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# House/Work: Home as a Space of Work and Consumption

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## Abstract

This paper explores the literatures on home as a place of work and a space of consumption. Geographers have made significant contributions to our understandings of homes as spaces that are (re)made by the work and consumption that goes on within them, as well as being locales of many different forms of work (paid and unpaid) and multifarious consumption activities. The paper focuses on how work and consumption in the home intertwine. That is how consumption at home creates work and is a form of work itself. Few activities in the home are separable from the work that goes on there, and consumption is intimately tied to domestic labour. This paper explores these relationships between work and consumption in the home focusing on housework, paid domestic labour, cooking and eating and sustainable consumption.

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## 1. Introduction

Every day I am cleaning for my madam, one riding shoes, two walking shoes, house shoes, that is every day, just for one person ...plus the children, that is one rubber and one shoes for everyday school, that is another two. Fourteen shoes every day. My time is already finished ... You will be wondering why she has so many bathrobes, one silk and two cotton. I say, 'Why madam has so many bathrobe?' Every day you have to hang up. Every day you have to press the back because it is crumpled (Filipina domestic worker in Paris, quoted in Anderson 2001 p. 21).

The employment of paid domestic workers highlights the close relationship between consumption and work in the home. Work for one person, the employee, is consumption for another, the employer. As this quote shows, the work of making home can be considerable, and the consumption that goes into establishing and maintaining a particular lifestyle at home can be considerable too. Stuart Aitken has argued that 'work creates place' (2009 p. 190), and this paper examines how homes are linked to wider economic, social and environmental systems by the consumption work that goes on in them. It examines the relationship between work and consumption in the home and argues that these two activities are not necessarily distinguishable. Housework and consumption have often been regarded as binary opposites, and research has tended to see its focus as on one or the other. Consumption is generally thought of as a leisure activity, a form a relaxation and the opposite of work: it might be a browse in the shopping centre, a self-indulgent meal or a holiday in the sun. However, this paper shows that consumption is also closely bound up with necessary activities and work, particularly in the home. In fact, among the first mass-produced consumer objects were cleaning products aimed at reducing the drudgery of housework and from the turn of the 20th century, housewives were targeted by early advertisers as home economists taught them that their new job was to shop (Matthews 1987; Strasser 1982). Refocusing on the *work* of consumption allows for a broader understanding of both activities.

It is important to reveal consumption as being inseparable from work in the home as this disrupts the casual dualisms of public/private, work/home and production/consumption, which are strongly gendered. The extent of home-making work can be revealed, as part

of an ongoing project to expose the amount of women's unpaid work, and the value and variety of reproductive labour (see, for example, second-wave feminist work such as chapters in Malos [1980] 1995). An examination of the geographic and historic specificity of home-based activities also shows how far such activities are from being natural or essential. This article takes three angles on the close relationship between work and consumption in the home, examining three topics that show in distinct ways how work and consumption intertwine. Although the paper begins with what might be thought of as the traditional terrain of feminist geography, discussing housework and then research on paid domestic labour, it soon moves to two other topics that have been flourishing in recent geographical research – food consumption and sustainable consumption – that are less often analysed through a gender lens and that provide fertile ground for making links not only between social and economic relations but also to the natural world.

The paper begins by examining how housework became a topic of academic study as part of the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s and how the geographic and historical specificities of household work were revealed. I then focus on three areas of recent research where, I argue, work and consumption in the home come together in distinct ways and that demonstrate three different relations between work and consumption. First, paid domestic labour, a form of work that facilitates the consumption of others; second, food consumption, the work of very literally consuming; and third, sustainable consumption, the work of minimising consumption and dealing with the waste consumption creates. Exploring the links between work and consumption in the home reveals the relationships between the home, the wider economy and the natural world. The lives of most people in the minority world are tied to capitalist forms of production and exchange, even within the 'private sphere' of the home and even when we do activities such as housework or childcare, which appear to be beyond the reach of capitalist relations. Intimate, caring, home-based activities are networked to the wider world, through flows of goods and energy, the migration of domestic workers across the globe and our attempts to protect the environment as we consume more sustainably. The paper is by no means a complete review of all relevant research nor does it cover every topic that could be included. As a result the article has a number of lacunae. The most important perhaps is that it focuses largely on the minority world, particularly the UK, USA and Australia and does not do justice to international differences in practices or to inter-relationships between places.

## 2. *Discovering the Work that Goes on at Home*

Housework was 'discovered' as a topic for academic enquiry (rather than a natural fact) as part of feminist struggles to denaturalise women's responsibility for reproductive labour and the work of making homes. These struggles sought to problematise the binary divide between the 'public' world of work and the 'private' world of home and to reveal the *work* that women were involved in when they did housework. Geographers added to this an understanding of how spaces, both inside and outside the home, are shaped by the organisation of reproductive labour. While this literature is often conceptualised as focusing exclusively on women's work in the home, and for many writers the political imperative was to illuminate precisely that, from the start of second-wave feminism there was also an engagement with the role of consumption in shaping women's experiences as housewives.

In 1963 Betty Friedan published 'The Feminine Mystique', a book which is credited with kick-starting second wave feminism (Bowlby 1987) and 'upend[ing] Western women's vision of what constitutes the good life' (Shriver 2010 p. vii). Friedan argued that American housewives were unhappy, trapped and wasted. The book opens:

The problem laid buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slip-cover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent questions: 'Is this all?' (Friedan [1963] 2010 p. 5).

Friedan calls this 'the problem with no name'. It is the general dissatisfaction, and sometimes great misery, that women feel when their only role is try to make perfect homes and be perfect women. Friedan identifies the routine drudgery of housework as problematic, but she also strongly links 'the problem' to women's role as consumers. She sees women as manipulated by the media, primarily women's magazines and advertisers, into believing that buying things will give them the purpose, identity, creativity and self-respect they lack in their lives (Bowlby 1987). The endless round of consumption and display to create the perfect home drains women's lives of meaning [think Betty in *Madmen* (Shriver 2010)]. Friedan is clear that her analysis focuses on educated, middle-class, suburban housewives. A group of women for whom, because of their relative wealth, consumption was central to their daily lives. Learning how to be good consumers had become the work of these women.

Other texts from the period focused more firmly on the labour involved in housekeeping as a way to have women's contributions in their homes recognised as work. Ann Oakley (1974) compared the activities of housewives to those of factory workers and showed how housework made similar demands on both mind and body to routine factory work. There was a strong link between feminist demands for (and debates surrounding) wages for housework and the researching of work in the home [see, for example, Malos [1980] (1995)].

Research on the home revealed the geographic and historical specificity of housework – both as a phenomenon, there were not always specific tasks that were identified as 'housework' in contrast to 'productive' work to provision for the family – and in terms of the forms it took and who was responsible for them, including the changing nature of consumption as an element of housework (Cowan 1989; Oakley 1974; Strasser 1982, 1999). Although the period since the industrial revolution has been a time of dramatic change in the way that households source and use the things that they need, there is not a simple history of households moving from being units of production to becoming units of consumption. What is available to households to buy and the technologies (including energy and water supplies) that are available to them to carry out necessary tasks are mediated by social and economic structures and institutions (Cowan 1989). This means that housework does not simply get easier and less time-consuming as more advanced technologies and well-designed consumer goods become available. The new technologies and goods may change the tasks carried out, and perhaps who does them, but do not necessarily reduce the total amount of work needed to maintain a home. Cowan (1989 p. 79) gives the example of piped water and sewage supplies that replaced systems of water being carried into homes from standpipes and wells. Piped water reduced the considerable labour of carrying water and slops but it also raised standards of cleanliness and underpinned the consumption of cleaning products and use of appliances. Often, the task that was cut out had been carried out by men, whereas those that grew were carried out by women.

Geographic forms and housing design also make a difference to what is bought, what is produced at home and what the work of home-based consumption is. The ideal of the suburban house, which Betty Friedan was railing against, for example, was built on

expectations of particular forms of consumption and gendered work. Single-family homes in widely spaced suburbs rely on the consumption of large amounts of energy (inside the house and for transport) as well as the use of domestic appliances and other consumer goods. Dolores Hayden ([1984] 2002 p. 60) comments that such

dream houses got out of control economically, environmentally and socially because they carried unacknowledged costs: they wasted available land; they required large amounts of energy consumption; and they demanded a great deal of unpaid female labour.

Other ways of living, in higher densities in urban areas or in vernacular housing suited to the local physical environment, create different ways of consuming and working in the home.

Geographers have added to understandings of the different forms that housework takes and how work and consumption at home are related to broader social relations and processes. Recently, this has included interrogation of men's involvement in housework and cultural understandings and interpretations of this (Aitken 2009; Doucet 2004; Gorman-Murray 2008a, 2008b). There are also broader discussions of the gendering of housework in a range of contexts and the importance of the gendering of reproductive labour within development agendas (see, for example, Katherine Brickell 2011 on Cambodia). The paper now turns to look in detail at three areas where research on the inter-relationship between household work and consumption has been particularly fruitful for revealing the myriad ways in which our lives are tied to global-scale systems through the consumption that goes on at home.

### *3. Paid Domestic Work*

Those writing on household work in the 1970s and 80s were likely to be concerned with unpaid work by women in their own homes; by the 1990s and into the 21st century, the phenomenon of paid domestic labour has emerged as a key topic for researchers interested in reproductive labour. The rise of paid domestic labour has been observed throughout the world, and it involves consumption for some people as they employ the labour of others to carry out housework, childcare, elder care and many other activities. It reveals the interleaving of work and consumption in a range of ways. The labour of domestic workers facilitates conspicuous consumption by employers and helps them to maintain and enhance their social status. Additionally, the organisation of domestic work can involve domestic workers themselves becoming like consumer objects, as they are denied the rights that protect other workers. At the same time, domestic workers may be increasing consumption in their own homes, as they earn foreign currency to remit to their families. Migration for domestic work explodes the scale of the home, stretching families across continents and linking housework and consumption in global circuits.

As the quote at the opening of this paper suggests, the employment of domestic workers is not only about providing care for children or vulnerable adults, it is also about maintaining a particular lifestyle. Employers may make choices to buy clothes that need hand washing or to furnish their houses with materials or in colours that are difficult to maintain, because they know that someone else will be doing the work needed to look after those things:

Domestic work is also concerned with the reproduction of lifestyle, and crucially, of status – nobody has to have stripped pine floorboards, hand-wash only silk shirts, dust-gathering ornaments, they all create domestic work, but they affirm the status of the household, its class, its access to resources of finance and personnel (Anderson 2001 p21).

Employers of domestic workers can create work through a desire to display their taste and their status. They may require employees to do certain tasks or to do things in particular ways, such as scrubbing floors on hands and knees, which they would not do themselves as this marks their ability to consume the labour of another person. This is revealed clearly in the historical literature that traces the growth of paid domestic labour alongside the rise of conspicuous consumption in the home. Anne McClintock (1995) argues that the British cult of domesticity, which underpinned the highest points of demand for domestic labour in Victorian times, is explicitly related to the colonial endeavour through acts of consumption. British colonialism produced a particular imaging of 'home' that depended on domestic labour to produce and reproduce gender and class hierarchies. Home became a place of conspicuous idleness and consumption for middle-class women; a place to display objects – many of them the outputs and representations of imperialism – that had to be maintained and shown to others. In this period, the home became a place to display class through gender difference. Women's idleness at home was *the* mark of men's wealth (see also Tosh 2007), but displays of middle-class femininity were based on the use of working-class women's labour, most obviously in the home but also, for example, in the 'sweated' trade of dressmaking. McClintock describes a 'doubling' of women (1995 p. 98) a looking glass world in which the femininity and idleness of middle-class women is dependent on the labour and degradation of working-class women.

When domestic workers are used in this way, it is not only the objects that they care for that are being consumed, it is the worker's labour power and selfhood (Garcia-Castro 1989). In order that the status of the employer is elevated by her activities, the domestic worker is demeaned and she can become an object of consumption or a status symbol herself.<sup>1</sup> The short documentary 'Domestic Worker in Singapore' (Phulsuksombati 2012) compares hiring a domestic worker to buying a new laptop or perhaps a plate of food. Domestic workers have been described as modern-day slaves or indentured workers (Pratt 2004) as they do not have the same contractual or labour rights as other workers (see among others, Anderson 2007; Briones 2009; Cox 2012; Williams and Gavanas 2008), and some are treated as if they are 'owned' by their employers (Anderson 1993, 2000).

The employment of paid domestic workers in private households highlights that the consumption of services is important to the smooth working of many homes. Huge amounts of labour go into maintaining and producing particular lifestyles and that labour is organised at a global scale and segregated by class, gender and ethnicity. One of the most important features of the growth in paid domestic employment is the fact that, particularly in richer countries, domestic workers are predominantly migrants who leave their homes, often thousands of miles away, to work in the homes of richer families in richer countries; this is consumption on a global scale (Labadie-Jackson 2008). Domestic workers' labour is consumed by their employers but they are working abroad to increase their own ability to consume and to provide for loved ones at home. Migration for domestic work is often fuelled by consumption, because the economies of sending countries, such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka, have been restructured and individual households increasingly need money to pay for things, such as food and housing, which may previously have been sourced through subsistence and informal activities. People also increasingly have to pay for services, such as health care and education, which may previously have been provided by the state, and migrant domestic workers may themselves have to employ others to provide care for their families while they are away (Parreñas 2001). To meet their families' needs, workers move abroad and send both cash remittances and goods back to their home countries. For migrant domestic workers, this means that relationships with family can become redrawn in terms of the provision of goods rather than physical presence (Mckay 2007; Parreñas 2001, 2005, 2008; Silvey 2006).

Examination of the phenomenon of migrant domestic work reveals the links between the home and the globe, it shows the work of consumption at home to be networked into international flows of people and money (though the sending of remittances) and to be part of broader political and economic relationships. This international movement of people to carry out domestic work disrupts ideas of home and of family even as it maintains the homes and families of employers.

#### *4. Food, Cooking and Eating: Literal Consumption in the Home*

Food and eating practices are often points of tension between domestic workers and their employers (see, for example, Pratt 2004) and geographers have found that food practices are important for the shaping of identities, the forming of families and influencing the physical space of the kitchen and the home more broadly. Although research on food tends to be framed in terms of consumption patterns, consumption and work are indivisible when we consider food, eating and cooking are the work of literal consumption. Not only do we consume food itself, we shop for it and for many gadgets and other items associated with it, and then cook it and clean up after it. Cooking can be a burden for some people, but for many, cooking (and eating) is experienced as leisure and relaxation, more enjoyable than other forms of domestic work, and even a form of resistance to structural inequalities. Foodways can also be important for maintaining links to past experiences of food and eating and to sustain identities.

One of the most vibrant areas of recent research on eating habits has been the exploration of different foodways within households, and this work reveals the relationship between the work involved in food consumption and the importance of consumption practices to identity formation. Valentine (1999) argues that an examination of cooking and eating practices within the home can challenge the idea that households are single units of consumption. Rather, she argues that family members can use shopping, cooking and eating to create identity in different ways, and the household can, thus, be a site of multiple and contested consumption patterns. Similarly, Wills et al. (2008) researched teenagers' eating habits and how these were part of complex arrangements that reflected teenagers and parents lifestyles and personal relationships. For teenagers, eating habits could be a way to assert an independent identity but for parents catering to flexible arrangements could be time consuming and a site to negotiate rules and boundaries (see also Jackson 2009). There has also been a flourishing of research on children's eating practices and food preferences in the home (see, for example, Kime 2008; Kenneally and Lebel 2009; Curtis et al. 2010). Although much of this work is influenced by concerns to support 'healthy' eating, it also reveals that the negotiation of food practices between children and adults is constitutive of generational identity and of the family itself.

Cooking and eating are also important to adult identities, and research on food is one of the areas that suggests that (some) housework is experienced positively as a form of affirmation and even resistance. In 1990, bell hooks published her seminal essay 'Homeplace (a site of resistance)', in which she argues that the homes of African Americans were created as spaces of nurturance in the face of the brutality of racist oppression and that Black women's work of homemaking for their families was an act of resistance that allowed black people to regain the dignity they lost in the outside world. There is now a growing body of work that echoes this and shows migrant and minoritised women's work with food in their homes to be a form of resistance to racism and alienation. Rather than being a burden, the work of cooking has been found to be a celebration of community and a basis of resistance for minority women in a range of circumstances (Kneafsey and Cox 2002; Matthee 2004). Additionally, the preparation and cooking of food, as well as eating it, provides a visceral connection to homes left behind and enables migrant women to create a sense of place in a new location (Longhurst et al. 2009).

Similarly, the kitchen can be a space of freedom and belonging for women (see Pascali 2006 on Italian migrants in North America and Supski 2006 on migrants to Australia in the post-war period) as well as a place to labour. Louise Johnson comments that 'The kitchen is where work mingles with desire, pleasure, creativity, violence, safety and other people; and where domestic technologies, architects and designers create devices and spaces which shape gender' (2006 p123). It is a place where work and consumption are inseparable. Not only does our need to consume food shape the kitchen but the kitchen itself is the site of ongoing consumption decisions that reflect fashions in interior design and domestic technologies. The size, layout and organisation of the kitchen change over time and reflect cultural imaginings of the 'right' way to live and do family life (Johnson 2006; Saarikangas 2006).

##### *5. Dealing with the Detritus of Consumption: Environmental Concerns, Sustainable Consumption and Housework*

In recent years, concerns about climate change and environmental degradation have led to increased research into resource use within households and a focus on sustainable consumption. Research shows that consumption (particularly of water and energy) and the creation of waste are tied into routine household activities and everyday practices. Geographers have investigated the home as an important site of sustainable consumption and engagement with environmental concerns (Barr and Gilg 2006). There is a large literature that investigates 'green' consumption by households in terms of shopping behaviours and choices of goods such as food (see, for example, Barr 2006; Hinton and Goodman 2010; Gibson et al. 2011 and contributions to Lane and Gorman-Murray 2011) but in this section, I focus on practices inside the home, consumption and attempts to live more sustainably. In particular, I want to highlight the work that goes into minimising consumption. Waitt et al. (2013: 51) call this 'the work of being sustainable'; this is a burden that is not shared equally between or within households. Women do more of the work of sustainable consumption and have higher expectations of what should be carried out, and this is linked to their traditional role within the home.

For households in the minority world, consumption is our normal way of being in our homes and making spaces that feel homelike depends on consuming goods and services and also energy and water (Pierce et al. 2010; Shove 2003). The very normality of such consumption appears to make it difficult to address, and a range of studies have commented on the gaps between expressed desires to consume less (or more sustainably) and people's actions when it comes to consumption in their homes (Pink 2012). Discourses of rationalisation of lifestyles, often favoured by policy makers, can alienate householders, because they do not chime with their social justice priorities and may not be sensitive to the way that consumption fits with the everyday work of making home and the meanings of household consumption (Hobson 2002, 2003, 2006; Lawrence and McManus 2008; Martens and Spaargaren 2005). Waitt et al. (2013 p. 68) have found, for example, that it is lower income households who do the greatest amount of work to increase their sustainability at home, whereas 'it is relatively affluent populations and households, often with a high interest in, and commitment to, sustainability, who continue to live unsustainably by virtue of their ability to consume.'

By looking in detail at (un)sustainable behaviours in the light of routine practices and as a form of work that goes on in the home, rather than just as a form of consumption, greater insight can be gained into precisely why people behave as they do and how to change unsustainable behaviours. Sarah Pink's (2003, 2004, 2005) detailed visual ethnographic research, videoing research participants in their homes as they go about their daily routines, has uncovered the details of quotidian practices and sensory experiences of living in a home and revealed unpredictable reasons for why people use resources in the way that they do. This

fine-grained approach locates sustainable consumption in the context of housework, rather than environmental beliefs, and is able to shed a great deal of light on routine (un)sustainable behaviours (see also pink 2012; Pink and Leder Mackley 2012).

As well as the work of consuming and of trying to consume less, there is work involved in ridding ourselves of the waste of consumption. A large number of studies by geographers and others have investigated household recycling behaviours in a range of countries (see, for example, Kipperberg 2007 on Norway and the USA; Vicente and Reis 2008 on Portugal; Robinson and Read 2005 on London, UK). Recycling is shown to be related to the routine behaviours of housework and, therefore, often organised unequally between household members, particularly men and women (Oates and McDonald 2006). Recycling is also located within relationships between people and is a source of 'warm feelings' that result from doing the right thing. Research by Gregson et al. (2007a, 2007b) has provided nuanced accounts of practices of divestment of used goods by households and how these exist within relationships of love for household members (see also Lane et al. 2009; Horne et al. 2011, on second hand goods and household relationships). This work shows that even attempts not to consume or to reduce the volume of goods in the home involve some kind of household labour and that this labour is embedded in relationships and hierarchies of power.

## 6. Conclusion

Research on work and consumption in the home has diversified considerably since the second-wave feminists raised the issue of women's unequal burden of domestic responsibility and showed that the work that goes on in the home is real work. Housework has long been tied to consumption, and we are increasingly aware of the complexities of this relationship, its geographic and historical specificities and how the physical nature of housing and domestic technologies create the need for different forms of consumption while networking the home to global economic and environmental processes. Thinking about the entanglement of consumption with work inside the home can expose the gendering of consumption activities, and the gendering resulting from them, but we are also more aware now of men's homemaking activities as well as women's. We are also more aware of how class and ethnicity/nationality shape work and consumption in the home with some households able to purchase the labour of others to carry out domestic work, in the process stretching the households of those workers and their consumption across countries and continents.

Geographers have attempted to unpack the household and through a focus on everyday activities, such as food choices and have revealed that the household is not a single unit of consumption but that multiple relationships are negotiated and identities made through quotidian practices. These practices are also a focus of attempts to live more sustainably and research has shown that only by understanding the minutiae of everyday routines, of what is wasted by households as well as what is consumed by them, can we begin to tackle environmentally damaging behaviours.

Throughout this paper I have attempted to show how consumption and work in the home are intertwined. Although consumption may seem like a form of leisure – the opposite of work – the two activities are, in fact, often indivisible. We rely on consumer goods to carry out housework, and our purchasing of things for our homes creates work, for ourselves and sometimes others. For most people in the minority world, our lives are inextricably tied to capitalist forms of production and exchange, even as we go about cooking, cleaning and caring for loved ones – activities that so often appear to be outside the relations of paid work and consumption. These intimate, home-based activities are networked to the wider world, through flows of goods, the international migrations of domestic workers and our attempts to protect the environment as we consume more sustainably.

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### Short Biography

Rosie Cox's research sits at the intersection of work and consumption in the home. She has a long standing research interest in paid domestic labour and has also researched food consumption habits and DIY and home maintenance. She is author of *The Servant Problem: Paid Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (2006 I.B. Tauris), co-editor of *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination* (2007 I.B. Tauris), and co-author of *Reconnecting Consumers, Producer, and Food: Exploring Alternatives* (2008 Berg) and *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life* (2011 Profile Books). She is currently engaged in an ESRC funded project titled 'Au pairing after the au pair scheme', which is investigating the effects of the deregulation of au pairing in the UK since 2008. She has a BA (hons) in Geography from Newcastle University (UK), an MA from the University of California, Davis, and a PhD in Geography from Coventry University. She currently works at Birkbeck, University of London where she teaches on programmes in geography, gender studies and social research.

### Note

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<sup>1</sup> I use female pronouns when writing about domestic workers for simplicity, because the vast majority are female. There are also male domestic workers, and I do not wish to exclude them.

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