

The gendered techniques of household work

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Introduction

The following text deals with two poor parents in the families of work and of technology. In the first place, domestic work, which is often unpaid non-market work, and in the second place the techniques and technology employed in household chores, which have a relatively low standing in the world of technique.

Usually, technology and market-oriented work are associated with men, and the domestic sphere and domestic jobs with women. Nevertheless, technology has a prominent place in the domestic context. The techniques employed in housekeeping have even been fundamental in the course of the history of cultures, although often ignored in favour of the more spectacular inventions and artefacts. Little attention has been paid to the huge social repercussions which relatively recent technological modifications in the home have brought about. As stated by Cowan (1976: 8-9): "The change from the laundry tub to the washing machine is no less profound than the change from the hand loom to the power loom."

In the following short, fragmentary historical overview of housework and its techniques, special attention is paid to their gendered character. The discussion of the recent changes in techniques in the household in Portugal will include some outcomes of a research project still in progress which addresses the interrelationships between "technology, time allocation and gender".

The work of housekeeping

¹ This paper contains some preliminary fragments of a more extensive text on the same topic, in preparation. It has been conceived in the framework of the project "Time allocation and technology: a gender approach in the Portuguese context", financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT PIHM GC/0037/2008), with support of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG).

The domestic domain is not immediately associated with the concept of work, at least not in the dominant male perspective. Men regard the home primarily as a place for resting, eating, leisure and enjoying the company of the family. In reality, a great deal of essential work which is neither light nor simple occurs in and around the home. This housework includes a variety of activities, for which techniques and management skills are applied, including the ability to respond adequately to the needs of the others. In spite of being essential to the physical and social reproduction of the household members and to the functioning of society (Torres 2002: 119), housework is usually held in low regard and is not considered real work. This low esteem is reflected in and results from the absence of payment, when it is executed by a member of the family. This family member is almost always a woman, the female spouse. If work in the household is compensated (for example, in the case of domestic servants), wages are low and the workers usually occupy a precarious position on the labour market or find themselves in the grey area of the "subterranean economy".

Some household activities are instrumental, some require less or more skill than others. Other tasks fall within the scope of emotional labour, including caring for and helping family members, creating an agreeable environment, maintaining external contacts and receiving guests (Bourdieu 1998: 104-105; Lees-Maffei 2007). As pointed out by Hochschild (1983), Folbre (1994, 1995) and others, emotional labour can be tough and stressful. In the commercial sector (among flight attendants and receptionists for example) it has an exchange value, but in the private sphere it has use value only and the time spent on it is very hard to determine. Sometimes even while carrying out caring duties a person can be busy with other things; on the other hand, caring might involve being on duty on a 24/7 basis.

Techniques

The instrumental dimension of housework can be called "technical", considering that "technique" consists of more than only appliances. It also encompasses the way appliances are used in an intentional action. The ancient Greek word *technè* means art, skill and expertise and therefore comes very close to what Richard Sennett (2008) calls craftsmanship. In this text, technique implies both instruments and practical skills.

Techniques do not necessarily require material tools, as sometimes the appropriate use of the body is sufficient to attain the goal. As Marcel Mauss has argued in his essay about *techniques du corps* or body techniques, "Le corps est le premier et le plus naturel instrument de l'homme." (Mauss 2003: 372). Mauss points out that a person can achieve an objective through certain postures or movements of (parts of) the body: : resting, by means of sitting or lying down; locomotion, through walking or skating and so on. Body techniques also include the ways a human being handles tools and other objects, be this cutlery at the dinner table (Elias 1939), a loom, a shopping bag, a bicycle or electronic machinery. The way the body is used in these situations is influenced by culture and has been acquired through informal or formal training. On account of the differences between the training boys and girls receive, the use of the body is also engendered. The idea of *techniques du corps* is fundamental to Pierre Bourdieu's treatises on *habitus* (Bourdieu 1979), which, although it does not feature prominently, is a key term in Mauss's essay (Mauss 2003: 368-369).

The history of mankind in various parts of the world has been characterized by experimentation, the development and sometimes the abandonment of techniques. One powerful marker in this history is the control of fire. Fire has manifold uses², in the first place in the preparation of food. Many authors, Darwin (1871) and Lévi-Strauss (1964) among them, have viewed the capacity of human beings to transform the

² For an extensive overview, see Goudsblom 2001.

raw products of nature into digestible food through heating as a major characteristic of culture³. These earlier views should be juxtaposed with by the argument recently expounded by Wrangham (2009), namely: that it was precisely the cooking of food which enabled early humans to develop culture into further stages. Food which was cooked produced more energy and also meant a reduction in the time and energy spent both on eating and on the metabolic process of digestion. Therefore, Wrangham argues that the biological conditions were created in which the brain could develop and hence more time was available to evolve culture in its broadest sense.

In the course of prehistory and history, techniques gradually advanced and apparently small inventions were made, such as those used for subsistence (the practices of hunting, fishing and collecting) and for protection (housing and clothing). Material possessions were not really compatible with a nomadic way of life and only the most necessary and easily transportable implements had a *raison d'être*. This is the usual explanation adduced for the fact that only in the Mesolithic and early Neolithic periods, when the first permanent settlements emerged, did material culture begin to develop on a large scale⁴.

Major techniques invented or at least improved in the Neolithic, including basket-weaving, pottery, sewing, spinning and weaving, had a key function in the domestic context. Pots, as Kuper (1996: 93) points out, allowed people to "store their food and drink more easily and [...] cook in new ways, escaping the monotony of roasted foods." Baskets were a practical asset for storage and transport. This all favoured the development of new methods not just for the preparation but also for the preservation of food, such as salting, curing, pickling and fermentation. The very simple tools used for spinning and weaving make

³ For a survey of opinions, see the article by Wrangham *et al* (1999), including the section "comments" to his views. A predominant motor of cultural development is symbolization or language, so much that Mark Pagel (2010) calls language a "social technology".

⁴ Diamond (2005: 261) notes that the oldest known clay vessels manufactured with the use of fire have been found in Japan and are about 14,000 years old, the oldest known basket was made around 13,000 years ago, and the oldest known woven cloth dates from around 9,000 years ago.

the beauty of some items even more surprising. As in pottery and metallurgy, *technè* was the keyword, signifying a close convergence between artist and artisan, between art and technique. Assuming that women assumed the main responsibility in the domestic sphere, the idea that women's contribution was fundamental in the development of these manufacturing techniques, and of the diverse techniques in the domain of food preparation and preservation, is not too far-fetched⁵.

The introduction of new technology

In more recent times, the term "technology" has been accepted and become part of our daily language. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the introduction of large-scale, large-dimension machinery which ushered in profound alterations in the nature of work. Technological development was geared towards industries and their needs, and it usually was only many years afterwards that the principles of these technologies found their way into household use.

Domestic technologies are underestimated, because of an undervaluing of the domestic sphere and the female chores, and of an underestimating of household work in market terms. The development and application of machinery is prioritized in those areas in which the time saved is most lucrative. When such a criterion is applied, the household rates only low down in the pecking order.

Modern household devices eventually began to be brought onto the market from the second half of the nineteenth century, their promotion partly inspired by commercial and patriarchal interests. The emergence of the phenomenon of the housewife, the woman who devotes herself completely to the home and the education of the children and who generally remains aloof from public life, coincided with suitable developments in science, in techniques and technology.

⁵ As was already assumed by Lewis Morgan in his theory of the evolution of societies in which inventions (including of the "nonmechanical" kind) were considered the trigger for progress (Morgan 1877; Engels 1884; Oldenziel 1999: 26-27).

New scientific insights, especially in the biomedical sciences, underlined the importance of household hygiene. Consequently, the middle classes in Western countries were exhorted to take special care of the condition of their clothes, houses and bodies. This change in attitude meant more work for the woman, but industrial researchers were quick to produce new, more effective cleaning products. Other scientific contributions to household work included recommendations about the management of work and time, and "body techniques" or ergonomics. Schools and courses for the preparation of future housewives were founded and household manuals made their appearance as a genre. In the twentieth century, taylorization, although first introduced in the industrial sector, was also advocated for domestic work. This is evident from the emphasis put on planning and organization in the training courses for domestic economy and in specialist journals such as (in the United States) *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*⁶. Childcare and education were now also provided with a scientific basis. New theories spawned innumerable rules, directed to mothers, governing nutrition, schedules, medication and personal hygiene for children, which meant that mothers had to dedicate a great deal of time and attention to their offspring. Hence, these processes which began in the nineteenth century and were aptly characterized by Virgínia Ferreira as "the feminization of the woman, the infantilization of the child and the hygienization"⁷, exiled the middle-class woman to the "interior", the private and invisible domain, overburdened with a plethora of tasks to see to and hence excluded from the labour market.

Although household appliances and techniques might have been introduced with the message that they would reduce the time and effort spent on domestic chores, they were also a means to motivate middle-class women to keep up with the continually rising standards of housekeeping and dedicate themselves even more to the domestic work. This paradox of time-saving appliances, which perhaps do not save time

⁶ In Portugal there were several, including *Modas e Bordados*. For predecessors, see Leal 1992; Ildefonso 2003; Lopes 2005.

⁷ Ferreira 1981: 60. [Our translation].

at all, has been discussed by several authors and has been paid special attention in our research project⁸.

Portugal: some data

The first to adopt new household techniques and technologies were the urban middle classes, in the USA in particular, soon followed by their counterparts in Western Europe⁹. Poorer categories of the population might have coveted living in a family represented by the male-breadwinner model and with access to modern technology, but they had neither the resources nor the conditions to achieve their aspirations. Only in the course of the twentieth century did technological equipment become more widespread. In Portugal this innovation occurred later than in most other European countries.

A precondition for the use of most of these new appliances is the availability of electricity and running water in and around the house. In Portugal, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that these facilities came within the reach of most people. There was, moreover, for many decades a high imbalance in access to technical infrastructure between the urban and the rural areas. In the rural areas, many older women still remember the physical burden of such household chores as the drawing and transporting of water. Until fairly recently, wood stoves were commonly used to heat water. Women had to gather and transport firewood, balancing it on their heads, applying a typical body technique. On reaching their destination, the wood often needed to be chopped. Manuela Ribeiro (1997: 300) relates how one generation ago in the remote northern Barroso region cooking was a complex job, not so much because of the preparation of the food as for

⁸ Vanek 1974; Cowan 1976, 1983; Bittman, Rice and Wajcman 2004; Gershuny 2004; Cardia 2009; Lourenço and Las Heras 2010; Schouten et al. 2010.

⁹ See for example Cowan 1976: 6-7; Ashenburg 2007: 232-239.

the permanent attention required by the kitchen fire. Besides sheer inconvenience, the smoke affected eyesight adversely and covered the interior of the kitchen with soot.

Because of constraints imposed by economic hardship and also by the less than simple material available for food preparation, the menus of the poor were quite austere (Ribeiro 1997). For rural Trás-os-Montes during the twentieth century, Nunes (1997: 60, 83) lists rye bread, potatoes and pork, sometimes supplemented by fruit or vegetables in season as the basic food. On holidays and during festivities, the meals were more abundant and included special fare¹⁰.

In such households, domestic chores were executed within the narrow limits of the possibilities to which the perceived fundamental needs were adapted. The women were usually expected to labour hard on the land and were simply unable to spend much time on the tough domestic chores (not even on child-rearing) as full-time housewives would have been able to do. This will be the reason an elderly woman in Barroso thought that "formerly, the housework was simpler", while another stated that "in fact, formerly the houses were never cleaned"¹¹.

Although people usually say that nowadays the housework is easier, there are still some who express a bit of *saudade* ("longing") for earlier days, when there was little to choose from and life seemed more manageable. Nunes (1997: 91) reports that in her research village in rural Trás-os-Montes in the 1990s, despite the construction of public waterworks, several houses did not have a water supply because the residents did not feel the need for it.

The high number of houses in Portugal in 1970 which still went without running water and the even higher number without indoor plumbing represented a fair amount of drudgery in laundering and preparing a bath. However, it has to be borne in mind that formerly these activities

¹⁰ In this respect, there is a parallel with the households of the poor in the Netherlands in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, where the daily meals consisted of potatoes, beans and bread, the monotony only broken by the incidental piece of lard (Montijn 2002).

¹¹ Ribeiro 1997: 305. However, it was and still is a general custom in (rural) Portugal to clean the home before Easter. See also Lamas 2002.

were less frequent than they are today. People changed underwear perhaps just once a week, and woollen blankets were washed very rarely, if ever (Nunes 1997: 89). Bathing was rare among the rural and urban poor, but in this respect beliefs about the detrimental consequences of contact of the human body with water played a role, alongside the fuss involved in the heating and carrying of a considerable volume of water in winter. It was often assumed that the washing of the clothes (in particular, underwear) would be sufficient as these were believed to absorb the dirt from the body (Nunes 1997: 86-88; Ashenburg 2007).

Some women who were interviewed for this research in 2010 remembered the sheer toil and the time-consuming nature of the traditional laundering process, either from their own experience or from observation: "[the women] used to go to the stream or they washed in the washtub, and all that was a drama for the women, not for the men, but for the women"¹². Laundering in the old-fashioned way required women to display a whole range of techniques and expertise: the transport, the scrubbing, the rinsing, the special care, the wringing or the mangling, the selection of the best places for drying. Groothuis (2010) describes in detail how complex and intensive the laundering process was in a rural area of the Netherlands, in the 1940s in a house without water supply. The process swallowed up five days each fortnight; on the other hand, the items of clothing to be washed were far fewer in number than might have been expected in a Dutch family of the same size (or smaller) of today¹³.

In the middle of the twentieth century many Portuguese households still had no electricity, which ruled out the use of most modern domestic

¹² "Iam para a ribeira e lavava-se nos tanques, e isso tudo, isso era um drama p'ra as mulheres, para os homens não, mas para as mulheres". [extract from focus group session]

¹³ A different method was described for a poor family in the northern Netherlands at the beginning of the twentieth century. Each male member had only one set of outer garments, which had to be washed and dried overnight from Saturday to Sunday. Female household members did the washing, while the men were resting in their box beds (*bedstedes*), and then, the oven was used for the drying process - and this in a house with only one division, where eight to ten persons spent the night (Van Hichtum 1990: 53-54).

appliances. In 1970 only 63.5 per cent of the homes had access to the electricity grid, but this percentage increased during the 1970s, the decade of rapid modernization, and attained 89.5 in 1981. Nowadays, virtually all homes have mains electricity. The late construction of infrastructure plus the high incidence of poverty during most of the twentieth century were two major factors contributing to the generally late acceptance of domestic appliances in Portuguese families.

In the survey of 430 households in the districts of Castelo Branco and Braga which was executed in the framework of the research about Time Allocation, Technology and Gender, the following frequencies pertaining to the presence in the home of selected domestic appliances was found (table 1).

Table 1. Presence of selected domestic appliances in 430 households, districts of Castelo Branco and Braga, 2010

	number	percentage
washing machine	421	97.9
vacuum cleaner	396	92.1
microwave oven	376	87.4
dishwasher	227	52.8

Source: Survey
Time Allocation and Technology: a
Gender Approach for the Portuguese
Context.

Washing machines and vacuum cleaners are almost universal. The dishwasher was included in Table 1 because the number of families owning this appliance has been rising considerably in Portugal. According to the Survey on Family Budgets and the Survey on Family Expenses¹⁴, in 1995 12.5 per cent of the domestic units on a national level had this appliance and this had risen to 34.7 in 2005¹⁵. Many interviewees

¹⁴ INE - Inquérito aos Orçamentos Familiares (até 2000); Inquérito às Despesas das Famílias (2005/2006) (Survey of the Family Budgets; Survey of the Family Expenses).

¹⁵ INE - Inquérito aos Orçamentos Familiares (até 2000); Inquérito às Despesas das Famílias

had a dishwasher at the top of their wish-list. In the previous parts of this text, considerable attention has been paid to the techniques of cooking through the ages. The questions in the survey did not cover the presence of a cooker as its universality was assumed. However, the microwave, which today replaces the cooker on various occasions, has achieved a firm place in many households, as can be seen in the table.

In the focus group sessions and during the application of the survey, the predominant opinion registered was that the various appliances used in households have made life much simpler. However, despite memories of back-breaking labour, many women of the older generation still prefer to do the laundry manually in certain situations; in other words they are selective in the use of the washing machine. This choice is not because they mistrust or fear the machine, but is inspired by the special care they devote to certain pieces of textile. Alongside modern devices, many courtyards and sculleries of flats are still equipped with a *tanque*, the typical rectangular washtub with scrubbing board. In rural areas, the river and brooks or the communal washing places (*lavadouros*) are still in use as a complement to the domestic equipment, and the maintenance of *lavadouros* or the construction of new ones are popular programme points in some village administrations (*juntas de freguesia*).

Looking at the results of the open-ended questions in our survey, the story of laundry has great relevance. For a brief analysis at this juncture just one of these questions is chosen, namely opinions about the importance of appliances in the household.

(2005/2006) (Survey of the Family Budgets; Survey of the Family Expenses) Source: PORDATA. (last update 2010-03-01 10:58:37). It should be noted that the percentages which resulted from our survey do not coincide with those of the above-mentioned surveys, not only because of the time gap (2005/2006 to 2010) but also because all households in our sample included a (married or cohabiting) couple. This factor is also important when interpreting the outcome of the *Survey on Family Expenses 2005/2006*, according to which the percentage of domestic units in Portugal with a washing machine was 92.1, and with a vacuum cleaner 79.9.

Table 2

Question: Which appliance do you consider as the most essential ("you cannot do without it")? Districts of Castelo Branco and Braga, 2010

Women:	number	percentage
1. Washing machine	112	51.1
2. Cooker	34	15
3. Car	23	10.5
Men:	number	percentage
1. Car	58	27.5
2. Washing machine	32	15.2
3. Television set	31	14.7

Source: Survey Time Allocation and Technology: a Gender Approach for the Portuguese Context.

Table 2 shows that more than half of the women mentioned the washing machine and this was followed at quite a distance by the cooker, the number one preference of only 15 per cent of the female interviewees. On the other hand, few men (15.2 per cent) put the washing machine first. As a matter of fact, the section of the survey related to time allocation (not discussed in the present paper) reveals that 81.5 per cent of the men declared they never washed clothes.

Appliances for the care of clothes (including, for example, the iron) were considered the most important technologies by more than half of the women in all age categories, although there was a high interest among some of the younger women in ICT and cars¹⁶. Most women regard the treatment of the clothes (washing, ironing and storing) as a pivotal domestic task, and over and above this, women and men regard it as a

¹⁶ In the open questions, all types of technology could be mentioned, which led to a total number of 83 devices, some of which imaginary such as robots. In the treatment of the data, we clustered these in the following categories: (support for) the treatment of clothes; food preparation; cleaning; infrastructure; leisure; information and communication; information and leisure; transport; professional work; personal care.

women's job - despite minor changes in attitude among the younger and more highly educated people.

Machines make this job much easier, not only because it saves time and energy but also because they make the *technè* of washing by hand (the knowledge needed and the bodily and instrumental techniques) redundant. But neither the relative simplicity nor the fact that nowadays an electric appliance (usually seen as belonging to the "male" domain) is used for this task has succeeded in exerting an aura to attract the men to the world of clothes. With other appliances for different household tasks, this has been somewhat easier. It is not the appliance or the technique, but the domain of the work and its meaning in the cultural context which has the greatest influence on whether a man or a woman will engage in it.

Final considerations

This paper has focused on the instrumental dimensions of household work and concluded that, principally thanks to technical appliances which have been introduced, the laundry and the cooking in particular now consume less time and effort. The techniques used in household work have changed, are easier and take less time. It seems that a part of the time "set free" from the instrumental dimension is now dedicated to the emotional dimension of housework. The laundry is done more frequently, as it is considered an implicit way of taking care of the health of the family members and of making them feel good (Denèfle 1995), and meals can be more elaborate, pleasing all the family (Kaufmann 2005; Truninger 2009). The general tendency to spend more time with and attention on children is attributable to many factors but is certainly facilitated by the comfort of new technology (Schouten and Lourenço in press).

On the first page of this chapter, the great importance of the washing machine was pointed out in a quotation by Ruth Schwarz Cowan. As has been shown, this machine has probably not brought about a great change

in the division of roles between men and women, but it has considerably relieved the household work of women. Remembering the period (one generation ago in Portugal, two in the Netherlands) when it was usual to do the laundry by hand, which required not only a knowledge of a cluster of special techniques but also the undertaking of an exhausting and poorly recognized job, it must be deemed a blessing that many women no longer need to engage in it. At least, this is the case in the Western world. For many women in other countries in the world, the laundry is still a back-breaking chore, often executed under difficult circumstances in a life which is less than kind to them.

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