

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

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Kinder, Küche, Kirche, Kapital

by Richard Ohmann

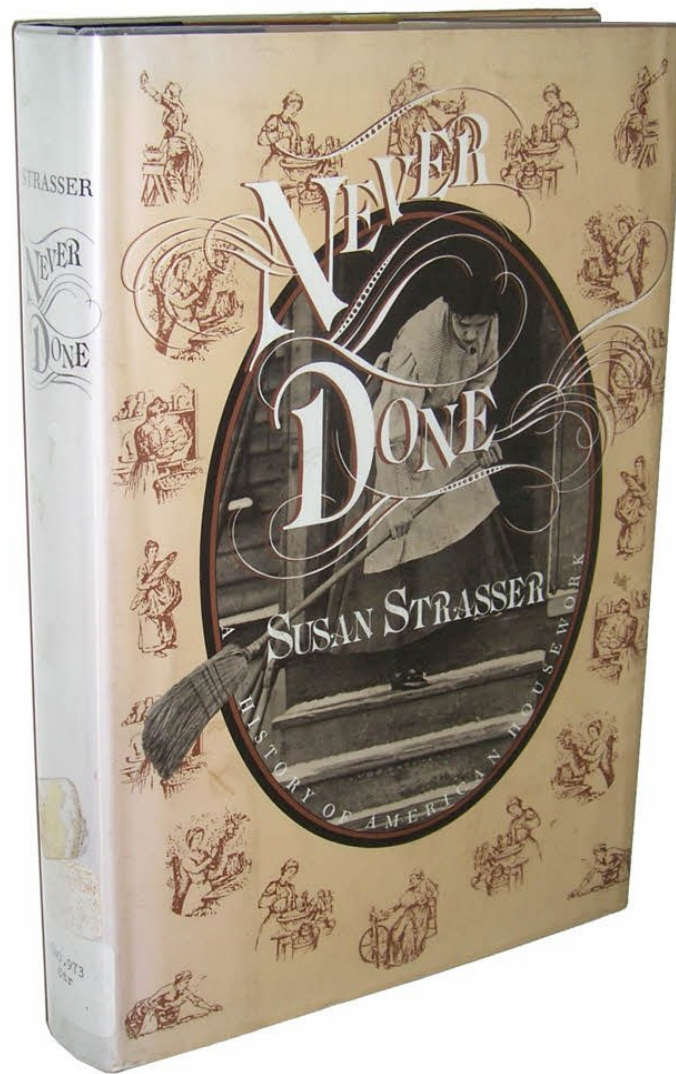


IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ALISHA B. WORMSLEY

Review of Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

To kindle up the cook stove each morning, in the late nineteenth century, a housekeeper went through these steps:

First, dispose of the remains of the last fire: remove the stove lids; gather the ashes and cinders into the grate; replace the lids; close the doors and drafts; dump the cinders and ashes into a pan below the grate and sift either in a sifter built into the stove or in a regular ash sifter...; set a fire with shavings or paper, small sticks of wood, and a few larger pieces; reopen the drafts, light the fire, and add large pieces of wood or coal; now close the dampers.

In an advanced stove, this work produced a fire that would last four hours -- four hours for making dough, baking, plucking the chicken, roasting it, and carrying out the dozens of other tasks required to bring mainly unprocessed foods (flour was an early exception) to the Sunday table. The cook stove was a tremendous improvement over the kitchen hearth, with its array of crude iron utensils hung from a crane or standing on tripods over the open fire, where most women had cooked until after mid-century.

Yet these modern stoves were no microwave ovens. In 1899, when housework had become a process for experts to study and simplify, the School of Housekeeping in Boston kept track of the time and activities needed to care for a coal stove:

In a six-day period, twenty minutes were spent in sifting ashes, twenty-four minutes in laying fires, one hour and forty-eight minutes in tending fires, thirty minutes in emptying ashes, fifteen minutes in carrying coal, and two hours and nine minutes on blacking the stove to keep it from rusting.

During these six days, 292 pounds of coal went into the stove.

Some readers of *Never Done* will delight in the book even -- or especially -- for its profusion of gritty details like these about the work and the implements of keeping a house over the past two hundred years. I am one such reader. I am fascinated by changes in cookery that went with its move from fireplace to wood or coal stove; with the endless elaboration of the stove for bread baking, roasting, water heating, etc.; with the controversies and rear-guard nostalgia that surrounded these changes; with the ever-so-slow spread of pots and pans that wouldn't rust (enameled, aluminum, stainless steel). I read with dismay and admiration about nineteenth-century Mondays (plus Tuesdays, for ironing -- two-sevenths of each week for laundry). I confess to peering from very close up into the wonderful photographs in this book, letting my near-sighted eyes make me intimate with a group of quilting Dakota women in 1885, or with the crowd at the first self-service market (the Piggly-Wiggly in Memphis, opened in 1916). Susan Strasser brings back the lives, the words, the faces, the feelings, of women doing the work of social reproduction,

work that many of them and most historians have thought to be of no importance. That act of recovery is not the smallest virtue of *Never Done*. Strasser belongs in the company of excellent feminist historians-from-below, like Gwendolyn Wright and Dolores Hayden, who take us into homes where women made their lives, with finger knowledge and lofty ideals integrated into one picture. This alone makes *Never Done* an invaluable work of social history, a natural to use in any course that treats women and work in the United States.

Of course one may find out about our foremothers' skills and tools from coffee table books or on nostalgia trips to Old Sturbridge and Williamsburg. Strasser's project is very different. For one thing, although she respects the skills lost to commodified housework, laments its privatization, and fully acknowledges the movement of control over it from women's minds to corporate boardrooms, she in no way sentimentalizes the good old days. Housework was backbreaking, unhealthy, and dangerous for most women until just the day before yesterday. The appliance makers may have bamboozled millions into buying redundant gadgets like the electric can opener and wasteful ones like the self-defrosting refrigerator. But anyone who would like to cancel out the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, indoor plumbing, or central heating is either an ignoramus, a masochist or a misogynist. Strasser sees much of the present technology of house work as a precondition for any truly radical reorganization of social life and of relations between men and women. I agree.

On the other side, she also differs from those infatuated with "progress," in seeing this technology always as responsive more directly to the profit imperative than to the needs of housekeepers, and not responsive at all to the socially articulated demand for a democratic and decent society.

On the other side, she also differs from those infatuated with "progress," in seeing this technology always as responsive more directly to the profit imperative than to the needs of housekeepers, and not responsive at all to the socially articulated demand for a democratic and decent society. Even more impressively, to me, she steadfastly resists any form of technological determinism, keeping always in sight the questions: who made the technology? for whose benefit? And *Never Done* explicitly challenges what I call the "fallacy of firsts," the dating of historical change by the first patent or first working device or first appearance of a new institution or practice. The technology of indoor plumbing and of the cook stove were available for many decades before as many as half of the women and families in the country benefited from these absolutely basic improvements. To put it another way, Strasser keeps class in mind and never mistakes the history of affluent women for the history of women. For most housework remained

primitive and grueling well into the present century. Capitalist home improvement goes where the profits are.

The virtues I've just mentioned follow from the book's main strength: keeping the whole historical process in view, and seeing housework as part of it. You'll have to read *Never Done* to appreciate this. Let me just stress two points here. First, Strasser shows convincingly how her subject fits into the great capitalist transformation of our society. The shift from home production to factory production and the market is a main theme, naturally enough. Strasser also argues well that housework changed along paths previously established for capitalist labor in general. From craft to manufacture; from country to city; from family and village control to corporate control; from traditional knowledge to the advice of outside experts like the manufacturer, the advertiser, the home economist; from use to exchange, so that housework is entirely organized with and around commodities now.

Second, *Never Done* places itself squarely in the new tradition of scholarship that explores the historical construction of gender. Perhaps its main contribution in this area is to put the much-discussed idea of "separate spheres" in a context of material life. As soon as wage labor away from home became common -- as early as the 1820s -- this doctrine began to emerge: the "outside" world was a competitive jungle, the home a sanctuary of caring, moral refinement, and piety. The former was the sphere of men, the latter of women, who were thus assigned the job of keeping capitalist society human -- for free. Strasser argues that even around the time of the Civil War, when the idea of separate spheres got its fullest articulation from writers like Catharine Beecher, and when it was integral to the dominant ideology, it was already losing touch with the realities of home and market, the two places becoming less separate as housework came to mean using industrially produced commodities and preparing boys for wage labor. Later, when more and more women went out to work for wages and when capitalists set out to make consuming the main project of the home, the ideology stretched to the snapping point, yet continued to find powerful exponents and to increase the tensions and anxieties of women's lives. I admired and learned from the way Strasser weaves together ideological debates, social movements, and the facts of home production and consumption, through this part of her story.

It comes to a provocative conclusion at the end of *Never Done*. Strasser thinks that both the current women's movement and the family-oriented traditionalists of the New Right presuppose the doctrine of separate spheres. Few will disagree with her claim that the latter celebrate and advocate return to a repressive separation that was contradictory even a hundred years ago. But readers of *Radical Teacher* will surely want to ponder and debate her view that as the women's movement went from its consciousness-raising stage to engagement with political and economic issues, it privileged the public sphere as if, for most women, their exploitation there were separate from what goes on at home. Strasser thinks women must struggle

for equality both at work and at home, but that this won't be enough. What else? Women and men must take back decisions over daily life from corporations, of whose increasing power in this area her book offers such a rich account.

A self-respecting reviewer should be quick to unmask methodological blunders, ideological lapses, and factual errors. Sorry. I found this a splendid study on all counts. It has helped me in my own current efforts to understand the emergence of a national mass culture just before the turn of the century; and everyone doing historical research or teaching in areas close to Strasser's subject will want to learn from her book. It would make a fine teaching text. It is written by a human being for human beings. High School students could read it. (So could dissertation writers.) It is always clear and often moving.

Strasser says she teaches and writes history because she believes, "only people who understand that societies can and must change will have enough faith to work for a better future: imagining the differences of the past challenges a hopelessly static conception of the present." This book helps us and our students do that.



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