Explicitly or implicitly, feminist or not, much of the literature employing a political economy perspective has assumed the existence of two largely separate spheres: a public sphere located in the formal economy and dominated by men, and a private sphere confined to the household and managed by women. For non-feminist theorists, this assumption is evident in the focus on the formal economy to the virtual exclusion of the household. The separation of spheres means, it seems, that the household economy is essentially irrelevant to the functioning of capitalism and to an understanding of how the system works. Feminist theorists, however, have frequently looked to the household for an explanation of sex
inequality, arguing that a different kind of analysis — one centred on patriarchy and reproduction — must be applied to the domestic sphere. Although some of these theorists, notably socialist feminists, have maintained that domestic labour reproduces the labour force and is thus crucial to capitalist production, they have usually been content with a dualist approach, taking as given marxist analysis of class inequality while developing theories of patriarchy to account for sex inequality.

Meanwhile, however, studies of specific communities as they have changed over time, such as that of selected maritime fishing villages undertaken by Patricia Connelly and Martha MacDonald in SPE 10, often demonstrate quite clearly the interpenetration of the household and the formal economy. And the new literature on the history of households and of their technologies builds on lessons from both feminists and non-feminists to offer a wide range of evidence that challenges the efficacy of any approach based on the assumption of two separate spheres. At the same time, this literature can be interpreted as indicating the usefulness of marxist tools in analyzing how the entire political economy works.

In Never Done: A History of American Housework, Susan Strasser maintains that “the functions of the household have changed in conjunction with changes in the methods, structures, and products of business and government, not simply as a result of economic and political change.” The “spheres were never separate in fact, and the apparent distinctions between the household and the outside world continue to erode.” In More Work for Mother, Ruth Schwartz Cowan argues that “if work shapes individual lives and social forms, and if industrialization has shaped work in the past two centuries, then to fail to understand the history of housework is to fail to understand ourselves.” And in The Grand Domestic Revolution, Dolores Hayden claims that “far more than their contemporaries, feminists, designers and political theorists at the turn of the century saw urban space as a social and economic product.” While these three American studies differ somewhat in their focuses and approaches, they all illustrate the weakness of any analysis that fails to link the formal and domestic economies, that fails to comprehend the entire political economy.

Capitalism provides the shape for the historical evidence
presented in these books. Capitalist production creates equipment and other goods for the home, paid jobs for those workers whose domestic labour becomes less and less necessary with the introduction of new technologies at home, and wages for the purchase of increasingly necessary commodities for domestic transformation and consumption. According to Cowan, it is men who first have their household labour-time reduced by commodities, men who lose the capacity to provide directly for their basic needs, and thus men who first enter the labour market. The iron industry, for example, developed during the mid-nineteenth century when new techniques made the production of iron — and of stoves — cheaper. These stoves were economical because they required less fuel and because they were cheaper to install, since they did not require a skilled crafts-person for installation. Both women and men wanted these stoves because they required less work. They needed them because wood fuel was becoming increasingly scarce and expensive, especially in cities. The "stoves were labor-saving devices, but the labor they saved was male." Men no longer had to fell as many trees or chop and carry as much wood, but women still had to do the cooking. Indeed, Cowan argues that female work increased as the diets of stove-owners became more varied with the possibilities introduced by the stove, and as the stove itself required more care than had earlier fire-places. Each generation of men became less and less skilled in domestic work, while their access to wage-labour changed the social relations of the household. Similar developments took place in flour production, as the male task of grinding was commodified, and in meat processing, as butchering too became part of the market economy.

With capitalist development, as Marx pointed out, new needs are created. One early twentieth-century woman explained: "We no sooner got used to regular towels than we began to want toothbrushes. . . . We got toothbrushes and we began wanting toothpowder to brush out our teeth instead of ashes. And more and more we wanted more things, and really needed more things the more we got them." But these new needs are not simply accidental. Nor are they satisfied in any way the household members desire. As Cowan shows, "industrialization of the home was determined partly by the decisions
of individual householders but also partly by social processes over which the householders can be said to have had no control at all, or certainly very little control." She illustrates the point by examining the development and sale of the refrigerator. What we have is in several ways less efficient and more expensive than its alternative:

We have compression, rather than absorption, refrigerators in the United States today not because one was technically better than the other, and not even because consumers preferred one machine (in the abstract) over the other, but because General Electric, General Motors, Kelvinator and Westinghouse were very large, very powerful, very aggressive, and very resourceful companies, while Servel and SORCO were not. Consumer "preference" can only be expressed for whatever is, in fact, available for purchase, and is always tempered by the price and convenience of the goods that are so available.5

Production and marketing decisions were (and are) based on profit considerations rather than on worker or consumer needs, and they tended to encourage dependency on products and experts, further reducing the housewife's control. Alternatives, like home-delivery services, were structured out. Moreover, the interdependency among equipment and other products structured in specific needs: "The toothbrush and the toothpowder provide a good example of the interrelationship among manufactured products: nobody would buy appliances without electricity or gas to run them, and home laundering machines eventually depended on new kinds of detergents that most effectively washed the new kinds of fabrics."6 Furthermore, as Cowan points out, the equipment that was produced set limits on the work, for "once obtained, the tools organize our work for us in ways that we may not have anticipated."7 Washing machines and then clothes dryers eliminated much of the heavy drudgery of laundry work, but "craft satisfaction, intimacy, and community [had gone] along with the gruelling amount of heavy labour." "Like other workers, the housewife lost control of her work process: manufacturers exerted their control on her through product design and advertising rather than through direct supervision."8

Capitalism has not, however, developed in a simple linear fashion. There has not been a consistent pattern of increasing commodification of goods and services formerly produced in the home. Indeed, the purpose of Cowan's study is to explain
why technology was not used to socialize all domestic work. Initially, according to Strasser, “industrialists ignored most of the patents for household labor-saving devices because they could not produce them profitably: they produced others, like canned foods and washing machines, for military and commercial applications decades before they offered them to households.”

It was these commercial developments of domestic technology that encouraged material feminists like Zona Gale to believe that “the private kitchen must go the way of the spinning wheel, of which it is the contemporary,” and to engage in theoretical and practical projects designed to socialize or industrialize the work remaining in the household.

These visions were, however, doomed to failure for a variety of reasons, the most important of which was the capitalist drive to accumulate. The commercial laundry business, for example, had, as Strasser explains, removed much laundry work from the home, but because of the nature of its services it remained small-scale, labour-intensive, and less amenable than manufacturing to improvements in production techniques. Washing machines, by contrast, could be readily produced on assembly lines and easily distributed throughout the nation. A washing machine in every basement meant greater consumption, more waste (since the machines stand idle most of the time), fewer paid jobs for women workers, and more-isolated work for them in the home, as the trend to commodify services was reversed. Similar processes have occurred with transportation and entertainment. “Capitalism had socialized only those aspects of domestic work that could be replaced by profitable commodities or services, and left the cooking, cleaning and nurturing for the housewife.”

But developments in household organization and technology were not the outcome of large capitalist firms acting alone. The state was also actively involved in creating and eliminating alternatives. The extent and nature of municipal services, as well as the regulations that accompanied them, provided the basis for the demand and use of various appliances and facilities. All three authors point to the 1931 Hoover Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, which developed a national strategy of taxation, zoning and other supports designed to promote single-family dwellings for men “of sound charac-
ter and industrious habits." According to Hayden, "its basic support came from manufacturers concerned with selling cars and consumer goods, real estate speculators, and housing developers." Its implementation meant the return of some services to the home and the isolation of millions of women.

The authors also demonstrate that state policies did not simply reflect the interests of capital, that capitalists did not always have things their own way, and that capitalism often took new directions as a result of developments in household organization and of protests from household members. All three books, and The Grand Domestic Revolution in particular, contain descriptions of how people actively resisted, demanded alternative strategies, and tried to implement them, with varying degrees of success. Boarding houses, some initially organized by employers, were later actively discouraged because such a socialized form of providing for daily needs proved to be an incubator for protests. Cooperative housing established by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers allowed workers to resist capitalist efforts to organize their living space: "The tenant owners bought electricity, milk, and ice wholesale and distributed it themselves; when Consolidated Edison threatened to raise their electric rates they switched to diesel power and cut their costs further."

The very structure of capitalist society made it difficult for socialism in one coop to survive for long. The Workers' Cooperative Colony, for example, created housing with "effective social space often used for demonstrations and rallies." These "coops were a hive of political activity," but the unionization of the workers in the coop stores and services made it difficult to compete with other retail outlets using low-wage labour. Other experiments in coop housekeeping often failed because wholesalers refused to trade with them or because they lacked organizational expertise and competent staff. In some cases, servants organized against coop services, fearing "speed-up" of their work and the loss of jobs.

Capitalists also intervened directly to prevent such alternatives from succeeding, or to create alternatives of their own. In so doing, they demonstrated both the tremendous flexibility of capitalism and the importance of household organization to capitalist development. Hayden shows that the suburban
single-family dwelling, as well as the relocation of factories away from congested urban areas, was promoted in large measure as a direct response to demonstrations by workers living in the close intimacy of urban tenements. As one official put it: "Get them to invest their savings in homes and own them. Then they won't leave and they won't strike." Mortgages were introduced as a means of encouraging home ownership, of tying workers into the wage system, and of bolstering the private consumption household. Tenement-house legislation was applauded by at least one academic as a “fight against a lapse into primary communism, a clear-eyed and unflinching determination to save and purify the monogamic family” from the threat to individualism posed by rooming houses.

When *Godey's Lady's Book* suggested that women get together to purchase sewing machines collectively for home use, Singer's partner introduced first the instalment plan, and later the trade-in, to prevent such socialized consumption and to promote increased sales. Water and sewage systems, settlement houses, health and safety regulations, and changes in schools and hospitals were all at least in part the result of reformer demands, as well as of the need for a healthier and more contented labour force. And all demonstrated how inextricably linked were (and are) the household and the formal economy.

Struggles for reform make up a continuing theme throughout the three books, as do the differences among women. Like other technological developments, household technology was diffused unevenly. In general, the rich and the urban dwellers had first access to the latest innovations, but the techniques of mass production eventually led to mass distribution. The initial impact, Cowan argues, was to increase differences among women, but later developments led to greater homogenization, bringing the work experiences of women closer together. The remaining differences among women were reflected in the solutions they promoted. According to Hayden, “the producers' cooperative appealed to housewives, and the consumers' cooperative appealed to professional women and political activists. Women industrial workers were more interested in the possibilities of tying services to industrial enterprises as workers' benefits, while women active in urban movements often looked for ways to introduce new municipal or national services.”
For some, the "servant problem" was paramount; for others, the problem was in being servants. However, as domestic technology increasingly enabled one woman to do the work alone, and as capitalism took more and more of the alternative means of support from women, fewer of them managed servants, were servants, did homework, took in boarders, or sold produce. As Strasser explains: "Because married women were isolated and unorganized in their households, class became a less important distinction for them than for their husbands and brothers, despite important class differences between households." Differences in experiences and solutions remained but were diminished. Especially since World War II, however, married women have entered the labour force in rapidly growing numbers, as they have not only been denied the capacity to provide directly for their needs, but have also increasingly found their husbands' earnings to be inadequate for their required purchases. Differences among women are probably growing again as more women personally confront the labour market.

Material conditions, social relations and ideas change together, and the three authors have not neglected the ideological developments that have accompanied the technological innovations and struggles. Before the 1920s, fired by visions of alternative ways of organizing social relations and production, and encouraged by the possibilities opened up by the new technology, feminists planned, and sometimes put into operation, socialist cities, communitarian villages, model homes and cooperative housekeeping arrangements. Some envisaged transformed ways of providing food, clothing, shelter and the next generation. Others had more modest ambitions, planning specialized methods for one or more components of the work done by women in the household, while accepting in general the capitalist mode of production. Some sought to abolish class differences, others to reduce sex differences.

All faced ideological as well as structural opposition. Cowan sets out to "show that an examination of the tools with which housework was done in eighteenth- and early, nineteenth-century America can teach us a great deal about why the doctrine of separate spheres both suited the needs and encouraged the development of the emerging industrial order."
Hayden documents some of the deliberate strategies of propaganda. In the 1920s, "advertising and marketing firms spent one billion dollars to promote private domestic life and mass consumption." Corporations paid women to travel across the country encouraging consumption and efficiency in the home. Such strategies were, in her view, supported by the "same forces that would remove articles on cooperation from women's magazines" and that would argue, as did an Indiana Chamber of Commerce, that "the first responsibility of an American to his country is no longer that of a citizen, but of a consumer. Consumption is a necessity." For this kind of consumption, a pot in every kitchen and a woman stirring it were required — not a collective pot with one person preparing the broth. Ideological opposition to alternative means of organizing domestic labour was also evident when just after World War I the United States War Department drew up and circulated a "spiderweb" chart listing feminist activists and organizations alleged to be "part of a 'red web' aimed at destroying America through pacifism and socialism." At about the same time, a women's group "dedicated to the Defense of the Family and the State AGAINST Feminism and Socialism" found considerable support in government and industrial circles. From authors such as Catherine Beecher in the nineteenth century, to those like the very modern Phyllis Schlafly, an ideology of consumption by women in the private home has enjoyed wide and positive media coverage.

It should not be assumed that the authors under review are agreed on an explicit, consistent and/or marxist line of argument. In spite of the evidence she marshals to support her expressed attempt to "examine not the ideas and the attitudes but the physical constraints under which people lived their lives"; in spite of her conclusion that "the individual household, the individual ownership of tools, and the allocation of housework had, almost literally, been cast in the stainless steel, the copper, and the aluminum out of which those systems are composed"; and in spite of her argument that "profits are always the bottom line," Cowan still insists that the majority of people "chose to preserve in both the realm of symbol and the realm of fact, those activities that they deemed crucial to the creation and maintenance of family life." Hayden is somewhat more con-
sistent, although she too insists that the lessons to be learned from her analysis are first that patriarchal assumptions must be defeated, and only second that “capitalists as a class, as well as individual men, have a strong economic interest in keeping women subordinate.” Strasser ends where she begins, arguing that “extricating American society and individual women and men from the personal dilemmas that corporate control of daily life imposes takes, first, an understanding that daily life is neither free nor private but bound inextricably with economic and social change.”

This is probably the most important message in these important books: that the personal is political, that the private is invariably linked to the public, and that any analysis that fails to take this connection fully into account is necessarily flawed. The authors also point to the need for much more wide-ranging and imaginative theory and practice, in order to analyze and transform all aspects of the political economy. They underline the argument that all such theory and practice must take sex differences into account.

Notes


3. Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 61. (See n. 2 above.)

4. Quoted in Strasser, *Never Done*, 257. (See n. 2 above.)

5. Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 14, 144

6. Strasser, *Never Done*, 257


8. Strasser, *Never Done*, 8, 9

9. Ibid., 8

10. Quoted in Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution*, 17. (See n. 2 above.)

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11. Ibid., 26

12. Ibid., 286. In what might be labelled an early form of containerization, Hayden considers detached suburban houses to be "bare boxes to be filled up with mass-produced commodities." Ibid., 23

13. Ibid., 254-7, 284

14. Strasser, *Never Done*, 156

15. Ibid., 139


17. Strasser, *Never Done*, 181


22. Strasser, *Never Done*, 11