“Industrializing” Housework and Child Care

The replacement of housework done on an unpaid basis by purchased family care services has increased, due to the entry of more and more married women into paid work. The “industrialization” of childcare and food services, and perhaps of housecleaning services as well, can be thought of as the ultimate episode—and the logical conclusion—of a process that began millennia ago. Before economies based on regularized exchange were well established, the only way to get some product or service was to have some family member produce it. As economies have developed over the centuries, more and more products for family consumption have come to be supplied by barter or purchase and fewer by within-the-family production. Housework and child care are the major do-it-yourself products that remain; if they are absorbed into the exchange economy, only self-chauffeuring, some amateur housepainting, and backyard vegetable gardening will be left.

The industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century and the urbanization it engendered speeded up the decline of production in the home for direct family use, particularly for city people. People stopped sewing their own clothes, and purchased clothing became the rule. The lifting of water from a well by the bucket was replaced by the services of the water authority. Centrally provided energy services changed the nature of the activities needed to produce heat, lighting, and cooking, and reduced the time such activities took. While country people continued to do much of their own butchering, food preserving, and baking, city dwellers could not. Schools have partially replaced home care for children. Institutions such as hospitals and old-age homes have replaced some in-home care of the sick and the disabled. Most recently, entertainment activities with a significant do-it-yourself component—conversation, reading, games—have given way to commercially produced electronic entertainment.

There has been some reverse flow, where purchased production has been replaced by production by family members. One instance is the decreased usage of household servants. Another is the replacement of the public bus
and train by the private car driven by a family member. The latter is the result of suburbanization, and a failure, in the United States at least, to develop public transportation.

Every transfer of the production of services from the home to an industrialized or commercial setting changes the size and shape of the economy. Establishments that produce and sell prepared food and out-of-home child care have proliferated. The sale for money of housecleaning services may also be growing, after a century or so of shrinkage, partly due to uncontrolled immigration. The growth of these industries creates paid jobs, some of which are taken by women coming onto the labor market. The industrialized production process is generally different from the at-home process: for one thing, efficiency is gained by producing in large batches. And as Clair Brown has noted, home production requires that each home have its own equipment, which is idle much of the time. An industrialized process is more mechanized than a home-based process, and yet may require less total societal investment in mechanical equipment. Each piece of equipment a business buys is more intensively utilized.

When we replace self-produced services with purchased services, family life changes. The services we buy tend to be quite different from the home-produced services they are replacing. Fast food differs from home-cooked food; a child’s experience in a day care center is nothing like the experience of a housewife’s child. The purchased services may be judged to be better or worse than the homemade ones they are replacing, but different they certainly are, and less individualized. There is a loss of the “mother’s touch.” As a cook, a mother may produce meals lacking taste and variety; as a child-minder, she may be petulant, negligent, or anxiety-producing. Nevertheless she is one’s own mother, and commercial substitutes for her services, even of excellent quality, do not have the same psychological significance.

The purchase of services has tended to reduce the contacts that family members have with each other. Day care is the most obvious example of that. The purchase of prepared food seems to reduce the number of meals that are shared by family members. When the only source of dinner was the main dish mother had prepared, everybody gathered around the table for it. Now individual family members can pick up their own takeout food and eat it by themselves or with friends.

A vow to completely industrialize housework was heard from Russian revolutionaries in the 1920s. However, their commitment to the relief of women from household drudgery turned out to be not a very deep one. At that same time, communes called “kibbutzes” were being organized in Israel by people who wanted to work and live collectively. The kibbutzes were set up to minimize private housework, and to replace it by collectively organized food preparation and child care services. Most people in Israel never joined a kibbutz, however, and the kibbutz style of life never spread beyond Israel.

Yet under the highly flexible economies that capitalism creates, the industrialization of family care is going forward. An industry providing