

DISCONNECTION: ADVERTISING AND EDITORIAL CONTENT IN THE *HOUSEWIVES LEAGUE MAGAZINE* (1913-1916)

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Introduction

The editorial content of the *Housewives League Magazine* published between 1913 and 1916 provides an interesting parallel with the contemporary food movement. During the 1910s, the Housewives League, led by Mrs. Julian Heath, started a public campaign for “clean, sanitary, and wholesome food” in response to what they conceived to be unsanitary conditions on farms, in grocery stores, and in markets. Their campaign took them into the public sphere, even as they invoked their roles as housewives in the private sphere as their central identity. The League was instrumental in promoting what they called green or municipal markets, the equivalent of contemporary farmers’ markets. The members of the Housewives League used their identities as wives and mothers, as nurturers of the family, the home, and their accepted realm—the private sphere—to seek changes in the nation’s food system—a very public demand indeed. In seeking wholesomeness, they weren’t stepping out of their traditional boundaries. In demanding access to farmers’ markets, they were asserting their collective might as newly organized consumers—realizing the importance of united purchasing power. As this transformation, both in the public and private spheres was taking place, however, the disconnections between the editorial content of the *Housewives League Magazine* and the advertising copy became apparent, causing a rift among League members, leading to its eventual demise.

Public vs. Private Sphere: an Artificial Dichotomy

By the early part of the 20th century, most middle-class and elite women, especially in rapidly urbanizing areas, were no longer producers. They had become consumers. “Why has consumption been understood economically as a private act by self-interested individuals rather than politically as a site for collective action?” asks Wendy Wiedenhoft (281). This question justifies the necessity of the League and its work. For example, in July 1915, the Housewives League organized a lobbying group to defeat three milk bills in Minnesota aimed at reducing the quality of milk sold. They banded together with small farmers to argue against the bills which were based on the interests of the large dairy dealers to the detriment of consumers and small dairy farmers. They argued that consumers and small farmers were not being treated fairly by the proposed bills. This action exemplifies the fluidity of the dichotomy between public and private. Members of the Housewives League of Minnesota were down at their state legislature, lobbying their representatives, noting their power as consumers, as well as their political clout as citizens, even if they were not able to vote. Due to the success of their lobbying efforts and to continue this work, the Minnesota Housewives League created a legislative committee as reported in the national magazine, sparking a political consciousness in Leaguers across the nation. The magazine often reported that the League itself attracted women who had never before taken part in public work and the magazine was only too happy to give an account of their political activism and victories. These events show that the middle-class women the Housewives League was aimed at mobilizing were able to move from one sphere to the other, justifying their actions by the notion that their public work was in fact reinforcing the private sphere.

Equating political activity only with the public sphere or voting negates the importance of alternative forms of political participation. Elite women allied with powerful male state actors and they created their own opportunities even though they did not yet have the right to vote. Nevertheless, women were involved in political various forms of political activity (Wiedenhoft 283). As “Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has demonstrated with his concept of ‘habitus,’ in practice social actors are not always self consciously aware of how they structure the social world” (Wiedenhoft 283). The Housewives League members clearly understood the importance of political participation even as their leader, Mrs. Julian Heath, refuted the importance of suffrage for women. Indeed, they did not necessarily view effective political participation as being tied to voting. One article in the magazine outlined an important decision of the U.S. District Court for the Southern

District of New York as affecting all housewives. The article states that “every housewife has a direct, personal interest in the decision recently handed down by Judge Hough” (Whittier 39). Even judicial decisions, clearly a domain of the public sphere, the article argues, are related to women’s everyday, ostensibly private sphere lives.

The members of the League used their private sphere identities as mothers and housewives to effectuate changes to the nation’s food supply. Similarly to members of other consumer leagues, as argued by Wendy Wiedenhoft in her 2008 article “The Politics of Consumption,” the Housewives League used “its initial forays into the *public* realm [to] serve as a forward position from which women could redeploy their organizations for *political* ends” (emphasis in original; Clemens 189; Sklar: 1995a, 1995b in Wiedenhoft 289). Local politicians recognized the power of the Housewives League and its organized members. One Buffalo, NY politician cried out: “I’d rather see the ‘De’il hi’self’ coming after me than the Housewives League...!” (Servoss 41). Clearly, women in the public sphere were to be feared by men for their power, their influence, their energy. This view is at odds with Mrs. Heath’s decidedly public actions of testifying to the legislature, and traveling the country making public appearances and speeches about League activities and promotion of her anti-suffrage views. Ironically, she used a very different reasoning to argue for her anti-suffrage stance. Mrs. Heath, as quoted in a February 15, 1909 *New York Tribune* article, asserted during a testimony to the New York state legislature in Albany, NY, that “women had done nothing where the chance had been given them, and that therefore nothing could be expected of them were the chance [to vote] given them in this [New York] state” (*New York Tribune* 1). Mrs. Heath saw nothing amiss with her own public, and clearly very political role in testifying to the state legislature and her anti-suffrage viewpoint, all the while the content of her testimony asked for women to continue to be kept out of the public sphere altogether since, she argued, were they to be allowed to claim their role as citizens, they would not know what to do with it.

At the same time as Mrs. Heath was testifying against suffrage, some of the other League chapter presidents were writing about suffrage in connection to the home. Mrs. Bisland, the president of the Bronxville chapter of the League wrote: “women can take their place in a community shoulder to shoulder with men and help materially in the building of the nation, city, home or village; and it seems to me that right here in the Housewives League we can prove our ability” (Bisland 26). Mrs. Bisland, a suffragist herself, associated being a woman, a housewife, a mother, and a Leaguer as integral to building a nation. She argued that the roles were part of one another and that

it was her responsibility as a woman that encouraged her to work for the benefit of her family, her community, and her nation.

Other League leaders were less fearful of suffrage as yet another step in the modernization of women away from their primary role as housewives and mothers. As a matter of fact, various high-ranking politicians such as the governors of North Carolina, Montana, New York, Michigan, and Kansas, all wrote editorials in the fourth anniversary edition of the *Housewives League Magazine* in support of general League activities, praising the membership for their tireless efforts in reforming the nation's food system. The governor of Kansas, the Honorable Arthur Capper, argued that the home was an important "unit of citizenship" and that without it as a foundation, the nation's institutions would not exist (Capper 15). Kansas was a progressive state since it first gave women the right to vote in school board elections in 1861, gave women the right to vote in municipal elections in 1887, and passed a constitutional amendment to the Kansas state constitution granting women suffrage in 1912 (Ruthsdotter 2010). While Capper's view can certainly be read as a precursor to the "family values" argument of contemporary conservative pundits, allowing women some form of citizenship in order to placate their demands for suffrage, in its historical context, it can also be read as a way for women to use that partial citizenship to make demands for more.

The notion of political opportunities has been used by social movement scholars to "explain *why* social movements occur rather than understand the intricate processes of *how* collective action is accomplished (Wiedenhof 282). The Housewives League intended to clarify this issue with their magazine, letting their members know that one of the fundamental principles of the Housewives League was to make history by making women aware of their "real economic function as the dispenser[s] of wealth of the world" (Heath 17). The president herself claimed that the League had professionalized housewifery and that the awakening of women's economic importance affected the entire world of commerce due to the changes in relationships among husbands and wives, as well as wives and industry (Heath 20). This had not been accomplished by individual housewives working individually in obscurity, but by the collective power of what Mrs. Heath called "pioneering women." She acknowledged that there was still much to learn, but called on the members to be "tolerant and patient, *radical and yet conservative*, keeping always our principle—a square deal for all" (my emphasis; Heath 20). This call for being both radical and conservative at the same time echoes the dualism of her stance both on suffrage and on the place of women in the public sphere. She wanted women to be experts in the field of housekeeping. She

wanted to radically change the nation's food system through political and legislative means, but she was also adamant that the only way for women to do that appropriately would be through the private sphere of the home.

The Housewives League members saw themselves as responsible for the well-being of the nation. Taking an essentialist view of their roles as mothers, they argued that they were responsible for mothering the entire world, including their servants among other "less fortunate" groups (Heath 10). For example, one article takes a market-based view of the "servant problem" and argues that a housewife should run her home like a business and view this predicament as a labor problem. This view invokes the expertise of home economics as a model for running a household. However, Heath goes on to argue that servants should not be overworked and should be given holidays and reprieves from the constant drudgery of their labor. A democratic model of the home, modeled after the American system of government is also endorsed in the same article. This maternalism is evident in many of the writers in the League magazine. It is the elite women's burden to care for their less fortunate sisters. While this article appears in an early issue of the magazine (April 1915), less than one year later, a lengthy article describing the marvel of a new science called eugenics, or what they called "the science of being well-born" (Wallin 50) in relation to those "less fortunate sisters" makes apparent the original intent behind the first article. As long as the servants are living in one's home, they are sheltered from the horrors of the tenements where their families are likely to live. Were they to go back there permanently, in the League's view, they would become likely candidates for sterilization to prevent them from procreating excessively.

The shift of middle class and elite women's roles from producers to that of consumers occurred due to rapid industrialization and urbanization throughout the latter part of the 19th century. The inherent dichotomy of this change for this particular class of women, as with the public/private split was unlikely to be fluid. Beyond a few examples of various extraordinary women of the time, there was very little flexibility in identity. The rigid boundaries of these distinctions, as with those of race, class, gender, etc, did not move freely. Working-class and rural women of course, were still very much producers, since what they called "economic progression" had really only touched the lives of middle and upper class, mostly urban, white women. The magazine argued that "food production had been taken out of the individual garden spot, and pasture and kitchen, where it had been carried on in the past, and transferred gradually into the wholesale

manufacturing plant—the packing house, the great bakery, the canner” (Marshall 4). While women had made this “progress” in their lives, it was also argued that they had gone a bit too far afield in asking for suffrage. The Housewives League was a potential instrument for bringing them back to the private sphere where they belonged. This was occurring at the very same time as the League was asking them to take up legislative issues with their local government, accompany food safety inspectors into packing plants, food distribution centers, grocery stores, and other types of markets to inspect for sanitary and wholesome conditions.

While the public and private spheres were never really separate, a connection was created between the two through the establishment of “home economics” as “another outlet for public female activity ... since home economics ... provided the illusion that women had not really left the domestic sphere ” (Rutheford 68-69). Women were able to work in the public sphere while appearing to remain in the private one, since their political concerns were related to their roles as wives and mothers in providing wholesome food for their families. Even before suffrage in the United States, with the rise of various magazines catering to the housewife such as *Good Housekeeping* for example, the status of housewife was starting to become elevated to that of a profession (Pugh 18). Much was made of the fact that women spent 90% of the household income on goods for the home, so advertisers, manufacturers, as well as politicians were on notice to listen to their demands. Marriage itself was touted as a partnership of husband and wife, producer and consumer. This argument went even further, with one writer in the December 1915 issue of the magazine arguing that “trade begins and ends in the home... The whole United States—its industries, its agriculture, its mines, its railroads, its wealth... is based on the purchasing power of the home” (Miller 21). A world war was raging in Europe, the American economy was suffering in numerous ways, women were trying to achieve suffrage in many parts of the world, but this writer, along with Mrs. Heath, the Housewives League’s eternal cheerleader, argued that many of the nation’s economic problems were being solved by housewives through their collective and organized purchasing power. Again, this raises the question whether collective economic action necessarily translates into political consciousness, but I argue that the context for the imminent suffrage vote enabled some of these women to turn their activism as housewives into concrete political gains only a few years later.

The ideals behind the Housewives League were again taken up by militant housewives during the Great Depression as a way to organize consumer actions, barter networks, and lobbying groups. As

they had during World War I, the Great Depression activist housewives argued that “the homes in which they worked were intimately linked to the fields and shops where their husbands, sons, and daughters labored; to the national economy; and to the fast growing state and federal bureaucracies” (Orleck 149). Through this understanding, the politicization of women and mothers began to transform women from thinking of themselves purely as consumers with economic power to viewing themselves as political actors. Annelise Orleck argues that the housewives’ activism had a great “impact on the consciousness of the women who participated. Black women [and others] learned to write and speak effectively, to lobby in state capitals and in Washington D.C., to challenge men in positions of power, and sometimes to question the power relations in their own homes.... The very act of organizing defied traditional notions of proper behavior for wives and mothers...” (Orleck 160). The housewives during the Great Depression as well as those who came before them did not necessarily think of themselves as feminists, but they did understand their position as economic and eventually political actors, and fought in the public sphere for their rights as keepers of the private sphere.

Advertising

Processed foods were advertised toward the end of each issue of the *Housewives League Magazine*. In the first issue, there is one single ad for baking powder. By the last available issue, there are advertisements for various products ranging from Scott paper towels, to condensed soups, to prepared cookies. In the September 1915 issue, there is also an open letter to the membership from Mrs. Heath, the president of the League herself, endorsing Ryzon Baking Powder—a product made by the General Chemical Company. In less than one year, the advertising space increased from one single page in the January 1915 issue to 3 full page, 4 half page, and 8 quarter page advertisements in the November 1915 issue. The content of the advertisements were mostly variations on a theme of wholesomeness, purity, and most importantly for modern women: convenience. However, the advertisements weren’t the only space given over to the corporations’ interests. In each issue, some space was given to a spokesperson for various food manufacturers in order to praise the virtues of their products. For example, in one issue, the precursor for margarine, called “Butterine,” was discussed. Housewives were admonished to care for the product in specific ways to ensure its continued sanitary and hygienic conditions.

Housewives were to use advertising and other types of informa-

tion, such as those found in the Housewives League publication and activities, to learn how to become better and more effective consumers since the home was no longer considered a center of production (Rutheford 71). For example, Christine Frederick, the 1929 author of *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, a tome directed to advertisers in an effort to help them understand female consumers, argued that women should remain in the home, and that advertisers should play a pivotal role in teaching them how to consume more effectively. The feminist social commentator Charlotte Perkins Gilman had argued long before, in a 1912 article, that advertising was the “ceaseless, desperate effort to compel patronage” (Gilman in Rutheford 76). Clearly her feminist (and seemingly anti-capitalist) view was at odds with Frederick’s who had been writing about the wonders of advertising for women in various outlets for years.

The *Housewives League Magazine* understood the burdens of business placed on the small dealers and/or farmers. They knew that these small outlets would be unlikely to spend money on advertising either in their publication or elsewhere and they chastised advertisers for encouraging consumers to convince people that they were “getting something for nothing” through their advertisements. At the same time as they argued against large corporations in their editorials, they sold more and more advertising space to big companies and gave them their seal of approval or Mrs. Heath’s endorsements as recommendations for their products to members of the League throughout the country. This disconnection remains central to the controversy over Mrs. Heath’s resignation and perhaps even to the dismantling of the Housewives League as an agent of change for the American food system on behalf of women and families in the early part of the 20th century.

The League greatly contributed to the industrialization of food production/processing by using the purchasing power of its membership to patronize certain brands over others, and even branded merchandise over bulk products. The League president encouraged advertising in her editorials saying that the “unintelligent consumer” thinks that the advertiser is trying to put one over on her. Conversely, the intelligent consumer looks upon advertising as the manufacturer’s open letter to her, and sees ads as educational, *if* they have integrity. It is unclear, however, how the intelligent housewife was supposed to discern between scrupulous and unscrupulous advertisers. In Mrs. Heath’s view, educated housewives knew that advertisers were likely to put their best foot forward, and were likely able to discern between editorial and advertising content. In one article, she addressed advertisers directly, describing the potential of housewives

as educated consumers. She argued that it was the advertisers' job to inform League members of their products' benefits. In conjunction with her endorsements of certain products, Mrs. Heath, as president of the Housewives' League seems to have been intent on shaping consumer demand to meet the magazine's advertisers' needs.

Mrs. Heath addressed her readership again regarding the benefits of advertising in the August 1915 issue of the magazine. In it, she reiterates the importance of women's economic power as organized consumers. She argues for the protection of the home as "woman's greatest contribution to economics" (Heath 15). At the same time as she essentializes women's roles in the home, she also outlines the notion that there is no "typical woman": she doesn't exist. Heath recognizes that women come from all walks of life and may have different perspectives but for her, one perspective remains constant: women should be the keepers of the home in as professional and educated manner as possible.

This address seems to be the beginning of the end of her tenure, since she was subsequently charged by the attorney general of New York with corruption charges for taking money from advertisers who would get the League's endorsement of their products in return. Even while embattled though, when she was faced with the "peach situation" of 1915, whereby a bumper crop of peaches was going unsold at the docks, she went there with a few associates to investigate in the middle of the night. It turned out that the retailers were at fault; being unwilling to buy peaches in bulk for fear that they would go unsold since they thought "modern" women were too busy to spend time canning peaches as they had in the "old days." So while Mrs. Heath's trajectory as a disgraced president of the Housewives League is certainly worthy of notice, it's also important to see how that particular path exemplifies the complexity of women's identities as much more than housewives, even in the early part of the 20th century. On the one hand, Mrs. Heath is advising modern women to get back to their respective kitchens. In addition, she is a fearless activist on behalf of changing what she viewed as an inefficient and dishonest food system. On the other hand, she is not beyond being corrupted herself by manufacturers who end up paying for her, and therefore the League's, endorsement.

Conclusion

It seems fitting to end this essay with the demise of the *Housewives League Magazine* in 1916. Any documented trace of the magazine ends with the 4th anniversary edition of the magazine of

December 1916. This timing is suspiciously similar to the disgrace of Mrs. Julian Heath, who was asked to resign by members of the East Orange, New Jersey Housewives League for endorsing the Ryzon Baking Powder company as a result of receiving remuneration for that endorsement in the magazine. *The New York Times* covered the story from late 1915 until July 18, 1918 when the New York state attorney general finally asked Mrs. Heath to step down as president of the League. In actuality, her fall was not related to the dual roles she lived, as a public person advocating for the private sphere. Indeed, her fiery orations, whether ethical or not, proved that she had the power to politicize thousands of women all over America in relation to food. She categorically refused to resign and defended her role as an educator of housewives all over America, saying that while the League didn't have the names of every single one of their members, she was quite sure that the League was an economic force to be reckoned with since it was 800,000 women strong. Whether this figure is accurate or not is certainly open to debate. However, while Mrs. Heath may have argued that the League was an economic force, I contend that it was also a political force pushing for changes in the food system during times of economic scarcity. Women had to make do with less in order to feed their families good food whether it was due to World War I food scarcity, or whether it was due to other economic factors.

During the current economic recession, we are also trying to make do with less, and perhaps it would behoove us to look backward in history to the Housewives League and take examples from their political playbook. As consumers, we need more direct access to fresh farm products, so that both the producer and consumer can reach a fair price. As citizens, we need to demand change in the global food system and distribution process that puts small farmers and consumers at a disadvantage for the benefit of large agribusiness corporations using taxpayer-financed, government-sponsored agricultural commodity subsidies. The Housewives League was able to find alternatives to their food system, and we should too. A century separates us, but the issues we face now are clear echoes of the same from 100 years ago.

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