (OPA) responsible for price ceilings and rationing during World War II (Feller, 1942; Coles, 1942; Earley, 1944; Monroe, 1944).<sup>112</sup> Yet, others, like Reid (1942; see also Douglas, 1934a), warned that when the government takes responsibility for prices, business interests automatically enter politics to influence legislation and administration, a move that was ultimately detrimental to consumers. As a whole, for home economists, consumers needed federal protection against high prices, either through direct price controls or active anti-trust policies.

The right for consumers to have a sufficient, steady, and equitable income was also put forward (Kyrk, 1924; Harap, 1933; Breckinridge, 1935). To Kyrk, the lack of income was an evident “limitation upon freedom of choice” (46). The problem of irregularity and insecurity of income had been most specifically raised during the Great Depression. Although production was abundant, many consumers were suddenly not able to satisfy basic human needs because of income loss (Douglas, 1933, 370). To resolve this problem, home economists supported an increase in wages – at the expense of profits – in order to raise the buying power of the masses (Harap, 1933). Some of them also defended the

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<sup>112</sup> Even before the Great Depression, Kyrk already advocated price control “to secure an economical distribution of an inadequate supply of some commodity among consumers,” especially during wars (1924, 60).

Social Security Bill which planned to ensure a regular and adequate income for the most vulnerable citizens (Breckinridge, 1935).<sup>113</sup> During World War II, home economists supported public works that aimed at full employment in order to bring sufficient income for all (Wells, 1942; Burns, 1943). Finally, for home economists, federal government had to find ways to guarantee the “economic security” of families, that is, sufficient family purchasing power (Douglas, 1933; Breckinridge, 1935; Woodward, 1943).

Home economists also stated that the role of federal government was to safeguard “fair competition,” that is, a competition that did not rest on consumers’ ignorance (Douglas, 1934a; Kyrk, 1935; Keezer, 1936; Gaer, 1940). To this end, they promoted state-sanctioned quality standards and labels on consumer goods (Williams, 1929; Kyrk, 1935; Nystrom, 1934). The AHEA had begun to promote standards and informative labelling for textiles during World War I in order to help the ultimate consumer to know a fabric’s content and its suitability for some uses (Sherrill, 1960).<sup>114</sup> In 1927, it set up a Committee on Standardization of Consumer Goods which worked on standards for cooking and baking utensils as well as on household equipment and fabrics (72). It also encouraged home economists to promote the use of these standards through their publications, courses and materials. Indeed, many articles and editorials in the *Journal of Home Economics* were devoted to the necessity of establishing standards, grades and labels on consumer goods (especially in foods; for instance see Marlatt, 1936; Howe, 1939). In particular, Jessie V. Coles, a home economist who obtained a Ph. D. from the University of Chicago under the

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<sup>113</sup> The Social Security Act (1935) set up a federal system of old-age insurance and assistance to children, disabled individuals and to the unemployed, as well as public health services.

<sup>114</sup> The AHEA was a pioneer in textile fiber products identification.

supervision of Kyrk, became a leading proponent of standardization (Coles, 1932; Coles, 1938).

This idea of a government-enforced system of quality standards was taken up by the U.S. federal government during the New Deal. In 1933, the NRA's Consumer Advisory Board (CAB) established a committee on consumer standards chaired by sociologist Robert Lynd. The "Lynd report" called for federal government to set up an independent board to establish and test standards and grades for all consumer goods (Smith, 1994). This ambitious project never materialized. Instead, the CAB worked closely with the AHEA on quality standards. The idea was that in addition to setting price caps, the NRA would also mention minimum quality specifications on regulated commodities. For the AHEA, this represented a great opportunity to actually participate in the design of consumption standards (JHE Editorial, 1934, 516). Yet, industrial interests overwhelmingly dominated the NRA and federal quality standards remained at a draft stage.<sup>115</sup> Although the standardization of consumer goods was not implemented, home economists played an active role in bringing this topic in federal government.

So as to foster freedom of choice, home economists also defended policies to prevent misleading trade practices, such as frauds and deceptive advertising, which led to the ignorance and mistake on the part of consumers and thus to imperfect price and quality competition (for instance see Kyrk, 1944, 563). These interventions were quite effective since a series of laws regulating frauds and advertising were enacted during the late 1930s. In 1938, President Franklin D.

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<sup>115</sup> Throughout the 1930s, U.S. federal government (especially the Federal Trade Commission) encouraged voluntary efforts of business to standardize consumer products instead of government-enforced quality standards (Geertz, 1940). But "voluntary" standards were slow to emerge.

Roosevelt signed the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act which strengthen the authority of the U.S. Food Administration on the regulation of adulterated foods, drugs and cosmetics as well as fraudulent advertising related to these goods.<sup>116</sup> The AHEA had stood as one of the most prominent supporters of the law. Besides, the Wheeler Lea Act (1938) strengthened the supervisory powers of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to unfair or deceptive practices against consumers (previously the FTC could only restrict activities unfair to competing firms or industries). It was authorized to enforce measures against false or misleading advertising practices.<sup>117</sup>

The 1940s marked the decline of the consumer movement. Its critics took advantage of the “red scare” to discredit consumer organizations. Attacks against consumer organizations came from political as well as business leaders. For instance, Martin Dies, a representative who was chairman of the new House Committee Investigating Un-American Activities, launched an investigation in 1939 against consumer organizations – the League of Women Shoppers, the Consumers National Federation and the Consumers Union – for alleged communist influence (Jacobs, 2007, 171). Another example is the report on standardization commissioned by the Association of National Advertisers, in 1941, which concluded that standardization was supported by communists as a first step toward government ownership (Cohen, 2003, 60). These attacks on consumer organizations were part of a general backlash against the New Deal.

As consumer activism was often equated with communism and anti-Americanism during World War II, home economists came under pressure. With

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<sup>116</sup> Early home economists had supported the first laws for consumer protection - the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act (1906) - which had established minimum security and quality standards for foods and drugs.

<sup>117</sup> For instance, in 1939, it launched an investigation against the *Good Housekeeping* magazine for “exaggerated and fraudulent claims” in its advertisements.



the United States being committed to winning the war, the protection of broadly conceived consumers' interests was less urgent. The AHEA, like other consumer organizations, continued to demand better quality standards, government representation, equitable distribution of income and fair prices, but they added that they "want[ed] nothing for consumers now if it is to be at the expense of the war effort" (Howe, 1942, 3).<sup>118</sup> Besides, home economists largely abandoned their support for legislative action on behalf of consumers, except for guaranteeing the satisfaction of minimum food needs (see Reid, 1943). In a debate published in the *Journal of Home Economics* in 1944 on the question of whether the AHEA should abandon legislative "lobbying," home economists appeared divided. Some wanted to abandon the use of the law – which was qualified as "coercion" – and to concentrate on consumer education; others considered the law as necessary to guarantee freedom of choice (Kyrk, Dickins, La Ganke Harris, Storms, 1944). The latter option progressively receded.

Although consumer activists were more moderate, consumption remained an important concern for U.S. federal government. The regulation of the consumer goods market expanded. The OPA rationed scarce commodities and established ceilings on commodity prices. In 1942, most consumer staples were rationed – especially food commodities, soap, cars and gas – and 90% of consumer goods had their prices regulated (Cohen, 2003, 65). Besides, the OPA reinforced its policy for quality standards and grades (Jacobs, 2007, 193; see also Cohen, 2003, 68). As the Roosevelt administration increased government regulation of the economy, it justified its policies by the necessity to preserve a minimum level of living for every citizen.

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<sup>118</sup> Home economists complained that wartime price controls had led many firms to lower product quality, thus increasing the need for minimum specifications of quality (for instance, Feller, 1942; Kyrk, 1942; Earley, 1944).

Finally, home economists contributed to politicize consumers' freedom of choice. For them, "real" freedom of choice rested on the mobilization of consumers for a fair and full access to the marketplace for all, safety and clear identification of consumer goods as well as regulation of commercial influence on consumers' wants. Through education and mobilization, home economists assumed a leading role in the consumer movement of the 1930s, a movement that proved successful in increasing federal protection of consumers' interests during the 1930s and early 1940s. But to home economists, consumers were not only economic actors who had to be protected by federal government. Thanks to their purchases, they were also a powerful means to better family and social welfare.

### III- Mobilizing Women Consumers For Family and Social Welfare

During the Great Depression, home economists put renewed emphasis on women's economic role as "the spender of the nation's wealth" (Inenfeldt, 1934), that is, on the consequences of private consumption on the national economy. For home economists, women had responsibility to better economic and social conditions. Several women's organizations shared that idea. For instance, the General Federation of Women's Clubs formulated a "Shopper's Creed" which was relayed by the *Journal of Home Economics*.<sup>119</sup> Following in the footsteps of pioneer home economists Ellen Richards and Caroline Hunt, home economists wanted to expand the household management philosophy to the

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<sup>119</sup> The "Shopper's Creed" stated: "I believe that the American women, through control of a large share of the family budget, exerts a vital influence upon today's economic order. Therefore, I hold it my duty to help make this influence constructive; to govern my buying so that waste will be reduced and the greatest good to all realized from my expenditures" (undated, quoted from Gaer, 1940).

whole society: through their purchases, housewives were responsible for both family and social welfare (Woodhouse, 1934).

Home economists encouraged women to use their purchases to influence the labor conditions by avoiding commodities made under “unsanitary labor conditions,” “insufficient” wages and with use of child labor (Gaer, 1940, 365. See also Cooley, 1932; Woodhouse, 1934, 403; Nystrom, 1934, 748). This would help better labor conditions and eliminate “unfair competition,” that is, a competition based on “underpaying labor.” Suitable standards, specifications and labels stipulating labor conditions were needed to help consumers discriminate among commodities.

During the New Deal, the federal government used the idea of consumer responsibility toward workers to entice housewives to support its labor policy. In 1933, the NRA “Buy Now Under the Blue Eagle” campaign permitted businesses complying with the “Codes of Fair Competition” to display a poster of a Blue Eagle claiming “NRA Member. We Do Our Part.” In this way, businesses demonstrated that they were committed to guarantee “fair” labor conditions and to increase workers’ purchasing power since the NRA codes included agreements on minimum wages and maximum week hours (Glickman, 2001). Women were thus encouraged to buy in shops displaying the “Blue Eagle” and to sign a pledge of cooperation with NRA policies. They received a Blue Eagle sticker in exchange (Jacobs, 2007, 111). Besides, the NRA called on volunteers to promote the consumer pledge and to warn merchants who did not display a Blue Eagle that housewives would turn away from them (ibid.). Finally, the NRA succeeded in mobilizing women: 1.5 million volunteers participated in the consumer pledge campaign (mostly women’s clubs members) (ibid.). Federal government thus relied heavily on women consumers’ efforts to put pressure on businessmen so that they better labor conditions and raise wages (109).

Women consumers were also mobilized to ensure “fair” prices and quality of consumer goods. The NRA’s CAB initiated local consumer organizations (called “consumer county councils”) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on NRA policy and for complaints against local businesses charging high prices and/or with low-quality products (Smith, 1994, 148). Each consumer council included a home economist alongside a county agricultural agent, a farmer, a representative from a woman’s organization, a moderate or low-income housewife, and a manual worker (Jacobs, 2007, 124). Because they were the main consumers, women were designated as responsible for guaranteeing low prices and good quality of goods.

Home economists believed that women consumers could foster “fair” labor conditions, prices and quality of goods; likewise it was presented as a civic contribution to help reduce unemployment and to foster industrial recovery (Nystrom, 1934, 748). Home economists conveyed this idea through the U.S. federal government. In 1929, the Women’s Division of the Emergency on Employment federal program was designed to advise families who could afford it to “direct their buying to “move the goods” whose purchase will do most to overcome unemployment in a given region” (JHE Editorial, 1931, 56). Lillian Gilbreth, a home management specialist, was appointed head of the committee and mobilized many home economists (Graham, 1997). In 1930-1931, home economists also supported the “Thrift Week” which promoted consumption of goods from sectors with large rates of unemployment (JHE Editorial, 1931). The idea of women’s role in economic recovery was popularized by the President’s wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, in her 1933 *It’s Up to the Women*, which included numerous references to home economists.

Still, home economists were divided on the kind of consumption behavior that would foster economic recovery. Some of them claimed that frugality was

an antidote to national economic crises. Going back to a steady standard of living allowing only necessities was supposed to smooth economic cycles (Nystrom, 1934, 747; see also Harap, 1933). Other home economists, however, argued that in a context of mass-production, thrift and wise management were useless and even dangerous: a low level of consumption was responsible for the prolongation of the crisis (Busch, 1939). What was needed was more income for consumers, through social security and full employment for instance, so that they could “absorb the potentially abundant products of industry” (Harap, 1933, 453; see also Breckinridge, 1935; Woodward, 1943; Burns, 1943).

Even though home economists argued that consumers had the power and the responsibility to help solve unemployment and even to help economic recovery, they had difficulties convincing other consumer organizations and more generally consumers, who pointed instead to business responsibility. On their side, businessmen attributed the continuation of the crisis to consumers’ decision to reduce their purchases. They also recognized consumers’ role in bringing recovery and supported more consumption (instead of “wise consumption”) in the hope that it would create more demand for their products (Cohen, 2003, 57).

During World War II, home economists further emphasized the links between the management of family resources and the national economy (for instance in Monroe, 1944, 64; Coles, 1942, 149). They supported the idea that women’s role and social responsibility during the war was to minimize pressure on national resources. Indeed, much of the U.S. productive capacity was devoted to war needs and part of the remaining national production was shipped to the European Allies. National demand came to exceed national supply, leading to inflation. Home economists taught women that they could help limit inflation by increasing saving and by restricting their purchases. “Wise spending” was limited

to a minimum needed to guarantee family health (Kyrk, 1942; see also Feller, 1942, 636). Home economists taught women to be “food conscious,” that is, to save the nation’s food supply. This was considered critical to their families welfare as well as to the war effort. Home economists stood as a perfect channel to educate women about their role in solving wartime economic problems as illustrated by Berkeley home economist Jessie V. Coles in *Consumers Can Help Win the War* (Coles, 1943; see also Paul, 1943; JHE Editorial, 1943; Monroe, 1944).

Home economists’ emphasis on consumers’ responsibility helped the U.S. federal government to ensure that American families understand, support and even enforce its wartime economic policies. Since it had no enforcement power or legal authority, the OPA depended on the compliance of consumers and businesses (Jacobs, 2007). Home economists made it a duty to encourage women to respect federal policies on price control, rationing, taxation and saving (for instance in Kyrk, 1942; Coles, 1943; Earley, 1944). They explained the necessity of price control and impelled women to learn the ceiling prices under the OPA regulations. In 1943, they contributed to spread the OPA “Home Front Pledge Campaign” which stated: “I pay no more than top legal prices. I accept no rationed goods without giving up ration stamps” (Williams, 1942). Women were told to avoid the black market because personal benefits were gained at the expense of the “national effort” (Feller, 1942, 636). Besides, home economists encouraged women to support the increase of taxation since it permitted to finance the war effort and to limit inflation. Similarly, women had to save more through the buying of war bonds (Dodge, 1942, 717). Finally, supporting federal economic policies – price control, rationing and taxation – was presented as a patriotic duty and a great contribution of women to the war effort.

Home economists were particularly active in the OPA. From 1943 to 1946, Hazel Kyrk and Harriet Howe were board members of the OPA's National Consumer Advisory Committee, a committee devoted to mobilizing civil society to support OPA policy. It was headed by consumer activist Caroline Ware and assembled a cast of consumer, labor and women's representatives (Jacobs, 2007, 205). In practice, it recruited and coordinated volunteer "price-panel assistants" who monitored the prices that local sellers were charging (see below). But pressure from business groups greatly limited OPA's policy to rely on consumers mobilization. For example, the OPA abandoned a plan to disclose the list of price ceilings, which could have been a precious help for individual consumers and could have strengthened price control (Hyman & Tohill, 2017).

Home economists were also active at the local level. The OPA encouraged the development of local consumer information centers in state and municipalities to spread the latest economic information on government policies, supplies of commodities and price trends (Cohen, 2003). In these institutions, home economists gave consumer education courses and emphasized the links between women's economic behavior and the success of economic policy (Thompson, 1942, 284).

Women were generally receptive to the idea that consumers should take part in the success of wartime economic policies. The prospect of eliminating inflation and distributing consumer goods on the basis of family needs (as defined by the federal government) was enthusiastically welcomed by most families. To the extent that wages had been frozen in 1942, price controls and rationing were envisioned as a way to equitably share the costs of the war (Paul, 1943; Jacobs, 2007, 195).

Consequently, consumers (mostly housewives) largely respected OPA policies (Cohen, 2003, 66). Twenty million shoppers signed on the OPA "Home

Front Pledge Campaign” (Jacobs, 2007, 202). Women even participated in the implementation of OPA policies: they boosted OPA total staff from 3.000 to 30.000 at the end of 1943 (ibid.). Many of them became volunteers in one of the 5.525 local War Rationing and Price Control Boards (“little OPAs”). As “price panel assistants,” they conducted regular price checks in local shops, communicated on OPA policies and reported persistent violators (202). The widespread popular support for federal economic policies permitted to limit inflation to less than 8 % during the last two years of World War II (as compared to an inflation rate of 62% during World War I) and to deliver sufficient material to the front (Cohen, 2003, 66). Women consumers had accepted their new economic and social responsibilities: they considered themselves as the guardians of public interest (80).

Finally, home economists emphasized the social and economic responsibilities of women consumers who could use their purchases to influence labor conditions, the quality of products, the level of prices and more broadly, the economy. Political – and to a lesser extent business – leaders often used this discourse to mobilize women consumers during the 1930s and World War II. They appealed to their altruism and patriotism in support of diverse social and economic objectives. These attempts were quite successful as women understood and seized these opportunities to demonstrate that family and social welfare depended on their role as consumers.

#### IV- Conclusion

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, home economists contributed to designing a “consumer-oriented” society (Donohue, 2003). As the capitalist system was shaken, they conceived and mobilized for an economic system in



which production would be oriented toward the satisfaction of consumers' wants and needs rather than profit-making. They were quite successful: the necessity to better satisfy consumers' interests was used as an argument to justify greater economic regulation during the New Deal and World War II. The federal government then enforced several actions to this effect. Besides, home economists enticed consumers to be aware of the social and economic consequences of their private purchases on labor conditions, unemployment and price level in particular; which was used by policy makers to mobilize consumers in support of federal policies. The consumer had thus become a central economic, social and political figure, partly because of the efforts of home economists.

After the war, there emerged a "consumption-oriented" system which posited that abundance/economic growth was sufficient to satisfy consumers' needs (Donohue, 2003). Public policymakers, business, labor leaders and civic groups, all stated that full employment, which provided income for every family, was the best way to guarantee a rising standard of living for all (Cohen, 2003). Business and consumers' interests were finally reconciled. Consequently, the need for structural reform of the marketplace and federal protection of consumers receded. At the same time, the image of the consumer changed. It was no longer an individual who suffered from business manipulation and had to mobilize for greater protection. It was neither a "citizen-consumer" who had social and economic responsibilities and who purchased with the public interest in mind (Cohen, 2003). Henceforth the "purchaser-consumer" primarily sought private satisfaction (ibid.).

This transformation from a "consumer-oriented" society toward a "consumption-oriented" society had consequences on home economics. Home economists gradually joined the new consensus which supported a higher level

of consumption as the basis of national economic prosperity. Coming out of the war, they still favored a “wise expansion” rather than “boom and bust” and warned that postwar consumer spending should not overtake national productive capacities, for otherwise inflation would rise (Monroe, 1944). Besides, many home economists were in favor of keeping price control and rationing for essentials, which had been beneficial to consumers during the war and could help avoid postwar inflation (ibid., see also Reid, 1944).<sup>120</sup> But most home economists abandoned the politicization of women’s role as consumers. They ceased advocating structural economic reforms and laws protecting consumers and stopped questioning the responsibilities of consumers for improving social and economic conditions as well.

The greater faith in the efficiency of the market and in the rationality of consumers which characterized the postwar period reflected in new economic theories of consumption and family. These theories modeled the decisions of a rational family which sought to maximize its private satisfaction (chapters 5 and 6). Thus, concerns for improving family and social welfare disappeared.

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<sup>120</sup> At the end of World War II, price control and rationing benefited from a large popular support because they were considered necessary to protect family levels of living (Jacobs, 2007).

## Chapter 5

### The Lost Art of Consumption, 1943–1965

#### I- Introduction

From the mid–1920s to the early 1950s, the main goal of home economic studies on families was to increase family and social welfare. That goal implied not only advising families on how best to attain their objectives through buying and working decisions, but also promoting public policies that enhanced consumers’ and families’ interests. To that extent, home economists’ work on family economics can be described as an art of consumption.

After World War II, Milton Friedman (1953) popularized the distinction between positive and normative economics: the former focuses on “what is” whereas the latter concerns “what ought to be.” This bipartite division of economics had important consequences on the theories and practices of economists. As they strove for objectivity, economists increasingly ignored ethical, social and political dimensions. The art of economics, that is, efforts to determine a system of rules for the attainment of a given end based on a mix of ethical, social, political and economic considerations, was not considered part of economics any more (see Colander 1993). As a result, the gap between mainstream and home economics increased.

Within consumption studies, there was a shift around World War II from studies on the art of consumption conducted by women at the intersection of home economics and economics towards analyses associated with mainstream economics after World War II. These two kinds of consumption studies differed in several ways. Home economists focused on the “economic problems of families,” including consumption, non-market and market work, and stressed

the social, political and economic context. By contrast, postwar economists interested in consumption focused on the aggregate implications of individual consumption decisions. They increasingly downplayed the effects of psychological, social and cultural factors while emphasizing the rationality of the individual consumer. On a methodological level, home economists used an inductive and interdisciplinary method whereas economists adopted a hypothetico-deductive method and the utility maximization framework. Finally, these two kinds of consumption studies represented distinct visions of applied economics: the former aimed at helping families by defining rules of human and government conduct, whereas the latter were geared towards testing an underlying theoretical model and providing “objective” policy prescriptions.

The work of Margaret Reid offers a connecting thread between these two kinds of consumption studies. Reid was an important figure of the art of consumption during the 1930s and 1940s while she was at Iowa State College. She then focused on the roles of families as consumers and producers, and promoted consumer education and reforms to protect families’ interests. But after World War II, she began to work closely with economists. As she helped renew the neoclassical analysis of consumption with the permanent income hypothesis, she moved away from her reformist ambitions.

In what follows, I explore the institutional and intellectual factors which played a critical role in the transformation of consumption studies. I argue that in the immediate afterwar home economists strove to sustain the art of consumption (section II), but lacked institutional support to do so (section III). Then, I show that the art of consumption was gradually crowded out by new consumption theories emphasizing consumer rationality (section IV).

## II- Sustaining the Art of Consumption

Home economists who had made a reputation for themselves as experts in family economics during the 1930s and early 1940s (see chapters 3 and 4) continued to argue that the satisfaction of individual needs was a fundamental economic problem which mostly arose at the level of the family. The family was defined as a “system of socially sanctioned rights and responsibilities:” some family members were gainfully employed, some were completing household tasks while others were dependent (Kyrk, 1948, 444). Decisions related to consumption, household production and gainful work were taken in the household and were geared towards the satisfaction of the needs of family members. As these decisions depended on the economic, social and political context, home economists believed that a historical, demographical and institutional perspective was needed to understand them (see Reid, 1947; Kyrk, 1947; Hoyt, 1951; Hoyt, 1956; Reid, 1959).

From the 1920s to the 1940s, home economists – mostly Hoyt and Kyrk – had claimed that consumption expenditures in money, time and efforts were directed by subjective family “standards of living,” defined as the satisfactions considered essential by families (Kyrk, 1924; Hoyt, 1938). These standards depended on family composition, family history and the “cultural content” of the group of belonging, which included customs, conventions, social emulation and “business manipulation.” After World War II, Hoyt was still interested in how standards of living were conceived and evolved, that is, in a theory of wants development. She used her experience of field research in Guatemala from 1945 to 1949 to investigate the consequences of a sudden increase in spending power

(Hoyt, 1951; Hoyt, 1956).<sup>121</sup> She hoped to understand the relationships between income, expenditures and standards of living, i. e. the ideal ways of living.

Hoyt made clear that the main influence in expenditure was not purchasing power but instead “a disposition to buy” (1951, 194). First, that disposition stems from a “cultural pattern” including customs and traditions. Second, it depended on the “association” of a new market good or service to something favored like welfare, usefulness, novelty, or prestige. Advertising often used association to increase demand in a particular good. Third, the disposition to buy was influenced by a general pattern of consumption: a new object of interest was purchased if it blended in the existing “lifestyle” of a person.<sup>122</sup> Fourth, it depended on the “economic spirit,” that is, comparisons between “all available alternatives for a given end” based on price and purchasing power (198). But Hoyt warned that such “economic spirit” was “not so common as economists would like to think” (ibid).<sup>123</sup>

To the extent that cultural, social and psychological factors were more important than economic factors in explaining consumer spending, Hoyt argued that “consumption requires a considerable appreciation and some knowledge of social sciences other than economics [mainly psychology and anthropology]” (Hoyt, 1951, 22). In her 1965 “Choice as an Interdisciplinary Area,” she showed that a better understanding of choice required greater integration of economics,

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<sup>121</sup> The field research focused on workers’ reactions to a housing and community project of the United Fruit Company. See “Iowa State economist tests her theory afield” (undated), Box 1, EEH.

<sup>122</sup> To justify this argument, Hoyt (1951, 197) referred to the Gestalt psychology, which emerged in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. This theory emphasized the primacy of patterns/configurations over individual components.

<sup>123</sup> Hoyt emphasized: “It must be clearly understood that the fitting of a good or service into a pattern does not necessarily involve anything “rational” in the usual sense of the term. Whether a thing “fits” or not is a matter of feeling, and reason may or may not be involved in it” (Hoyt, 1951, 197.).

psychology and anthropology (Hoyt, 1965). Similarly, Reid (1959, 572) emphasized the importance of “history and social science in general” in the study of family and consumption.<sup>124</sup>

To home economists, understanding consumer behavior was meant to help increase welfare. For instance, the purpose of Reid’s (1943) *Food For People* was “to point the way toward more adequate food supply for all classes of consumers” as Kyrk (1943, 364) made clear in her review of the book. The part of the book on consumption tackled food consumption habits and their dynamics, their relation to commodity prices, family incomes and family size, as well as the adequacy of diets nutrition-wise. It included practical buying advice on how to best satisfy the needs of family members. The book also dealt with social policies in relation to food consumption. It discussed wartime policies of relief budgets, food stamp plans, school lunch programs, taxes on foods, agricultural programs and food controls, as well as traditional concerns of home economists for consumer protection and information (including advertising policies, legal protection against misrepresentation and grade labelling), reduction of marketing costs and control of monopolies.

Hoyt (1959) offered a more systematic approach to intelligent consumption. She argued that family satisfaction could be increased by a modification of standards of living. Accordingly, she distinguished protective elements (individual and social necessities), expansive elements (education, recreation, travels, religion) and destructive elements (addictions) of standards

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<sup>124</sup> Reid left more room for economics than Hoyt: “I want to emphasize the great importance of training in history and social science in general and *in economics in particular* for those home economists who have to deal intelligently with families and consumer education, either in advising families on their financial affairs or in helping them to understand the world in which they live and modifications of it compatible with our social objectives.” (Reid, 1959, 572, my emphasis).

of living, with a view to encouraging the first two categories through education and social policies.

Overall, the work on consumption and the family by home economists had little impact on economics as a whole. Hoyt's 1951 articles on standards of living were published in the *Journal of Political Economy* and in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, but they were regarded as contributions to development studies, not economics. Hoyt's call for integrating the contributions of economics and other social sciences to study choice, in 1965, had likewise little impact. Kyrk's 1953 textbook for college-level courses in family economics, titled *The Family in the American Economy*, which exemplified the home economic institutional and historical approach to the family, was not even reviewed in economic journals (Kyrk, 1953).<sup>126</sup> By contrast, *American Income and Its Use*, a collection of essays which included contributions by Hoyt and by Reid, was well received among economists especially Reid's part which was qualified as "an excellent statement of current thought on these subjects" (Cave, 1954, 998). In fact, economists appreciated Reid's extensive use of statistical data on national income, income distribution and levels of living. Yet, it seems that the home economic approach was increasingly at odds with the state of the art in economics (see Section IV). For instance, economist Roy C. Cave described Hoyt's and Reid's work as normative economics but criticized its

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<sup>126</sup> However, it was very well received among other social scientists. In the *American Journal of Sociology*, Gregory P. Stone remarked with admiration that while "ignoring academic boundaries, [it] achieve[s] an excellence in the treatment of conventional problems [i.e. the study of the family] that earlier specialization precludes" (Stone, 1955, 603). Stone lauded in particular the "general excellence of documentation" of the book making use of latest data on family structure and income from the Federal Bureau of Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (ibid; see also Rowntree, 1955; Montgomery, 1994). In *Social Problems*, John Sirjimaki welcomed a "systematic, factual, and informative" treatment of the topic (Sirjamaki, 1954, 175).



unclear definition of welfare and neglect of recent welfare economic literature (Cave, 1954, 999).<sup>127</sup>

### III- An Adverse Institutional Context

The art of consumption experienced institutional hardship after World War II. The Iowa State College (ISC) – which hosted one of the most important programs in family and consumption economics in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s (see chapter 2) – declined. Led by Reid, Hoyt and Mary Jean Bowman, this program was affiliated with the Department of Home Management and the Department of Economics and Sociology.<sup>128</sup> It benefited from the support of ISC administrators as well as of Theodore W. Schultz, the head of Department of Economics and Sociology and a renowned agricultural economist. His ambition was to develop a major program in applied economics.<sup>129</sup> Yet, in 1943, he accused the ISC administration to suppress academic freedom to please powerful farm interests. Following the “oleomargarine controversy” as it came to be called, he resigned.<sup>131</sup> That was a serious loss for ISC since Schultz cultivated a great professional network, including a number of top policy makers and administrators of private foundations, which made it possible to attract

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<sup>127</sup> In particular, Cave underlined that it was unclear whether welfare referred to consumption or to broader ways of living; to satisfaction attained (“levels”) or to satisfaction desired (“standards”); to a normative or an objective assessment (Cave, 1954, 999).

<sup>128</sup> The Department of Home Management was one of the nine departments of ISC Division of Home Economics, which was then the biggest academic division of home economics in the United States. The other home economics departments included Foods and Nutrition, Child Development, Applied Arts, Institution Management, Textiles and Clothing, Home Economics Education and Household Equipment. See CFCS.

<sup>129</sup> In 1941, Schultz was pleased to state that “Iowa State College has become an ideal laboratory for the social scientists interested in problems pertaining to agriculture, industry, home economics, and engineering.” memoranda, November 26, 1941, Folder 3, Box 9, MGR.

<sup>131</sup> On the oleomargarine controversy, see Beneke (1998), Seim (2008) and Burnett (2011).

funds for research projects (Burnett, 2011, 378).<sup>132</sup> Many scholars – including Reid and Bowman – left ISC in the wake of Schultz’s resignation.<sup>133</sup> They often joined federal institutions to participate in the war effort: Reid went to the Division of Statistical Standard of the Bureau of Budget while Bowman joined the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Forget, 2000, 541). The loss of faculty members as well as the termination of the unique collaboration between home economists and agricultural economists at ISC weakened the art of consumption.

After World War II, the home economic program on family and consumption economics was continued in a reduced form by Hoyt who stayed at ISC her whole career, and by Margaret I. Liston who joined her in 1949. Liston had been a student of Hoyt and Reid at ISC in the late 1920s and early 1930s before earning a doctorate in Family and Agricultural Economics from the University of Chicago. At ISC, Liston was a professor of economics and home management and she became the head of ISC home management department in 1952. That department offered an undergraduate major in consumption, led by Hoyt and Liston, with professional orientation to county extension work and consumer services in business and welfare programs. Graduate study and research programs on family economics and food economics were also maintained. The Department of Home Management even sponsored a national work conference on the social science foundations of family economics and home management in 1960, in cooperation with the Family Economics-Home

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<sup>132</sup> Paul Burnett (2011) tells that Schultz’s good relationships with Claude Wickard, the US Secretary of Agriculture and with Joseph Willits, the director of the Social Science Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, allowed ISC to carry out a series of “Wartime Farm and Food Policy Pamphlets” in 1943, which eventually led to the oleomargarine controversy.

<sup>133</sup> Reid wrote: “The group of which I was part derived a great deal from joint effort. With several members gone, the incentive to stay would have been weakened even though the college environment might otherwise have remained unchanged.” Reid to Bluedorn, Jan 22, 1947, Folder 2, Box 9, MGR.

Management Section of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) (Eppright & Ferguson, 1971, 300).

But overall the ISC College of Home Economics laid lesser emphasis on the economic and social study of the family and shifted toward homemaking and family education.<sup>134</sup> Courses in “marriage and the family” and on “child care and training” were added to the Department of Home Management in 1946, whereas courses on “consumers’ marketing” and “sociology of the family” were dropped. In 1950, a “General Home Economics” sequence was created “to serve the needs of students planning to marry” (Spratt, 1953, 126). A home economics student at ISC, Bessie Spratt, noted: “A change of emphasis toward courses more “family centered” and toward better preparation of students for increasingly successful family living has taken place in some of the general requirements as shown by course descriptions and changes in titles” (ibid.). Incidentally, a family environment department reunited the existing Departments of Home Management, Household Equipment and Child Development in 1967. By that time, the art of consumption was no longer an important component of home economics at ISC.

The program on family and consumption economics led by Kyrk at the University of Chicago also encountered administrative difficulties. In 1930, the new President of the University, Robert Maynard Hutchins had reorganized the whole university into a college, four graduate divisions (Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities) and five professional schools. Because the largest home economic field focused on foods and nutrition, the home economics department was placed under the jurisdiction of the Division of Biological Sciences. But this institutional arrangement posed

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<sup>134</sup> Home economics’ turn toward professional homemaking is not unique to ISC. See Elias (2008, 119).

problems because students in fields other than biological (like family and consumption economics) found it hard to meet the requirements of the division.

In order to guarantee the unity of the field while encouraging links with scholars in various divisions, Lydia Roberts, the head of Chicago's home economics department, proposed in 1935 that home economics scholars have a joint appointment in departments nearest to their interest and in an "Institute of Family Welfare."<sup>135</sup> That institute was supposed to focus on research and grant degrees under the supervision of members of the Institute reunited into divisional committees.<sup>136</sup> Unsurprisingly, Hutchins, who was interested in multidisciplinary ventures, welcomed this proposal.<sup>137</sup> He had already encouraged the creation of an inter-divisional Committee on Child Study – then Human Development– in 1930, soon followed by a Committee on Statistics in 1936, a Committee on Social Thought in 1942 and a Committee on Behavioral Sciences in 1949.<sup>138</sup> But the proposal for the creation of an Institute of Family

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<sup>135</sup> Several names were proposed including "Institute of the Family," "Institute of Family Relationships," "Institute of Nutrition and Family Welfare," "Institute of Euthenics" and "Institute of Home Economics." But Roberts warned that the latter "has been utilized so widely to characterize work in household skills that it has come to have almost entirely this connotation in the minds of the average person. This was not the conception of Home Economics as held by its founders not is it the one held by leaders in the movement today." "Plan for Changing the Administrative Status of the Department of Home Economics to that of an Institute" 2-3, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>136</sup> The proposed committee on Family Economics, which depended on the Division of Social Sciences, included Hazel Kyrk, Ernest Burgess (one of the earliest sociologist of the family), Harry A. Millis (economist), and Helen Wright (Social Service Administration). Other committees focused on "Child Psychology," "Textiles," "General Home Economics" and "Related Arts." See Details of Plan for Institute of Home, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>137</sup> Hutchins wrote to Roberts: "I think it will be possible to organize an institute if the members of the Department are ready to take posts in the various Departments in which they are doing their major work, such as Arts, Physiology, Economics, etc. The members of the Department could then be reassembled into an institution which would have a research budget.", Hutchins to Roberts, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1936, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>138</sup> On the Committee on Social Thought, see Emmett (2010). On the Committee on Behavioral Sciences, see Fontaine (2016).

Welfare was rejected both by Robert Redfield, the dean of the Division of Social Sciences and by William F. Taliaferro, the dean of the Division of Biological Sciences, who were not willing to grant more autonomy to the field especially for granting degrees.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, the existing interdivisional committees mostly focused on research and were not responsible for degrees. Thus, they did not alter the traditional pattern of Chicago's graduate training (McNeill, 1991).

Finally, in 1949, the home economics department was split into three distinct faculties: family and consumption economics as well as child development depended on the Division of Social Sciences; nutrition studies remained within the Division of Biological Sciences; while applied arts joined the Division of Humanities. However, no institute for home economic research was created.<sup>140</sup> For Thelma Porter, the chairman of the home economics department, this administrative organization amounted to the "virtual disintegration" of home economics. It pushed home economics fields toward rapprochement with

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<sup>139</sup> Although Redfield was in favor of interdepartmental committees, he informed Roberts that: "The Division [of Social Sciences] does not approve the proposal to confer degrees in the Division on candidates to be recommended by committees over which the Division does not have administrative control." Redfield to Porter, April 3, 1936. Shortly later, Redfield wrote to Hutchins that "If there is no way of organizing and administering an Institute of Home Economics except by giving them larger powers in granting degrees I would favor the retention of departmental status." Redfield to Hutchins, June 2, 1936. As for Taliaferro, he stated: "It seems to me therefore that in any reorganization we should see to it that the members of the Department of Home Economics are given their basic appointment in the respective departments, that the same basic Departments are made responsible for the research and that any degree given in the subject are satisfactory to the appropriate Division. In general I should say that these objectives are almost directly opposite those stated by Miss Roberts." Taliaferro to E. T. Filbey, December 5, 1935. Hutchins agreed with Redfield and Taliaferro that an Institute of Home Economics should not be able to grant degrees: "I feel that if possible the degrees should be granted not from the Institute but from the departments involved. I imagine that this is one of the things with which Miss Roberts would disagree." Hutchins to Taliaferro, June 2, 1936, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>140</sup> It is significant that shortly after, in 1951, a Family Study Center was created but it was headed by sociologist Ernest Burgess. It seems to have included mostly sociologists and demographers (like Donald J. Bogue and Nelson N. Foote) but no home economist.

more established disciplines. Incidentally, it was explicitly stated that “work in consumer economics could be done and done respectably in the Department of Economics in the Division of the Social Sciences.”<sup>141</sup>

At Chicago, like in many other universities and colleges, home economists had to face constant criticisms from administrators and scholars who questioned their scientific credentials (see Rossiter, 1995). Porter regretted that “some members of the Central Administration [had] strong suspicions, or even longstanding convictions, that Home Economics is not for the University of Chicago.”<sup>142</sup> In 1944, she had already been warned by Vice-President R. Wendell Harrison that “[the central administration] do[es] not believe that the University of Chicago should attempt to encompass all possible fields of Home Economics.”<sup>143</sup> The new Dean of the Division of Biological Sciences, Lowell T. Coggeshall, who administered food and nutrition studies at the Department of Home Economics was unequivocal in its assessment. In December 1950, he found “the qualification of the staff [of home economics], the quality of their work, the standards for degrees unacceptable.”<sup>144</sup> The main vision of the field among Chicago administrators and scholars was that home economics was only an application of existing “basic sciences” to “the problems of human living” and that it had “no basic subject matter of its own.”<sup>145</sup> In other words, home economics needlessly duplicated research on topics investigated more seriously elsewhere.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> “Memo on Home Economics,” August 6, 1948. Box 104, RMH.

<sup>142</sup> Porter to R. W. Harrison, November 8, 1948, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>143</sup> R. W. Harrison to Porter, May 10, 1944, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>144</sup> Executive Committee of the Department of Home Economics to Dean Harrison, Central Administration, December 18, 1950, Folder 10, Box 103, RMH.

<sup>145</sup> Committee to Study Administrative Reorganization of the Department of Home Economics, 1948, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>146</sup> “There is, however, no excuse at the University for the *duplication* of service in a Department of Home Economics that is adequately provided in our departments of

Paradoxically, the Chicago home economics program was nation-wide recognized for its emphasis on research. The University of Chicago was one of the few institutions awarding Ph. D. degrees in home economics fields, namely, in Family and Consumption Economics, a program led by Kyrk; in Nutrition and Food Chemistry and in Child Development.<sup>147</sup> Despite the unusual high proportion of doctorates in home economics, administrators and scholars were skeptical about the field because they had little knowledge of what was done in home economics departments.<sup>148</sup> Even Redfield, the Dean of the Division of Social Sciences who recognized the “artistic” or “humanistic” aspect of social sciences, seemed unaware of the contributions of Chicago home economists to the art of consumption.<sup>149</sup>

As a result, the Chicago home economics program was downsized. The number of faculties slightly increased from 10 in 1945 to 13 in 1950 before falling to 3 in 1955 (Dye, 1972, 101). The number of graduate students majoring in home economics sharply decreased just after World War II. There were 16 Ph.D. students and thirty students in master’s degrees in 1949–1950 (99). These numbers fell to 10 Ph.D. students and 12 master students in 1950-1951 and 5

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specialization.” Mr. Morgenstern (Alumni Foundation) to Vice President Emery T. Filbey, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1941, my emphasis, Box 104, RMH.

<sup>147</sup> “Program of Study in Home Economics,” Box 105, RMH.

<sup>148</sup> On the administrative attacks against home economics, see Rossiter, 1995, chapter 8. This restrictive and negative vision of home economics was also common outside universities. For instance, a Newsweek’s article on Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to ISC College of Home Economics in 1959 lamented that “In an age when man is reaching toward the cosmos, half of American institutions that admit women offer home economics courses” (quoted in Elias, 2008, 102).

<sup>149</sup> In “The Art of Social Science” (1948), Redfield distinguished the scientific aspect from the artistic or humanistic aspect of the social sciences. The former relied on a formal scientific method (the formulation of hypotheses and the search for empirical evidence for instance) whereas the latter relied on observation, intuition and imagination and was geared towards a better understanding of human nature and institutions.

Ph.D. students and 10 master's students in 1951–1952.<sup>150</sup> In the early 1950s, the Ph. D. program in Child Development was terminated (*ibid.*). As Vice-President R. W. Harrison pointed to the low student enrollment, the department of home economics was limited to a committee in 1955.<sup>151</sup> Home economics faculties were encouraged to leave or to retire (Kyrk retired in 1952). In 1956, after the departure of Porter, the Chicago program in home economics was terminated.

Whereas the biggest postwar research agencies, such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, did not recognize home economics as a scientific field deserving funding, the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics (BHNHE) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture continued to fund home economic research on consumption (Rossiter, 1995, 166). Its Family Economics Division, headed by Reid from 1945 to 1948, participated in a series of studies on family incomes and expenditures: the Rural Family Spending and Saving in Wartime in 1943, the Household Food Consumption Survey and the Survey of Farmers' Expenditures in 1955, and the Consumer Expenditure Survey in 1961 (Staab, 1959). These were parts of nationwide surveys based on household data which aimed at securing national estimates of expenditures and savings of families while they also gathered socio-economic information about households, including the level of income, the size of the family, the region and the level of urbanization. But the BHNHE lost its supervision role of rural family data at the benefit of the Bureau of Census and

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<sup>150</sup> The decline of student enrollment was due to the lesser educational facilities and to the fact that home economics was less attractive to female students as other curricula opened more widely to them (Rossiter, 1995, chapter 8).

<sup>151</sup> Dean Coggeshall also wished to divert part of the funds devoted to home economics to other programs in his Division of the Biological Sciences and to replace the term of "home economics" by "nutrition." See "Request to Review Department Status" Folder 10, Box 103, RMH.



of the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the early 1960s. This eventually eroded the visibility of home economists as consumer experts.

The BHNHE had faced waning federal support since the end of the war. Budget cuts first occurred in 1947 and they continued in the early 1950s (Goldstein, 2012, 249). The number of staff members decreased from 300 in 1948 to 240 in 1952 (ibid.). Research programs were reduced: family and consumption economics studies were continued but on a reduced scale while most remaining research focused on foods and nutrition. In 1952, an administrative reorganization divided the bureau into two units which depended on the new Agricultural Research Service (ARS) (Goldstein, 2012, 249-253). As a result, home economics lost its status as a separate federal research bureau. In 1957, an Institute of Home Economics was created inside the ARS to pool home economics research.

The Institute of Home Economics, which later became the Consumer and Food Economics Institute, continued to investigate topics which had been central to the art of consumption. It published the *Family Economics Review* (then *Family Economics and Nutrition Review*) from 1957 to 1995. The journal contained mostly descriptive articles on consumer spending with particular emphasis on food expenditures, consumer prices, the economic role of women and legislation affecting families.<sup>152</sup> However, it was circulated to a limited audience, mainly to home economics specialists.

Overall, the defenders of the art of consumption faced an adverse context. They lost the support of federal government and administrators in universities.

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<sup>152</sup> The *Family Economics Review* originates from a newsletter – *Wartime Family Living* – published during World War II. It was transformed into *Rural Family Living* after the war and was then renamed the *Family Economics Review* to accommodate urban families. See [https://archive.org/stream/CAT79725210114/CAT79725210114\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/CAT79725210114/CAT79725210114_djvu.txt), consulted on December 29, 2019.

Like Kyrk, they were pushed to retire or, like Hoyt and Liston, they were confined to home economics departments with little visibility. Their work attracted little attention in their own home economic field as well as among social scientists. In such a context, as Reid's career illustrates, individual strategies were likely to supplant collective enterprises. Reid was still at the beginning of her academic career, she was 49 in 1945. She had been a leading figure of the art of consumption from the 1930s to the early 1940s. Trained by Kyrk at the University of Chicago, she had contributed to the study of the relationships between consumers and business (Reid, 1938; Reid, 1940; Reid, 1942). After World War II, she continued to work on the economics of consumption and family. But her affiliation with home economics, which suffered from decreasing institutional support and scientific criticisms, became a problem. Consequently, she moved away from home economics and connected with economists who were more and more interested in consumption.

#### IV- New Mainstream Theories of Consumption

After World War II, there was a renewed interest in consumption among economists. It followed the publication of John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory* (1936). Unlike home economists, who mostly focused on consumption at the micro/family-level, the *General Theory* centered on aggregate consumption patterns. Keynes's macroeconomic consumption function relates aggregate consumption expenditures to the current level of production/income. Thus, it deemphasized the relevance of those psychological and social factors like customs and emulation which mattered in home economics.<sup>153</sup> Besides,

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<sup>153</sup> The Keynesian macroeconomic consumption function was based on a "fundamental psychological law" which stressed the importance of current level of family income in explaining consumption expenditures. This law stated that consumption increases "as [...]"

Keynesian theory had great implications on public policy since it justified greater government spending so as to boost an inadequate level of aggregate demand. Following Keynes, economists mostly focused on explaining aggregate consumption patterns with a particular interest in public policy implications.

As a mass of new data on income, saving and consumption expenditures became available after the war, many economic studies aimed at estimating the Keynesian macroeconomic consumption function (Trezzini, 2012). That function, which relates consumption expenditures to the current level of income, specifies that the proportion of income consumed decreases with the level of income.<sup>154</sup> Using both cross-sectional data and times series, most studies found that the ratio between consumption expenditures and income was inversely related to income. But in 1942, Simon Kuznets used longer time series to show a constant relationship between consumption and income despite a substantial rise in income (Kuznets, 1942). That result, which went against the Keynesian consumption function, led economists to find explanations for aggregate consumption patterns that were more consistent with empirical findings.

The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) was central in the renewal of consumption studies after the war. Because of the work of Kuznets (1934) who had developed the first official estimates of American national income for the Department of Commerce, the NBER was then known for research on the measurement of national income. In 1936, Kuznets had organized the first Conference on Research in Income and Wealth (CRIW) to bring together at the NBER the increasing number of people interested in

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income increases but not by as much as the increase in the income” (Keynes, 1936, 96). Consequently, social and psychological factors were considered marginal or were held constant.

<sup>154</sup> More specifically, the marginal propensity to consume was positive, less than one and inferior to the average propensity to consume.

national income and its distribution. A number of CRIW sessions in the late 1940s and 1950s focused on finding consistent explanations to aggregate consumption (and saving) patterns (Fabricant, 1946; Brady & Friedman, 1947; Modigliani, 1949; Brady, 1952; Reid, 1952). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Reid, along with Dorothy Brady and Rose Friedman, became regular participants in the annual CRIW.

Reid, Brady and Rose Friedman all shared a longstanding interest in consumption. Brady had earned a Ph.D. degree in mathematics from Berkeley in 1933 before working as a statistician (Forget, 2011). Along with Rose Friedman, she had worked on the first comprehensive study of American family income and expenditures, the Consumer Purchases Study, at the Bureau of Home Economics (BHE) during the 1930s. Besides, these women became specialists of statistics on income, consumption and cost-of-living as they worked for the federal government during World War II. Rose Friedman and Brady were at the BHE until 1943, Brady joined the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 1943 while Reid worked at the Division of Statistical Standard in the Bureau of Budget from 1943 to 1944 (Forget, 2011 ; Trezzini, 2016).

In the postwar era, these women cultivated working relationships with economists. Reid had been close to Theodore W. Schultz since her stint at ISC. After their leaving from ISC in 1943, Reid contributed to the collaborative book edited by Schultz, *Food for the World* (Schultz, 1943).<sup>155</sup> Besides, she became

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<sup>155</sup> This book gathered various contributions related to food by home economists (including nutritionists), demographers, agricultural economists and specialists in international relations following their participation to the twentieth Institute of the Harris Foundation lectures at the University of Chicago. The Annual Harris Institutes were composed of a private round table and a series of public and teaching in international relations. They were funded by Norman Wait Harris Memorial Foundation, a trust fund given to the University of Chicago in 1923 for the promotion of knowledge of an interest in international affairs. See <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.HARRISNW> consulted on November 14, 2019.

involved in debates on the official cost-of-living index produced by the BLS during the war, which was an opportunity to work with leading economists, including Wesley C. Mitchell and Kuznets from the NBER (Stapleford, 2011).<sup>156</sup> Brady was also involved in the same debates as she was the head of the Cost of Living Division of the BLS in the early 1940s. As for Rose Friedman, she had worked at the NBER during the late 1930s and kept close ties with economists in part thanks to her husband, Milton. Consequently, Reid, Brady and Rose Friedman were in a position to contribute to the renewal of consumption theories in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In a 1947 CRIW session at the NBER, Brady and Rose Friedman proposed to relate saving (and thus consumption) not only to the current income of the family but also to the average income in the community of belonging (Brady & Friedman, 1947). Using existing empirical studies, they argued that the share of income saved increased with the relative position of the family in terms of income distribution. Besides, they observed that families accustomed to a high income did not easily cut their expenditures when their incomes dropped.<sup>157</sup> In doing so, Brady and Rose Friedman related consumption patterns to social and psychological factors.<sup>158</sup> Very much like Brady and Friedman, Kyrk (1924, 185) had emphasized that families were eager to maintain their standard of living, even though their income decreased. However, unlike home economists, the main interest of Brady and Rose Friedman was not to find ways to increase family satisfaction but rather to explain and predict aggregate consumption patterns.

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<sup>156</sup> She enthusiastically wrote to a former ISC colleague: "Life in Washington has been very interesting especially during the past two months when I have had a chance to get acquainted with Wesley C. Mitchell and Simon Kuznets of the National Bureau of Economic Research." Reid to Buchanan, April 5th, 1944, Folders 1&2, Box 9, MGR.

<sup>157</sup> They showed that the average dissaving occurred at a higher rate in high income communities as compared with low-income communities.

<sup>158</sup> Brady (1952) elaborated on this analysis.

Similarly, James S. Duesenberry (1949) partly relied on a social explanation of consumption. He argued that the proportion of income saved or consumed in the short-run depended on the “relative income,” i.e., the relative position of the individual in the community (Trezzini, 2012). Individuals sought to satisfy a standard level of consumption determined by their status and by comparison to the standard of consumption of those close to them. Therefore, in the late 1940s, the social and psychological factors continued to play an important role in economic theories of consumption.<sup>159</sup>

Oddly enough, Reid herself pointed to an explanation of family consumption patterns that gave more weight to consumer rationality. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, she was investigating various definitions of income and their effects on the income-expenditure relationships (Reid, 1948; Reid, 1951; Reid, 1952). Looking at farm families, she noted that they had a high variability of money income as compared to nonfarm families. Besides, farm families had a substantial amount of nonmoney income which was more stable than their money income. Reid concluded that current money income was not a “suitable indicator of what families have in mind when deciding to spend or to save” (Reid, 1952, 134). Following Milton Friedman’s distinction between transitory and permanent income, she argued that farm families planned their spending according to the “permanent component of [their] income” which included nonmoney income.<sup>160</sup> She pointed out that the relation of expenditures to the permanent component of income was likely to be rather stable throughout time and among different groups.

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<sup>159</sup> The Italian economist Franco Modigliani, who participated in CRIW, was also briefly interested in the relative income hypothesis (Modigliani, 1949, see Mason, 2000a).

<sup>160</sup> While Friedman was working on the revision of Kuznets’s manuscript on *Incomes from Independent Professional Practice* at the NBER during the 1930s, he introduced the decomposition of the actual income into three components: permanent, quasi-permanent and transitory (Friedman & Friedman, 1998, 73; see Friedman & Kuznets, 1945).

Milton Friedman attended the 1951 CRIW, where Reid presented her paper based on the permanent component of income. He had been involved in consumption research during the 1930s when he worked on the Consumer Purchases Study at the National Resources Committee as well as during his stint at the NBER as the first secretary of the CRIW. Besides, he had kept an interest in this field thanks to his wife own interest and their discussions with Brady (Friedman & Friedman, 1998, 215). It is likely that Reid's paper made an impression on him since he subsequently put her hypothesis at the center of *A Theory of the Consumption Function* (Friedman, 1957).<sup>161</sup>

During the summer of 1953, Friedman wrote a first draft of his *Theory of the Consumption Function* which devoted a central place to the distinction between permanent and transitory income. Like Reid, Friedman argued that the main determinant of consumption is permanent income which he defined as the average expected return on consumer's wealth—that is, a kind of lifetime income.<sup>162</sup> This theory was thereafter referred to as the “permanent income hypothesis” (PIH). Clearly, Reid and Brady followed closely the writing of the book. In 1952, Reid had been hired by the University of Chicago where she became Friedman's colleague.<sup>163</sup> In August 1953, Friedman wrote to her: “I have been meaning to write to you all summer, for you have been much in my

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<sup>161</sup> In fact, Friedman (1957, ix) even claimed that Reid pushed him “to write up the underlying theory so that she could refer to it in a paper presenting her conclusions.”

<sup>162</sup> Friedman used Irving Fisher's model of intertemporal choice in which the consumer decide the amount of his consumption expenditures so as to maximize his lifetime satisfaction (Fisher, 1930). As a result, consumption is related to wealth.

<sup>163</sup> Reid was hired as a professor of economics and home economics to replace Hazel Kyrk who retired. The committee in charge with the hiring was headed by Theodore W. Schultz and included Hazel Kyrk, D. Gale Johnson, Milton Friedman, H. Gregg Lewis, Frank Knight, Jacob Marschak and Tjalling Koopmans. Kyrk had been Reid's thesis supervisor at Chicago while both Schultz and Gale Johnson were former colleagues of Reid at Iowa State College. See Box 41, Folders 2 & 3, CDE.

thoughts. I finally got around to writing up the theory of consumption, and naturally drew much on your [1952] paper.”<sup>164</sup> He sent a copy of the book “for [he] very much want[ed] [Reid’s and Brady’s] comments on it.” Reid became a close friend of the Friedmans, as well as Brady who joined the University of Chicago in 1956 (Friedman & Friedman, 1998, 267). In the final version published in 1957, Friedman recognized that “[*A Theory of the Consumption Function*] is in essential respect a joint product of the group [Rose Friedman, Brady and Reid], each member of which not only participated in its development but read and criticized the manuscript in its various stages” (Friedman, 1957, ix).

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the PIH enjoyed great success among economists. Reid continued to produce empirical work in support of the PIH (Hoyt, Reid, McConnell and Hooks, 1954; Dunsing & Reid, 1958; Reid, 1962a; Reid, 1962b). At about the same time, economists Franco Modigliani and Richard Brumberg argued that current consumption depended on wealth (Modigliani & Brumberg, 1954). With Albert Ando, Modigliani proposed a “life-cycle theory of consumption” in which consumers smoothed consumption over their life-cycle (Ando & Modigliani, 1963).<sup>165</sup> Technical differences notwithstanding, the life-cycle theory was very similar to the PIH.<sup>166</sup> Both considered consumption expenditures as resulting from deliberate choices of forward-looking consumers seeking to maximize their satisfaction.

It is significant that during her career at Chicago, Reid adopted a more accommodating conception of consumer rationality and market efficiency.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Friedman to Reid, August 7, 1953, Folder 1, Box 6, MGR.

<sup>165</sup> It should be noted that Kyrk also investigated the evolution of family income and expenditures throughout “family life span” in her textbook *The Family in the American Economy* (Kyrk, 1953).

<sup>166</sup> Modigliani acknowledged Reid’s contribution to the life-cycle theory in his 1985 Nobel lecture (Yi, 1996, 20).

<sup>167</sup> After the Chicago home economics department closed down in 1956, Reid was a full professor of economics.



She progressively abandoned the idea, which was central in home economics, that the consumer was in most cases a woman who was influenced by several social, psychological and economic forces and had to be educated to become more rational. Her vision of the market also changed. In the early 1950s, she still doubted consumer sovereignty and emphasized the lack of information on consumer goods and the imperfect functioning of the market (Reid & Vaile, 1951). By the 1960s, she wrote that “Freedom of consumers to choose among goods offered for sales and a market system which allocates productive resources on the basis of money votes of consumers is the norm in a free enterprise economy.”<sup>168</sup> Reid’s changing conception of consumers and market was influenced by her greater connection with economists from World War II onwards, and especially by her close ties with Schultz and Friedman at Chicago.<sup>169</sup> Beyond Reid, the PIH benefited from a new faith in consumer rationality and market efficiency among economists which was fervently defended by the Chicago School (see Van Horn, Mirowski, Stapleford, 2007).

More generally, the success of the PIH relied on the restatement of neoclassical theory which became dominant after World War II (Morgan & Rutherford, 1998). Concomitantly, the institutionalist movement, which informed home economists’ art of consumption, was losing ground (see Rutherford, 2011). Starting from a different perspective than the PIH, Paul Samuelson had also intended to revitalize neoclassical theory of demand by freeing it from the psychological interpretations of utility (Samuelson, 1948). He argued that utility functions could be deduced from observed consumer choices which represent underlying preferences. The revealed preference theory was

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<sup>168</sup> “Notes on consumption” (undated), Folder 6, Box 11, MGR.

<sup>169</sup> Schultz, who was close to Reid since his stint at ISC, was instrumental in her hiring at Chicago in 1952.

then extended by Hendrik S. Houthakker (1950) and it greatly influenced contemporary neoclassical consumer theory (Mongin, 2000).

Like the revealed preference theory, the PIH illustrated economists' new conception of "applied economics." As neoclassical theory and mathematical modeling became widespread during the 1950s and 1960s, applied economics was increasingly understood as the empirical test of theoretical models (Backhouse & Cherrier, 2017). The PIH was exemplary of this new conception of applied economics since it was based on the neoclassical assumption of a utility-maximizer consumer and it paved the way for empirical work to verify its implications. Thus, the consistency between the predictions of the PIH and empirical evidence was said to demonstrate its superiority over alternative theories of consumption (Friedman, 1957, 168; Reid, 1962a).<sup>170</sup>

Finally, the PIH was praised by many postwar economists because it served to draw "politically-neutral" policy prescriptions. Indeed, policy makers have increasingly resorted to economic expertise since World War II (Bernstein, 2001). As a way to keep political opinions and values away, many economists like Friedman (1953) stated that the method of economics, namely, the use of mathematical optimizing models, guaranteed their objectivity. The PIH, which was based on the proper hypothetico-deductive method, could draw "objective" policy knowledge. It had indeed important policy implications since it shed doubt on the possibility to predict the effects of greater public spending on total

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<sup>170</sup> In particular, the PIH helped explain the discrepancies in empirical results between budget data and long time series. In budget data, the decrease of the average propensity to consume with income could be explained by the short-run effect of the transitory component of income. In the long-run, this influence disappeared and the relationship between consumption (or saving) and income was constant, as illustrated in long time series (like in Kuznets, 1942).

demand and thus weakened the justification for Keynesian policies.<sup>171</sup> As a result, the PIH enabled economists to play a role of neutral policy advisers. By contrast, previous home economists' art of consumption, which was centered on suggesting ways to increase welfare, was increasingly suspected to be value-laden and inadequately objective. Finally, economists superseded home economists as the leading experts in consumption and they obscured home economists' family and welfare-centered, inductive and interdisciplinary approach to consumption.

## V- Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the lack of institutional support for home economics and the emergence of a mainstream in economics explain the decline of the art of consumption. New economic theories of consumption emerged, fostered by the support of the NBER, which better fitted the increasingly dominant neoclassical paradigm.

The decline of the art of consumption, a feminine field associated to home economics, occurred in a context of masculinization of academia which has been described by Margaret Rossiter (1995). With the explosion of student enrollment and increased funding for education and research, a number of American administrators strove to increase the prestige of their university. Accordingly, they encouraged the development of research, the rise in salaries, the hiring of young Ph.D. men and the pensioning off of older women, which all weakened home economics. Administrators and scholars from other disciplines criticized home economics for being too vocational and technical. The low proportion of

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<sup>171</sup> A consequence of the PIH was that the propensity to consume (and thus the Keynesian multiplier) was unstable since households increased their consumption expenditures only if they considered the additional income as permanent.

PhDs as compared to other disciplines, as well as the high proportion of women (90-100%) especially older ones, were used as evidence of the low scientific status of the field (165). Paradoxically, the feminist movement of the 1960s also undermined home economics. At the AHEA annual meeting in 1972, feminist Robin Morgan explicitly blamed home economists for encouraging women to become homemakers and for supporting unequal gender roles (Goldstein, 2002, 282-283). From the 1960s onwards, home economics gradually lost its status of academic field.

Meanwhile, the aura of thoroughness of economics, a predominantly male discipline, grew from World War II onwards. As they were mobilized for the war effort, economists began to create an image of their discipline as a rigorous and apolitical science (see Bernstein, 2001). This self-image was strengthened after the war as economics came to be increasingly defined by its methods and benefited from the largesse of federal government and philanthropies.

Home economists considered consumption as a traditional female activity and emphasized the economic, social and psychological constraints facing consumers. In contrast, for economists, the consumer was a rational individual seeking to maximize his satisfaction while reacting to economic variables such as income, wealth and prices. In the process, social and psychological factors were gradually set aside. With the development of the New Home Economics in the 1960s and 1970s, other family behavior such as fertility, marriage, investment in health and education and intra-family division of labor followed the same path (see chapter 6).

## Chapter 6

### The New Home Economics and the Rational Family, 1960–1981

#### I- Introduction

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, American popular culture and policy makers considered the nuclear family a source of happiness, security and the foundation of capitalist democracy (Tyler-May, 1988). Experts, either influenced by Freudian thought, structural functionalism or modernization theory, gave credit to this traditional family in which the husband worked outside the home while his wife was running the house and caring for children (Camic & Balasubramanian, forthcoming). Any deviation from appropriate sexual and familial behavior was seen as leading to social disorder and national vulnerability.

Many Americans endorsed traditional family roles. They married younger, divorced less and had more children. This resulted in the “baby boom” starting in the mid-1940s. But the 1960s marked the erosion of the traditional family with the decline of fertility rates, the rise of divorces, the surge in women's labor force participation and the emergence of the “second wave” of feminism which questioned the isolation of women in the domestic sphere.

Social scientists seemed unprepared for the radical transformations of American families after World War II. In particular, the baby boom, followed by its sudden end in the early 1960s, had not been anticipated. It interrupted the prolonged decline of birth rates dating back to the nineteenth century. Consequently, the question of the determinants of family size and other family

behaviors became pressing research topics for social scientists, mostly economists, sociologists and demographers.

Starting in the early 1960s, some economists, including Gary Becker and Jacob Mincer, argued that family behaviors were the result of deliberate choices based on economic variables like income and costs. In the mid-1960s, they created the “new home economics” (NHE) which modelled the household like a firm which maximizes an objective function while economizing its scarce resources – time and money. As a result, family behaviors were explained as rational reactions to “economic factors” such as commodity prices, incomes and technologies of production. Social and cultural factors like habits, customs and social emulation, which had an important role in earlier studies of the family – especially in the “old” home economics – were relegated to a marginal status.

In this chapter, I first argue that the NHE emerged in a context of increased concern for the relationships between the transformations of the American family and postwar economic conditions (section II). The NHE emphasized the role of economic forces, notably women’s earnings, in explaining most family behaviors and demographic trends. In so doing, economists believed they could challenge alternative approaches of other social sciences. I then show that the NHE had a lasting influence on economics as well as on sociology and demography (section III). There were two reasons for that influence: (1) household decisions were increasingly viewed as resulting from deliberate choices; and (2) NHE models represented a scientific ideal of the era for it enabled the “verification” of the theory by empirical evidence.

## II- Building the Economic Approach to the Family at Columbia University, the National Bureau of Economic Research and the University of Chicago

What later came to be called “new home economics” found its origins in the contributions of Becker and Mincer and in their collaboration.<sup>172</sup> Becker and Mincer began to be interested in labor economics early in their careers under the influence of H. Gregg Lewis at the University of Chicago. Becker’s dissertation on discrimination, which was completed in 1955, was supervised by Lewis; while Mincer attended Lewis’ Labor Workshop at Chicago in 1957-1958 during his post-doctoral fellowship (he had earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1957). Lewis’s approach to labor economics was new: he used price theory whereas existing studies were mostly historical and institutional and concerned unions and collective bargaining, for instance (Teixeira, 2007, 10).

Subsequently, while they both joined Columbia University, Becker and Mincer became leaders in the new field of human capital studies, the topic of Mincer’s dissertation, which was an outgrowth of the new neoclassical approach to labor problems (Mincer, 1958; Becker, 1962a, 1964).<sup>173</sup> Besides pointing to the productive effects of investments in education and health, studies on human capital also emphasized the importance of the household as a unit of decision-

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<sup>172</sup> The term “new home economics” seems to have been coined by Marc Nerlove (1974).

<sup>173</sup> Mincer had argued in his dissertation that individuals decide whether or not to invest in their education or training by examining the costs and the benefits of such investment in “human capital” (See Mincer, 1958). The distribution of income was then explained by human capital: occupations requiring more training had higher remuneration to compensate individuals for direct costs of training and for the postponement of their earning period. As for Becker, he sought to show that investment in human capital could explain many uniformities in the labor market and the economy by estimating the rate of returns from investment in different levels of education in his 1964 book on *Human Capital*.

making. Indeed, investments in education and health derived from the allocation of resources within the household.

The human capital approach gained visibility as it permitted to explain the “residual” of postwar economic growth, that is, the part of growth which remained unexplained by changes in the labor force and in the nation’s capital stock. Following Theodore W. Schultz (1961), economists suspected that the quality improvement of labor could have played an important role in postwar economic growth. As a leader in economic growth studies, the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), which was then located close to Columbia University in New York City, welcomed Becker in 1957 and Mincer in the early 1960s in part to study the macroeconomic effects of investments in education and health under two earmarked grants from the Carnegie Corporation (Becker, 1964, ix).<sup>174</sup>

In the process, Becker and Mincer helped establish a community of scholars working on human capital and, more broadly, on the neoclassical approach to labor. The NBER sponsored conferences on human capital and hired a number of Columbia Ph.D. students (like Reuben Gronau, Robert Michael, Michael Grossman, Solomon Polachek and Arleen Leibowitz) as research assistants.<sup>175</sup> Besides, Becker and Mincer launched the Columbia’s Labor Workshops which gathered senior participants as well as some of Columbia’s

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<sup>174</sup> Schultz and Mincer started to work together in the late 1950s after the former read the latter’s dissertation on human capital and invited him at Chicago for a post-doctoral fellowship in 1957-1958 (Teixeira, 2005, 137). Becker also knew Schultz from Chicago. He explained that “The origin of [his *Human Capital* book] can be traced both to the finding that a substantial growth in income in the United States remains unexplained after the growth in physical capital and labor has been accounted for and to the emphasis of some economists on the importance of education in promoting economic development.” (Becker, 1964, viii).

<sup>175</sup> For instance, the 1968 Conference on “Education, Income, and Human Capital” at the University of Wisconsin.



economics students, including Grossman, Michael, Polachek, Leibowitz, Elizabeth Landes and Andrea Beller (Grossbard, 2001, 120).

In this institutional context, Mincer initiated research on female labor supply in the early 1960s which also led to emphasize household decision-making. Women's labor force participation sharply increased during the 1950s in the United States.<sup>176</sup> Traditional microeconomic theory, which modeled labor supply decision as an individual trade-off between labor (which provided earnings for consumption) and leisure, seemed inadequate to account for this trend. In three important articles Mincer (1960; 1962a; 1962b) stressed (1) the necessity to consider the household as a unit of production and not only of "leisure" (2) the family – rather than the individual – as the appropriate unit for labor supply decisions as well as for decisions to invest in human capital and (3) time an important factor in household decision-making.<sup>177</sup>

Still in the early 1960s, the NBER spearheaded economic research on another contemporary concern, namely, demographic trends. Fertility was not a customary topic in economics (see Willis, 1973, 25). But in 1959, a conference on "Demographic and Economic Change in Developed Countries" was organized by a cooperative venture of universities and the NBER, named the Universities-National Bureau Committee for Economic Research. The conference focused on the "mutual influences in industrially advanced countries between changes in national population and changes in national economies" (Coale, 1960, 3). Indeed, whereas industrialization and economic growth had previously been

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<sup>176</sup> Women's labor force participation in the United States rose from 28% in 1950 to 39% in 1960. <https://ourworldindata.org/female-labor-force-participation-key-facts>, consulted on December 18, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> Mincer benefited from a grant awarded by the Social Science Research Council to the NBER. He thanked members of the Columbia Labor Workshop (including Becker). According to Grossbard (2001, 104), Mincer was also influenced by Margaret Reid, Theodore Schultz and H. Gregg Lewis, whom he met at Chicago.

associated with a decline in fertility in Western countries, the period after 1945 was characterized by a rising fertility rate and an unprecedented economic growth. The conference meant to explain the evolution of fertility and its relationships with economic variables in Western countries. Like for human capital and female labor supply, fertility turned economists' attention towards household decisions.

The 1959 conference on fertility featured a variety of approaches: Becker used neoclassical consumer theory; Simon Kuznets' contribution was informed by history; Guy Orcutt used econometrics; while Nancy and Richard Ruggles drew upon statistics. It also included contributions from demographers and specialists in population studies, like Ansley J. Coale and Norman B. Ryder from the Office of Population Research at Princeton University, and of social-psychologist David Goldberg.<sup>178</sup> In his article, Becker (1960) argued that social scientists had not yet successfully developed an accurate analysis of the interrelations between socio-economic variables and fertility.<sup>179</sup> He took this opportunity to analyze "family size decisions within an economic framework" and to show that "economic variables did better than others," thus opposing the tendency of other social scientists to emphasize non-economic variables (Becker, 1960, 209-210).<sup>180</sup>

To this end, Becker analyzed fertility as a consumption choice: he defined children as consumer durables whose quantity and quality produce a stream of

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<sup>178</sup> Demography emerged as an institutionalized discipline during the 1930s. It brought together scholars from diverse social science disciplines but a majority of them were sociologists. Created in 1936 at Princeton University, the Office of Population Research was one of the leading institution devoted to demographic research in the United States; it conducted studies on fertility and mortality rates and population movements.

<sup>179</sup> On the intellectual and institutional background of this article, see Fleury, 2009, 92-94.

<sup>180</sup> For instance, demographer Ansley J. Coale, who was at the same conference on fertility, noted that "the explanation [of the evolution of fertility] is necessarily noneconomic in part" (Coale, 1960, 7).

future satisfactions for parents. In this framework, the decision to have a child was based on income, child costs, knowledge, uncertainty and tastes.<sup>181</sup> Finally, Becker argued: “family size [is] partly determined by economic factors. . . . This discussion . . . should be sufficient to demonstrate that students in consumption economics need to pay more attention to the determinants of family size than they have in the past” (230), implying that standard neoclassical theory of consumption was useful in explaining fertility trends. Three years later, Mincer (1963) also addressed fertility and argued that it was a negative function of women’s wages since the latter were a measure of the opportunity cost of the time spent in rearing a child. The idea that fertility could be explained by economic factors, in particular by women’s earnings, thus emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Shortly after having modeled the choice to have a child as a family consumption choice, Becker was involved in the reformulation of the neoclassical theory of consumption. Becker (1965), Richard Muth (1966) and Kelvin Lancaster (1966) each independently postulated that it was the use of “characteristics” of commodities which yield satisfaction to consumers rather than the purchase of market goods and services *per se*. As a result, the focus was on the household-production process which aimed at satisfying basic personal and family objectives.

Becker’s “A Theory of the Allocation of Time” (1965) aimed at modeling household decision-making. In this article, family is defined as a consumption and production unit. The family’s utility function depends on “basic commodities,” such as “seeing a play” or “sleeping,” which are produced within

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<sup>181</sup> In Becker’s model, the negative correlation between family income and fertility before World War II was attributed to better contraceptive knowledge which raised the quality and reduced the quantity of children. The postwar rise in fertility was explained by the sudden income growth which offset the negative effect of contraceptive knowledge.

the household by combining time of family members and market goods and services. For the first time, the family is formally treated as a firm, economizing on its two most scarce resources—time and money. Daily discussions with Mincer and other Columbia Labor Workshop participants appear to have led Becker to emphasize household production and time in household decision-making.<sup>182</sup> As Becker himself explained: “It should be pointed out . . . that in recent years economists increasingly recognise that a household is truly a ‘small factory’: it combines capital goods, raw materials and labour to clean, feed, procreate and otherwise produce useful commodities” (496). As a result, household activities could be explained with the help of the combination of slightly modified versions of neoclassical theory of the firm and theory of consumption.<sup>183</sup> Becker’s model laid the foundations of the NHE.<sup>184</sup>

Becker’s 1965 model was first applied to the decision of having a child. Fertility was the central theme for the two conferences chaired by T. W. Schultz in 1972 and 1973.<sup>185</sup> The NBER co-sponsored these conferences with the

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<sup>182</sup> Becker explicitly recognized that “much of any credit it merits belongs to the stimulus received from Mincer, Owen, Dean and other past and present participants in the Labor Workshop at Columbia” (1965, 494). He also thanked Milton Friedman.

<sup>183</sup> Technically, the household utility function is maximized subject to the production function and constraints of budget and time (the constraints are transformed into a single constraint of “full income,” representing the total amount of money which would be earned if all the time available within the family was devoted to work). The result of the maximization is the standard microeconomic relationship for optimality: the marginal utility per unit of cost is the same for all commodities, or the ratio of marginal utilities of two commodities equals the ratio of their marginal costs. Here, the cost/price of a commodity is a “shadow price” which is determined by its cost of production, including the price of market goods needed and the cost of time invested in the production of the commodity.

<sup>184</sup> Although Shoshana Grossbard defined the NHE “as any economic model analyzing household decisions” (2001, 118), I use NHE to refer to models analyzing household decisions as the result of family utility maximization.

<sup>185</sup> “New Economic Approaches to Fertility” in 1972 and “Marriage, Family Human Capital, and Fertility” in 1973. Contributions to these conferences were first published as supplements to the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1973 and 1974 and then as *Economics of*

Population Council. These two research organizations were interested in the relationships between economic development and demographic trends.<sup>187</sup> Research in population and family economics was one of the five programs in the NBER Center for Economic Analysis of Human Behavior and Social Institutions and it had been supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation since 1970 and by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development since 1972.

Fertility models presented at the 1972 and 1973 conferences were based on the assumption that parents have a utility function which depends on three “commodities”: child quality, child quantity and “other sources of satisfactions” (Willis, 1973; Becker & Lewis, 1973; see also Schultz, 1973). The utility function is maximized with respect to time and budget constraints. Fertility demand and demand for child quality are determined by equalizing the marginal cost to the marginal utility/return of an additional investment in children for parents. Decisions to have a child and to invest in one’s child education and health are thus considered from the point of view of cost-benefit analysis.

NHE models of fertility were used by economists to explain the existence of small families in developed countries. It was generally assumed that, among household activities, taking care of children was especially time-consuming in particular for women (Schultz, 1973). In the Western world, women’s wages had increased as a result of economic growth and investments in human capital. Consequently, taking care of children was becoming more costly, prompting

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*the Family, Marriage, Children and Human Capital*, an essay collection edited by Schultz (1974a).

<sup>187</sup> The Population Council was a foundation-sponsored research organization created by John D. Rockefeller in 1952.

families to have less children.<sup>188</sup> Besides, another effect of higher family earnings was a substitution of quality for quantity of children (Becker & Lewis, 1973; DeTray, 1973, Willis, 1973). Parents invested more time and money per child and chose to have fewer children of higher quality rather than to have more children.<sup>189</sup> Finally, the NHE fertility model provided an economic explanation of demographic transition in the Western world: the increased value of women's time had led to a reduction of fertility because of the increasing cost of having and rearing children.

In addition to fertility, economists extended NHE models to study the decision to marry. Becker first presented his "Theory of Marriage" at the 1973 NBER conference on "Marriage, Family Human Capital, and Fertility" (Becker, 1973; 1974a). From a personal perspective, Becker found himself alone to take care of his two daughters after losing his wife in 1970 (Fleury, 2009, 145). The question of the advantages of a (second) marriage arose in concrete terms. From a scientific perspective, Becker deplored the fact that economists had not been interested in studying marriage (except Gronau, 1970).<sup>190</sup> Like for the decision of having children, he aimed at demonstrating that "marriage . . . can be successfully analyzed within the framework provided by modern economics. If correct, it is compelling additional evidence on the unifying power of economic analysis" (Becker, 1973, 300). A grant from the Ford Foundation to the NBER for the study of the economics of population enabled him to develop his work on marriage, regarded as family formation. He discussed earlier drafts of his paper

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<sup>188</sup> The substitution effect of higher incomes was higher than the income effect: parents preferred good-intensive commodities to time-intensive commodities (like children).

<sup>189</sup> The growing investments in children quality further increased the negative effect of income on fertility.

<sup>190</sup> Becker wrote: "To the best of my knowledge, the only exception prior to my own work is an unpublished paper by Gronau (1970). His paper helped stimulate my interest in the subject" (1973, 299).

at the Workshop in Applications in Economics of the University of Chicago, as well as in seminars held at the NBER and at the Population Council.

In his theory of marriage, Becker strove to answer a number of questions including the decision of whether or not to marry, when and whom to marry. To Becker, the decision to marry – or rather to share the same household – “is practically always voluntary” (1973, 814). Thus, in the first part of his theory, he modeled marriage using a NHE model, in which individuals decide to marry when their expected utility is superior to the utility of staying alone. Formally, each household, including those comprised of a single person, has a utility function which depends on household commodities, such as “the quality of meals, the quality and the quantity of children, prestige, recreation, companionship, love, and health status” (816). Single persons compare their utility to that they would have in the case of marriage, that is, in a two-person household. Of course, the gains stemming from marriage are compared with its costs, including legal fees and costs for searching a mate.<sup>191</sup>

In Becker’s theory, marriage is closely related to the intra-household division of labor. Indeed, the gains from marriage are positively related to the differences in earnings and in household productivity between partners. As a result, a woman who specializes in household tasks and a man in a well-paid profession are very likely to wish to marry together since each of them have a lot to gain from this marriage. In fact, households are like two-person firms in which men hire women for bearing and rearing children because they are more efficient in these household activities; and women hire men because they earn more in market work (Becker, 1973; Becker, 1974a).

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<sup>191</sup> The decision of whom to marry was then analyzed by optimal sorting in a marriage market.

Following Becker, other economists explained the traditional gender division of labor within households. Mincer and Polachek (1974, 397–8) stated that a division of labor unavoidably emerged in a family unit as a result of different comparative advantages of family members. They claimed that women’s comparative advantage in household work resulted both from “genetic” endowment, as women had a biological comparative advantage in rearing a child, and from different investments in human capital.<sup>192</sup> As women anticipate that they will spend less time in the labor market and that they will earn less, they invest less in human capital. This in turn lowers women’s market productivity and wages. Conversely, men have more incentives to invest in human capital as they anticipate a longer duration of work experience and higher wages. Finally, the economic forces – here, the investments in human capital – reinforce the natural/biological grounds of existing sex-based division of labor. This explanation became the standard economic view on gender division of labor (Becker, 1974b; 1976b; 1981a).

It should be noted that economists explained the traditional gender division of labor within households at the moment when it was losing strength. Indeed, the “second-wave” feminism was spreading in the United States and it denounced the isolation of women in the domestic sphere.<sup>193</sup> In addition, women increasingly participated in the paid labor force and were not just

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<sup>192</sup> They also recognized that institutional and cultural factors could play a role in explaining sex roles, including tradition and discrimination against women on the labor market. But these factors were excluded from their framework as they focused on biological and economic explanations.

<sup>193</sup> The “second wave feminism” is said to have been launched by the book of Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan shocked the public by stating that “the women who ‘adjust’ as housewives, who grow up wanting to be ‘just a housewife,’ are in as much danger as the millions who walked into their own death in the concentration camps . . .” (Friedan, 1963, 294).



housewives. In fact, for new home economists, the increasing economic independence of women destabilized the family.

In particular, NHE framework permitted to explain the boom of the divorce rate in the United States in the 1960s as the result of women’s better insertion into the labor market.<sup>194</sup>

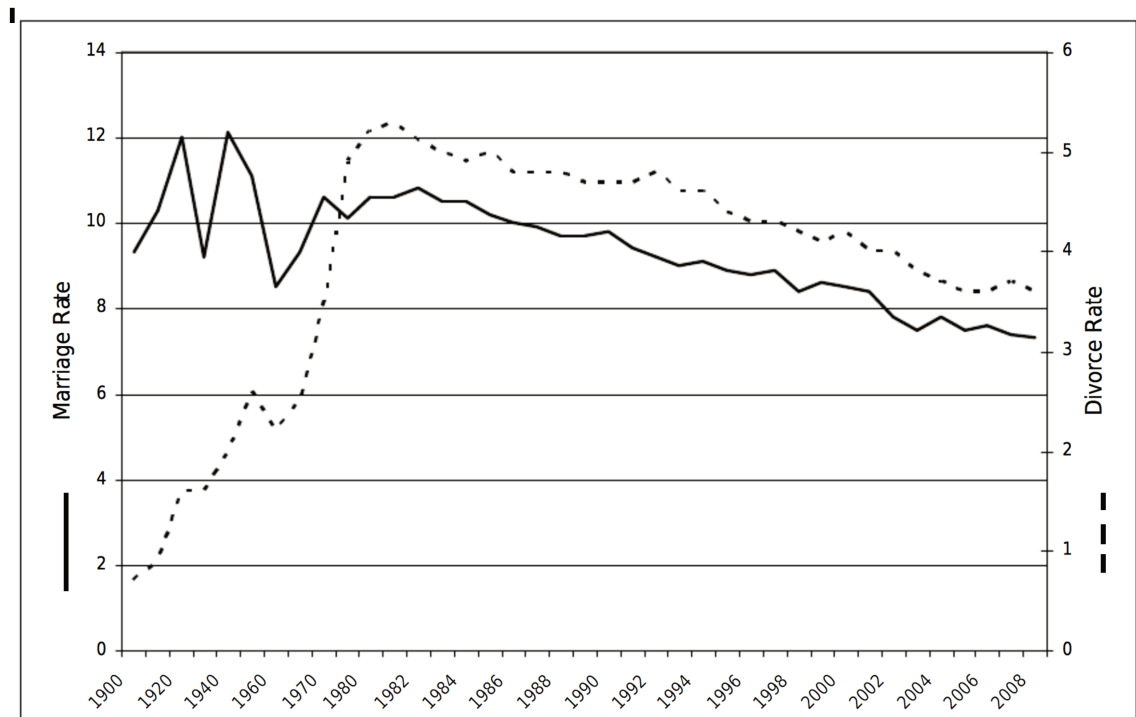


Figure 2: U. S. Marriage and Divorce Rate per 1,000 Population  
Sources: National Center for Health Statistics, U.S.<sup>195</sup>

With better job opportunities and better wages, women’s comparative advantage in household production decreased. Besides, they had more incentives to invest in their human capital which increased even more their earnings. The evolution of the family toward smaller families also made women’s specialization in household production less necessary (Schultz, 1973). In turn, the

<sup>194</sup> The rise of the divorce rate is in part due to the no-fault divorce law which was passed in the late 1960s.

<sup>195</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49131286\\_Until\\_Death\\_Do\\_Us\\_Part\\_The\\_Economics\\_of\\_Short-Term\\_Marriage\\_Contracts](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49131286_Until_Death_Do_Us_Part_The_Economics_of_Short-Term_Marriage_Contracts), last consulted on November 12, 2019.

specialization of family members within the household tended to decrease inducing less complementarity between partners and thus smaller gains from marriage (Becker, 1974). Finally, higher women's incomes (relative to men's) were responsible for less marriages and more divorces. Conversely, traditional gender roles were an efficient arrangement because each member gained from association with a complementary partner; they were also a source of family stability since they increased the interdependence between partners and thus reduced the rate of divorce.

By making women's earnings the central determinant of the decisions to marry and to have children and of the intra-family division of labor, NHE models echoed the increasingly common idea that the rising economic opportunities available to women explained the dislocation of the family (Fleury, 2009, 140–1). In fact, the NHE framework could be used to justify conservative policies by providing a conceptual framework which supported the questioning of women's financial autonomy and of social transfers for their negative consequences on family. For instance, NHE models could explain that social assistance to mothers reduced the cost of an additional child, prompting women to have more children while it also made more profitable for women to live on social benefits and to be single, thus increasing the number of divorces. Incidentally, Becker himself criticized the Aid to Mother with Dependent Children (148).

The NBER conferences of 1972 and 1973 showed that Becker's original household-decision model could be applied to a variety of family behaviors.<sup>196</sup> Fertility, marriage, gender division of labor, and investments in education and health were analyzed as rational choices of family members who compared the costs in money, time, opportunities foregone and the monetary or nonmonetary

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<sup>196</sup> Another NBER Conference on Research in Income and Wealth on "Household Production and Consumption," held in Washington, on November 30 and December 1, 1973, also included contributions using NHE models.

benefits of each alternative. In other words, the economic approach could account for most family behaviors as well as demographic trends.

Although research on the NHE waned at Columbia University, it was continued at the NBER and at the University of Chicago. After Becker's departure in 1970, Mincer and his Columbia students lost interest in the NHE approach. This may also be related with the fact that the NBER, which had stimulated research on family economics, moved to Cambridge in the early 1970s and severed its links with Columbia. The NBER continued to support the NHE during the 1970s and early 1980s,<sup>197</sup> but overall Becker was the main contributor to the NHE during the 1970s as he continued to strengthen and to extend this approach while he was at the University of Chicago.<sup>198</sup> He published *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* in 1976 which gathered, among others, his articles on the family. He even treated "society" as a kind of family since he extended results obtained at the family level (including the famous "rotten kid theorem," see below) to the "synthetic family," i.e. society (see Fontaine, 2007). In 1981, Becker published a *Treatise on the Family* which applied microeconomics to virtually every human and animal behavior.<sup>199</sup> It tackled the now familiar topics of the division of labor within households and of the demand for children. Likewise, it broadened the theory of marriage to include polygamy and monogamy and investigated the effects of human capital investments, of altruism and welfare transfers on families, inequality and intergenerational mobility. It even applied the NHE model to "families" in nonhuman species.

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<sup>197</sup> For instance, Gronau recalled that he wrote "Leisure, home production, and work--the theory of the allocation of time revisited" during a sabbatical at the NBER (Gronau, 1977).

<sup>198</sup> Becker joined the University of Chicago in 1970.

<sup>199</sup> It was, on Becker's own admission, the "most sustained intellectual effort [he] ha[d] undertaken" (Becker, 1993, 46).

The University of Chicago provided a favorable context for Becker's work on the family since it had a tradition of research on consumption and household economics represented by Hazel Kyrk and Margaret Reid. Kyrk had spent her whole academic career at Chicago (1923–1952) whereas Reid replaced her in 1952 and stayed there until the end of her own career; she was professor emeritus in 1961 and continued to work well until the early 1980s. Along with other home economists interested in family economics, these women emphasized that the household was an important unit for consumption and production (see chapters 3, 4 & 5). They studied the allocation of money, time and effort within the households (Hoyt, 1938, 381; Reid, 1934, 242; Kyrk, 1933 & 1953). As early as in 1934, Reid defined household production as the unpaid activities that can be replaced by market goods or services (Reid, 1934, 11). This definition became standard among economists in large part because it paved the way to a monetary evaluation of household production.<sup>200</sup> Several scholars associated with the NHE recognized the influence of Reid: Schultz (1970), Michael & Becker (1973), Ferber (1973) and Nerlove (1974) mentioned her contributions as an antecedent. Michael and Becker evasively stated that the NHE “places greater emphasis on technical aspects of multi-commodity production” than former studies (1973, 285). The reference to Reid stemmed from her interactions with new home economists at Chicago. For instance, she attended Becker's workshop during the 1970s.<sup>201</sup> But her recognition by economists can also be explained by the fact that she endorsed the NHE approach (Reid, 1977; Reid, 1979) while other home economists working on

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<sup>200</sup> For instance, Reid's definition of household production was used in Hawrylshyn (1977) and Gronau (1977).

<sup>201</sup> At a AHEA conference in 1979, Reid (1979) wrote: “I have had the very great advantage in the last 10 years of sharing very closely in the work of Gary Becker and others at the University of Chicago.”

family economics, like Kyrk and Elizabeth Hoyt, rejected neoclassical theory and sought to study the role of the household in a broad social and economic context.<sup>202</sup>

The NHE can be considered an illustration of the Chicago School's approach to economic problems, that is, the application of price theory to behaviors which were not previously considered as part of economics (see Van Horn & al, 2011).<sup>203</sup> Indeed, the NHE models applied the assumption of rationality to a variety of household behaviors which were not formerly considered as the result of intentional choices but rather as the product of tradition and social norms. As Melvin Reder noted, the Chicago economics department has a strong tendency to “resist explanations of behavior that do not run in terms of utility maximization by individual decision makers coordinated by market clearing prices” (Reder, 2008, 763-764). As a result, it is not surprising that most scholars associated with the NHE — Becker, Mincer, Schultz and many of their students — were associated with the University of Chicago.<sup>204</sup>

### III- The Reception of the NHE Among Economists and Other Social Scientists

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<sup>202</sup> According to Folbre, Reid's recognition in the economics profession at large dates back to the 1980s (Folbre, 1996, xi). She was named Distinguished Fellow of the American Economic Association in 1980 for being “one of the pioneers in several areas of research on consumer and household behavior, each of which has now burgeoned into a major field of study on its own.”

<sup>203</sup> Willis (1987) argued that some economists considered the NHE as part of the “Chicago School”.

<sup>204</sup> Schultz was chairman of the economics department from 1946 to 1961.

At first, the application of the economic approach to the family was not well received among economists, many of whom lamented its “economism” (Fleury, 2009, 92-94). For instance, James S. Duesenberry, who discussed Becker’s first article on fertility (Becker, 1960), argued that babies could hardly be considered as consumer durables and that the decision to have and to bring up children was determined by social norms rather than by rational choice (Duesenberry, 1960).<sup>205</sup> For Duesenberry, fertility was better explained by sociologists, who focused on “why [people] don’t have any choice to make” than by economists who were concerned with “how people make choice” (233). More generally, economists deplored the lack of consideration for nonmonetary variables, like social groups, institutions, norms and tastes, in NHE models (Ferber, 1973, 1332; Marshall, 1977, 107; Humfries, 1982). For instance, G. P. Marshall suggested that the study of marriage must devote a place to love while the study of child quality has to investigate social norms explaining the “obsession of Western societies” for education. Finally, these economists argued that by insisting too much on economic variables and neglecting psychological and sociological factors, NHE models did not provide convincing explanations of family behaviors.

Sociologists reacted even more strongly against the NHE since they had long claimed disciplinary jurisdiction over the family.<sup>206</sup> Before World War II, sociologists considered family as an archaic institution whose economic and social functions were declining in an industrialized and urbanized society (Ogburn & Tibbitts, 1933).<sup>207</sup> As they were accustomed to focus on the influence

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<sup>205</sup> Duesenberry (1960, 233) wrote: “I need not go through the whole routine about roles, goals, values, and so on. It will be sufficient to remark that there is no area in which the sociological limitations of freedom of choice apply more strongly than to behavior in regard to bringing up children.”

<sup>206</sup> It should be noted that the family was also central in the analyses of home economists and social workers.

<sup>207</sup> However, the “culture and personality” school of thought emphasized the function of the family in the construction of individual personality and in the socialization of individuals.

of customs and communities on the family, sociologists were uneasy with NHE's neglect of social norms. For instance, Norman Ryder, a sociologist and demographer from Princeton's Office of Population Research, criticized economists' carelessness of social-structural factors (Ryder, 1974; see also Arthur, 1982).

Two assumptions of NHE models were especially questioned. The first was that families were rational maximizers. Economist Robert Ferber (1973) argued that more research had to be done on the determinants of actual household decision-making for he suspected that habit and lack of awareness of alternatives could be more important than rational choice (see also sociologists Berk & Berk, 1983). Economist Marianne Ferber, who subsequently became one of the leading feminist economists, and Bonnie Birnbaum argued that the persistence of a strong gender division of labor within households went against Becker's comparative advantage analysis (Ferber & Birnbaum, 1977). Indeed, women's rising participation in the labor force and higher wages should have induced men to take a larger part in household duties. But empirical analyses showed that men's household responsibilities did not increase and that women's leisure time decreased.<sup>208</sup> This was likely to be the result of a traditional vision of women's household responsibilities rather than of utility maximization (see also Humfries, 1982). Finally, for many economists and sociologists, the *a priori* rationality of families was problematic.

Likewise, the assumption of stable individual preferences was criticized for eliminating social and cultural factors (Michael & Becker, 1973; Stigler & Becker, 1977). Stable preferences were at the heart of the "economic approach" as defined by Becker (1976) to such an extent that Marc Nerlove claimed that "it is

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<sup>208</sup> The failure of intrafamily time allocation to adjust to the growth of female labor force participation was even noticed by neoclassical economist Robert Willis (1987).

virtually part of the definition of what an economist is that he takes tastes as given” (Nerlove, 1974, S209).<sup>209</sup> For new home economists, it permitted to eliminate *ad hoc* explanations based on differences or changes in tastes which they considered “too facile and often phenomenon-specific with little generality” (Heckman, 2015, 77). But to many sociologists and demographers, constant preferences seemed an unsustainable assumption since it implied that individual preferences were independent from institutions and culture (MacRae, 1978; Arthur, 1982). Even economists had doubts (Sawhill, 1977, 121; Mack, 1976). Ruth Mack from the NBER observed that “The hallways of this [1976 conference on “Household Production and Consumption”] room seem to have been haunted by an invited guest, one bearing with insignia: tastes, value systems” (Mack, 1976, 647). Similarly, Nerlove acknowledged that “[he] sometimes suspect[s] that many of us require all tastes to be identical and assume that all differences among individuals arise from differences in the resource constraints those individual face” (Nerlove, 1974, S209). Indeed, assuming constant preferences permitted to overemphasize the influence of economic variables like relative prices, real income and factor productivity. For instance, Michael and Willis (1976) related the decrease in fertility to the lower cost of the pill. But Mack (1976) argued that their NHE model led them to ignore the dramatic changes in the value system that occurred in the late 1950s and 1960s. Resentment of the Vietnam war, awareness of ecological problems, generation gaps were more likely to be the causes of the decline in birth rates. In fact, the ignorance of preferences led to biased and distorted findings (see also Berk & Berk, 1983).

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<sup>209</sup> Becker summarized the “economic approach” as: “The combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences, used relentlessly and unflinchingly, form the heart of the economic approach as I see it” (Becker, 1976, 5).



NHE scholars were also reproached for willing to impose their framework over domains which had long been under the jurisdiction of other social sciences while neglecting their contributions. Economist Robert Ferber stated that “most consumption economists . . . [drew] blinders about their eyes even more tightly lest they be contaminated by other disciplines” (Ferber, 1973, 1332; see also Wallerstein, 1983). A demographer warned that “Anthropologists, sociologists, and demographers will be annoyed that while [Becker’s *Treatise*] intrudes on their subject era it ignores their achievements” (Arthur, 1982, 397). Similarly, a sociologist stated that although Becker claimed that he wanted to stimulate a “cross-disciplinary dialogue,” his effort reduced to nothing more than a “monologue” (Scanzoni, 1982).

No doubt, the contributions of NHE models to the understanding of the behavior of real families seemed debatable. Economists Isabel Sawhill (1977) and Ferber and Birnbaum (1977) denounced the circularity of the argument for gender division of labor and the too great importance given to women’s wages on every family decision.<sup>210</sup> Demographer Brian Arthur noted that “Becker is more interested in showing that this machine [NHE models] can ‘solve’ any given problem than in the problem itself” (Arthur, 1982, 397). Similarly, Paul Samuelson saw the mathematical complexity of NHE models only as a way for economists to state their superiority over other social scientists.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> The circular reasoning is as follows: NHE models often imply that gender division of labor results from different investment in human capital (as well as from biological differences). As women anticipate that they will earn less in the labor market, they invest less in human capital. But the converse is also true: as women invest less in human capital, they earn less in the labor market.

<sup>211</sup> In 1976, Samuelson denounced the “sterile verbalizations by which economists have tended to describe fertility decisions in terms of the jargon of indifference curves, thereby tending to intimidate non-economists who have not mis-spent their youth in mastering the intricacies of modern utility theory” (quoted in Ben-Porath, 1982, 58).

Despite the above criticisms, a growing number of economists, sociologists and demographers were convinced that rational choice was indeed an important explanation of family behavior, especially among those who questioned the “oversocialized” family.<sup>212</sup> For instance, although demographer W. Brian Arthur (1982, 397) criticized Becker’s *Treatise* on several grounds, he “[did] not deny that family process is a choice process.” In fact, NHE models reinstated choice in a field overwhelmed by the force of tradition. Becker himself recognized that “[his] work has sometimes assumed too much rationality, but [he] believes it has been an antidote to the extensive research that does not credit people with enough rationality” (Becker, 1993, 402). New home economists convinced many social scientists that, because of its focus on choice, the maximization framework was the right approach to family behavior. At the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1976, Duncan MacRae recognized that “Becker’s analyses demonstrate the value of economic reasoning over a wide range of sociological topics.” (MacRae, 1978, 1254; see also Kelley, 1976, 520; Reid, 1977; Humfries, 1982; Ben-Porath, 1982; Berk & Berk, 1983).

Besides, because of their practicality, NHE models represented a scientific ideal for economists as well as for many social scientists at the time. It was the first time that family decisions were designed in a comprehensive mathematical model. The methodological sophistication, simplicity and elegance of NHE models were lauded by sociologists and economists alike (Sawhill, 1977; Stinchcombe, 1982; Berk & Berk, 1983). The common perspective to the analysis

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<sup>212</sup> In the early 1960s, the use of rational choice in sociology can be illustrated by the work of George C. Homans who argued that individuals seek to maximize their individual satisfaction through social exchange (Homans, 1961). Rational choice became a significant part of sociology in the early 1990s with the work of James Coleman, Becker’s colleague at Chicago.

of family behavior and the use of a “unified set of concepts” was said to be “no minor achievement” (Ben-Porath, 1982, 59; see also Kelley, 1976, 517). Indeed, relying on few and simple assumptions, NHE models explained marriage, fertility, resources devoted to children and life cycle solely through changes of variables in utility functions and budget constraints.<sup>213</sup>

NHE models were especially appreciated by economists and other social scientists for their relationships to empirical work. Predictions of models could be “verified” or “falsifiable” through empirical work and econometric techniques (Peacock, 1978; MacRae, 1978; Ben-Porath, 1983).<sup>214</sup> This provoked enthusiasm as it offered promise of “scientific progress” through a dialogue between theory and data.<sup>215</sup> Indeed, as large-scale microeconomic data on earnings, expenditures, fertility and labor supply were becoming available, empirical works on NHE multiplied (Heckman, 2015). Economists proudly emphasized that

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<sup>213</sup> As Becker explained in the preface to *A Treatise on the Family*, “This volume uses the assumptions of maximizing behavior, stable preferences, and equilibrium in implicit or explicit markets to provide a systematic analysis of the family.” (Becker, 1981, ix)

<sup>214</sup> However, sociologists like Berk & Berk, 1983, demographers like Arthur (1982) and economists like Kelley (1976) emphasized that the presence of non-observables variables in NHE models complicated empirical work. For instance, the concepts of “commodity shadow prices” (price of nonmarket household commodities), “full income” (total money and time resources of the family), “investment in human capital” and “child quality” were not clearly defined and could be evaluated by different methods. NHE scholars themselves recognized the difficulties of estimating these variables (see Schultz, 1970, 306; Ben-Porath, 1982). This complicated the confrontation of NHE results with empirical evidence. Economist Sawhill (1977) warned of the risk that observed variables and relationships could be forced to fit the “received microeconomic doctrine”.

<sup>215</sup> For instance, Reid placed a great deal of hope in the possibilities of improving NHE models through a dialogue between the theory and the empirical findings. She wrote “Take a look at [the equations]. But you see to me most of the equations are empty. You can’t put any data into them that are good, so you have to keep speculating and isolate down to the very narrow things where you can get very specific information that will get you to see any one of the equations, because after all there is a whole complex set of these relationships that are involved. We are just in the stage with econometricians of recognizing that it is very difficult and there is a very large gap between the model and the data. The data have been constrained in many places.” (Reid, 1979)

economic variables often influenced family behavior in the direction suggested by the theory (Nerlove, 1974).<sup>216</sup> Even sociologists like Berk & Berk (1983) recognized that NHE models predicted an important part of the aggregate trends.

A number of social scientists (like Marshall, 1977) showed interest in the NHE framework because there were few alternatives to the study of household and consumption behavior.<sup>217</sup> In particular, sociologists and (what was left of) home economists lauded the NHE for its emphasis on household activities which had previously been neglected by social scientists and confined to home economics departments, women's magazines and radio programs (Reid, 1977; Manning, 1979; Berk & Berk, 1983).<sup>218</sup> Sociologists had previously produced a weak "disembodied social psychology of family interactions" (Berk & Berk, 1983). Marxist analyses had also devoted a place to the family but as a center of reproduction (Jefferson & King, 2001). With the NHE, family was recognized as an important center of consumption and production and day-to-day nonmarket activities acknowledged (Berk & Berk, 1983).

For social scientists acknowledging the contributions of NHE models to the study of the family, these models had to be complemented by the contributions

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<sup>216</sup> For instance, there was a negative relationship between female wage rates (or education as a proxy of the cost of time) and family size and a positive relationship between family size and income. The economic explanation of demographic transition also seemed plausible since women had less children but of higher education.

<sup>217</sup> At his Nobel's lecture, Becker himself stated about his *Treatise* that "no approach of comparable generality has yet been developed that offers serious competition to rational choice theory" (Becker, 1993, 402).

<sup>218</sup> Home economist Sarah L. Manning participated in the 1979 AHEA workshop on "Household Production – A Look Beyond the Market." On this occasion, she stated: "Since the decade of the 1960's with its emphasis on human capital and the development of the new home economics fathered by Gary Becker (1965) and enthusiastically pursued by dozen of young economists since, we in family economics have come to feel justified. We want to say to these new comers "We told you so". My regret is that we did not tell them earlier in ways they could hear" (Manning, 1979, 16).

of other social science disciplines so as to integrate non easily quantifiable, social variables (MacRae, 1978; Berk & Berk, 1983). For instance, sociologist MacRae proposed that sociologists work on the institutional constraints facing families, the motivations and characteristics of individuals and the measurement of “implicit” variables like human capital and child quality (MacRae, 1978, 1255). Collaboration between new home economists and other social scientists would add “the rich diversity of cultural, historical, and social-structural” context to NHE theoretical models (ibid.).

The NHE had a great impact on the sociology of marriage and the family. Sociologist Valerie Kincade Oppenheimer published “A Theory of Marriage Timing” in 1988 in which she drew on Becker (1974).<sup>219</sup> She envisioned marriage as a rational selection of men and women in a marriage market and she applied a modified job-search theory – that is, an analysis of the matching of workers to job in the labor market – to mate selection.<sup>220</sup> In this framework, “socio-economic status” and “economic prospects” played a prominent role in the decision to marry. Megan Sweeney (2002) further used this framework to investigate “the shifting economic foundations of marriage.” In 2005, an interdisciplinary group of “family demographers” provided an overview of research on family life and change and stated that “The most dominant model of family decision making is from neoclassical economics” (Seltzer & al., 2005, 910). More broadly, rational choice theory became commonplace in quantitative sociology and demographic research.

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<sup>219</sup> Oppenheimer defended the use of rational choice in the study of marriage: “Sociologists often dismiss economic models because they object to the economist's emphasis on rational choice. However, many supposedly “nonrational” elements have limited value in accounting for social differences and changes in marriage formation because they do not vary systematically over time and space.” (Oppenheimer, 1988, 566-567)

<sup>220</sup> Becker did not use job-search theory in his theory of marriage as he assumed perfect and costless knowledge on the part of marriage-market participants.

The NHE had substantial influence on several economic subfields, including labor economics, demographic economics, consumer economics and national accounting. That influence signaled the affirmation of the neoclassical economic approach at the expense of approaches emphasizing the impact of culture, institutions and psychology.<sup>221</sup> Decisions to have children, to marry, to consume and to search for a paid job were henceforth considered as the result of a cost-benefit analysis. From a technical standpoint, the introduction of imperfect information, transaction costs, risk, uncertainty, externalities, and strategic behaviors were envisioned by some economists as good ways to significantly improve NHE models (Ferber, 1973; Ben-Porath, 1982; Wallerstein, 1983).

For economists, however, the treatment of the family as a basic decision-making unit was problematic from the outset. In Becker's original model, the family pools resources of family members (time and money) and allocates them for the production of several "commodities" (Becker, 1965; Michael & Becker, 1973). Thus, the family has a unique utility function representing the satisfaction of all family members. But this was at odds with methodological individualism, which was deeply rooted in economics.<sup>222</sup> In addition, this framework passed over silence the existence of conflict, power relationships and negotiation among family members in "real" families (Pollak & Wachter, 1975; Ferber & Birnbaum, 1977; Sawhill, 1977; Ben-Porath, 1982). For instance, Sawhill argued that it was difficult to understand why "divorce ever occurs" if family members sought to maximize family satisfaction (1977, 121). To answer these criticisms,

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<sup>221</sup> Pedro Teixeira traces with detail the transformation of labor economics from institutional approaches to labor problems (unions, collective bargaining...) toward the application of neoclassical theory (Teixeira, 2005).

<sup>222</sup> Traditional neoclassical theory of demand was based on an individual utility function which represents a family but it did not investigate intra-household decisions. The family was thus a black box .

Becker modified the NHE models from 1974 onwards (Becker, 1974b). He assumed that every family member had an individual utility function and that the head of the family was an “altruist.” Practically, the utility function of the head depended on the utilities of every family member. This permitted to account for different preferences among family members – the head was “altruist” whereas other family members were selfish. But this conception of the family was also problematic because it implied the additional assumption that the family head had complete and accurate information about each member’s welfare.<sup>223</sup> Besides, it still did not allow for conflict between family members since even when they were selfish, family members aimed at maximizing family satisfaction (rotten-kid theorem).<sup>224</sup>

Although Becker’s *Treatise on the Family* (1981) became a standard-setting work on the economics of the family, the convergence of the interests of family members remained suspicious to many economists (like Folbre, 1986).<sup>225</sup> Becker’s 1981 article on “Altruism in the Family and Selfishness in the Market Place,” which aimed at justifying the existence of altruism in families on an efficiency basis, did not suffice to dispel the doubts (Becker, 1981b). Incidentally, the emphasis on the household as the main decision unit for labor supply, consumption and fertility behaviors faded by the late 1970s. Consumption, labor and demographic economics, which had been united within the NHE, eventually

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<sup>223</sup> The head is assumed to have developed a knowledge of other family members’ utility functions through repeated interactions (see Fontaine, 2000, 413).

<sup>224</sup> Some economists, like Nerlove (1974) and Kelley (1976), pointed to a logical problem with the assumption of a single utility function for the household, as well as with the “altruist head” utility function. Both implied a fixed number of family members while NHE models sought to explain family composition (the number of children).

<sup>225</sup> Becker’s *Treatise* was reprinted in 1991 and Becker earned the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science in 1992.

separated and went on their own ways from the 1980s onwards (Grossbard & Beller, 2018). The phrase “New Home Economics” even disappeared.

In the late 1980s, new models of household decisions were developed, including ‘game-theoretic’ models following the work of Manser et Brown (1980) and McElroy et Horney (1981), and collective models of household decisions (see Bourguignon, 1984; Chiappori, 1988).<sup>226</sup> In these models, rational choice is applied to individual family members but it is not assumed that they share common preferences and resources.<sup>227</sup> This made room for negotiations and power relations within the family. Finally, the family was no longer considered as *a priori* rational but rather as composed of *a priori* rational individuals.

#### IV- Conclusion

During the 1960s and early 1970s, there were concerns about the transformation of the American family – in particular, the changing family size and the increased number of divorces – and its relationships to new economic conditions, including the unprecedented economic growth and the rising women’s participation in the labor market. Substantial funds were devoted to these questions both by private and public sources. Supported by research organizations (the Population Council and the NBER) as well as by prestigious universities (Columbia University and the University of Chicago), the NHE emphasized the role of economic forces, notably higher women’s earnings, in explaining most family behaviors and demographic trends. In so doing,

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<sup>226</sup> More on household decision models in Sofer (1999) and Donni & Ponthieux, (2011).

<sup>227</sup> This is not totally true for in cooperative game bargaining models, the partners maximize a product which takes into account the utilities of both partners as well as their “threat points.”



economists meant to show that the economic approach could challenge alternative approaches from other social sciences.

Despite the many criticisms coming both from within and from outside economics and its short-lasting existence (roughly from 1965 to 1981), the NHE had a significant influence among economists and it also impacted the work of other social scientists, sociologists and demographers in particular. Many of them recognized cost-benefit analysis as a powerful way to clearly explain family behavior. In turn, family behaviors were no longer viewed as constrained by multiple social, cultural and psychological factors but rather as the result of rational reactions to economic factors. Consequently, the NHE was a powerful tool which accompanied the rise of economics imperialism (Fleury, 2009, chapter 5).

# Conclusion

## A New History of Family Economics

This dissertation traces the history of family economics in the United States. A traditionally feminine and marginalized subfield associated with home economics before World War II, family economics became a predominantly masculine field within mainstream economics in the second part of the twentieth century.

The first part of this dissertation accounts for the strategy of women facing few opportunities in a male-dominated academic system. Some of the first women economists and social scientists specialized in topics neglected by male social scientists and related to the domestic sphere, including consumption, household production and women's paid work. Although they were able to gain scientific recognition, these women failed to enter economics departments (chapter 1).

Because of the growing popular and mainly feminine concern for family economic questions, deans of home economics departments welcomed women social scientists willing to develop family and consumption economics. The U.S. federal government also supported and funded this new field with a view to controlling family consumer expenditures. More broadly, family economic studies benefited from the increasing political resonance of women's and children's issues within reform movements. Family economics was thus institutionalized during the 1920s and early 1930s in home economics departments or divisions in American colleges and universities – including at the Iowa State College, the University of Chicago, and Cornell University – and in federal government through the Bureau of Home Economics.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the way home economists saw the economic role of families. Home economists emphasized the economic and social importance of household production and carried out empirical studies on the allocation of housewives' time. They developed a theory of consumption conceived as an alternative to the neoclassical theory of demand: family consumption expenditures were said to arise from socially-defined standards of living which were particularly influenced by traditions, social emulation, advertising and selling practices (Kyrk, 1924; Hoyt, 1938). Their study of current consumers problems, including the lack of or misleading information on consumer goods and the insufficient purchasing power, led them to advocate federal protection of consumers against business abuses. In so doing, they became leaders in the consumer movement of the 1930s. More broadly, studies on consumption and household production carried out by home economists were meant to increase family and social welfare.

The construction of a separate women's economic field within home economics enabled women to cultivate an uncommon concern for welfare while doing economics. Their work was widely circulated through consumer organizations, women's magazines and radio programs; it was especially influential in education, notably with the creation of consumer education courses. It helped mobilize women around their role as consumers and gain political leverage. From a professional point of view, home economists' art of consumption enabled women to achieve academic careers which they could not pursue in existing departments of economics.<sup>228</sup> Finally, it permitted women social scientists to gain autonomy, visibility and recognition.

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<sup>228</sup> The phrases "art of consumption" and "art of spending money" were used by economists Wesley C. Mitchell (1912) and John A. Hobson (1914) to refer to efforts geared towards increasing welfare through consumption. Home economists often cited these authors to justify their work, although they did not explicitly use the "art of consumption."

The art of consumption enjoyed success but women's careers were often limited to home economics or federal government. Although the art of consumption was close to institutional economics at a time when it was the dominant "school of thought" in economics, its connection with economics was rather loose. There were three reasons for that: (1) the family was not considered an important part of economics, (2) most economists rejected home economists' attempts to modify family expenditures and more broadly, the allocation of family resources, and (3) the art of consumption was a wholly feminine field. As a result, the art of consumption remained a separate and marginalized women's economic field.

After 1945, economists displaced home economists' art of consumption and regained disciplinary control over the study of consumption (chapter 5). Firstly, home economists faced waning institutional support both in academia and in federal government in a context of masculinization of research and education (Rossiter, 1995). A female field focusing on the home and family was no longer socially acceptable. This eventually led to the decline of the community of home economists working on the art of consumption: some retired and were not replaced; others were isolated. Second, the art of consumption developed by home economists clashed with the scientific standards of postwar economics. With the popularization of the distinction between positive and normative economics, the effort to address practical problems and to formulate rules of behavior using economic knowledge — that is, the "art of economics" — was no longer recognized as part of economics (Colander, 1992). Third, fostered by the support of the NBER, new theories of consumption better suited the newly dominant neoclassical paradigm. In particular, Milton Friedman's permanent income hypothesis, which is based on rational intertemporal choice, falls in line with the new standard conception of applied economics as the application of a

core neoclassical theory whose implications could be verified through empirical work. The transition from the art of consumption toward postwar consumption economics is exemplified by the work of Margaret Reid. Reid's close proximity with economists from World War II onwards, in particular with Friedman, Theodore W. Schultz, and Gary S. Becker, goaded her to reject concerns for improving family welfare and to adopt the neoclassical framework.

More broadly, the aura of thoroughness of economics, a predominantly male discipline, grew from World War II onwards. Economists had been mobilized during the war and they created an image of a rigorous and apolitical science (see Bernstein, 2001). This image was strengthened after the war as economics came to be defined by its method. Consequently, economists benefited from rising funding from federal government and philanthropies.

In chapter 6, I consider the formation of a mainstream family economics from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. The "New Home Economics," as it was called, extended the maximization framework to every family behavior. I argue that it emerged in a context of increased concern for the relationships between the transformation of the American family and economic forces. New home economists emphasized the role of the latter, notably higher women's earnings, in explaining most family behaviors and hence demographic trends. In so doing, they believed that the economic approach could challenge alternative approaches from other social sciences. I underline the role of research organizations (NBER, Population Council), universities (Columbia University, University of Chicago) and philanthropies (Ford and Carnegie Corporations) in supporting the NHE.

Some new home economists were in contact with home economists' work on family economics. In particular, Schultz was a colleague of Reid and Elizabeth Hoyt at Iowa State College in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Besides, Reid

worked side-by-side with Schultz, Friedman and Becker at the University of Chicago from the early 1950s to the late 1970s. However, earlier contributions to family economics, notably Kyrk's and Hoyt's, were overlooked by new home economists because they were not compatible with their approach. Only Reid was recognized as a precursor – although only for her work on household production – because she defended the NHE at the end of her career (see Reid, 1977, 1979). This dissertation has shown that household production, consumption and the allocation of time within the household had been important concerns for home economists since the mid-1920s and that another kind of family economics – interdisciplinary, empirical, concerned with bettering family living conditions – existed before the NHE.

Finally, I have shown that the boundaries of economics transformed with time. While the family was not originally considered a part of economics, it became so from the late 1960s. New home economists argued that every family behavior could be explained within the maximization framework, provoking the ire of economists like Ruth Mack (1976), Isabel Sawhill (1977), Marianne Ferber and Bonnie Birnbaum (1979) who stated that the NHE underestimated the weight of tradition and led to a tacit endorsement of the traditional nuclear family model.<sup>229</sup> Other social scientists, including sociologists and demographers, also criticized the NHE for downplaying the effects of social norms and structural constraints over the family. Yet, the NHE had a lasting influence on the study of the family. The practicality of its models was appreciated, as well as their relationships to empirical evidence which attested to NHE's scientificity and objectivity. The NHE thus illustrates the changing division of intellectual labor as

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<sup>229</sup> Some of these women, like Marianne Ferber, were instrumental in developing a new field of feminist economics which was institutionalized in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see below).

economics encroached upon topics previously considered as part of other social sciences.

## Rationality Transformed

In this dissertation, I sketched home economists' notion of rational family behavior which spread through education, consumer organizations and public policy (chapters 3 & 4). For home economists, families were largely irrational because they were influenced by a variety of social, psychological and economic factors which prevented them from having clear objectives and knowledge about how best to attain them. However, home economists believed families could be made more rational provided their aims and means were reconsidered critically. Scientists and government institutions could help them by investigating the consequences of family behaviors on health and welfare and by establishing "minimum needs." Besides, to enable families to best satisfy their wants, consumer education providing market information was needed, as well as structural market reform to guarantee freedom of choice, through reasonable market prices and family incomes for instance. Finally, rationality was conceived as a construct, a process toward the attainment of an evolving ideal.

This dissertation traces a shift in the vision of rationality from a "build-up" rationality before World War II to an *a priori* rationality after World War II. In chapters 5 and 6, I illustrate the increasing importance of neoclassical theory in consumption and family economics and the gradual replacement of earlier theories centered on social and psychological constraints affecting family behavior, such as institutions, values, tradition, etc. Neoclassical theory assumes a rational family seeking to maximize its utility function. Unlike in earlier versions of rationality, family objectives are taken as given and their relationships to

welfare and health are not questioned. Besides, in this new conception of rationality, only economic incentives like changes in price and income can influence family behaviors.

## Family Economics after the New Home Economics

The history of family economics does not stop with the decline of the NHE in the late 1970s. During the 1980s, game-theoretic and collective models of household decisions were developed.<sup>230</sup> In these models, rational choice is applied to individual family members but unlike NHE models, it is not assumed that they share common preferences and resources.<sup>231</sup> This made room for negotiations and power relations within the family. With their emphasis on rational choice and formal modelling, these models retain the neoclassical economic method and hence can be referred to as illustrations of the “new new home economics.”

In parallel, feminist economists, including Nancy Folbre (1986) and Julie Nelson (1994; 1995), developed an alternative family economics field. They rejected the utility-maximization framework for putting too much emphasis on individual choice and self-interest. Instead, they focused on the ways family members organize collectively to get a living. As Nelson (1994, 126) explained, this included “a set of questions about who gets what and who does what; how decisions about jobs, purchases, and household chores are made within the marital relation.” In this approach, unpaid and nonmarket activities play a

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<sup>230</sup> Game theoretic models were developed following the work of Marilyn Manser and Murray Brown (1980) as well as of Marjorie B. McElroy and Mary Jean Horney (1981). As for collective models of household decisions, they were initiated by François Bourguignon (1984) and Pierre-André Chiappori (1988). See Sofer, 1999; Donni & Ponthieux, 2011.

<sup>231</sup> This is not altogether true for in cooperative game bargaining models, the partners maximize a product which takes into account the utilities of both partners as well as their “threat points.”



significant role. Besides, a large place is devoted to social norms and ideologies, gender roles in particular, which are said to greatly influence people's behavior. This kind of family economics, which is not well developed, is very similar to the "old" home economics of the 1930s and 1940s: it tries to put social, cultural and psychological factors at the center of the study of family behaviors. Thus, it can be called the "neo home economics." Like the "old" home economics, the "neo home economics" remains at the periphery of economics.

Finally, it seems that there is a feminine approach to family economics, which emphasizes the structural constraints on family behaviors and is concerned with welfare. Taking the form of the old home economics, this approach was widespread before World War II. In the 1960s and 1970s, a masculine approach to family economics focusing on rational choice and striving for objectivity – the NHE – was developed and became mainstream. Recent developments have polarized family economics between these two approaches – the feminine neo home economics vs the masculine new new home economics. More generally, this polarization reflects tensions between an approach that stresses social and cultural forces and an approach that supports choice and agency.

## Annex

Table 1: Early Family Economists Associated With Home Economics

<b>Name</b>	<b>Date PhD</b>	<b>Discipline PhD</b>	<b>University/College PhD</b>	<b>Ph. D. supervisor</b>	<b>Topics investigated</b>	<b>Institutional affiliation</b>
<b>Hazel Kyrk</b>	1923	Economics	University of Chicago	James Field	Theory of consumption, cost of living, consumer education, family economics	University of Chicago (department of home economics and department of economics)
<b>Faith Williams</b>	1924	Economics	Columbia University	Henry Seager	Food manufacturing industries, consumers' problems, standards of living and dietary studies	Cornell University (department of home economics), Federal Bureau of Home Economics
<b>Elizabeth Hoyt</b>	1925	Economics	Radcliffe College	?	Theory of consumption, standard of living	Iowa State College (department of home economics and department of economics)

<b>Day Monroe</b>	1930	Home economics	University of Chicago	Hazel Kyrk	Family economics, food economics, empirical studies on family income and expenditures	Cornell University (department of home economics), University of Chicago (department of home economics), Federal Bureau of Home Economics, University of Washington (department of home economics)
<b>Jessie Coles</b>	Early 1930s	Home economics	University of Chicago	Hazel Kyrk	Consumers' problems, standardization of consumer goods, consumer education	University of California at Berkeley (department of home economics)
<b>Margaret Reid</b>	1931	Home economics	University of Chicago	Hazel Kyrk	Household production, family economics, consumption	Iowa State College (department of home economics and department of economics), Federal Division of Statistical Standards, Federal Bureau of Home Economics, University of Chicago (department of home economics and of economics)

<b>Alison Comish (Thorne)</b>	1937	Economics	Iowa State College	Elizabeth Hoyt	Consumption, women's studies	Utah State University (department of home economics and department of sociology)
<b>Margaret Liston</b>	1949	Home economics and agricultural economics	University of Chicago	Hazel Kyrk ?	Family economics, history of family economics	Iowa State University (department of home economics and department of economics), University of Nebraska (department of home economics)

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**Titre :** Du "*home economics*" (économie domestique) au "*New Home Economics*" aux États-Unis : vers une science de la famille rationnelle, 1924-1981

**Mots clés :** économie domestique, économie de la famille, comportements familiaux, consommation, rationalité

Résumé : Cette thèse retrace l'histoire de l'économie de la famille aux États-Unis entre 1924 et 1981. Je montre que dans la première partie du XXe siècle, les économistes voyaient principalement les comportements au sein de la famille comme le résultat des normes sociales. Par suite, la famille restait pour l'essentiel à la périphérie de l'économie. A la fin des années 1920 et au début des années 1930, le désintérêt de la plupart des économistes pour ce sujet a permis la création d'une économie de la famille au sein de départements d'économie domestique, distincts des départements traditionnels d'économie. Cette sous-discipline explore les contraintes structurelles (psychologiques, sociales

et économiques) qui pèsent sur les comportements familiaux tout en cherchant à améliorer la situation des familles. Elle reste marginale en économie, d'une part, parce que les comportements familiaux semblent trop différents des comportements marchands ; d'autre part, parce que des femmes pour l'essentiel la composent. Après 1945, les économistes analysent les comportements familiaux comme étant le résultat de la maximisation de la satisfaction des familles par rapport à des contraintes économiques. L'économie de la famille rejoint alors l'économie néoclassique et devient majoritairement masculine.

**Title :** Finding a New Home (Economics): Toward a Science of the Rational Family, 1924–1981

**Keywords :** family economics, home economics, new home economics, household behaviors, consumption, rationality

Abstract : This dissertation traces the displacement of family economics from the periphery to the center of economics. I show that in the early twentieth century, most economists viewed the family as ruled by social norms – tradition, customs and morals. Accordingly, they did not regard the study of the family as coming within the scope of economics. Women economists who had an interest in family were able to create a separate family economics field within home economics departments in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This field explored the

structural constraints on household behavior and was geared towards increasing family welfare. Because household behavior seemed so different from market behavior and because it was a female field, studies on the family remained marginal within economics. After World War II, economists began to interest themselves in consumption and from the 1960s they accounted for a wide range of family behaviors using a utility maximization framework. As family economics became mainstream, it was masculinized.