

Home Economics and “Housewifery” in 1950s America

Julia Barnard

The Centron film “Why Study Home Economics,” made in 1955, is a good starting point for learning about the culture of Home Economics in the 1950s, and about that culture’s manner of combining a corporate agenda with dominant ideas about women’s roles in society. This short film, which appeared in the middle of the 1950s, was made in Lawrence, Kansas as an educational film intended for distribution to high school students. It tells the story of one adolescent girl, Janice, who decides whether or not to take Home Economics. When Janice is asked why she is interested in Home Economics, she responds, “if I’m going to be a homemaker for the rest of my life, I want to know what I’m doing.” Janice then visits the Home Economics teacher, Mrs. Jenkins, to learn more about Home Economics. She explains that “in the courses that deal with the preparation of meals, you’ll learn more than just the fundamentals of how to cook. You’ll also learn the principles of food buying, food handling.” At this point in the narrative, we see a young woman interacting with a butcher at the grocery store (Fig. 1) and another woman opening up her refrigerator, situated next to a pantry filled with cutting-edge boxed and canned food (Fig. 2).¹ Mrs. Jenkins continues “and, of course, the preparation and serving of family meals.”²

When Janice enrolls in Home Economics, she will learn what Mrs. Jenkins terms “the principles of food buying.” Young students of home economics will learn to select the most cost-effective and healthy boxed meal at one of America’s new supermarkets, a “quintessential symbol of the triumph of American capitalism.”³ Janice will learn how to buy appliances like refrigerators and microwaves, important tools in food handling and preservation.

This curriculum reflects the larger socio-cultural context in which Home Economics, a unique subject taught almost exclusively to female students was situated in the 1950s.⁴ The film was educational and commercial, and it was designed to further more general corporate and dominant cultural interests. Home Economics classrooms became an important site of much of the explicit

¹ Travis, Margaret, Script. *Why Study Home Economics*. Dir. Herk Harvey.” Centron Corporation, Inc.: 1955, Film. <http://www.archive.org/details/WhyStudy1955>

² Ibid.

³ Levenstein, Harvey. *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*. New York: Oxford Press, 1993. 114.

⁴ Attar, Dena. “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: The History of Home Economics--A Study In Gender.” *Policies for the Curriculum*. (1989): 131.



Figure 1: A young girl chooses a cut of meat at a “modern” 1950s American supermarket.

and implicit advertising that contributed to the way American eating habits and the structure of the food industry changed in the 1950s. These classrooms were important in changing and shaping the minds of young American women. They combine ideas about gender roles with technical points about food preparation and marketers’ interests in affirming a society increasingly influenced by agents of mass consumption.

Not only were corporate interests being served by the particular contents of the Home Economics curricula, but cultural values both old and new were also an element in the new, post-war Home Economics setting, serving as a sort of hidden element of the curriculum in these classrooms. As Janice thinks about taking Home Economics in the *Centron* film, she reminds her sister and her audience that she wants to be a homemaker one day. This normative assumption and aspiration about women’s lives is reinforced by Mrs. Jenkins, who talks about shopping for “your future family” throughout her discussion with Janice.⁵ In an article she wrote for the *Journal of Home Economics*, Edna Martin (Vice President of the American Home Economics Association in 1953) argued that the teaching of Home Economics was important in schools, formulating her argument around her presumption that all girls were made for a life of housewifery.⁶ This view was widely held, with some publications even suggesting that the role of

⁵ Travis, Margaret, Script. *Why Study Home Economics*. Dir. Herk Harvey.” Centron Corporation, Inc.: 1955, Film.

⁶ *Journal of Home Economics*, Edna Martin, 1953, Vol. 45 No. 1. AHEA, Washington D.C., 24.



Figure 2: A young woman presents her family’s unique assortment of packaged and processed foods from her kitchen’s refrigerator.

the housewife was “divinely ordained.”⁷ It is this attitude towards gender roles, advanced by both men and women that influenced the curriculum in Home Economics classrooms.

Home Economics, as a school subject, began to take hold in the early nineteenth century. In her *History of Home Economics*, Hazel T. Craig shows that Home Economics was, from its inception, gendered and focused on an ideology of separate spheres. Some Land-Grant colleges adopted the “Mount Holyoke plan,” mandating that each female student spend at least two hours learning about food preparation.⁸ These early programs emphasized woman’s domestic role and her function as the agent and manager of “housewifery.” Public secondary schools began introducing Home Economics into their curriculums in the 1880s and 1890s.⁹

One view of Home Economics holds that in public schools, designed primarily “to impose on working-class children the bourgeois view of family functions and responsibilities’ because of a fundamental fear of an unruly working class,” girls’ domestic science classes became an important avenue for transmitting these bourgeois values to a new generation of young girls and women.¹⁰ In

⁷ Attar, *History of Home Economics*, 131.

⁸ Craig, 5.

⁹ Craig, 7.

¹⁰ Attar, Dena. *Wasting Girls’ Time: The History and Politics of Home Economics*. London: Virago Press, 1990. 38.

some schools, domestic economy classes existed due to the idea that the lack of domestic skills held by low-wage and impoverished women singlehandedly sent families on tracks to poverty.¹¹ Home Economics, through this lens, was literally born of an initiative to domesticate and train women for excellence in their sphere, which by the 1950s meant consuming a vast array of products aimed at wealthier post-war Americans.

The Lake Placid Conferences at the turn of the century legitimized Home Economics as an academic discipline. Taking place in the Adirondacks in New York and attended by Wilbur O. Atwater, Director of Nutrition Investigations of the United States Department of Agriculture, and Melvil Dewey, Secretary of the New York Board of Regents, this conference created the categorizations of Domestic Economy, Domestic Science, and Home Economics.¹²

Terms like “Domestic Science” and “Home Economics” helped to frame the study of cooking and buying as an academic discipline, full of skills worth learning and studying. This series of conferences, and later the entire discipline of Home Economics, was founded on the idea that consumer culture was something one could be educated in. Home Economics was the study of consumption: how to buy, where to buy, what to buy, and also what to eat, where to eat, when to eat, and who to eat with. Although these are “skills” that many women today feel they can master alone as functioning adults, they were at the foundation of Home Economics curricula. Contemporary women may find it hard to believe a situation in which women sat captivated by a demonstration that appears to be nothing more than a teacher demonstrating simple cooking techniques (Fig. 3), but some may argue that home economics was built upon such lessons.¹³ After these conferences, the American Home Economics Association was founded in 1909 and helped to set the agenda for national Home Economics curricula.

Around a quarter of a century later, the American Home Economics Association, with the Home Economics Department of the National Education Association, came out with a Statement titled *Consumer Education and Home Economics in Secondary Schools*. This publication started to define the women involved in Home Economics as primarily consumers. It defined Home Economics as a discipline that aims at affirming “the welfare of the consumer as an individual, a member of a family, and a member of a community.”¹⁴ It goes on to pose one central question: “how to use well what we have, as individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole.” This document understands each Home Economics student as a consumer, and suggests curricula within the framework of consumer capitalism.

Young Janice, our Centron protagonist, would receive this type of “Consumer Education” if she took a course on what Mrs. Jenkins calls the “fundamental

¹¹ Attar, *History of Home Economics*, 134.

¹² Craig, 9.

¹³ Travis, Margaret, Script. *Why Study Home Economics*. Dir. Herk Harvey.” Centron Corporation, Inc.: 1955, Film.

¹⁴ United States. *Consumer Education and Home Economics in the Secondary Schools*. Washington D.C.: Consumer Education Study, 1945, 2.



Figure 3: A home economics teacher performs simple cooking techniques to a captivated group of home economics students.

principles of food buying.” As Mrs. Jenkins is explaining this course to Janice, viewers see an adolescent girl, much like Janice, in a supermarket. She is discussing her choice of meat with a butcher. When Mrs. Jenkins is talking about “food handling,” we see the image discussed earlier of a young girl placing an item wrapped in aluminum foil into a refrigerator surrounded by boxed food.¹⁵ Home Economics classrooms were not teaching students how to buy fresh food at markets, but rather to buy pre-made and packaged food at huge supermarkets. These women were being prepared to function in a distinct and new domestic culture that positioned food as a focal point.

This food culture was one manifestation of a broader historical era, one in which women were toying with new ideas about gender and work. During the Second World War, American women experienced an unprecedented amount of freedom when they were allowed into the work force to assist with the war effort. After the war, many of these women lost their jobs and were expected to return home to undertake “the biggest morale job in history,” a job focused on welcoming their husbands home.¹⁶ Polls in this period show that most Americans, both men and women, opposed women working jobs outside of the home. Amidst

¹⁵ Travis, Margaret, Script. *Why Study Home Economics*. Dir. Herk Harvey.” Centron Corporation, Inc.: 1955, Film.

¹⁶ Harvey, 102.

an enormous amount of relocation and suburbanization, American women were “warned against asserting any war-inspired independence.”¹⁷ These women were pushed to enter into a later version of the “housewifery” that existed in the nineteenth century, into a job devalued enough that full-time housewives were thought to be incapable of performing any other jobs.¹⁸ Advertisers in the twentieth century made sure that women understood this message, and Home Economics classrooms helped to reinforce it. In 1956, sixty percent of women attending co-educational institutions were taking classes that prepared them for lives located them safely within the “feminine” sphere.¹⁹ These women, like young Janice, were preparing themselves for lives as faithful mothers and wives. Home Economics as an academic discipline served in part to keep women in domestic roles.

This idea of the “homemaker” was partly a fiction or new cultural construction, even at its inception. In 1953, thirty percent of American housewives were working and by 1957, 22 million women were working full time (12 million of whom were married).²⁰ The 1950s saw the emergence of new ideas of femininity and feminism. In 1957, Betty Friedan documented what she called “the feminine mystique,” or the “idea that a woman’s place was in the home and nowhere else,” but Friedan could suggest that this even during this period, the idea of the spheres was not universally accepted.²¹ American women such as Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rachel Carson, Pulitzer Prize winner Marguerite Higgins, Margaret Mead, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Dorothea Lange all participated in culture and did important intellectual work in the 1950s.

One important change took place in the realm of fashion, where designers began to fashion “casual” clothes and “separates,” items that were functional as well as beautiful.²² As Laura Shapiro notes in her book, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, “the war instigated fresh thinking, and by the late ‘40s a woman’s place was in dispute.”²³ Women like Betty Friedan did not wish to be defined by cookery, housewifery, or buymanship. These ideas about womanhood and femininity were important to the study of Home Economics because the discipline was founded on the ideology of separate spheres.

As women were increasingly pursuing lives based on careers outside of the home, popular media was simultaneously hailing “a renaissance in the home arts.”²⁴ This tendency also seems to be mirrored in the development of Home Economics, which reached the peak of its historical popularity during the same period. Remember, the Centron film, “Why Study Home Economics” was released in 1955, only two years after the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s

¹⁷ Levenstein, 102.

¹⁸ Kaledin, 48.

¹⁹ Kaledin, 52-53.

²⁰ Levenstein, 105.

²¹ Kaledin, 18.

²² Kaledin, 38.

²³ Shapiro, 133.

²⁴ Shapiro, 139.

feminist classic, *The Second Sex*. Dena Attar notes that definitions of housework actually vary widely, and that it has been understood “by materialist feminists... as strictly necessary, productive though unpaid-for-labour; for Marxist feminists it means the reproduction of the labour force.”²⁵ She points out a real problem with Home Economics curricula: their presentation of one singular variation of domestic labor, presented as an expert and scholarly take on woman’s proper role.²⁶ Home Economics curricula did not yet reflect the complexity of postwar women and maintained a relatively conservative vision of women’s work, determined partially by advertisers and corporate marketers.

Ideas about how one should consume were central to these curricula. The *Consumer Education and Home Economics in Secondary Schools* manual explains that “buymanship,” an aspect of consumer education dealing with the use of resources, was a widely accepted part of “basic education” for all secondary school students.²⁷ Again, “buymanship,” an aspect of Home Economics that would include tips on what to buy, where to buy, and how to buy seems to be a fairly self-explanatory skill. However, in an era where marketers were struggling to sell their then-foreign boxed, canned, and premade products, this particular aspect of Home Economics curriculum makes perfect sense. Rightly, the manual reminds teachers to avoid using sources promoting particular brands, noting that many “bulletins, leaflets and pamphlets are prepared by commercial concerns and urged upon the schools for use in consumer education. Some of these are useful, many are only qualifiedly so, and some are useless.” The program’s primary limitation lies in its framework, one that never questions the post-war regime of consumption and status. The outline goes into the aforementioned questions of where to buy and when to buy, and even into “consumer welfare and the economic system.”²⁸

The course in buymanship was also a course in the display of taste and status. The same manual refers directly to an abstract “interest in social status... expressed very often in expenditure of money.”²⁹ Young Janice was learning how to entertain, how to follow trends in fashion and popular culture (Mrs. Jenkins defines this as learning about “the type of clothing you should buy [as well as] the psychology of clothing”), and what and how to eat.³⁰ All of these aspects of Home Economics curricula were meant to prepare women for lives within a clear cultural mainstream, one that often sees status and social position as continually performed through consumer choices. These were choices young girls were being prepared for in Home Economics classrooms.

This kind of status anxiety, expressed clearly in the National Education Association’s publication, was widespread in the post-war period. Historian Richard

²⁵ Attar, *Wasting Girls’ Time*, 145.

²⁶ Attar, *Wasting Girls’ Time*, 145.

²⁷ *Consumer Education and Home Economics in the Secondary Schools*, 6.

²⁸ *Consumer Education and Home Economics in the Secondary Schools*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-19.

³⁰ Travis, Margaret, Script. *Why Study Home Economics*. Dir. Herk Harvey.” Centron Corporation, Inc.: 1955, Film.

Hofstadter mentioned in his 1954 essay, *The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt*, that the importance of “the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life and, above all, of its particular scramble for status and its peculiar search for secure identity.”³¹ He explained that, in the United States, “we boast of the ‘melting pot,’ but we are not quite sure what it is that will remain when we have been melted down.”³² Women were feeling pressure to conform, and were living in an era that few would describe as being “a period of creative risk.”³³ In order to assert class status, sets of standards were necessary, and Home Economics teaching helped to establish “an idea of *objective* rules about housework”³⁴ that could be adhered to by status-conscious women. The scramble for status is a clear factor in Home Economics materials in the post-war period.

These concerns about status anxiety made the transition to processed foods harder for corporations and advertisers, who struggled to avoid a lowbrow reputation. The industry came up with the creative idea that all it takes “to become a gourmet the easy way was a simple technique known as ‘glamorizing.’”³⁵ This advertising campaign helped to legitimize processed foods, and even made it possible to imagine “housewives in Topsfield [applying] the term *gourmet* to a dish made with Cheez Whiz.”³⁶ In one high school, foods classes integrated consumer and domestic lessons by comparing “large cans versus small; ready-mix preparations versus those made at home; prepared sandwich filling versus that made at home; ready-prepared cereals versus those cooked at home.”³⁷ All of these comparisons normalized what was, at the time, a very novel kind of product: prepared (boxed, canned, frozen, or otherwise processed) foods. Cooking, unsurprisingly, was a major aspect in the homemaker’s routine, one that garnered more and more attention during the 1950s. Approaches to this basic aspect of domestic culture were changing rapidly under the pressure of the post-war food industry.

Technological changes in the years directly after the war helped the food industry shift attention towards a new kind of product. The Centron video highlighted the refrigerator and the packaged foods as parts of a normal kitchen. These elements reflect larger social, technological, and economic developments. The refrigerator, a relatively rare appliance before World War II, became a ubiquitous household item in the four years after the war when American families collectively purchased over 20 million of them.³⁸ Along with the 21.4 million automobiles purchased in the same period, Americans were beginning to visit the supermarket and to buy more food less often. These changes were motivated

³¹ Hofstadter, Richard. “Pseudo-Conservative Revolt Revisited.” *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage, 2008, 51.

³² “Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” 52.

³³ Kaledin, 1.

³⁴ Attar, *Wasting Girls’ Time*, 145.

³⁵ Shapiro, 65.

³⁶ Shapiro, 67.

³⁷ *Consumer Education and Home Economics in the Secondary Schools*, 6.

³⁸ Levenstein, 102.

by businesses that were learning to reap immense profits by marketing new and different foods to the general public.

Similarly, during the same post-war period, the food industry had to find a way to market foods manufactured for soldiers to the general peacetime public.³⁹ Important during the war effort, canned and packaged foods were able to travel and last, and could thus help to nourish soldiers far away from home for long periods of time. One product that would grow into immense popularity, Minute Maid orange juice, was developed during the war using the same processes developed for penicillin and blood plasma.⁴⁰ Frozen foods were novel to American consumers, and flavors were lackluster, as the processes canned and boxed foods went through largely removed them. Nevertheless, after the war, the food industry worked to transpose these military meals into supermarkets, and started to “persuade millions of Americans to develop a lasting taste for meals that were a lot like field rations.”⁴¹ Just as military garments such as the “T shirt” gained popularity with post-war consumers, forms of food initially designed for military economy and efficiency soon gained currency in the marketplace.

Advertisers aggressively marketed and popularized “convenience foods.” Ads heralded boxed and canned dinners that required “no pots or pans, no serving dishes, a plate which you throw away when you are finished... This is a housewife’s dream.”⁴² These are the same type of products central to Centron’s film “Why Study Home Economics.” The student’s “typical” pantry is filled with these types of “convenience foods.”⁴³ Although much popular advertising developed themes about homemakers hating “drudgery” or the time it takes to prepare dinner, virtually “no independent research backed up this vision of the homemaker who ‘loathed’ making dinner.”⁴⁴ This trope pervaded advertising, nevertheless, and prevailed, even as some of the new products did not, in fact, save very much time.⁴⁵

The food industry in America was fighting a battle against traditional practices of cooking and food consumption and, in this war, eliminated as many workers as possible in order to replace them with machines as part of “the drive for more value added.”⁴⁶ This “more value added” campaign introduced processed, precooked, and packaged foods to the market in an unprecedented way.

This new wave of processed and prepared foods instigated a huge change in American food and eating habits. Concerns in Home Economics classrooms about preparation time, pricing, and getting “one’s moneys worth” helped to shift the

³⁹ Shapiro, 8.

⁴⁰ Shapiro, 12.

⁴¹ Shapiro, 8.

⁴² Shapiro, 11.

⁴³ Travis, Margaret, Script. *Why Study Home Economics*. Dir. Herk Harvey.” Centron Corporation, Inc.: 1955, Film.

⁴⁴ Shapiro, 44.

⁴⁵ Levenstein, 111.

⁴⁶ Levenstein, 108.

focus away from taste.⁴⁷ One article from a 1950 edition of *Good Housekeeping* is titled “Anyone Can Make a Good Hamburger—And Quick.” Another advertisement in the same magazine promotes a meal by deeming it to be “thrifty.”⁴⁸ Producers generally agreed that industrial food-processing techniques made food tasteless and without texture but argued that because processed foods were easy to market and inexpensive to produce, they were indeed the proper direction for the food industry.⁴⁹ During this era and, perhaps, not without reason, “food industry moguls had a generally low opinion of consumers’ taste buds.” One cookbook, the *June Fete Cookbook*, published in 1955, boasted recipes like “Gourmet Pate de Foie Gras out of cream cheese, liverwurst, and a can of bouillon; they added sherry and Cheez Whiz to broccoli.”⁵⁰ Another publication “suggested sprinkling cheese on tomatoes, topping them with banana slices and mayonnaise, and then browning them in the oven.”⁵¹

As time went on, women were ready to direct their purchasing power towards more delicious culinary products and more sophisticated ideas about womanhood. From the 1960s on, such women simultaneously welcomed Betty Friedan and Julia Child into the cultural mainstream. These two women offered up a future that “took place on a wide-open frontier that invited lifelong exploration, and their appetites for it were as big and eager as a man’s.”⁵² Women had come to understand both the virtues and the drawbacks of frozen foods and chose between specific products.

Women understood the role that Home Economics presented to them, the role of the housewife; but they also understood what Betty Friedan was writing about, and many understood the alternative model for women’s lives that was embodied in figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Marguerite Higgins. Increasingly, after the 1960s, women understood that they could make a choice between the two. Not all women agreed, and they continue to disagree. But courses like Home Economics that presented only one version of healthy womanhood began to appear outdated, and departments and older curricula began to be phased out. At the University of Kansas, the Department of Domestic Science ceased to exist in 1966. Women like Mrs. Jenkins and girls like Janice from Centron’s “Why Study Home Economics” would have a very different conversation today.

⁴⁷ *Consumer Education and Home Economics in the Secondary Schools*, 7.

⁴⁸ “Anyone Can Make Good Hamburgers--And Quick.” *Good Housekeeping* July 1950: 154-158.

⁴⁹ Levenstein, 109.

⁵⁰ Shapiro, 83-84.

⁵¹ Shapiro, 58.

⁵² Shapiro, 247.