

A Different Domesticity?

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Traditional European history textbooks discuss the “cult of domesticity” as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Tracing separate spheres for men and women to an increased division of labor brought about by the rise of factories, they portray a dramatic shift in the roles of women. Relegated to the home while men work in business outside of the home, women are characterized as “angels in the house” providing a nurturing environment to husbands and children. The gender ideology surrounding this division of labor includes ideas of physical and intellectual inferiority of women. At the same time, they exert a superior moral force which is exercised on the household and family. Charged with creating a world away from the dirty, competitive, capitalist world of work, they ensure a domestic haven of goodness and love for their families.

This characterization of a deep division in the worlds of men and women merits discussion. Seen as too simple and too dramatic by some historians it is currently under scrutiny as a historical construct. Our seminar readings add evidence to the proponents of revision. This essay argues that just as the Industrial Revolution as a historical construct deserves alteration in the face of new research, a research that shows dramatic changes and extreme growth in the British economy to be overstated, so too does the “separate spheres” ideology deserve revision.

Through the work of Jan de Vries, Keith Wrightson and Maxine Berg, we receive a more nuanced picture of the role of women and girls in the labor market in the decades leading up to the Industrial Revolution. We also see a new paradigm of domesticity emerging, one that places and empowers women in the 17th century as they assume an important role as the arbiters of consumption and taste within the family. Establishing and guaranteeing their class position through the acquisition of consumer goods, they also supported the change to a market economy. By working for wages and using wages to purchase goods previously produced in the household, women set the course for the

developments which lead to an industrious and then an industrial revolution. This change in household economics connects societies of the past with our own conspicuously consumptive societies of today in a slow moving yet transformative pattern of change.

If the change from home production to industry was a long, gradual process, with distinct and unique developments in particular industries, then this has implications for the gender ideology of the 19th century. Gender roles in the 19th century did not just arise out of the factory system, but also followed a more gradual path. The writings in this course can contribute to an understanding of the more nuanced and subtle shift in family relationships over the course of the early modern period.

Let's begin with the old argument. Eric Hobsbawm's work spawned the idea of dual revolutions occurring in the late 18th century. In his view, the French revolution and the Industrial Revolution combined to usher in an age of modernity. Both revolutions are sudden and they dramatically change politics and production. New research, however, calls this paradigm into question. Particularly for women, the French revolution did little to alter political rights or power. Women were not included in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Ultimately, Napoleonic Law set women further back in property rights and family power than prior to the French revolution.

In regard to the Industrial Revolution, Hobsbawm's Industry and Empire argues "In the second phase of the Industrial Revolution, the industries...had a work force composed exclusively or overwhelmingly of men. Moreover- and this affected gender relations even more directly- the typical male worker increasingly went out to work. Increasingly, following a middle class model, the adult man was conceived of as the sole income earner for wife and children, and wives of men in adequately paid jobs stayed home, their status assured by visibly not needing to contribute to the family income as women and indeed children, in the poorest sections of the working classes still had to do." (p. 96) Our reading in this seminar makes a compelling case for a more gradual and varied change in work habits, work organization and the household economy. This profound change in gender roles ushering in the era of separate spheres, the cult of domesticity, actually had origins going back to the 17th century. In light of current research, it behooves teachers to take a more comprehensive look at changes in the

household over time. Teachers need to discuss shifting gender roles and responsibilities over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Currently, textbooks discuss the agricultural revolution and enclosure which drives agricultural workers off the land and into cities. The proletariat arrives at the newly created factories where they work in family units until protective legislation drives women into the home. Keith Wrightson in Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Modern Britain agrees that severe economic hardship and strategies by landowners to maximize production leads to fewer people working on the land but many find ways to combine farming and industry in order to survive. Maxine Berg in The Age of Manufacturers: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain, 1700-1820 argues that enclosure leads to proto-industrialization and shifts in work patterns in the household economy ultimately lead women to working in the marketplace, away from the home and ultimately assuming power as managers of domestic production and consumption. Let's examine these arguments in more depth.

Seventeenth century Europe was a peasant economy. Men, women and children worked in order to survive. Carrying out a multitude of tasks, they remained restricted by traditional methods of farming, community controls and the traditional rights and privileges of the lords and nobles. Jan De Vries in his work The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600-1750 provides a detailed and compelling look at life in an age of want and dearth. In the 17th century, there were many obstacles to the development of a larger market economy because people believed that markets were static; they believed that there was a limited supply of goods to go around. If the common people adopted the dress and consumption habits previously confined to the rich, it seemed a symptom of moral and economic disorder. This imitation would “drain the state of its treasure at the same time that it undermined god ordained status distinctions.”(p. 178)

Secondly, if workers had a surplus, they chose to work less, rather than buy more. Permanence and sanctity of social hierarchy worked against new consumption patterns but during the 17th c. cities helped to break down these barriers and permit merchants a more dynamic role. By the 18th century, real income had risen and a widening range of consumer goods became available. All classes of society became interested in upgrading standards of comfort.

Wrightson also discusses relations among husbands and wives of the middling classes. He maintains that prior to the 19th century women's roles "complemented and overlapped" with those of their husbands. Women assisted in businesses, continuing them as widows if necessary. Women competently participated in day-to-day labor. Women of the late 17th and early 18th century also took a primary role in the thrifty management of household resources. This meant, according to Wrightson, controlling consumption. These women were not necessarily imitating their superiors but creating homes of dignity and imitating other middling families. They helped initiate new standards of domestic consumption. Changing material culture was now a part of their identity. Learning the proper way of making coffee and managing household spending yet still employed in the market, women carved out domestic space for their talents and desires. This could be characterized as an earlier domesticity than previously discussed but how it affected gender roles is not thoroughly examined by these economic historians.

Jan deVries subsequent article "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution" makes similar arguments. He believes that the historical construct of a dramatic Industrial Revolution has succumbed to "revisionist macroeconomic research that downwardly revised the rate of growth of the British economy." Seeing the rise of industry as less abrupt, he calibrates the change from agriculture to industry more finely arguing for the idea of an "industrious revolution." The industrious revolution is predicated on a combination of changes in the household that increase both the supply of marketed commodities and labor and the demand for goods offered in the marketplace. (p. 255) These changes began in advance of the Industrial Revolution constituting a demand side revolution preceding the more fundamentally supply side phenomenon so often discussed by historians. The access to the market unleashes a beneficial industriousness as men, women and children work in the labor market that is outside of household production, in order to afford the "luxuries" of the market. This in turn empowers women as they become the central decision makers in the household, operating at the nexus of "production, reproduction and consumption."

Maxine Berg also argues for the centrality of women in the household economy painstakingly analyzing the process by which many different industries traversed the stages of technological change, some becoming industrial and others remaining small

production centers while adapting new technology. Berg finds that the agricultural innovations shed labor but much higher proportions of female labor than male. (p. 137) Between 1700 and 1850, the work force had shifted from families in agriculture to an older, more male, workforce in agriculture. Increasing proportions of the labor were involved in manufacturing. She compellingly argues that textiles are a woman's industry and they remained as such into the early 19th century. Women also dominated lace making and stocking knitting. New industries such as button and buckle making, japanning and toy making employed growing proportions of women and girls. New technologies in spinning and weaving were invented with women and girls in mind. Women's labor was in demand because it allowed introduction of new technologies and bypassing of traditional artisan customs and arrangements.

Berg concludes that women's workforce participation in the 18th c. turned on three factors: demography, institutional change and organizational and technical changes. There were substantially greater numbers of women who needed to work. Enclosure and poor law changes released labor and led to a rising supply. Women went into a wide range of proto-industrial manufactures but how this changed sexual divisions in the household is still largely unknown. Sometimes the household took in others to complete production; sometimes they shared tasks with kin. Interesting that in many cases a production unit set up in the home came to be identified as housework, industrial production become entwined with household duties and therefore subsumed under the rubric of "women's work."

She argues that labor changes have a profoundly "gendered" nature since "most of the commodities upon which the era of commercial expansion was based were those associated with domestic possessions: lightweight clothing and furnishing fabrics, mahogany furniture, colonial groceries, dyes, china, the goods that these women are working to buy are profoundly domestic items. China, calico, tea, coffee, etc. are goods used in the home and constitute the desires of women."

In order to afford these goods, a shift in household activity takes place moving towards activities generating money income and away from those of home production. This was primarily a shift in the use of women's time from labor in the home for domestic consumption to labor in the marketplace for wages in order to buy consumer

goods. With fewer goods made in the home, women took “a greater part in decision-making over commercially-produced goods.” The desires of women moved household behavior away from home production to wage work in rural and later factory industries.

What can we make of all this? At least, we can revise our trajectory of women’s lives from peasants to cottage workers to factory workers. We should mention the rise of new trade and technology, new processes and manufactures that occupied women’s labor after agricultural changes freed many women from working on the land. We need to discuss more about the manufacturers who industrialized on a small scale and their contributions to women’s labor force participation. And, we need to infuse the idea of a demand side revolution driven by domestic purchases into our teaching of the changes in the 18th and 19th centuries.