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Home Economics as an Art of Improving Family Welfare: Creating a Rational Consumer, 1924-1945

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This article focuses on home economists' efforts to educate women to rational consumption from the 1920s to the end of World War II. Using the publications of key home economists who were active in the field of consumer and family economics – namely Hazel Kyrk, Elizabeth Hoyt and Margaret Reid – I argue that their interest in rationalizing consumption emerged as an effort to counterbalance the negative influence of corporations on consumers. Home economists proposed to direct consumer's spending – like advertisers did – but from a welfare standpoint. Then I analyze home economists' institutional and intellectual influence in federal government, consumer organizations as well as in education from the early 1930s to 1945. I argue that home economists were instrumental in building a new image of the woman consumer as an individual who could be made more rational thanks to scientific and technical information.

Keywords: home economics, consumer rationality, advertising, consumer education

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I. Introduction

In 1933, Elizabeth Hoyt, a professor of economics and of home economics at Iowa State College, explained that the agenda of home economics was "to raise the consumption of economic goods. . . to the dignity of an art," which she called the "high art of living" (Hoyt, 1933, 303). That suggestion was in line with advice given to housewives in nineteenth century books.[1] But in a context of growing concern with the alleged irrationality of consumers, the responsibility of business in manipulating consumer choices, and the rise of technocratic management, the art of consumption took a new meaning for home economists. It was conceived as an effort to raise family welfare which was endangered by corporations.

American families experienced unprecedented affluence during the Roaring Twenties. The development of mass consumption permitted to absorb the massive amount of goods and services produced. In particular, the growth of advertising, of marketing and salesmanship – which all greatly benefitted from the development of new radio programs and women's magazines – were used to increase and direct consumer demand (Donohue, 2003). The development of the market certainly brought new comforts for families but many also worried about the increasing influence of business. Social critics like Frederick J. Schlink, Stuart Chase, Paul Douglas, Rexford Tugwell and Robert Lynd denounced the manipulation of consumers during the 1920s and 1930s. For Thorstein Veblen (1904), who was increasingly popular in the 1920s, consumers were the primary victims of an industrial system ruled by businessmen. Similarly, home economists criticized the "exploitation" of the American public which was considered as "a great pool of suckers" by advertising and, more generally, by business (Busch, 1939, 438). A growing social movement of consumers, in which home economists were important actors, voiced these concerns during the 1930s (see Cohen, 2003; Glickman, 2009).

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

Using the publications of key home economists who were active in the field of consumer and family economics – namely Hazel Kyrk, Elizabeth Hoyt and Margaret Reid – especially in the *Journal* *of Home Economics*, this paper documents how context shaped home economists' view of their intellectual and social role. It also analyzes home economists' institutional and intellectual influence.

In section II, I trace the emergence of home economists' interest in rationalizing consumption during the affluent 1920s in an effort to counterbalance the negative influence of corporations on consumers. I claim that home economists proposed to direct consumer's spending – like advertisers did – but from a welfare standpoint. In section III, I trace the institutional success of home economists' education to rational consumption in federal government and consumer organizations during the 1930s and World War II. In section IV, I relate how education to rational consumption permeated American high schools, colleges and universities during the 1930s and forced social scientists to discuss home economists' view of the consumer.

II. The New Art of Consumption

A group of home economists with an educational background in economics began to investigate consumer behavior in the 1920s. In particular, Hazel Kyrk, worked on a Ph. D. dissertation on "The Consumer's Guidance of Economic Activity" at the University of Chicago which was published as *A Theory of Consumption* in 1924 (Kyrk, 1924). From 1925 onwards, she taught consumption and family economics at the University of Chicago (in the Department of Economics and in the Department of Home Economics). Besides, Elizabeth Hoyt became interested in consumer choice as she wrote her dissertation on "Foundations of Economic Value" (PhD 1925, Radcliffe College) (Hoyt, 1928). She had the same kind of joint appointment than Kyrk at Iowa State College. These women were especially interested in the relationships between business and consumers.

More precisely, home economists worried about the increasing influence of business and corporations on consumers which led to "consumption wastes," that is, purchases of commodities that were not really wanted or which were harmful to consumers. Family income had risen since the beginning of the 20th century but most purchases reflected social emulation and business manipulation and were thus unsatisfactory to consumers.[2] In fact, home economists considered that a large part of the new abundance of commodities was wasteful since production was oriented toward profit, not toward welfare (Woodhouse, 1934, see also Kyrk, 1924, 104).

This concern for business influence on consumers led Kyrk and Hoyt to reject neoclassical demand theory as an explanation of consumer behavior (Kyrk, 1924; Hoyt, 1928). For Kyrk, the utility maximization framework, based on utilitarianism, was obsolete. Three characteristics posed problems: its "individualism" (individual preferences were not influenced by others), its "intellectualism" (choice was the result of a rational process of calculation and deliberation) and its "hedonism" (deliberation rested on a balance between future pleasure and pain). Like the widely quoted economists Veblen (1909) and Wesley Clair Mitchell (1912), home economists doubted the rationality assumption could be applied to firms and to consumers alike. The assumption that consumers were maximizing their utility hindered the fact that most of the motives behind consumption choice were unclear, even to consumers themselves.[3]

Unsurprisingly, home economists advocated the "need of exploring the world behind the demand curve" (Kyrk, 1924, 19), that is, to study the development of wants in order to explain consumption choices. To this end, Kyrk approached values through the concept of family "standard of living."[4] Standards of living encompassed all that was considered necessities by families, the main unit of consumption. (Hoyt equally defined standards of living as satisfactions considered essential by families). They were distinct from actual family purchases, called "manner," "level" or "plane of living."

As they took their source in individual's psychology and personality, standards of living were explained by psychology and in particular, the new functional psychology.[5] For instance, Kyrk (1924) distinguished several individual "instincts" (instincts of self-preservation, of workmanship and of distinction, desire for ownership and play instinct) which influenced standards of living.[6] These instincts were social constructs: they depended on the "cultural content" or "social values" from that time and from the group of belonging. For instance, the goods considered necessary for survival, for attaining prestige and welfare were transmitted by customs and social interactions. Similarly, Hoyt (1938) distinguished different "basic cultural interests" that consumers sought to satisfy through their consumption: two primary interests (sensory and social) present in all cultures and four secondary interests (intellectual, technological, aesthetic, empathetic) (Parsons, 2013, 8). Thus, family standards of living evolved according to individual psychology, family history and "folkways" (a vague term to encompass habits, conventions, customs, and social emulation).[7]

Advertising, salesmanship and fashion were increasingly important in creating new necessities for consumers, which entered into their standards of living (Reid, 1934, 210; Hoyt, 1933, 304). Though corporations did not create consumers' wants from scratch (since commodities occasionally did not find buyers), they strove to control and guide demand in order to increase profits (Kyrk, 1924, 105-7). Wants created by business, with the help of "the ablest psychologists," were denounced as "wasteful," "superficial" and "contrary to the interests of the consumer" (Williams, 1929, 730, see also Kyrk, 1924, 94-5). In particular, monopolistic firms practiced intense salesmanship and product differentiation (through brands) that permitted them to base their selling on the prestige of the buyer rather than on the performance of their commodities. More generally, advertisers and salesmen played on individuals' feelings and interests ("sex appeal, snob appeal, fear appeal and success appeal") rather than on their intelligence (Busch, 1939, 438; see also Reid, 1940, 136; Hoyt, undated). Fashion and social emulation, which were encouraged by business, were especially wasteful. As Hoyt put it: "Millions and millions of dollars every year go out for fads which lose their attraction overnight. A large part of our income is spent in emulative copying of other people still more foolish than ourselves" (Hoyt, 1930 quoted from Parson, 2013, 9). These business influences on consumers' wants drove consumers constantly unsatisfied (Hoyt, 1928; Kyrk, 1930). Besides, wants which were not profitable (aesthetic and intellectual wants for instance) were neglected. Overall, consumer wants were "wasteful" as they were not satisfactory for consumers themselves.

Besides "wasteful" or "futile" wants, another source of consumer "waste" resulted from the poor, if not misleading, information on commodities spread by corporations. With increased affluence, new varieties and growing quantities of goods available, "the possibility of wrong choice ha[d] been multiplied" (Reid, 1934, 210). Besides, consumers now faced unknown sellers while they had previously relied on trust and personal relationships (Kyrk, 1935). Most information on market goods and services came from business advertising and selling practices and was increasingly known for its lack of objectivity leading to fraud, deception and misrepresentation. Finally, new abundance had made it more difficult for consumers to know which product to purchase.

To overcome the negative corporate influences on consumption choices, home economists had faith in the power of science and education. They sought to develop an "art of rational consumption" which would teach women how to attain welfare through consumption (see for instance Monroe, 1937, 670). They proposed to direct and shape consumer's spending for food, clothing, housing, furnishings, transportation and even recreation – like advertisers did – but from a welfare standpoint.

First, home economists argued that consumers needed an objective, disinterested guidance to remake their own valuations and to establish more beneficial wants. The concern for developing better wants or values was shared with Chicago economist Frank Knight. In discussing the relationships between economics and ethics in 1922 at a Harvard conference, Knight claimed that "Our values, our standards . . . are not stable. . . [we need] to test and try these values, to define and improve them, rather than to accept and "satisfy" them (quoted from Van Velzen, 2001, 59-60).[8] If Knight appeared rather isolated in this endeavor among economists, home economists became experts in the critical examination of family standards of living.

For home economists, consumer satisfaction stemmed from the capacity of consumers to attain what they considered necessary.[9] As a result, satisfaction could be more easily attained when "wasteful needs" created by customs, social emulation and "business manipulation" were eliminated. Home economists encouraged consumers to free themselves from external influences and to search for the satisfaction of the most pressing "necessities" (Hoyt, 1933; Williams, 1929, 730). Food, housing and clothing were "basic necessities" since they were necessary to "health and decency" (Monroe, 1937, 665). Conversely, the search for comforts and cultural items had to come afterwards.

In practice, home economists designed "scientific," "standard" or "model" budgets to help families evaluate and modify their own expenditures. Theses budgets, which were based on actual budget studies, were geared towards satisfying basic needs with current income.[10] Specific shares of the budgets were devoted to food, clothing, housing, furnishings, but also education, health, transportation and recreation (Donham, 1929; AHEA Committee, 1932; Hoyt, 1933). It also included savings and taxes. Model budgets served as an "objective" criteria to define rational consumption.

Home economists made clear that a "one best budget" was impossible to devise since household budgets depended on the characteristics of families (AHEA Committee, 1932). Thus, some of them constructed different optimal household budgets, taking into account the characteristics of families (Woodhouse, 1926; Marlatt, 1936; Comish, 1936). In particular, budgets were designed according to income level or professional status (poor families, wage earners, college faculty members).[11] Some studies investigated the influence of family size and tried to reduce families to a common denominator. Such denominator was based either "upon the energy or other nutritive or physical requirements of persons of different age and sex" or "upon expenditures made for members of families of different age and sex" (AHEA Committee, 1932). The latter was considered as the easiest way to develop guides for family expenditures. Home economists attempted to construct cost-consumption scales representing relative expenses for different members of families. Many other home economic studies focused on specific items instead of total expenditures.

One of the main focus of home economists were "scientific standards" for food expenditures.[12] Besides being a physical necessity, food was also a large part of daily family expenditure.[13] The significant development of nutrition permitted to assess the biological needs of family members. As a result, it was possible to devise food standards and thus to say whether "the family's diet [was] adequate for health" (AHEA Committee, 1932). In fact, home economists believed that science could help define the most urgent and beneficial needs (for instance see Hoyt, 1939, 3). For them, the combination of science and education could help families judge their own spending and develop beneficial wants (Kyrk, 1935).

Yet, if shaping food needs toward a healthy and economical minimum was foreseeable, shaping other consumer needs toward welfare soon appeared a difficult task. Indeed, home economists struggled to establish definite criteria to define needs for housing, clothing, household articles and recreation since such "criteria of adequacy lack[ed] the kind of scientific bases we have for dietary standards" (Dickins, Monroe & Greene, 1944, 505). These needs differed among individuals according to their social background (Hoyt, 1931; AHEA Committee, 1932). Besides, the notion of necessities had evolved. Commodities that had been considered as non-necessities a generation ago – like bathtubs, radios, movies, telephones, and automobile for instance – entered the standard of living of many families in the 1920s. It then appeared difficult to set a fixed level of necessities.

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

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

Although home economists had helped women “to choose among the bewildering variety of goods competing for their dollars” since the beginning of the XXth century, consumer buying education acquired greater significance in the late 1920s. Indeed, most home economists considered that “objective” information on commodities was needed as a “more adequate basis for purchases than beautiful pictures, appealing slogans, and the endorsement of movie actresses” in advertisements (Williams, 1928, quoted from Jacobs, 2007, 89; see also JHE Editorial, 1927; JHE Editorial, 1934). All the more so as families faced decreasing purchasing power as well as quality deterioration “in practically every line of goods” during the Great Depression (Nystrom, 1932, 872). Home economics courses in colleges and universities (including in extension services) provided a product-centered technical expertise with the use of buying guides, the critical analysis of advertising statements, the search for technical information (like labels, grades, ratings) and knowledge to assess the quality, the economy and the effects of goods and services on health (Kyrk, 1941).

Although home economists criticized business influence on consumers, they also sought to affect consumer expenditures but through the promotion of “intelligence,” “rationality” and “welfare” in buying choices and the dissemination of technical information on market commodities. As many contemporary social scientists (like John Dewey and Wesley C. Mitchell), home economists had faith in the ability of science and education to further social progress, in that case, to enhance family spending. Home economists’ art of “rational consumption” permeated American society during the 1930s.

III. The ‘Rational Consumer’ Turn in American Society and the Dissemination of Home Economics

Whereas the art of consumption was initially conceived as a response to the new problems caused by affluence, it flourished in the context of scarcity of the 1930s. Indeed, as their incomes had dropped, American families were led to reconsider and to reduce their wants. The question of satisfying the most urgent family needs became a practical urgency. Likewise, the possibility of guaranteeing a minimum for the maintenance of families was a great political concern. The home economists’ emphasis on thrift as well as their efforts to prioritize wants appeared as a providential help in that context. Besides, in retrospect, home economists’ denunciation of the artificial stimulation of consumption by business appeared justified. As a national Thrift Week was organized in 1931, the editorial of the *Journal of Home Economics* noted: “January, 1930 finds the advocates of wise spending no longer like prophets crying in the wilderness, but in general favor as public speakers and teachers . . . let the upholders of old-fashioned thrift give heartfelt thanks” (JHE Editorial, 1931, 57).

Federal government popularized home economists’ efforts to teach women how to prioritize basic needs. At the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Home Economics (BHE), Hazel Stiebeling and her group of home economists conceived healthy menus at four cost levels in 1933 (Goldstein, 2012).[14] As they were part of New Deal relief programs, these budgets were publicized by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and distributed widely throughout the 1930s. Besides, many home economists taught women about nutrition and emergency food budgets (see Stage & Vincenti, 1997). Home economists’ efforts to shape family wants toward a suitable minimum thus benefitted from federal support during the 1930s.

The BHE permitted a consolidation of home economists’ expertise on market commodities. It conducted tests on food products (value of foods in terms of bodily needs), on textiles and clothing (fabric quality) as well as on household equipment (design and physical properties). More broadly, it gathered information on consumer commodities and operated as a “clearinghouse about consumer goods” (Goldstein, 2012, 64). In particular, Ruth O’ Brien, the head of the BHE Division of Textiles and Clothing was asked by President F. D. Roosevelt’s National Emergency Council to write a quality guide for ready-made items (Goldstein, 2012). It was published as “Present Guides for Household Buying.” The BHE also contributed to the Consumers’ Guide published from 1937 to 1942 by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s Office of Consumers’ Counsel. Dealing mostly with food products, this guide was one of the most widely circulated periodicals during that period.

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

Home economists' expertise in consumption was soon imitated by several consumer organizations. In particular, organizations testing consumer goods like the Consumers' Research (CR) and the Consumers Union (CU) proliferated and were part of the "consumer movement" of the 1930s. CR was the first US subscribers-financed organization for testing consumers' products.[16] It was founded in 1929 by Stuart Chase and Frederick John Schlink - the authors of the best-seller *Your Money's Worth* (1927). The latter described the "exploitation" of consumers by business: besides creating unnecessary wants, the profit-motive led to production of hazardous and inefficient commodities and misleading advertising. According to Schlink and Chase, the solution was to provide consumers with results of objective technical and economic research so that they make informed choices. Consequently, CR staff gathered information on commodities either from private or public sources. They used these to evaluate goods according to several criteria: quality/efficacy, durability, cost and reliability (Rao, 1998). As such, they implicitly encouraged consumers to primarily seek convenience (durability, quality, service) while buying a good or a service. Results were published in a bi-monthly bulletin, the Consumers Research Bulletin. CR tried to compete with BHE in providing a product-oriented technical expertise. It was increasingly popular: the number of subscribers increased from 25,000 in 1932 to 40,000 in 1933 (Donohue, 2003, 180). This success indicates that concerns for rationalizing consumption were increasingly shared among consumers.

The relationships between CR and home economists evolved through time. Home economists initially welcomed "a new ally in consumer education" (McGovern, 2006, 189).[17] Indeed, CR method was quite close to home economists consumer buying education. It proposed a technical, independent and objective expertise to families, emphasizing the importance of standards, testing and science (Rao, 1998, 931). Home economists were early members of CR staff: Edith Copeland became the first employee of CR (besides Schlink and Chase). Other home economists were thereafter hired, as well as economists and consultants (mainly women) (McGovern, 2006).[18] Besides, "Schlink addressed home economists numerous times over the first few years of the organization's existence" (McGovern, 2006, 189).[19] Yet, CR soon criticized the home economics profession for being too close to business. In particular, Schlink denounced the commercial influence on home economics education which impeded a truly "objective" guidance of consumers (McGovern, 2006, 202-203).[20] In an increasingly competitive environment between consumer organizations, each argued that they were more objective and scientific than the others.

CU was also a non-profit consumer organization which defended the idea of "wise buying" like CR and contemporary home economists. It was created in 1935 by some of CR employees who were unsatisfied by CR lack of emphasis on labor conditions (Glickman, 2001).[21] For them, labor conditions were an important criterion for evaluating commodities. Consequently, they emphasized this topic in their "scientific" analyses and testing of commodities which were published in *Consumers Reports.*

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

Business also turned toward the 'art of rational consumption' in an effort to adapt to a new type of consumers who were increasingly demanding regarding their spending. Through the creation of private testing institutes, which were often associated to women's magazines, more emphasis was put on the quality and the usability of goods. Since the 1920s, many women's magazines and newspapers had established "bureaus" and "institutes" aiming at conducting scientific research on household products (Goldstein, 2012). They continued publishing information on consumer commodities throughout the 1930s and the 1940s. In particular, the Good Housekeeping Institute (GHI), which belonged to the Hearst Corporation, a big media corporation, served as a model for other institutes such as the New York Tribune Institute and the Delineator Home Institute. GHI granted the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" to goods tested in the station and advertised in the *Good Housekeeping Magazine*. It also offered a two-years warranty to buyers, thus guaranteeing the reliability of goods advertised (201).

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

Yet, GHI's proximity with business interests turned out to be harmful for the home economics profession who claimed to base its expertise on science and objectivity. Indeed, the Seal of Approval was highly prized by manufacturers since it permitted them to claim high quality. But this was a source of potential conflict of interest for GHI since the latter was funded by advertisers who wanted to publicize advertisements in the Good Housekeeping Magazine.[22] In fact, GHI's tests for evaluating the quality of goods were based on subjective criteria and lacked "scientificity" as compared to methods used in government (Bureau of Standards and BHE), academia or independent research organizations (CR and CU). GHI credibility was tainted in 1939 when the Federal Trade Commission launched an investigation into its activities. The latter concluded that GHI's claims were exaggerated and fraudulent. A small percentage of the products advertised were actually tested, and many errors subsisted (Hearst admitted 40% of error in its tests). GHI was forced to change its standards of testing, to remove some claims, as well as the mention "Tested and Approved" from its Seal of Approval. GHI had participated in blurring the distinction between service to consumers and sales. It reinforced public skepticism in advertising and business. As for home economists, they came to be associated with deceitful attempts to manipulate housewives.

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

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

Rationalizing food consumption became one of the main concerns of American families since food supply was rationed. The study of food and nutrition, which was already the dominant home economics' field of study, expanded.[23] Significantly, the USDA was reorganized in 1943 to give more importance to food problems (Goldstein, 2012). The BHE was brought under a new agency, the

Agricultural Research Administration (ARA), and was renamed Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics (BHNHE) (JHE, 1943). According to the administrator of the ARA, the BHNHE had a "unique and important role in the war, for nutrition problems became of paramount importance to the whole country, and home economists have been leaders in the field" (160). Indeed, political and economic leaders relied on the BHE to popularize ways to improve the eating habits of families (Goldstein, 2012). In particular, the BHNHE established its own nutritional standard stating specific quantities of food for one week for each member of the family according to their sex, age and activity (Kory, 1945). Hazel Stiebeling contributed to establishing a standard for minimum nutritional inputs, the "recommended daily (or dietary) allowances" (Stanley, 1943).[24] Home economists also served on local nutrition committees where they circulated information on the relative economy of various food in an adequate diet. Their ability to translate nutritional scientific information into practical recommendations for American homemakers was appreciated.

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

Finally, home economists' art of consumption greatly benefitted from the context of scarcity of the 1930s and early 1940s. Calls for moderation as well as technical expertise on commodities were supported by federal government through the BHE. Several private consumer organizations carrying more or less close relations with business imitated home economists' "objective" or "scientific" product testing. The American education system was also a powerful vehicle for rational consumption.

IV. The 'Rational Consumer' Turn in Education and the Clarification of the Definition of Economics

The art of consumption permeated the American education system during the 1930s and 1940s. Consumer education became part of general education in high schools. Kyrk even stated that it was then promoted as "one of the objective that should guide school curriculum" since "everyone" was concerned about consumption (1944, 543). It was envisioned as a training to the new "home problems" complementary to vocational and professional education. In colleges and universities, consumer education was spreading too. In 1940, a professor at the University of Maryland estimated that the number of "consumption economics" courses was "ten-fold" that of the early 1930s (Marshall, 1940, 33). The publication of college textbooks is telling: while textbooks on the economics of consumption barely existed before, they multiplied in the late 1920s and 1930s (Kyrk, 1939). In 1928, agricultural economist Warren C. Waite published *Economics of Consumption* whereas Hoyt published *Consumption of Wealth*. The following year, Paul H. Nystrom's *Economic Principles of Consumption* appeared.[25] In 1938, Roland Vaile and Helen Canoyer published *Income and Consumption*, a book written "for use at the University of Minnesota" (Vaile, 1940, 149).

Consumer courses were often envisioned as a new way to teach economics and to provoke students' interest. For instance, Vaile described his 1938 textbook as an "experiment in pedagogy" (1940, 149). With his coauthor Helen Canoyer, they wanted "to know whether or not [they] could get greater interest, appreciation, and understanding of economic principles and problems among beginning students when [they] approached the subject mainly from the standpoint of [their] mutual interest as consumers rather than from the less intimate standpoint of the producer" (150). Similarly, approaching economics from the standpoint of students' interests as consumers in economic process was thought by Kyrk (1944) as a way to appeal to students' immediate self-interest.

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

Although home economists offered most of consumption courses some departments of economics, business-administration, sociology, agricultural economics, finance and education also proposed such courses (Marshall, 1941). However, the content of consumption courses varied widely according to the instructor and the department which offered them (Marshall, 1940, 33-34). Home economists were interested in consumption and home management as important levers to attain family welfare/well-being and health (Sanderson, 1930; Kyrk, 1930; Reid, 1934; Hoyt, 1938; Van Syckle, 1941). Conversely, some economists were interested in consumption from a theoretical point of view.[26] They often stuck to the neoclassical theory of demand.[27] Other economists became interested in consumption on a macroeconomic level. Although home economists also tackled national aspects of consumption, they emphasized "their significance in terms of family well-being" (Monroe, 1944, 66). For their part, the new marketing specialists were interested in the consequences of consumption for industrial and agricultural productions. Home economists' approach to consumption was thus explicitly different from that of economists.

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

In December 1938, at the annual American Marketing Association conference held in Detroit, a breakfast meeting was organized under the leadership of Benjamin R. Andrews in order to gather people interested in consumption economics (Mason, 1998). Andrews was a professor of family economics at Columbia University and a pioneer of home economics.[28] The breakfast meeting resulted in the publication of a literature review of the field of consumption by Kyrk (1939) in the *Journal of Marketing*.[29] Shortly after, in December 1939, a session on "Recent Books on Consumption" was organized at the semi-annual conference of the American Marketing Association (jointly with the American Economic Association). The session was chaired by marketing professor Beckman and led to the publication of several book reviews in the *Journal of Marketing*, in which home economists' contributions stood in good place (Kyrk, 1940; Hoyt, 1940; Cassady, 1940; Widener, 1940; Reid, 1940; Atkins, 1940; Vaile, 1940; Gordon, 1940). Another literature review of consumption economics, written by Beckman, was published in the *American Economic Review* (Beckman, 1940). Finally, in the early 1940s, home economists had revitalized the study of consumption in economics and marketing.

In doing so, home economists contributed to popularize a different vision of the (woman) consumer than that of the neoclassical demand theory: thanks to scientific and technical advice, consumers were capable of "rational" behavior (i.e. deliberate and satisfying choices) and could overstep the influence of customs, social interactions and advertising. But marketing economists' interest in home economists' explanation of consumer behavior faded in the 1940s in part because of the indifference of mainstream economists (Mason, 1998). The latter focused on price, income, and marginal utility as the prime determinants of consumption and they rejected the social and psychological dimensions of consumer choice (147).

The gap between economists and home economists widened as some economists attempted to exclude home economists from their discipline. For instance, Warren Waite (1933) stated that home economics "[was] largely concerned with the administration of the individual consuming unit" whereas "the economist largely concerns himself with a wider group, the market. Thus the economist talks about market behavior, market prices, marketing institutions, and so on" (572). Economists were not interested in the administration of family income even if they could make some contributions to these "technical" problems. Similarly, Frank Ward (1940) claimed that home economics was concerned with "home management" and provided knowledge and judgment to homemakers in order to "operat[e] the home efficiently on the income available" (368). For most economists, home economics was an art of spending time and money similar to business management and accounting but applied to the family.

Paradoxically, home economics defined as the administration of family resources had to be a serious concern for economists who shared Lionel Robbins' 1932 definition of economics as "the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" (1935, 16). Indeed, Hoyt (1940) explicitly referred to Robbins' definition. To her, consumer's problem was the minimization of the spending of family resources to attain family members' wants. Mary Jean Bowman, an economist who taught consumer economics at Iowa State College along with Hoyt and Reid, also used Robbins' definition although she did not quote him directly (Bowman, 1939, 22). In the mid-1940s, prominent economists like Oskar Lange and Joseph Davis, the former president of the American Economic Association, recognized that managing family resources was a significant issue for economists (Lange, 1945; Davis, 1945).[30]

However, Robbins' definition of economics was not widely shared among economists during the 1930s and 1940s.[31] Most of them defined their discipline as the study of wealth or of the market. Conversely, home economists' view of consumption distanced itself from a focus on the market and made room for household management (use of time, division of labor, work method).[32] For instance, time and efforts were considered as important elements in consumption behavior since they could be used as substitutes for money expenditures (Comish, 1936). Most economists were not willing to include the allocation of time and effort within the scope of economics.

In spite of that, some home economists considered themselves as proper economists. For them, home economics was not only practical home management advices to housewives. For instance, Kyrk (1924) and Hoyt (1928, 1938) investigated the valuation and choice processes like many other social scientists (economists but also psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists). Home economists also studied the economic system from the point of view of consumers/families. Thus, after economist Homer Widener referred to her book *Consumers and the Markets* (1938) as dealing with "marketing practices and buying motives […] not [with] economic theory and its systematic application" (Widener, 1940, 124), Reid made clear that she was "*by profession an economist"* who had "studied the economic system including marketing practices from the standpoint of the efficiency achieved in performing certain services important to consumers" (Reid, 1940, 134, my emphasis). Even though home economists dissented from other economists, they regarded their work as "economics."

Perhaps the main divergence between economists and home economists was their relation to normative questions. Economists often criticized home economists' focus on family satisfaction/welfare because for them, the effort to manipulate consumers' ends should not be part of economics. For instance, economist Ralph Cassady claimed that economists "can throw light on our economic system, and indicate various economic phenomena which may affect the consumers' activities," but cannot "aid directly in improving consumption" since "direct[ing] purchases in any specific way . . . would be dictating choices" (1940, 123). Similarly, Widener attacked this "self-appointed group of consumer experts who are determined to spend the consumers' money for them" (1940, 131). For most economists, consumption choices should remain in the hands of individuals. Some home economists like Coles (1938) and Reid (1938) defended themselves by arguing that they did not want to direct consumer choices but rather to help consumers choose with greater knowledge.[33] By providing scientific and technical information on market goods and services and on the determinants of wants, they hoped that consumers would devise their own definition of welfare. Other home economists recognized that they tried to influence consumers for their own good: they "set[…] tentative goals" and tried to "maximiz[e] satisfaction" (Van Syckle, 1941, 82; Hoyt, 1940). As such, they claimed to be close to early economists interested in consumption, namely, Simon Patten, John Hobson and George Watkins, who focused on welfare (see for instance Kyrk, 1939).

Finally, while science is often said to influence education, the "art of rational consumption" is an example of the opposite. The great success of consumer education led to a renewed interest for consumption among social scientists. Home economists' vision of a "malleable" consumer provoked discussions (especially among economists close to the new marketing field) since it questioned the neoclassical explanations of consumer behavior. This led to the clarification of the frontier of the economic discipline away from the question of the allocation of family resources. Consequently, home economists remained the leading consumer and family experts in academia.

V. Conclusion

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

The "art of rational consumption" developed by home economists is exemplary of the faith in science and expertise as vehicles for social progress which was widely shared during the 1920s and 1930s. But it is also evidence of the active role consumers took in the development of the consumer society. During times of crisis, like the Great Depression and World War II, there was a significant demand for information and expertise on consumption. Finally, home economists both aroused and benefited from a new interest in consumption.

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Notes

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[1] Catharine Beecher's *Treatise on the Domestic Economy* (1841) is a famous example of this kind of literature.

[2] Kyrk stated "It is certainly true that the consumer could have vastly more health and less illness, more beauty and less ugliness, more usefulness and less trumpery, more amusement and less boredom, by a different expenditure of his dollars" (1934, 18).

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

[4] Kyrk was likely to be influenced by pragmatist philosopher John Dewey on valuation, as remarked by Susan Van Velzen (2001). Dewey had been chairman of the Chicago department Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy from 1859 to 1904. This department had housed the newly created department of Household Arts in 1901, later transformed into a Department of Home Economics and Household Administration. Dewey's influence may still have been significant while Kyrk was a graduate student in economics at the University of Chicago in the late 1900s (she completed her Ph. B. degree in 1910).

[5] Functional psychology is a school in psychology which relates human behavior and mental state to the external environment. It owes much to the work of John Dewey, William James and George Herbert Mead at the University of Chicago in the late 20th century. "[Functional psychology] emphasizes the causes and consequences of human behavior; the union of the physiological with the psychological; the need for objective testing of theories; and the applications of psychological knowledge to the solution of practical problems, the evolutionary continuity between animals and humans, and the improvement of human life." See https://dictionary.apa.org/functionalism

[6] Kyrk relied on Veblen for the instinct of workmanship and the instinct of distinction.

[7] Both Kyrk's and Hoyt's theories of consumption relied heavily on Veblen (1899) and Mitchell (1910, 1912).

[8] It is not clear whether Kyrk and Knight had read each other. In 1922, Kyrk had finished writing her dissertation (published in 1924) while Knight was professor at the University of Chicago. Knight gave two conferences at Harvard on the relationships between economics and ethics (Knight, 1922; Knight, 1923).

[9] Home economists' "standard of living" framework emphasized the difference between one's level of living (sum of goods and services purchased) and the satisfaction it procured. A same level of living could either lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction according to one's standard of living (appreciation of the essentials). If the level of living covered the essentials, that is, the standard of living, then it was satisfactory. Privation and

dissatisfaction emerged when families lived below their standards. As such, even a high level of living could be unsatisfactory.

[10] Home economists used in particular the Consumer Purchases Study as well as Cost of Living Studies data.

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

[12] On nutritional standards, see Kory (1945)

[13] According to Jacobs (2007, 42), an average wage-earning family spent 40% of its annual income on food in 1901 and 35% in 1940.

[14] They used the data on food consumption from the Consumer Purchases Study, the first comprehensive study of family income and expenditure in the US.

[15] The BHE bulletins circulated widely during the interwar period. It reached 2 million people in 1927 according to Goldstein (2012, 103).

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

[17] "Home economists found [*Your Money's Worth*] evenhanded and stimulating; its advocacy of scientific purchasing fitted the goals of the home economics movement, and Chase acknowledge a debt to Henry Harap, the home economist and educator whose work predated his own." (McGovern, 2006, p. 179)

[18] CR rapidly grew: in 1932, they were 20 employees (Donohue, 2003, 180).

[19] CR was also supported by well-known economists, namely Tugwell and Mitchell, who were interested in consumer and business unbalanced relationships.

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

[21] CU members defended the idea of a convergence between consumers' and workers' interests. For them, the ultimate aim of both workers and consumers was a "decent standard of living." This included high wages but also high purchasing power, satisfactory labor conditions and high quality consumer goods.

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

[23] A study of the AHEA estimated that 46% of the 700 projects conducted by home economists in 1941 and 1942 tackled foods and nutrition topics (Dickins, Monroe & Green, JHE, 1944).

[24] Stiebeling became assistant chief of the BHNHE in 1942 and was made its chief in 1944.

[25] Paul Nystrom was an economist (Ph. D from the University of Wisconsin in 1914) and a pioneer of marketing. He taught briefly at University of Wisconsin and at the University of Minnesota before joining Columbia University. He first published books on retailing and fashion (1915; 1928).

[26] "The field of consumption from the point of view of the interests of different groups" Folder 5, Box 13, EEH.

[27] For instance Waite and Cassady (1939) used marginal utility as an explanation of choice.

[28] Andrews became the first secretary-treasurer of the AHEA in 1908 and the first director of the *Journal of Home Economics* in 1909. He published *Economics of the Household* in 1923.

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

[30] Using home economists' distinction between standards and actual levels of consumption (without any reference to them), Davis claimed that "Improving the planes and content of living, with due respect to varied needs and preferences, is an eminently practical and wholesome overall objective of individual ambition and of national and international policy. Achievement of such improvement is not mere humanitarian dream. *It is basic to attaining fuller utilization of available resources, hence a serious concern to economists*" (Davis, 1945, 14, my emphasis).

[31] Robbins' definition of economics was progressively accepted and became prominent only in the late 1950s, especially among Chicago economists (Backhouse & Medema, 2009).

[32] The inclusion of time as an input in family production will be used by Gary Becker to renew the study of the economics of the family in the 1960s (Becker, 1965).

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