

The Housework Monster

“Why ‘More Work for Mother?’: Knowledge and Household Behavior, 1870–1945” by Joel Mokyr, in *The Journal of Economic History* (Mar. 2000), Karl Eller Center, 202 McClelland Hall, Univ. of Arizona, P.O. Box 210108, Tucson, Ariz. 85721–0108.

One of the great mysteries of American domestic life is why, for many decades after 1870, despite new labor-saving appliances and declining fertility, married women continued to spend at least as many hours as ever on housework and child care. Scholars have offered assorted explanations, including an academic variant of Parkinson’s Law (that work expands to fill the time available for its completion). Mokyr, an economic historian at Northwestern University, does not reject all previous explanations, but adds a new one: Scientific advances in understanding the causes of disease persuaded American housewives that responsibility for their family’s health rested in their hands, driving them to spend “more time cleaning, nursing, laundering, cooking, and looking after their children.”

The connection between filth and disease had come to be vaguely understood by the early 19th century, Mokyr says. “The sanitary and hygienic movement that began after 1815 . . . picked up enormous momentum between 1830 and 1870, and swept the later Victorian era, leading to a widespread if unfocused war against dirt.” New statistical data lent support to what had been long suspected: “the close relation . . . between consumption patterns, personal habits, and disease.” In the 1850s, contaminated water was discovered to be the transmission mechanism of cholera and typhoid. After 1865, the germ theory of disease came into its own, Mokyr notes, and in the final two decades of the century, “researchers discovered pathogenic organisms at about the rate of . . . one every two years,” gradually establishing how the diseases were transmitted. With the identification of the tubercle bacillus in 1882, tuberculosis ceased to be seen as “hereditary and beyond human control.” So it went with other infectious diseases as the new bacteriology progressed. No longer was fate or Providence chiefly responsible for

illness. Blame for the era’s high infant and child mortality rates, for example, was pinned on inadequate maternal care. The new science of home economics came into being to teach women how to keep the microscopic enemy at bay.

In the 20th century came more burdens, as it became clear that certain diseases, such as rickets, pellagra, and scurvy, were the result of nutritional deficiencies. The fresh emphasis on providing family members with a “good diet,” Mokyr observes, “heaped even more responsibility on the homemaker’s already overburdened shoulders.”

After World War II, however, the poor housewife finally got a break: The introduction of antibiotics, says Mokyr, took away some of the household responsibility for health, transferring it to doctors. The new “wonder drugs” allowed homemakers to relax their standards of cleanliness a little, without worrying that family members might fatally suffer for it.



This 1920 ad’s promise of more leisure for America’s housewives proved to be an illusion.