Technology and Society in Twentieth Century America

An Anthology

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Contents

Introduction 1

Selections:

1 **The Americans:** The Democratic Experience, *Daniel J. Boorstin* 5

2 **The Resisted Revolution:** Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930, *David B. Danbom* 31

3 **Labor and Monopoly Capital:** The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, *Harry Braverman* 50

4 **America by Design:** Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism, *David F. Noble* 66

5 **The New Industrial State,** *John Kenneth Galbraith* 85

6 **Birth Control in America:** The Career of Margaret Sanger, *David M. Kennedy* 96

7 **Medical Nemesis:** The Expropriation of Health, *Ivan Illich* 111

8 **The Car Culture,** *James Flink* 124

9 **Crabgrass Frontier:** The Suburbanization of the United States, *Kenneth T. Jackson* 146

10 **The Making of the Atomic Bomb,** *Richard Rhodes* 162

and even the "restructuring of institutions" in ways that were dimly foreseen but assumed to be "progressive."

How this change occurred in so short a time is not a mystery, but rather that most vexing of historical problems, the "overdetermined event." New men arrived and brought with them those ideas of the "seed time" of the 1950s. Among those ideas were the notions that the Third World was the main theater of the Cold War and that in that contest prestige was as important as power. Their new ideas validated a far greater role for government in planning and executing social change. The new men also cared more for imagery and felt increasing pressure to display their control over affairs in the wake of early setbacks in foreign policy. Finally, each major figure in space policy—Kennedy, Johnson, Webb, Dryden, McNamara, Welsh, Kerr, and others—saw ways in which an accelerated space program could help them solve problems in their own shop or serve their own interests. This is not to say that they were petty; it is to say that they were technocratic, applying command technology to political problems.

As for contrary arguments, they were disposed of, one by one. Nixon himself abandoned the original Republican skepticism toward space races even before the campaign. The USAF view that the main threat was military got nowhere with the image-conscious civilians. The scientists' argument against prestige-oriented manned spaceflight was bulldozed. When the Soviets weighed in by orbiting Gagarin, and the Shepard flight confirmed NASA's contention that the mission was feasible, all barriers came down. All, that is, except cost, and that, too, was less important in the new White House. We will probably never know precisely what was in Kennedy's mind when he decided that Americans should go to the moon. What may have tipped the balance for him and for many was the spinal chill attending the thought of leaving the moon to the Soviets. Perhaps Apollo could not be justified, but, by God, we could not *not* do it.

Of all those who contributed to the moon decision, the ones farthest in the background were the engineers of Langley and Goddard and Marshall, many of whom devoted their lives to spaceflight, designing dreams. Their reports and studies were necessary buttresses to the political arguments: they had to persuade that the thing could be done. Otherwise, they were absent. Some of their visionary talk about exploration and destiny found place in political speeches, but their efforts to stretch the minds and hearts of their fellows, to sow wonder for its own sake, got lost in their very adoption by the technocratic state. What Constantine's conversion did to the Christian church, Apollo did to spaceflight: it linked it to Caesar. The new faith might conquer the empire, but its immaculate ability to stir hearts was accordingly diminished. Of course, it could not have been otherwise.

CHAPTER 13

More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave

Ruth Schwartz Cowan

It is sobering to note the recentness of the arrival of many household appliances and amenities in most homes in the United States. As recently as 1940, one out of every three Americans was still carrying water in buckets, and two out of three Americans did not enjoy the comforts of central heating. In 1941, only 52 percent of American families owned or had "interior access" to a washing machine, thirty years after the machines had first come on the market and twenty years after their prices had fallen as the result of mass production. About the same percentage of families had mechanical refrigerators (the successor to the older, literal "iceboxes.") And as many as one third of all households were still cooking with wood and coal, which meant backbreaking labor to provide the fuel and attend to the requisite cleaning.

By the early 1980's, running water and built-in bathrooms, central heating, washing machines, refrigerators, and gas or electric stoves had become basic household items. It would seem that a dramatic technological revolution of sorts had taken place close to home. Yet Ruth Schwartz Cowan argues that all of this added up to little diminishment of the housework burden most women shouldered.

Cowan offers several interrelated explanations of this apparent paradox, in this selection, taken from the concluding chapter of her study of American housework. She points out that the technological revolution hastened the disappearance of two important sources of assistance that even working-class housewives formerly had been able to afford: paid domestic labor and commercial delivery services. Maids and home-

delivered groceries became faint memories for most. Consequently, housewives of all economic classes discovered that they faced housework unassisted. In the early twentieth century, a college professor's wife, for example, had two household assistants, but no assistants are to be seen in the 1950s, when we hear a latter-day college professor's wife narrate her typical day.

The new household technologies made work at home much less physically onerous, but surprisingly they did not significantly reduce the amount of time American women spent doing housework. Cowan argues further that wives remain, for the most part, unassisted by their husbands, who, if anything, shoulder even less of the housework burden than before because of the arrival of new appliances. Despite the journalistic hoopla in the 1950s and late 1970s about "new husbands" and "househusbandry," Cowan remains unconvinced that the gender division of work actually has become more equitable in most households.

Cowan describes the reasons why women decided to enter the paid labor force—some by choice, others by necessity. But all "working" women, she maintains, faced stigmatization in a society that still clung to the notion that a woman's place remained in the home. Theoretically, "functionalist" sociologists might have been expected to provide some encouragement to women who got outside jobs. These sociologists believed that economic and technological changes had rendered the household "functionally" useless, but instead of urging women to move out of the "obsolete" household, they instead urged women to concentrate on the remaining "feminine" functions, such as nurturing the children. A "backward search for femininity" led couples to decide to have many children. And some housewives took up preindustrial crafts and skills in an attempt to return to an idealized past, before modern appliances challenged a housewife's traditional "function."

Given the strong negative connotations of "working mother," women with children who entered the labor force had to fight tremendous ideological pressure to stay at home. A technological explanation of why these women and the others nevertheless took up outside work is that the revolution in household technology left housewives with free time. But Cowan argues that this explanation does not stand. It was the housewives who could least afford the new labor-saving devices and amenities who were the first to enter the labor market. Cowan prefers to treat the new conveniences and appliances as mere "catalysts" of women's participation in the work force, not causes.

In the concluding section, the author reviews the place of female housework in American history. It has always been, and continues to be, disregarded by economists because it is hard to measure. It has always been, and continues to be, defined as the proper domain of women. Cowan makes a provocative argument about the postwar growth of our suburbs and the technological systems that make them work: she says that the modern individual home is outfitted and located in ways that make it very difficult *not* to have someone on hand to ferry the children to and fro and take care of all the still-considerable amount of housework that is socially defined as necessary. And when this certain "someone" decided to take a new full-time job outside the home, she discovered that she was still stuck with the old one at home. Hence, the classic double burden carried by working women.

The technological systems and low-density housing patterns that are in place are here to stay, so a certain amount of domestic work seems destined to remain. But Cowan prescribes elimination of what she regards to be "makework" domestic duties, which originate from old cultural standards that were established to announce the family's distance from poverty or to keep the separate domains of women and men clearly distinct, free from "sexual pollution." In short, Cowan says, the technology itself is not to be faulted; rather we should use it in ways that at long last make housework less time-consuming, and less the special burden of women.

HOMOGENIZING HOUSEWORK

Over, under, around, and through those statistics about the technological systems with which we live, lies a daily reality about the work processes of housework that we often forget. If the basic material conditions of life have become homogenized for all Americans (the fact that the less-than-basic material conditions have not is another matter, relevant to another book), so have the work processes of housework. In times past, housewives of the "uncomfortable" classes were manual laborers in their own homes, but housewives of the "comfortable" classes were both managers and laborers. Nowadays, the general expansion of both the economy and the welfare system has led fewer people than ever before into the market for paid domestic labor, and the diffusion of appliances into households, and of households into suburbs, has encouraged the disappearance of various commercial services. The end result is that housewives, even of the most comfortable classes (in our generally now comfortable population) are doing their housework themselves. Similarly, the extension of schooling for those who are young,

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the proliferation of school-related activities, and the availability of jobs for those who have finished their schooling has led to the disappearance of even those helpers upon whom the poverty-stricken housewife had once been able to depend. Hence, in almost all economic sectors of the population (except the very, very rich), housework has become manual labor: the wife of the lawyer is just as likely to be down on her hands and knees cleaning her kitchen floor as the wife of the bricklayer or the garbageman. In 1914, the wife of a college professor had, as I described in chapter 6, two different kinds of household assistant (a laundress, who washed and did heavy cleaning; a student who cleared after meals, did light cleaning, and supervised the children when their mother was away) and did much of her marketing over the telephone. Forty years later, the wife of another college professor described her typical day this way:

> I get up at 6 A.M. and put up coffee and cereal for breakfast and go down to the basement to put clothes into the washing machine. When I come up I dress Teddy (1-½) and put him in his chair. Then I dress Jim (3-½) and serve breakfast to him and to my husband and feed Teddy.
>
> While my husband looks after the children I go down to get the clothes out of the machine and hang them on the line. Then I come up and have my own breakfast after my husband leaves. From then on the day is as follows: Breakfast dishes, clean up kitchen. Make beds, clean the apartment. Wipe up bathroom and kitchen floor. Get lunch vegetable ready and put potatoes on to bake for lunch. Dress both children in outdoor clothes. Do my food shopping and stay out with children until 12. Return and undress children, wash them up for lunch, prepare lunch, feed Teddy and put him to nap. Make own lunch, wash dishes, straighten up kitchen. Put Jim to rest. Between 1 and 2:30, depending on the day of the week, ironing (I do my husband's shirts home and, of course, all the children's and my own clothes), thorough cleaning of one room, weekend cooking and baking, etc.; 3 P.M., give children juice or milk, put outdoor clothes on. Out to park; 4:30 back. Give children their baths. Prepare their supper. Husband usually home to play with them a little after supper and help put them to bed. Make dinner for husband and myself. After dinner, dishes and cleaning up.
>
> After 8 P.M. often more ironing, especially on the days when I cleaned in the afternoon. There is mending to be done; 9 P.M., fall asleep in the living room over a newspaper or listening to the sound of the radio; 10 P.M., have a snack of something with my husband and go to bed.

And just as striking were the comments of another housewife in the same decade—a twenty-four-year-old woman living in the then newly build Levittown, Pennsylvania; she was described by those who interviewed her as a member of the "working class." This housewife, whose grandmother might well have been grateful to have bread and soup on

the table at night, described her day in terms virtually identical to those of the college professor's wife:

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

In the 1950s (and the 1980s) the housewife of the "professional classes" and the housewife of the "working classes" were assisted only by machines. Few such women had paid household help, and fewer still had food or milk or clean laundry delivered to their doors. The differences between these women were no doubt profound—differences in levels of education, in families of origin, in annual household income; but those profound differences did not produce, as they would have done in the past, equally profound variations in the ways in which the women did their work.

Apparently, also, there were no significant variations in the time that women spent at that work. One sophisticated statistical analysis of time-use data collected from a large national sample of households in 1965 found that the average American woman spent about four hours a day doing housework (or twenty-eight hours a week) and about three and one-half hours a day (or twenty-six and a half hours per week) caring for children (a fifty-four-hour week). These figures were startling in two respects. First, they were not strikingly different from what Leeds had found for affluent housewives in 1912 or from what other researchers had reported for rural and urban housewives in 1935. Second, these averages were not markedly affected either by the income level of the household or by the educational attainment of the housewife: women who managed on less than four thousand dollars a year in household income spent 245 minutes per day at housework and 207 at child care; while, at the other end of the income scale, housewives who could dispose of over fifteen thousand dollars put in 260 and 196 minutes at

housework and child care, respectively. Housewives with college educations were logging in 474 minutes a day of housework and child care (a little under eight hours); and housewives who had not completed grade school put in almost equally tiring days of 453 minutes (or seven and one half hours).

Neither the working-class wife nor her middle-class contemporary could have expected her husband to help much with this work. For a while, in the 1940s, there was a hullabaloo in the popular press about "new husbands" in suburbia who were diapering babies and drying dishes and cooking barbecues and otherwise becoming "feminized." Again, in the late 1970s, a spate of books and national magazine articles appeared touting the virtues of "househusbandry," most of these articles written, it turned out, by free-lance writers and journalists who had decided to stay home for a while with their children when their wives went back to work. If the results of sociological studies are to be trusted, not much lay behind either one of those journalistic episodes. Men do very little housework; and the few "househusbands" there have ever been seem not to have stuck to it for long. Whether men are asked to estimate the time that they spend at housework, or wives are asked to estimate their husbands' time, or outside observers actually clock the amount of time that men spend at it, no one has ever estimated men's share of housework at anything higher than one and a half hours per day. Housewives who are not employed in the labor market spend, roughly speaking, fifty hours a week doing housework; housewives who are employed outside their homes spend, again roughly speaking, thirty-five hours on their work in and for their homes. Men whose wives are employed spend about ten minutes more a day on housework than men whose wives "stay home", and men who have small children add yet another ten—a grand total, for these particularly helpful husbands, of just under eleven hours of housework a week. Men who do housework tend not to do the same work that their wives are doing: they take out the garbage, they mow the lawns, they play with children, they occasionally go to the supermarket or shop for household durables, they paint the attic or fix the faucet; but by and large, they do not launder, clean, or cook, nor do they feed, clothe, bathe, or transport children. These latter—the most time-consuming activities around the home—are exclusively the domain of women. In households that are particularly well equipped with appliances, men do even less housework, partly because they believe that the work simply cannot be onerous, but also because some of the "extra" appliances actually relieve them of sex-related, or sex-acceptable chores. In homes where there are garbage disposals, men give up removing the small quantities of garbage that still need to be carried to the curb; and in households where there are dishwashers, men cease providing whatever help with the dishes they had formerly proffered.

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

THE "WORKING" MOTHER

The modern technological systems on which our households and our standard of living depend were constructed on the assumption that women would remain at home, that they would continue to function as pre-industrial workers (without paychecks, time clocks, or supervisors), and that, as a corollary, they would not be tempted to enter the labor market except under unusual (and usually temporary) circumstances. Ironically, the last of these assumptions proved erroneous. In the postwar years, more and more married women, and more and more mothers, entered the labor force, the comforts of full-time wifehood and motherhood and the existence of washing machines and dishwashers notwithstanding.

In the decades after the Second World War, the national economy shifted its focus from production to service, from manufacturing to communication; and, in the process, jobs were opened up for which women were considered to be appropriate candidates: jobs as typists, clerks, and receptionists; as waitresses, store clerks, and stenographers; as teachers, social workers, nurses, administrative assistants; and, later, as computer programmers. To various women, at various times, those jobs

and the salaries they provided, proved to be attractions too great to resist. In different households, the decision that wife and/or mother would "go back to work" or "continue working" was made at different times, determined either by what was going on in the world outside the family or by a particular family's development. Some women "continued to work" in the postwar years because they were reluctant to give up the life and the income to which they had become accustomed during the war; some women went home and had babies and did not re-enter the labor force until their children were grown and out of the house; other women never went back to work. As the years passed, some younger women decided not to interrupt their careers when their babies arrived, because the high level of education that they had attained, and the high salaries that they could consequently hope to command, seemed to compensate for the double burden of motherhood and career which they had to shoulder. Other women found that, whether or not they were graced with higher education and higher incomes, the growing pressure of inflation was so seriously eroding the purchasing power of their husbands' income that, small children or no, they had to go back to work. Furthermore, as a result of divorce, desertion, or the decision to remain single, other women, in increasing numbers, had no husband's income to fall back upon. The end result was that, by 1980, just over 40 percent of the total workforce was female (up from 25 percent in 1940), women with children at home constituted almost 20 percent of the labor force, and more than half of the nation's children under the age of six had mothers who were working full time. Even though different women achieved the status of being "homemakers with jobs" at different times, very large numbers of them did achieve it; and if present trends continue unabated, even more of them will do so in the future.

Woman's "Place"

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

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

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

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

lution would be to create a new ideology, one that would rationalize the woman's situation and diminish the likelihood that she would suffer "role anxiety."

The "Backward Search for Femininity"

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

> in the huge kitchen of a house that she had helped build herself. She was busily kneading the dough for her famous homemade bread; a dress she was making for a daughter was half-finished on the sewing machine; a handloom stood in one corner. Children's art materials and toys were strewn all over the floor of the house, from front door to stove: in this expensive modern house, like many of the open plan houses in this era, there was no door at all between kitchen and living room. Nor did this mother have any dream or wish or thought or frustration of her own to separate her from her children. She was pregnant with her seventh; her happiness was complete, she said, spending her days with her children.

The wiles of the "backward search for femininity" apparently enticed men as well as women—as is nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in the writings of Kurt Vonnegut, whose novels ruthlessly dissect postwar mentality. In *Player Piano* (1952), Vonnegut created Paul Proteus, an archetypically unhappy "organization man" (an engineer working for a big electrical manufacturing company), who lives with his wife,

Anita, in an archetypically "backward looking" home, replete with a huge fieldstone fireplace with candle molds over the mantel:

> Paul narrowed his eyes, excluding everything from his field of vision but the colonial tableau, and imagined that he and Anita had pushed this far into the upstate wilderness, with the nearest neighbor twenty-eight miles away. She was making soap, candles, and thick wool clothes for a hard winter ahead, and he, if they weren't to starve, had to mold bullets and go shoot a bear. Concentrating hard on the illusion, Paul was able to muster a feeling of positive gratitude for Anita's presence, to thank God for a woman at his side to help with the petrifying amount of work involved in merely surviving. As, in his imagination, he brought home a bear to Anita, and she cleaned it and salted it away, he felt a tremendous lift—the two of them winning by sinew and guts a mountain of strong, red meat from an inhospitable world. And he would mold more bullets, and she would make more candles and soap from the bear fat, until late at night, when Paul and Anita would tumble down together on a bundle of straw in the corner, dog-tired and sweaty, make love, and sleep hard until the brittle-cold dawn.

Such erotic and historical fantasies were (and still are) potent cultural forces; they help us to understand not only why some people have difficulty coming to terms with the reality of their lives, but also why some people (most notably affluent housewives) are still spending so very much time at their work. People who believe that family solidarity can be bolstered by hand-dipped chocolates and hand-grown string beans are bound to spend a lot of time dipping chocolates and growing string beans.

In any event, even if these ideological props for full-time housewifery had not existed, historical experience itself would have militated against widespread enthusiasm for the entry of married women into the labor force. The adults who were worrying about these matters in 1950 (and even in 1960) had been children of the Depression; hence, they had good reason to remember that in their youth a "working mother" had been a person to be pitied, and her family had quite possibly been a family to be shunned. If "mother worked" during the 1920s and the 1930s, her family was more than likely to be poor, the father more than likely to be unemployed, the children more than likely to be dirty, the house more than likely to be in disrepair; when "mother worked," there were children who had no one to nurse them through illnesses, meals that were hastily thrown together from whatever could be found ready-made in the markets, poor teeth, clothing that did not fit, dirty floors, skin rashes, and bad breath. It hardly mattered that only a few of these symptoms of poverty were likely to have been directly attributable to the mother's employment, because the fact of her employment served as a symbol for all of them. Similarly, at the other end of the economic

scale, the presence of a full-time housewife served as symbol not just for the status of the family, but also for its degree of good health and for its decent living standards. Whether she actually did the work or whether she directed the work that was to be done, the presence of a full-time wife and mother meant careful supervision of the family's health, a well-appointed living room, white stockings, ironed hair ribbons, regular church attendance, Sunday dinner, birthday parties. All those small (and large) comforts both helped to demonstrate the family's status and to ensure that it did not fall. The postwar working-class husband who complained that he would be embarrassed in front of his friends if his wife went out to work, was as much a product of this historical experience as his middle-class contemporary who claimed that two well-organized dinner parties a month would do more for his family's annual income than the salary his wife would be able to earn at a job.

The Role of the Machine

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

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

to enter the labor market are the ones who are least likely to have many labor-saving devices and household amenities. Indeed, in the early postwar years, some married women were entering the labor force precisely in order to acquire those attributes of affluence.

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

The technological systems that presently dominate our households were built on the assumption that a full-time housewife would be operating them, since very few people in the last one hundred years (when the foundations for these systems were being laid) wanted adult women to leave their homes in order to work in the labor market, or believed that adult women themselves would ever want to go out to work. In the earliest stages of industrialization, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as some of men's work in the home was eliminated (fuel gathering, leather working, grain processing), some men were thereby freed to work (at least part of the year) in factories and offices. Some of the women's housework was eliminated at that time also (principally spinning and weaving), but no one then expected or desired women to leave their homes to work for wages elsewhere (unless the women were single or exceedingly poor) because so much of what had always been considered women's work still remained to be done at home: cooking, sewing, laundering, cleaning, child care. In the next stages of industrialization, even more of men's household work was eliminated, as was much of children's work; but, again, no one expected or desired women to leave their homes in order to go out to work because, whether rich or poor, a family's sustenance and status still depended on the presence of a full-time homemaker. In this stage of industrialization (roughly from 1880 to 1920), the foundations for the modern household technologies were laid: municipalities began to supply households with clean water and ample sewers; gas and electric companies figured out how to bring in modern fuels; merchandisers and retailers developed new techniques for selling durable goods to households. Almost no one who participated in this process—whether rich or poor, whether female or male, whether producer or consumer—seems to have doubted that the individual household would be the ultimate consumption unit, and that most of the work of that household would be done by housewives who would continue to work, as they had in the past, without pay and without timeclocks. If the utility companies had had any reason to believe that households would stop functioning after five or six o'clock—as offices, stores, and many factories do—they would have had precious little motivation for trying to supply them with electricity, water, and gas. Similarly, if householders had believed that they would have to pay every adult woman for every hour that she labored in their homes, they would have had precious little economic incentive for preferring washing machines to commercial laundry services and automobiles to deliverymen. Whether for good or ill, women were the only workers whose "place" was still at home in the years when homes were becoming mechanized, and the vast majority of these women were housewives who were not paid hourly, weekly, or even annual wages. When, in the decades after the Second World War, our economy finally became capable of realizing the potential benefits of these technological systems, the individual household, the individual ownership of tools, and the allocation of housework to women had, almost literally, been cast in the stainless steel, the copper, and the aluminum out of which those systems were composed.

The implications of this arrangement and the ironies implicit in it became particularly clear to those millions upon millions of families who moved out of urban areas and into suburban ones in the postwar decades. The move to the suburbs carried with it the assumption that someone (surely mother) would be at home to do the requisite work that made it possible for someone else (surely father) to leave early in the morning and return late at night, without worrying either about the welfare of his family or the maintenance of his domicile. Having made the move and purchased the house and invested in the cars and the

appliances without which the suburban way of life simply was not possible, people discovered that the technological systems in which they had invested (not only so much money, but also so much emotion) simply would not function unless someone stayed home to operate them.

When this "someone" had, however, decided that, for whatever reason, staying at home was no longer her cup of tea, neither the house nor the cars nor the appliances nor the way of life that they all implied could simply be thrown into the dustbin, nor did anyone wish to throw them there. All of these were long-term investments (consumer *durables*); and the technological systems of which they were a part (houses, roads, telephone lines, gas mains) were built to last for more than one lifetime. The transition to the two-income family (or to the female-headed household) did not occur without taking a toll—a toll measured in the hours that employed housewives had to work in order to perform adequately first as employees and then as housewives. A thirty-five-hour week (housework) added to a forty-hour week (paid employment) adds up to a working week that even sweatshops cannot match. With all her appliances and amenities, the status of being a "working mother" in the United States today is, as three eminent experts have suggested, virtually a guarantee of being overworked and perpetually exhausted.

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

Indeed, given the sacred feelings that most Americans seem to attach to meals, infants, private homes, and clean laundry—and given the vast investment individuals, corporations, and municipalities have made in the technological systems that already exist—our household technologies may never evolve so as to make life easier for the working wife and mother. In the generations to come, housework is not likely to disappear. Barring a catastrophic economic or nuclear disaster, the vast majority of today's children will form families when they grow up, will buy houses, and will outfit those houses with tools for doing housework. Home computers may be added to the repertoire, but there will

still be at least functional equivalents of cooking stoves and refrigerators, telephones and automobiles, washing machines and dishwashers. However much trouble these technologies may be, however much they may cost to obtain and then to maintain, and however much they may induce us to engage in amounts or forms of work that are often irritating and sometimes infuriating, the standard of living and the way of living that they make possible is one to which many Americans aspired in the past and that many are unlikely to forsake in the future. The washing machine may not save as much time as its advertisers might like us to believe, and electricity may not bring as many good things to living as the manufacturers of generating equipment would like us to think, but the daily lives that are shaped by washing machines and electricity are so much more comfortable and healthy than the ones that were shaped by washtubs and coal (or, before that, dirty clothes and open hearths) that we will probably not give them up.

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

Others of these rules—that, for example, men who dry dishes or change diapers are insufficiently masculine, that only women can properly nurture infants, that young girls should help their mothers in the kitchen and young boys assist their fathers in the garage, that husbands can undertake long commutes but wives cannot—ensure that the work processes of housework will be confined to members of only one sex, not only in this generation but in generations to come. These latter rules, connected as they are to aspects of our sexuality and our self-conception, are not easy to revise. Even those brave members of the postwar generations who learned to sever the bond between "working mother" and "social disaster" could not erase more than one social stereotype at a time; and when they chose spouses and formed households, they

adopted virtually the same sexual division of household labor with washing machines and microwave ovens as had their ancestors with washtubs and open hearths: the men responsible for fuel and for lawns (those symbolic remnants of fields of waving grain) and the women responsible for cooking, cleaning, laundering, and child care. If centuries upon centuries of social conditioning have led us to prefer the private household and the individual ownership of tools, then centuries upon centuries of social conditioning also prepared these young women to be housewives and these young men to believe that the work of cooking, cleaning, and caring for infants would threaten their masculinity. Indeed, when the children of the baby boom were still children, when they were forming their sense of "what it means to be a woman" or "what it means to be a man," all the adults upon whom these adolescents might have been modeling themselves—their parents, the people down the block, celebrities, creators of plots for movies, authors of magazine articles and textbooks—were still engaged in the backward search for femininity and still suggesting (in the strongest affective terms) that dishwashers and diapers were objects to be manipulated by females, and that wrenches and lawnmowers were objects to be manipulated by males, and that the manipulation of inappropriate objects was, to put it anthropologically, sexually polluting.

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

CHAPTER 14

Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business

Neil Postman

Is there any technological development in the twentieth century that has had a more visible impact on American society than television? The ubiquitous television set has profoundly changed news reporting, political campaigning, habits of consumption, and the ways in which we raise children—to name only a few of the often mentioned, and also often lamented—aspects of its influence.

Neil Postman is one of the many critics who has raised concerns about the television's negative impact on our society. But he stands apart from the other critics for his novel approach: he does not criticize television's output of junk. Entertainment is fine, he says. But unlike other entertaining media, television's influence has invaded the more serious, higher realm of our "public discourse," our society's discussion of public affairs; consequently television has reduced *everything* to entertainment.

In the selection presented here, "The Age of Show Business," Postman provides examples of what he regards to be alarming evidence of television's pernicious influence throughout society. Television is not, he says, an extension of the preceding literate tradition, that is, the tradition based on the printed word that television has supplanted. To Postman, television is an entirely different animal, and different on two separate levels.

First, the very technology of television, like all technology, contains a bias that will predispose it to be used in certain ways and not in others. Second, the television technology creates a social and intellectual environment in the particular place it is used—this Postman calls television as a *medium*—and this too will pull a technology's applications in a