Unwaged Work and the Production of Sustainability in Eco-Conscious Households

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Abstract:

An investigation of household sustainability production makes possible the evaluation of the trade-offs inherent in these pro-environmental activities. The results suggest that policies promoting household-level sustainability efforts may be misguided. Without accompanying radical transformations in infrastructures and institutions—including the household—these efforts will always fall short of what is needed to promote human flourishing and protect the environment from harm.

Key words: family and community; feminist economics; gender and economics; Marxist-feminism; sustainability

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1. Motivation and Background

The adults forming households and raising young children in the United States today grew up in the era of corporate oil spills, chemical disasters, acid rain, ozone depletion, deforestation, and, somewhat paradoxically, an increasing sense of *personal* responsibility for the natural environment. They learned about recycling in primary school, they diligently cut up their plastic six-pack rings to save wildlife, and they were bombarded with messages from promotional campaigns like Iron Eyes Cody's famous plea as he paddles his canoe through factory effluent

and a discarded fast food meal is hurled at his feet out of a moving vehicle: "People Start Pollution. People Can Stop It."

While the “Crying Indian” ad is one of the most successful American public service announcements of all time (Andersen 2013, 404), less well known is the background story of this ad campaign. It was produced by a front group for the lobbying interests of disposable beverage bottling companies seeking to avoid legislation, motivated by public concerns about waste and littering, that threatened to mandate refillable glass beverage bottles with bottle deposits (Andersen 2013, 407; Strand 2008). By convincing consumers to take on the unwaged work of proper container disposal, beverage bottling companies were able to avoid regulation, secure their profits, and ensure that reusable individual-serving beverage packaging all but disappeared as a method for transporting liquids to their end users. This campaign and others appear to promote “doing your part” for the environment, but in fact represent what Glazer (1993) calls a “work transfer”—shifting unwaged work onto households in service of capital.

In the United States, recent national policy has included initiatives urging citizens to take personal responsibility for the environment and climate change mitigation (The White House 2015, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2016, NASA 2017). With the U.S. Presidency currently held by a man who claimed global warming is a conspiracy “created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Trump 2012), local governments and environmentally-minded people are finding it more important than ever to take environmental protection into their own hands (Bondar 2017, Bromley-Trujillo 2017, Gannon

2017). Similarly, the Trump Administration's recent greenlighting of the neurotoxic pesticide chlorpyrifos, which the Obama-era Environmental Protection Agency had moved towards banning, has families worried about their health and safety in the face of a federal government that is seemingly unconcerned with their well-being (Levin 2017).

It is against the backdrop of this social history and more recent concerns about global warming and the health impacts of chemicals that I spoke with 37 informants from 23 highly ecologically-conscious households who are raising young children in one of the most "sustainable" cities in America. My larger project describes what happens when households decide to make interventions into mundane aspects of day-to-day life to bring the way they get things done into alignment with their environmental values and priorities. Because their ability to do so is constrained by the culture, society, and economic system in which they live, there are consequences and trade-offs involved in these household-level sustainability practices. Before promoting sustainability work at the household level as a solution to environmental and other problems, we must understand the full extent of these trade-offs.

2. Theory

I make sense of ethnographic data using an orienting perspective taken from both neoclassical (Reid 1934, Becker 1981) and feminist radical political economic theories of household production (Quick 1972, 2016). These theories frame my analysis of how households produce day-to-day life—making choices between alternatives using the resources available to them and limited by the factors that constrain them. Marshall [1890] 2009, Heilbroner (1988, 14), Nelson

(1993), and Power (2004) have all argued that understanding society's provisioning processes is (or ought to be) the central concern of economics. While interdisciplinary, my approach is fundamentally an economic one, enriched by social theory to fill in the gaps that might be left by an economistic view of the world.

A production function provides a useful framework that brings into focus the ways that households produce goods and services for use by the household (Reid 1934, Becker 1981). Producing dinner for a household is a complicated business that could be achieved in several different ways by employing household factors of production in a variety of combinations, with varying degrees of reliance on inputs purchased using money from waged employment (including tools owned by the household), resources from the government and non-profits, the unwaged time of family members, know-how, and assistance from friends and community members. And there are ways of getting food on the table, like collective or cooperative kitchens and contractual commercial meal delivery, which used to be common but have largely disappeared (Cowan 1983, 115, 104-105). The same can be said for just about every facet of day-to-day life, from staying comfortable when it's cold outside to dealing with the waste of an infant who isn't yet old enough to control its own bowels.

Households produce things like waste removal, cleanliness, and comfort for their members, and the way that they go about producing them is influenced by their unique set of priorities, resources, and constraints. Households are also situated in culture, in the economy, and in society, and these factors also influence how they get things done—compelling some activities

and hindering others. Households have varying priorities in the sustainability realm that include personal health, the natural environment, avoiding waste, technology, and community welfare. They consist of people who may have needs, desires, and priorities that may not be aligned. Households have resources that include money from waged work used to buy materials and services, help from extended family and friends, the unwaged work of household members, resources from the government and non-profits, productivity due to research/human capital/competence, and materials acquired through gleaning, borrowing, or theft. Each of these resources can serve as substitutes for each other in the production of day-to-day life. Households are constrained by factors shaped by the economy and society in which they find themselves—limited time and money, the availability of other resources, cultural norms, and the availability of information. These constraints cause them to make trade-offs between their priorities in the sustainability realm and other priorities, such as mental health and personal well-being. The orienting perspective provided by the theories I draw upon is used to examine the consequences, both intended and unintended, of sustainability-oriented ways of getting things done.

Reid (1934, v) points out that household production is an integral component of the economy, and unless we recognize it as such we will be unable to properly evaluate the costs and benefits associated with moving production into or out of the household. Past environmental research on households has focused on "green consumerism" from a marketing or advertising perspective, with aims related to selling products to consumers with environmental interests or critiquing consumers and consumer culture, eco-consumerism and "green-washing" (Straughan

& Roberts 1999, Young et al. 2009, Shrum et al. 2013, Micheletti 2003). It is true that green consumption and related pro-environmental lifestyle trends are easily co-opted, and are ultimately also implicated in the unsustainable environmental burdens associated with capitalism (Schnaiberg & Gould 1984, 94-96, 104). But by modeling "green" households as *producers* of sustainability rather than as *consumers* of environmental products, I am able to bring into focus the largely unwaged sustainability work that takes place in households.

3. Methods and Data

If the household can be thought of as a small factory that produces day-to-day life, then the research I conducted is a factory visit in the tradition of Smith ([1776] 2003) and Marshall (1919) or a Worker's Inquiry in the tradition of Marx ([1880] 1938). I spoke with 37 informants from 23 households living in the Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton metro area in 60- to 90-minute economic ethnographic interviews (Basole & Ramnarain 2016) about their day-to-day lives and how households "get things done".

The sampling frame for this study was adults in households in the greater Portland-Beaverton-Vancouver Metro area with children under age 10 who consider their lifestyles eco-conscious or sustainable. My choice to include only families with children under 10 is not an arbitrary one—this allows me to see how households balance sustainability and other priorities at a point in the lifecycle where resources like time and money are particularly constrained.

The sample size of 23 households is consistent with past ethnographic research on households, technology, and energy (for example, Bott [1956] 2001, Oakley 1978, Forsberg 2007, Wilhite & Wilk 1985, Livingstone 1992, Aune 2002, Moroşanu 2016) and allows for thick ethnographic description of the production of everyday life in eco-conscious households. The informants and households represent a non-random referral sample recruited through personal and professional contacts as well as through Facebook and MeetUp groups dedicated to pro-environmental parents and parenting. The resulting interviews were transcribed, coded, and evaluated in terms of the underlying theoretical mode in Atlas.ti. Using a grounded theory approach, data were assessed theoretically and descriptively (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

4. Results and Discussion

I found that ecologically-conscious households devote substantial money and unwaged work to these sustainability efforts, but their efforts frequently stimulate conflicts, and the end results are rarely perfect. Constrained resources and limited information mean household members must make trade-offs between competing priorities, often under duress. And the practices of my informants frequently seek to address and undo problems created at other sites and scales, such as the production, packaging, and distribution of goods. Most poignantly, these household sustainability efforts cause people committed to what one informant called "a less eco-hostile existence" to sacrifice their own mental health and even their desire to have children in the first place, to get day-to-day things done in a way that feels consistent with their values. But despite these sacrifices, their efforts frequently fall short of hopes and expectations, such as when they learn after the fact that all of the work they put in to cloth diapering or protecting their children

from fluoride was ultimately counter-productive. The conclusion I draw from the available evidence is that promoting household-level sustainability efforts may be misguided, as this transfer of unwaged work to individuals and groups results in even greater burdens on households, whose time, money, and emotional capacities are already stretched to their limits.

My informants are embedded in culture, in society, and an in a particular economic system that constrains their possible actions and choices. In day-to-day life, these constraints appear most visibly in the form of limited time, limited money, cultural objections to certain practices, and limits to available information. These constraints limit the potential efficacy of household-scale changes as each household is repeating the same small-scale tasks without the possibility of benefiting from economies of scale or a larger transformation of the processes my informants' sustainability practices aim to address. Even if we lived in a world in which my informants had limitless time, money, and information, many of their sustainability practices would prove ineffective because of the limitations built into the economic and social structures in which my informants find themselves. This isn't to say that one should take no responsibility at all, but rather that there are hard limits to the changes that individuals can make on their own.

Installing an energy-efficient clothes washing machine saves some electricity, but doesn't change underlying expectations about how often clothes should be washed, what clean towels should feel like, or who should be doing this washing and on what scale. Energy efficient furnaces and air conditioners can be installed, but they don't change underlying expectations about what sorts of spaces people should be living in and with whom, how people should feel indoors, and the

steps they should take to make indoor spaces feel that way. Similarly, progressive policies such as paid family leave reinforce the expectation that the young and the sick should be cared for in households by related adults.

Ultimately it is these underlying expectations that motivate the demand for resources like water, electricity, natural gas, and time spent in unwaged household work. These hidden and taken-for-granted expectations—including the expectation that related people should live in households and that this is the appropriate site and scale for raising children—become recursively embedded in our practices, appliances, infrastructures, and homes. The washing machine hook-up in the basement suggests to the inhabitants that there ought to be a clothes washing machine there. The presence of central cooling suggests that using this appliance is an appropriate way to remain comfortable during hot weather. The stock of three bedroom houses suggests that households of related people ought to live in them. Each layer reinforces the normalcy of the others, and limits the possibilities for radical changes in demand and ways of getting things done.

Shove et al. (2015, 275) argue that because "demand is an outcome of what people do, any radical change depends on reconfiguring the practices that comprise everyday life." However, they also point out the extent to which these changes are even possible is limited by existing infrastructures and the complexes of practices that are dependent on them. While Shove and co-authors are referring to physical infrastructures like buildings and roads, perhaps the economy as a whole and social structures can also be thought of as infrastructures that likewise constrain

possible actions and choices. The logical extension of Shove's theories of social practice is that infrastructures are *also* dependent on the practices and practitioners that reproduce infrastructures and make them seem necessary and normal. To "reconfigure the practices that comprise everyday life," infrastructures must also be transformed.

5. Conclusion

Many sustainability-oriented practices take more time or more money than conventional ways of getting things done. They require special equipment that saves resources without changing the meaning of practices and the cultural services involved. Or, they require large investments of unwaged work to produce substitutes that avoid purchases from the commercial sector. However, three sustainability practices I discussed with my informants offer the intriguing combination of saving both time and money, as well as resources: selective flushing[1], decreasing the frequency of showering, and wearing clothes more times between washes. There is a catch: changing these practices on a wider scale would mean redefining what cleanliness means in the United States, a nation obsessed with being clean.

A major limitation to redefining cleanliness is embedded in the infrastructures used to produce it—cultural expectations and technology are recursively related in ways that reinforce the normalcy of these expectations. Why do toilets flush if we aren't meant to flush them? Why shouldn't I wash my clothes after every wearing when it is easy and convenient to do so? Cross-

[1] The practice of only flushing the toilet following a bowel movement.

cultural comparisons of practices offer some reassuring counter-evidence, as Parr (1999, 264) found that many Canadians maintained their regular use of and affection for clotheslines even after they had purchased a tumble dryer. There isn't a one-to-one relationship between technology and practices—there are historical and cultural forces that impact what we perceive as acceptable ways to get things done.

Among my informants, a severe drought in California in the late 1980s and early 1990s changed perceptions of selective flushing, even for informants who had never lived in California. However, these examples are more the exception than the rule when it comes to the interwoven relationship between institutions, infrastructures, technology, practices, and social meanings. Policies that promote sustainability production within households should, as much as possible, avoid transferring additional unwaged work into households, and should instead focus on changing the meanings and infrastructures that motivate practitioners and necessitate practices.

Just as choices are constrained by the social and economic institutions we find ourselves in, so is our ability to even conceive of possible paths forward outside those institutions. More efficient appliances get the same things done, just using slightly less energy. Similarly, progressive reforms and other adjustments to waged and unwaged work are not sufficient to fully alleviate the problems faced by my informants: they are exhausted, they feel like they have no time, and they are having to make upsetting trade-offs between their own mental health and their desire for healthy families, communities, and environment.

The obvious culprit in a radical political economic study is capitalism, placing limits on the range of possible actions and compelling others. But according to Engels (1902, 71), the family represents a microcosm of all of society—within individual households, the same conflicts and processes take place as do in the economy and society as a whole. Fractal-like, the household is a miniature economy within the larger economy, a miniature society within the larger society, existing within but subsumed by these larger structures and bound by their laws. Schor (2011) and Matthaei (2015) have promoted intensive self-provisioning and household production as a pro-environmental alternative to capitalist production and a liberatory substitute for waged work. However, my interviews with households attempting to make these substitutions reveal that time spent in unwaged work for household production is no less exhausting and depleting than waged work—and in some cases may be even more so. Thus, simply changing the mode of economic production is not sufficient if the household and family are not likewise transformed in ways that offer more time for non-work activities—whether this work is waged or unwaged.

It is nothing new that "even the most radical flare up" at proposals to abolish the family (Marx & Engels [1848] 2012, 88). While notions of collective childrearing in the American mind are often conjured as what Benjamin (1988, 204) calls "a nightmare vision of raising children like Perdue chickens", this needn't be the case. Despite being idealized and frequently used as a political tool, families are not always healthy and happy, and frequently cannot be relied upon as sources of care (Barrett & McIntosh 1982; Quick 2008, 313). Recent work by both Hopkins (2017) and Haraway (2015) suggests that post-capitalist paths forward must include transformations not only of the economic system but also of our notions of the household and family. As Marxist-

feminists have long pointed out, the contemporary family-household was formed by capitalism, and at the same time makes possible its continued existence (Barrett 1980, Vogel [1983] 2013, Gimenez 2005, Brown 2012, Bhattacharya 2017). Thus, we need to radically redefine what we mean by "kin" and the infrastructures and institutions through which care is provided.

The household sustainability efforts of my informants, while well-intentioned, are most frequently aimed at addressing environmental problems originating outside the household. Each household individually repeats common sustainability tasks that could be achieved more effectively collectively or at a larger scale, or by eliminating the production of goods and services for profit. At the same time, environmental and social problems are also caused by the organization of families into individual households, a modern arrangement that is both socially and environmentally taxing. This belief is echoed by my informant, Kyle:

> Everyone doesn't need to have their own washing machine that goes unused 95% of the time, or your own car, or your own house! People living in their own houses is just absurd. The consumer culture, driven by the need to sell stuff for ever higher profits, creates these absurdities. And you need to be intentional if you want to do something different.

The households I spoke with over the course of this research are trying their best to, as Kyle suggests, do something different. Some pragmatic progressive reforms that involve changing the social meaning of practices in ways that decrease the demand for resources may provide a practical way to mitigate the effects of climate change. But without radical transformations in infrastructures and institutions, these efforts will always fall short of what is needed to promote human flourishing and protect the environment from harm.

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