THE UNPRODUCTIVE HOUSEWIFE:
HER EVOLUTION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ECONOMIC THOUGHT

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In 1878 the officers of the Association for the Advancement of Women (AAW) protested the U.S. Census’s notion that “homekeepers” were not gainful workers. In a letter to Congress they wrote, “We pray your honorable body to make provision for the more careful and just enumeration of women as laborers and producers.” They complained that women’s domestic efforts were “not even incidentally named as in any wise affecting the causes of increase or decrease of population or wealth.”1 (See Appendix.) In short, the AAW quarreled with the official assumption that housewives were unproductive workers because they earned no pay.

Census data consist of ordered sets of numbers. They appear objective and value free, but their meaning grows out of socially constructed concepts that are laden with cultural and political values. “Statistical reports exemplify the process by which visions

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1 Memorial of Mary F. Eastman, Henrietta L. T. Woolcott, and others . . . Senate Miscellaneous Documents, 45th Congress, 2d Session, vol. 2, no. 84 (Serial Set, 1786). For full text, see Appendix.
of reality, models of social structure, were elaborated and revised,”
writes Joan Scott. Other recent feminist scholarship details the
androcentric focus of many conventional census categories.

Gender bias in the definition of economically productive activity
has important implications for the analysis of changes in female
labor-force participation. One aspect of such gender bias—the
concept of the unproductive housewife—gradually coalesced in the
nineteenth-century censuses of population in England and the
United States. In 1800, women whose work consisted largely of
caring for their families were considered productive workers. By
1900, they had been formally relegated to the census category of
"dependents," a category that included infants, young children, the
sick, and the elderly.

Several factors shaped the changing attitudes toward household
labor during the nineteenth century. A new enthusiasm for female
domicity soothed apprehensions about the impact of capitalist
development on the family, and the growth of paid domestic service
relieved upper-class women from the most onerous domestic
chores. But gender interests were also influential. When male trade
unionists argued that hardworking housewives were—or should
be—"dependents," they obscured the benefits men enjoyed from
women's domestic labor.

Political economists and statisticians played an important role in
the deployment of a new vocabulary that complemented the
idealization of family life and men's demands for a family wage.
While they seldom explicitly discussed household labor, they
addressed related topics, and their influence on official terminology
can be traced through the evolution of census categories. In Great
Britain, the initial assumption that housewives were gainful work-
ers was gradually displaced, with the assistance of economist Alfred
Marshall. The prominent Francis Amasa Walker, who took charge of
the U.S. census after the Civil War, ignored the productive contribu-
tions of housewives, despite strong feminist criticisms. In Massa-
chusetts, the liberal Carroll Wright encouraged attention to

1 Joan Scott, "A Statistical Representation of Work," in her Gender and History

2 In addition to Scott, see Desley Deacon, "Political Arithmetic: The Nineteenth
Century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependent Woman," Signs:
Journal of Women in Culture and Society 11, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 27–47; Margo
Anderson, The American Census: A Social History (New Haven, Conn.: Yale
University Press, 1988); Marilyn Waring, If Women Counted: A New Feminist
Economics (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Nancy Folbre and Marjorie Abel,
"Women's Work and Women's Households: Gender Bias in the U.S. Census," Social
Research 56, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 545–70.
household work, but the census in his state gradually, if reluctantly, relinquished the concept of the productive housewife.

**Domesticity and devaluation**

Praise of domesticity and the unique character of the family home played a widely recognized role in nineteenth-century social thought. The "cult of domesticity" contributed to the emergence of a distinctively female culture and became an important strand of nineteenth-century feminism. While feminist scholarship has focused on the social and cultural aspects of this phenomenon, the economic implications have been largely ignored.¹

Ironically, the moral elevation of the home was accompanied by the economic devaluation of the work performed there. The growth of wage labor, which separated individuals from traditional family-based productive units, almost inevitably wrought new concepts of productive labor. Goods that could be bought and sold, quantities that could be expressed in dollar terms, became the new arbiters of value. Indeed, the growing enthusiasm for social statistics, reflected in new census-taking efforts, deflected attention from activities that could not easily be reduced to a money metric.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, work once performed within patriarchal households under the authority of fathers and husbands was gradually, but only partially, supplanted by the growth of an impersonal marketplace in which the labor power of individuals was bought and sold like any other commodity. Single women entered the paid labor force in large numbers, but most left upon marriage. As late as 1900, 40 percent of single women, but only 6 percent of married women, over age ten in the United States were designated "occupied" by the U.S. Census. In England and Wales in 1901, about 10 percent of married women were listed with occupations.²

These figures understate the contributions that women made to their families' economic welfare. Numerous social historical studies show that married women not only performed domestic labor


but also garnered significant amounts of market income.\textsuperscript{6} The wives of farmers, merchants, and craftsmen participated in family enterprises. Many women took in boarders and lodgers, exchanging household services such as cooking and cleaning for money. Housewives provided their own families with an even wider range of domestic services—meal preparation, laundry, child rearing, care of the sick and elderly, household management, and general nurturance.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, domestic work was recognized as a productive and valuable contribution. Despite a strict sexual division of labor, many men as well as women produced goods and services for household use, including housing, furniture, and food grown for the family table. As male participation in the market economy expanded, however, production for use rather than exchange became identified as a distinctly female activity.\textsuperscript{7} The home was often described in feminine terms—stable, reassuring, altruistic. The market, by contrast, was a masculine, dynamic realm, characterized by competition and the pursuit of economic self-interest.

A new emphasis on domestic virtue, rather than domestic work, was rooted in genuine fears about the impact of a new emphasis on profits and personal gain that conflicted with traditional religious values. Catherine Beecher’s \textit{Treatise on Domestic Economy}, first published in 1841, strictly banished the logic of economic self-interest and laissez-faire from the home. The great mission of the “family state,” she wrote, “is self denial and in training its members to self-sacrificing labors for the ignorant and weak.”\textsuperscript{8} Beecher consistently argued that women’s allegiance to home and family was a necessary counterbalance to the competitive anarchy of the market economy.\textsuperscript{9}


She developed her philosophy further in *The American Woman's Home*, published in 1869 and coauthored with her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe. The book embodies the contradictory character of Victorian domesticity. On the one hand, it provides a wealth of technical details regarding the efficient management and performance of household labor. On the other hand, it treats this work as a moral responsibility, not an economically important activity that might be organized along different, less gendered lines. This was family labor, not domestic labor—its aim, the fulfillment of God-given responsibilities, not economic efficiency; its motive not self-interest, but love.

Most political economists reinforced this distinction between the moral (or private) and the economic (or public) world, neatly assigning women and the family to one, men and the market to the other. Even the prominent English neoclassicals, well known for their emphasis on the competitive marketplace, were reluctant to allow economic self-interest to disrupt the home. Stanley Jevons, an otherwise loyal advocate of laissez-faire, proposed that mothers with children under age three should be banned from factories and workshops. Alfred Marshall cautioned against increases in women's wages that might tempt wives and mothers to neglect their household duties.

Growing class differences also contributed to a new view of married women's roles. The "lady," long the ideal of English aristocratic society, began to supplant the housewife as a cultural ideal in the United States during the 1830s. With the increased availability of domestic servants, middle- and upper-class families redefined the role of wives, emphasizing their qualities of personal nurturance and their civilizing influence on husbands and children. By 1880, more than fifteen domestic servants were enumerated per 100 families in many major cities.

15 David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 286. See also Faye
Victorian culture promoted new, refined ideals that working-class women, busy keeping their families fed and clothed, could seldom afford. Yet these ideals proved appealing partly because they helped stabilize a traditional patriarchal system that was being shaken by women's new economic opportunities outside the home. Wally Seccombe persuasively describes the emergence of the "male breadwinner norm" in England as an expression of the economic interests of skilled male trade unionists who feared competition from women who would work for a lower wage. Men also benefited economically from the cheap domestic services that women provided for them in the home.

In both England and the United States, predominantly male trade unions couched their demands in terms of a "family wage" that only men should earn. Economic vocabulary played an important part in such arguments. Consider the words of a member of the National Typographer's Union who protested the seating of Susan B. Anthony at a National Labor Union Conference in 1869: "The lady goes in for taking women away from the wash tub, and in the name of heaven, who is going there, if they don't? I believe in a woman's doing her work, men marrying them and supporting them." The gentleman's concern with his laundry hints at the stake men had in reinforcing women's domestic responsibilities, a self-interest that this speaker obscured with the concept of male economic "support." When male trade unionists argued that they should earn enough money so their wives would not have to work,

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20 Foner, 136.
they clearly defined “work” as labor performed outside the home for wages. By describing themselves as the sole support of the family, men undervalued the services they received in return for the wages they contributed.

The exaltation of domestic virtue, growing class inequalities, patriarchal interests—all of these factors contributed to new characterizations of household labor. But the most specific evidence of literal devaluation lies in the history of Anglo-American political economy. In both theory and practice, this emerging science showed a distinct tendency to treat women’s household work in moral rather than economic terms. The result was a new statistical categorization of housewives that gradually found expression in the censuses of population.

**England and Wales**

England was home to the classics of political economy, and her censuses provided a model for the data-gathering practices of her colonies and, later, her Commonwealth. Unlike the United States, where the Constitution mandated a decennial census that helped determine political representation, the early censuses of Great Britain were incorporated into the existing vital registry system and, as such, were heavily influenced by medical concerns such as the measurement of infant mortality.\(^{21}\) Perhaps as a result, early census practices reflected physicians’ appreciation of the difficulties of rearing children, rather than economists’ lack of interest in such forms of work.

From the very outset, political economy was preoccupied with the distinction between productive and unproductive labor. In the eighteenth century, the French Physiocrats suggested that agriculture was the only true source of surplus and described profits earned in manufacturing as a mere redistribution. But the Scottish economist Adam Smith offered a spirited defense of manufacturing and called for a new definition of productive labor, based on the addition of “net value” to a vendible commodity.\(^{22}\) He argued that services were unproductive because they did not contribute to the accumulation of physical wealth. Domestic servants, for example, merely enhanced their employers’ standard of living.


Smith used the term “productive” primarily to distinguish activities that he believed contributed to economic growth. Most of his immediate successors in the field, including David Ricardo, Thomas Robert Malthus, and John Stuart Mill, followed suit. But none agreed completely with the terms of Smith’s definitions. Mill, in particular, argued that some services, such as the training of workers, contributed to economic growth and should be deemed productive. Partly because the issue was never resolved, the classical dichotomy between productive and unproductive labor was gradually replaced by a new distinction between market and nonmarket labor.

By the end of the nineteenth century, most economists had come to agree that all paid services should be considered productive, and many advocated that the term “unproductive” be dropped from the language of their discipline. Yet, almost to a man, they also agreed that nonmarket services lay outside the realm of economics and therefore did not contribute to economic growth. While paid domestic servants were considered part of the labor force, unpaid domestic workers were not. Nonmarket production—a wife’s work in the home, for instance—was implicitly defined as unproductive.

This sharp distinction between the household and the market was not reflected in the early censuses of Great Britain. Following an unsuccessful attempt in 1801 to collect information on the occupations of individuals, the censuses of 1811, 1821, and 1831 inquired after the occupations of families as productive units. As Catherine Hakim points out, “The idea of an individual male wage-earner supporting his family was unfamiliar in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was assumed that all members of the household contributed to the family enterprise in agriculture, trade, or handicraft (unless they had independent means).” In 1831 occupations of males age twenty or older were enumerated separately, as were those of female servants of all ages. In 1851, for the first time, general female occupations were enumerated. The list of categories to which they could be assigned included nonmarket household work as well as paid occupations such as teacher or dressmaker.

Under the influence of the physician William Farr, the 1851 census placed “wives, mothers and mistresses” in a category by themselves, the “Fifth Class” among the occupations. Women with occupations outside the home were grouped accordingly in different classes. Still another class (the “Seventeenth,” to be precise) was reserved for “dependents,” or those supported by the community: “children, the sick and infirm, gypsies and vagrants, and certain ladies and gentlemen of independent means.”

The official discussion of the tabulations conveyed a strong appreciation of domestic work: “The most important production of a country is its population.” The text went on to deplore women’s employment outside the home.

In their critical analyses of the early English censuses, Desley Deacon and Edward Higgs both emphasize the influence of Farr’s medical orientation. But Farr was by no means immune to the predominant opinions of political economists. The tenor of the discussion of women’s work in the census volumes he supervised changed over time. In the 1861 Census of England and Wales, wives and widows “not otherwise described” were included in class 2, the “Domestic Class,” along with scholars, paid domestic workers, entertainers, and people who performed personal services, such as barbers. But the census discussion seemed somewhat apologetic: “These women are sometimes returned as of no occupation. But the occupation of wife and mother and housewife is the most important in the country, as will be immediately apparent if it be assumed for a moment to be suppressed.”

The 1871 census used similar categories, but more openly confronted its nomenclatural dilemma. The notes comment that the occupation of wife and mother is “a noble and essential” one, but they also call attention to the increase in women’s factory employment, a rapid increase in “the proportion of women engaged specifically in productive work.” The language suggests that unpaid domestic labor, however noble, was not truly productive.

Still, the suggestion remained just that; wives and mothers could have been but were not included in the new category termed “Indefinite and Non-productive,” which included people without

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28 Census of Great Britain, 1851, lxxxviii.
29 Deacon (n. 3 above); see also Edward Higgs, “Women, Occupations, and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses,” History Workshop 23 (Spring 1987): 59–80.
31 Ibid., xlii.
specified occupations and those whose occupations were described in general or vague terms. William Farr retired shortly after the 1871 census appeared, and terminology shifted more decisively in the 1881 census. Wives and other women engaged in domestic duties were explicitly placed in the “Unoccupied Class,” which apparently replaced the earlier “Indefinite and Non-productive” category. The discussion noted that many of the “unoccupied” were women, “of whom by far the greater part were married and engaged in the management of domestic life, and who can only be called unoccupied, when that term is used in the limited sense that it bears in the Census Returns. Many more of these women, though unmarried, were also engaged in domestic duties, or were assisting their fathers or other near relatives in the details of business.”

Having previously apologized for counting wives and mothers occupied, the registry now apologized for doing just the opposite.

In 1890, a parliamentary committee was convened to consider improvements to the census. The prominent neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall, who was called to testify, held up a recent German census as an example of superior methodology. Marshall complained that the English occupational categories failed to explain the distinctions between skilled and unskilled labor. He was also dissatisfied with the large numbers in the “Unoccupied” column and urged the committee to eliminate it. “In other countries,” he explained, “you see the dependents upon anybody who is occupied are entered as dependent, and therefore the figures in this column (unoccupied) are very small.”

Marshall clearly agreed with the German convention of describing married women as “dependents,” a description far more consistent with the tradition of English political economy than previous census practices. According to the diaries of the prominent social reformer Beatrice Webb, who opposed women’s suffrage at the time she met him, Marshall strongly disliked and disapproved of the prospect of female independence. His classic Principles of Eco-


[33] Report of the Committee Appointed by the Treasury to Inquire into Certain Questions Connected with the Taking of the Census, British Parliamentary Papers (c. 6071), LVIII, 13, 68.

[34] Ibid., 66.

[35] Glitter Around and Darkness Within, vol. 1 (1873–92) of The Diary of Beatrice Webb, ed. Norman and Jeanne McKenzie (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 273. The entire passage follows: “Conversation with Professor Marshall, he holding that woman was a subordinate being, and that, if she ceased to be subordinate, there would be no object for a man to marry, that marriage was a sacrifice of the masculine freedom and would only be tolerated by male creatures so
nomics mentioned only in passing the problematic character of the new definition of productive labor: “There is however some inconsistency in omitting the heavy domestic work which is done by women and other members of the household, where no servants are kept.”

At least one of Marshall’s lesser-known contemporaries devoted slightly more attention to the economic significance of women’s household work: “What this income really amounts to may be guessed if we imagine what we should have to pay to servants for doing work now done by wives, sisters, and daughters, and how entirely impossible it would be to get similar work done for money,” wrote economist William Smart. “If such women went to the factory or into professional life, we should have to withdraw probably a much greater number from the factory or professions to take their place, and should lose something with it all.” Unfortunately, by the time Smart registered these concerns, a new census terminology had limited the prospects for empirically assessing them.

In 1891 the Census of England and Wales restricted the “Domestic Class” to those employed in paid domestic service. The “Unoccupied Class” simply disappeared from the categories, as Marshall had recommended. Polite mention was still made of wives and mothers: “The most important, however, of all female occupations . . . is altogether omitted from the reckoning, namely the rearing of children and the management of domestic life.” If these were included, the notes continue, the proportion of occupied women would approach that of men.

Australia, a major Commonwealth country, shifted its terminology in a similar way in 1890. Advocates of a clear emphasis on men as “breadwinners” and women as “dependents” won a decisive victory when, in the absence of a clear statement to the contrary,

women’s work was classified as domestic and they were labeled “dependents.” The chief director of the New South Wales census “argued that both women’s contributions to family economies and their competition for jobs lowered the wages of men and the community’s standard of living.” National statistics showing a low rate of female labor-force participation would, he believed, enhance Australia’s image as a prosperous colony worthy of English investment.

**The United States**

The grand tradition of English political economy shaped the U.S. federal censuses from the outset. The lack of connection with a vital statistics registry may have deflected attention from child rearing and other domestic activities. The standard occupational categories consistently ignored women’s household labor, and protests by feminists, however articulate, had no apparent impact.

In the United States, political economists never fully endorsed Smith’s distinction between productive and unproductive labor. Yet they were remarkably unanimous in their low opinion of women’s capacity for important work. The absence of discussion before the 1880s was perhaps more significant than the few remarks that were made. Noteworthy, however, was the well-known political economist Amasa Walker’s insistence that women’s wages should be low because “the prevailing ideas of the community restrict them to easily dispensable occupations.” The eminent southerner Thomas Dew held that women’s qualities of mind fitted them for subservient roles.

Such ideas had little discernible influence on the early censuses of population, which, as in England and Wales, focused on families rather than individuals. In 1820, the first year that economic activities became a topic of concern, the federal census tallied the number of families engaged in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing. The 1830 census included no reference to occupations, but the 1840 census basically followed the 1820 format.

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35 Deacon (n. 3 above), 35.
38 Ibid., 908.
39 Still, even at this early date “household manufactures” were explicitly distinguished from others as “only incidental, and not the profession properly marking the class of society to which such individual belongs.” These words, attributed to John Quincy Adams, suggests that the census was more interested in “properly marking” class (broadly construed to include the class of housewives) rather than counting the
As industrial employment grew, so did interest in individual occupations. In 1850 the census inquired after the "profession, occupation, or trade of each male person over 15 years of age." In 1860 and thereafter, this inquiry was extended to women. Unlike the Census of England and Wales, the U.S. Census did not officially recognize the occupation of housewife.

The influence of political economic theory became particularly apparent in 1870, when Francis Amasa Walker, son of Amasa Walker, took charge of the census. Of all the nineteenth-century stewards of official statistics, Walker was by far the most academically prestigious. President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he also presided over the American Economics Association from 1885 to 1892. Under his aegis, the census explicitly stipulated a wage/salary criterion for women's occupations: "The term 'housekeeper' will be reserved for such persons as receive distinct wages or salary for the service. Women keeping house for their own families or for themselves, without any other gainful occupation, will be entered as 'keeping house.'" This wording implies that keeping house was a gainful occupation, despite its lack of inclusion in the aggregate tabulations.

Francis Walker supported women's right to vote and argued that they should have greater access to jobs outside the home—to a degree. Like his father, who described women as "incapable of self support," Walker had a low opinion of women's productive capacities. His views on the family were distinctly Malthusian. Men undertook the support of women in "obedience to a natural instinct second only, in the demand it makes on men, to the craving for food." Having distinguished himself in the Civil War, Walker was often addressed as "General." His description of women's assigned role in primitive economies reads like a list of military directives: "She will spin and weave . . . she will bring water . . . She will

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44 Ibid., 147.
46 Wright, The History and Growth of the U.S. Census, 159.
keep the hut or tent in a certain order and decency.” He went on to make it absolutely clear that women in such economies were not productive workers: “We may assume that speaking broadly, she does not produce as much as she consumes.”

Walker’s conviction that women’s household work was unproductive spilled over into the census’s measurement of women’s participation in the market economy. By Walker’s own account, women with occupations outside the home were underenumerated. He attributed this largely to social custom and enumerator bias. In the 1870 U.S. Census, Walker wrote, “it is taken for granted that every man has an occupation, and the examination of tens of thousands of pages of schedules returned in the present census has satisfied the superintendent that only in rare cases . . . have assistant marshals failed to ask and obtain the occupation of men, or boys old enough to work with effect. It is precisely the other way with women and young children. The assumption is, as the fact generally is, that they are not engaged in remunerative employments. Those who are so engaged constitute the exception, and it follows from a plain principle of human nature, that assistant marshals will not infrequently forget or neglect to ask the question.”

Women who took in boarders and lodgers, helped with the family farm or business, or contracted industrial homework from factories were not counted among the gainfully occupied, even though they were earning money.

The depreciation of women’s domestic labor had long been a theme of feminist protest. Early socialist feminists such as William Thompson and Frances Wright raised the issue in England during the 1830s, and so-called material feminists in the United States called for more efficient organization of domestic labor, including collective facilities for meals that could take full advantage of new cooking technologies. In the 1860s, as the National Women’s Suffrage Association explored the possibility of alliances with progressive trade unions, many of its members emphasized the

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 375.
drudgery of household work and the exploitation of women who performed it. Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that women’s domestic work differed from that of men only because it was “unpaid, unsocialized, and unrelenting.”

53 Elizabeth Blackwell wrote, “The theory that a wife who . . . bears her fair share of the joint burdens, is yet ‘supported’ by her husband has been the bane of all society.”

54 Some progressive trade unionists within the Knights of Labor fully agreed.

55 Explicit feminist criticism of the census originated with the Association for the Advancement of Women, a group founded in 1873 that included many of the most highly educated women of the day. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts was particularly well represented by Julia Ward Howe, a prominent feminist activist; Melusina Fay Pierce, famous for her advocacy of the collectivization of housework; and Maria Mitchell, a Harvard astronomer. Sometimes affectionately dubbed the “Ladies’ Social Science Association,” the group held annual conferences throughout the 1890s and helped design the Women’s Exhibit for the Centennial Exposition of 1876.

56 The AAW’s concerns were hardly limited to the “twelve millions of American women being overlooked as laborers or producers” (see Appendix). Consonant with their own professional interests, the members pointed out that the census could improve the quality of its statistics on women and children by hiring intelligent women as enumerators. Summaries of the conference proceedings included no mention of a response until a short retrospective essay was published in 1893. Apparently, Walker had invoked the cult of domesticity in his own defense. Ladies themselves, he argued, were reluctant to acknowledge that they worked for a living.

57 In 1900, the U.S. Census adopted a new use for the term “breadwinner,” cautioning that “it must be understood in a sense somewhat different from its usual one . . . it does not include a person who has retired from practice or business or a wife or daughter living at home and assisting only in the household duties

58 The Revolution, ed. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (December 24, 1868), 393.


56 Leach, 292–322.

57 American Association for the Advancement of Women, Historical Account of the Association for the Advancement of Women, 1873–1893, Twenty-first Women’s Congress, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago (Dedham, Mass.: Transcript Steam Job Print, 1893), 9.
without pay.”58 Wives and daughters without a paying job were officially designated “dependents.” State censuses became increasingly common in the late nineteenth century, and most of them conformed to federal format and terminology.59 The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, however, proved an important exception.

The Massachusetts anomaly

The 1875 State Census of Massachusetts, probably the most ambitious of its day, collected and compiled an unusual variety of social statistics. Its complexity may have obscured its English-style categorization of women’s domestic work, which received little or no attention. Its terminological anomalies represent an interesting detour from federal census practices that only gradually converged with the main road.

In 1875, housewives and unmarried women who performed housework without remuneration were included in the larger category of “Domestic and Personal Office,” along with subcategories for paid employment such as housekeepers, servants, nurses, and washerwomen. The introduction to the first volume makes it clear that a housewife’s work was considered productive: “The terms non-productive and unemployed are applied to all who take no part in the work of life.”60 Indeed, a separate occupational category was reserved for the “non-productive and propertied.”

Traces of the old-fashioned Smithian emphasis on production of material goods remained. The introductory notes observe that only occupations in agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, and mechanical industries, as well as apprentices and laborers, actually produced things. All services, though they may have been performed for pay, were seen as distinct from agriculture and manufacturing—and were, by implication, somewhat suspect.

Married women were not automatically assumed to be housewives. Some were described as “having nothing to do but superintend the households,” and there were those who did even less than that. In the census’s own words, “there are 4,786 wives of heads simply ornamental.”61 These amounted to less than 2 percent of all wives.

58 Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900 (n. 5 above), 225.
59 This generalization is based on scrutiny of nineteenth-century censuses from states in which more than eight censuses were taken: New York, Michigan, and Iowa, as well as the western states of Texas and Colorado. The majority of states did not conduct systematic censuses during the nineteenth century, and interest in occupational categories was limited to the most industrialized states.
60 The Census of Massachusetts: 1875 (Boston: Albert J. Wright, 1876), xlix.
61 Ibid., 1.
The 1885 State Census of Massachusetts dropped the “non-productive and propertied” category and introduced a variety of new categories in its place, including “retired”—“those possessed of a competency, inherited or acquired, or for some reasons, do not need to be actively engaged in order to obtain a subsistence, as distinguished from those persons classified as ‘dependents,’ mostly in private families, who are more or less dependent upon relatives or friends for their support.”62 Similarly, the term “non-productive” was reserved for “those afflicted persons, homeless children, paupers, prisoners, and convicts, who by reason of their disabilities, etc., have no productive occupations.” This census used the terms “dependent” and “non-productive” quite restrictively. They were not used to label housewives.

But the text that accompanied the tabulations in 1885 reflected a major concession to the emerging conventional wisdom. Housewives and women who performed unpaid housework, along with scholars and students, were subtracted from the total to arrive at “remunerative occupations.” The definition of the word “housewife” itself shifted away from one based on actual work performed to more general, social terms: “By housewives are meant the female heads of household, that is, the wife or some person in the family who has general charge of the domestic affairs.”63 “Housework,” used to describe the work of unmarried people who performed unpaid domestic labor, retained a specific meaning at least somewhat independent of gender. Of 89,062 people so engaged, seventy-seven were males.

The apparent contradictions persist in the 1895 Massachusetts census. Housewives and housework are tabulated in “Domestic Service,” rather than in the “not gainful,” “not productive,” or “dependent” categories. But in 1905, the Massachusetts census surrendered its eccentricities and placed housewives and housework in the “not gainful” class, along with scholars, students, retirees, those unemployed for twelve months, and dependents. The “Domestic and Personal Service” category was limited to those who received a wage or salary for their work.

This terminological shift was discussed in the twentieth annual report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor (1889), which summarized the findings of the 1885 census regarding women in industry. The lengthy explanation of why women were excluded from the “remunerative occupations” had an apologetic

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63 Ibid., xxv.
tone reminiscent of that found in the Census of England and Wales after 1880. But the discussion, far more assertive in its criticism of the conventional wisdom, anticipated William Smart's questions regarding the implicit value of unpaid domestic labor—in short, what it could cost, were it paid for:

To be sure, [housewives] receive no stated salary or wage, but their work is surely worth what it would cost to have it done, supposing that the housewife, as such, did no work at all. There were 372,612 housewives in Massachusetts in 1885, and only 300,999 women engaged in all other branches of industry. If a housewife were not expected nor required to work, then for the labor of 372,612 women paid service would have to be substituted. Such a demand for labor could not be supplied by the inhabitants of the State itself. Consequently, as the labor of the housewives was absolutely necessary to allow society to exist in its present form, the housewife is certainly "in industry." As has been stated, she is excluded from the previous tables in this Part for conventional and arbitrary reasons alone. The housewife is as much a member of the army of workers as the clerk or cotton weaver, and too often supplements the toil of the day, "in industry" with household duties performed at home, but outside of the "in industry" classification.\footnote{44 Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics, Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of the Statistics of Labor (Boston: Wright & Potter, December 1889), 579.}

The author of this prescient explanation remains a mystery, although Horace Wadlin, director of the Boston Public Library, was in command of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor at the time. Responsibility for the more generous English-style terminology of the 1875 and 1885 censuses lies almost certainly with then-director Carroll Wright, who had a unique, if undeveloped, theoretical perspective on women's household work. The 1875 Massachusetts census represented his official debut as one of the most influential statisticians of the late nineteenth century. Wright, who also served as a special agent for the 1880 U.S. Census, was appointed U.S. Commissioner of Labor in 1885 and served until 1905. During his tenure, he presided over the 1890 U.S. Census and many important census-sponsored studies and reports.

James Leiby's classic study of Wright's lifework describes him as an autodidact lacking in intellectual stature, who relied heavily
on the advice of Francis Walker. Yet the data that Wright collected may have had a far greater impact on subsequent economic research than Walker's theoretical or empirical contributions. Wright had an uncanny instinct for the systematic exploration of politically important issues. His classic study, *The Working Girls of Boston*, was one of the first efforts to examine the implications of factory employment. In it, Wright argued that the length of the working day for women should be limited to ten hours in part because, according to his survey, they did much of their own domestic labor and had little time for rest.

Wright eventually became far more sympathetic to feminism than most of his male counterparts, as evidenced by his article "Why Women Earn Less Than Men," which acknowledged the discrimination women faced. His Massachusetts background meant that he almost inevitably came into contact with some of the more prominent members of the Association for the Advancement of Women. But Wright's adherence to the concept of the productive housewife, though admirable, was neither strong nor persistent. His voluminous writings were largely preoccupied with relations between labor and capital. Even his published address to the American Social Science Association on "Problems of the Census" in 1887 omitted any consideration of household labor.

**The implications of a new terminology**

The censuses of England, the United States, and Massachusetts reveal the emergence of a new terminology that clearly labeled housework unproductive. What do these examples tell us about the coevolution of political economy and its more pragmatic language of measurement? The concept of the unproductive housewife was a by-product of a new definition of productive labor that valorized participation in the market and devalorized the nonmarket work central to many women's lives. The terminological shift formalized the assumptions of androcentric political economy.

This shift was not unique to one country. Given Alfred Marshall's recommendation that England import the German practice of cat-

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egorizing housewives as dependents, it cannot be attributed simply to Victorian ideology writ large. Nor did the shift go unnoticed. William Farr and Carroll Wright both resisted it initially. The Association for the Advancement of Women actively protested it.

Why, then, did it not stir more discussion and debate? Part of the answer lies in the ease with which upper-class men could arrive at a comfortable consensus concerning women’s capacities and contributions. The evolution of census terminology resonates with the story that social historians have told about the functional aspects of the “breadwinner/dependent ideal.”68 Indeed, it suggests that historians may have underestimated the importance of new cultural conceptions of work by failing to recognize the ways that gender bias influenced “objective” measurements of women’s productive work.

Political pressures influenced the way in which late nineteenth-century social statistics were collected in the United States. The Massachusetts Bureau of Labor was created largely in response to agitation by a labor group, the Knights of Saint Crispin. The Knights of Labor successfully demanded a Federal Bureau of Labor.69 The Divorce Reform League prompted the Federal Bureau’s study of marriage and divorce statistics in the United States, which Carroll Wright conducted in 1889. When Wright first assumed his responsibilities at the new Federal Bureau of Labor, his interest in developing a major study of African-American workers was discouraged because of concern that southern Congressmen would be offended.70 If African-Americans or women had had more political power, even an effective right to vote, U.S. census categories might have evolved differently.

A mélange of theoretical, political, and practical concerns influenced census designers. Yet their categories, in turn, exerted tremendous influence on both everyday politics and economic theory. By 1900, the notion that married women without paying jobs outside the home were “dependents” had acquired the status of a scientific fact. Women’s economic dependence commonly was used to explain their lower wages—they did not need a living wage. Indeed, men demanded a higher wage so that they might support their dependent wives.71

68 See Hartmann (n. 18 above); Seccombe (n. 17 above); and Rose (n. 18 above).
70 Leiby, 105.
71 Carroll Wright, The Industrial Evolution of the United States (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1901), 212; Sidney Webb (n. 18 above), 78; Barbara Meyer
The result was a certain symmetry between private, public, and academic assumptions. The new terminology made it difficult to explain how a married man benefited from his wife’s household labor or, similarly, how the larger economy benefited from nonmarket work. Those few scholars who remained interested in household production stepped outside the traditions of political economy to found the new discipline of home economics. In that sphere, the productive housewife lived on, in theory as well as in practice.

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Appendix

Memorial of Mary F. Eastman, Henrietta L. T. Woolcott, and others, officers of the Association for the Advancement of Women, praying that the tenth census may contain a just enumeration of women as laborers and producers.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled:

Whereas the acknowledged errors, discrepancies, and incompleteness of the Ninth Census render it an unsatisfactory and unreliable record of the population, wealth, industry, and physical, mental and moral conditions of the American people; and

Whereas the home and woman as a home-keeper have no place in the report, only the occupations called “gainful” being noted, and more than twelve millions of American women being overlooked as laborers or producers or left out, in common with those pursuing disreputable employments, and not even incidentally named as in any wise affecting the causes or increase or decrease of population or wealth; and

Whereas gross errors in enumerating the births, ages, diseases, and deaths of children are the inevitable result of the natural barriers in the way of men as collectors of social and vital statistics, who frequently obtain information, in the language of the report, from “fathers, nurses, servants, and unsympathetic fellow-boarders”; and

Whereas there is obvious justice and propriety in the employment of intelligent women to collect vital statistics concerning women and children:

Therefore we pray your honorable body, in enacting a law providing for the taking of the Tenth Census, to make provision for the more careful

Wertheimer, We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 207.
and just enumeration of women as laborers and producers; for a record of the wages of men and women in all occupations; for a record of causes of pauperism, vagrancy, vice and crime, insanity, idiocy, blindness, deformity, and disease; for the enumeration of all men and women engaged in disreputable occupations, for full statistics concerning all reformatory institutions; and

We further pray that you will enact such laws or amendments as may be requisite to secure the employment of a fair ratio of suitable women as collectors of the centennial census.

Mary T. Eastman, Massachusetts, Secretary Association for Advancement of Women, et al.