

Book Review

Megan J. Elias. *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 240 pp. Cloth \$45.00.

The introduction of home economics classes into American schools in the early twentieth century came out of the home economics reform movement to institutionalize domesticity in education and work. Cooking, sewing, cleaning, and managing a household budget became subjects of scientific analysis. Emerging in the Progressive era, the home economics movement influenced social attitudes about the home and family. Its supporters sought to transform American education and society using national conferences, federal funds, and government bulletins. However, over time, particularly in the 1950s, home economics lost its scientific and activist associations. By the 1960s, feminists scorned home economics as glorified domestic drudgery, despite its more ambitious original goals.

In *Stir It Up*, Megan J. Elias traces the history of the home economics movement in American culture. She concludes that ultimately its leaders failed to professionalize the field, although some issues they raised, such as consumer-producer tension, still exist in the twenty-first century. And in the Martha Stewart/Rachael Ray era of cooking and decorating, domesticity today is enjoying a renaissance. Elias's book, that tells this interesting story, is an important contribution to the history of education, to American social history, and to women's studies.

Elias begins with the roots of the home economics reform movement and the women who tried to legitimize the field, including: Ellen Richards, a chemist and graduate of MIT; Isabel Bevier, a chemist at the University of Illinois; and Martha Van Rensselaer, co-chair of Home Economics at Cornell University. These women hoped to reform domestic work through a scientific approach to household economics, rationing, nutrition, and bacteriology. This was work well beyond baking apple pies. However, their failure to frame domestic work as a gender issue ultimately limited their success in making real change for women. Elias demonstrates how the field's leaders focused "all their efforts on changing the lives of women, rather than on attacking gender categories" (p. 188).

By placing home economics in a cultural context, Elias shows how the field and attitudes toward it changed. In the 1950s, as it lost its activist and intellectual agenda, home economics became largely household tips. In the 1960s counter-culture, feminists such as Betty Friedan and Robin Morgan criticized "home ec" as sexist and traditional. Morgan

referred to the American Home Economics Association as “the enemy.” Elias explains how these second-wave feminists, despite the legitimacy of their criticism, did not fully understand the broader missions of the home economics movement. Nor did the general public, and, as an educational field, home economics became increasingly outdated and eventually obsolete.

Elias discusses her research in relation to important sociopolitical crises such as World Wars I and II, the Crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. The narration is lively, clear, and detailed. A minor criticism is that the research could have dealt more with the longer history of women’s place in the home. For example, Nancy Cott’s *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* provides an important historical perspective, particularly on the contradictory nature of women’s place in the home. Cott explains that the critically important place of women in the home (e.g., teaching children civic and moral virtues) largely confined them to the home, with no opportunity for paid work. In the twentieth century the same conflict existed: Was home economics training in scientific research that would open up professional opportunities for women, or was it training in being a good housewife?

In explaining how home economics shifted from being a “movement of social reform to a field that largely complemented changes already under way and beyond its control” (p. 99), Elias focuses on the post-World War II years when home economics became a skill set rather than a field of study. In these years, after the economic and political crises of the first half of the twentieth century, Americans longed for the stability and safety that a devotion to home life seemed to promise. However, Elias overlooks influences on the domestication of home economics by the education philosophies of the Progressive era that promoted an applied, real-life emphasis in schooling with the Life Adjustment Movement reforms. The emphasis of these reforms was personal hygiene, social relations, and emotional well-being—the skills and attitudes it was assumed housewives needed. Home economics courses that prepared female students for their roles as housewives fit neatly within the Life Adjustment Movement.

Another challenge the home economics field faced, although not one that Elias explores in depth, is that domestic labor has never been considered “work” in the traditional sense because it offers the laborer no direct economic benefits. In the United States, women, as well as men, whose work is caring for home and children, receive no salaries and are economically dependent on the employed spouse or partner. This situation may also explain why home economics, deprived of its intellectual momentum and message of women’s liberation, lost out to corporations marketing cake mix and detergents.

Such criticisms aside, *Stir It Up* is a valuable and well-researched book. It tells an interesting story and helps explain why home economics has become increasingly obsolete in American education. If the home economics reform movement failed in its original goals, ridiculed by the public as frivolous and anti-intellectual, Elias's account makes clear that the movement began with far more ambitious goals. The failure to achieve these goals is in large part the result of confused ambitions that wavered between the theoretical and the practical, and the fact that early leaders failed to imagine that domestic work could be shared by men as well as women.

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