

# **Hazel Kyrk’s intellectual roots: When First-Generation Home Economists met the Institutionalist Framework**

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**ASSA Annual Conference (6th January, 2023)**

*[Preliminary draft version, please do not quote without consent]*

## **Abstract**

In the years following its publication, Hazel Kyrk’s *Theory of Consumption* (1923) became the flagship of the field that would later be known as the “economics of consumption,” which gathered together theoretical and empirical works on consumption. In the existing literature on Kyrk, her theory is generally depicted as the starting point of the field’s history, thus failing to appreciate how and why it emerged the way it did (Kiss and Beller 2000; Tadajewski 2013). This paper examines Kyrk’s intellectual origins, which, we argue, can be traced back to two main threads: the American home economics movement and the institutionalist movement. Both movements conveyed specific answers and endeavors as responses to the American society’s material and social transformations that occurred at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the changing role of consumption and that of women in American society. On one hand, Kyrk pursued first-generation home economists’ effort to make sense and put into action the shifting of women’s role from domestic producer to consumer. On the other hand, she reinterpreted Veblen’s (1899) account of consumption in order to reveal its operational value for a normative agenda directed toward “wise” and “rational” consumption. This paper examines how Kyrk carried on first-generation home economists’ progressive agenda and how she adapted Veblen’s *fin-de-siècle* critical account of consumption to the context of the household goods development in the 1900-1920. Our account of Kyrk’s intellectual roots offers a novel narrative to better understand the role played by gender and epistemological issues in her theory.

## 1. Introduction

What did being a woman economist entail in the 1920s? What did it mean in terms of the kind of economics a woman could be doing then? These are some of the questions this paper wishes to address, by looking at Hazel Kyrk's early theoretical work context of formulation and main influences. Although Kyrk was fully trained as an economist and gained a PhD in economics at the University of Chicago in the early 1920s, the very fact that she was a woman framed her way of approaching economics. Historians of economics interested in gender have well-established how certain subjects/disciplines (like the household, family, or consumption) were favored by or attributed to women, leading to their exclusion from the economics discipline (see e. g. Folbre 1998; Forget 2011; Becchio 2020; Rostek 2021)<sup>1</sup>.

This article focuses on Kyrk's *Theory of Consumption*, published in 1923 and winner of the prestigious Hart, Schaffner & Marx Prize (see Madden 2018), which illustrates the dynamics of emergence and transformation of the study of consumption in the 1920s as well as the changing status of women in both society and academia. We examine the foundations and nature of her theory and show that it constituted a point of convergence of the epistemological (i.e., the need to theorize consumption) and gender (i.e., the transformation of the role of women in the home) issues that the study of consumption reflected in the context of emergence of the consumer society. The field of consumption economics that Kyrk's theory catalyzed must be understood within the particular context of the time, which, we argue, can be characterized by five main elements: (1) the absence of a systematic theoretical framework for studying consumption; (2) the expansion of the American (domestic) goods market; (3) the absence of regulation and consumer protection; (4) the changing place of women from domestic producers to consumers; and (5) the place of women in society and in the academia.

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<sup>1</sup> Historians of consumption and marketing have also been studying the issue, emphasizing the role of women in the development of consumer culture (see e. g. Trentmann 2012; Witkowski 2018) and marketing research (see e. g. Zuckerman and Carsky 1990; Jones and Tadjewski 2016).

In response to these issues, Kyrk's theory laid the groundwork for an institutionalist and progressive framework for the study of consumption that would serve as the theoretical and normative epicenter in the subsequent decade.

Indeed, Kyrk wrote her theory at a time when, on the one hand, the institutionalist movement had acquired a more stable research agenda and gained academic popularity; and, on the other hand, the home economics movement had established its usefulness in cleaning up and rationalizing the home. We argue that Kyrk's theory articulated an institutionalist approach to consumption with the home economics movement's progressive heritage in order to adequately account and take part in the transformations of American society and in the changing status of women. By looking at how she brought together this dual legacy, we wish to make visible an important historical shift in how studying consumption and being a woman connected in the history of economics.

### **The Gender of Consumption**

In the 1910s-1920s, consumption remained an unexplored subject of study, which was essentially limited to the abstract marginalist framework. As Frank W. Taussig's characterization in 1915 reveals: "the theory of consumption, —that uncertain group of topics in which it is difficult to get beyond platitude and exhortation." (Taussig 1915, 9). Since the 1890s, the few economists who ventured in exploring the origins of consumer's choice were Simon N. Patten (see e.g., Patten 1889), who was among the founders of the AEA in 1885, and Thorstein Veblen, who made conspicuous consumption a central feature of his institutional approach (Veblen 1899). However, both proposed views on consumption which did not spread among economists at the time. As Richard T. Ely recalled when reminiscing about the creation of the AEA in 1936: "Patten expressed the thought that our consumption in this country was not adapted to the American environment. ... My wife had been looking at Patten's economics.

She felt that she should do her part to contribute to good consumption (Ely 1936, 149-150). The mention of his wife Anna Ely's interest is indicative of how studying consumption was perceived at the turn of the century. Consumption as a practice was largely associated with a female activity, which was of more interest to home economists, i. e. women. Not surprisingly, both Patten and Veblen would become explicit influences for home economists interested in the study of consumption, like Kyrk, who would later build on Veblen's insights to approach "the problem of consumption" using an institutionalist framework.

Yet, in the aftermath of the Great War, home economists interested in consumption made visible a rather dual and paradoxical account of the consumer: he or she was perceived as a crucial protagonist in the national economic effort. In Olson's words "in the interwar United States and interwar Great Britain, it was common to portray the consumer as an agent capable of ensuring and enhancing economic growth and political democracy" (2019, 33). Kyrk developed this idea further by emphasizing his or her agency and strength to bring about a better future, and this account was even stronger when women were the ones associated with the figure of the modern consumer. But at the same time, home economists kept emphasizing how producers were taking advantage of consumers, who were either uninformed or unorganized to properly defend themselves. Kyrk's characterization is rather emblematic of such a dual view when she argues that "she [the woman] has become the director of consumption, the maker of budgets, the purveyor who seeks upon the market the goods which the family needs" (Kyrk 1923, 20), while recognizing at the same time the producer's ability to "mold demand" according to his profit-seeking goal. This led her to frame "the problem of the consumer," — by opposition to "the problem of consumption" — through the idea of equipping him or her with defenses to balance this unequal relationship.

## 2. Women Employment in Academia: Framing Kyrk's Theory of Consumption

Both Kyrk's career and the theory of consumption she developed illustrate the dynamics of emergence and transformation of the study of consumption in the 1920s. Here we examine the context in which her theory was produced regarding the place of women in academia. Kyrk's theory reflects a set of historical, institutional, and disciplinary contingencies that resulted from the condition of women then. Indeed, in the history of feminism and women's history in the United States, the 1920s-1930s are considered the low point of the *first wave of the feminist movement*<sup>2</sup> marked by the struggle for women's rights, which began in the second half of the 19th century and ended at the end of the First World War. In the United States, the 1920s-1940s correspond to a period of conservative contraction in American society after several decades of political fight that culminated in 1920, when women were granted the right to vote nationwide.

The last two decades of the 19th century had seen a significant expansion of women's education: in 1870, 30% of universities were coeducational, compared to 70% in 1900 (Chamberlain 1991, 4). In the aftermath of the Great War, the feminist dynamic came up against a conservative resurgence that prevented them from gaining access to positions for which they would compete with men. The situation of women in the academy reflected this general social trajectory. In the 1900s-1910s, women were getting more educated, the number of dissertations they were defending increased, and they were particularly well represented in economics (see Forget 1995; 2011; Albelda 1997). In 1920, women accounted for 19.29% of the theses in economics in progress, a proportion that would decline sharply over the next two decades, reaching 6.94% in 1940 (Forget 2011, 22). Thus, Kyrk started her PhD in economics at this *relatively* good time for women's higher education. Her dissertation was entitled "The

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<sup>2</sup> By opposition to the second wave, which corresponds to the women's sexual emancipation period in the 1960s-1970s, and the third wave of the 1990s (Becchio 2020, 2-3; Berkman 2000).

Consumer's Guidance of Economic Activity," which she defended in Chicago in 1920. For this work, she won the first prize (\$1,000) of the Hart, Schaffner, and Marx Prize<sup>3</sup> in 1921, leading to its publication in 1923 under the title *A Theory of Consumption*, edited by John Maurice Clark at the Houghton Mifflin Company.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the possibility to have an academic career was slim for graduate women, and home economics provided just such a *disciplinary refuge* for women trained in economics like Kyrk. Home economics was one of the few fields in which women could make a career and obtain regular professorships (Folbre 1998, 43; Rossiter 1982, 70). The Great Depression worsened the employment situation for women. By the 1930s, the employment of women economists in the academy was drastically reduced. Beyond the general economic slump, Forget (2011) offers four reasons that would have mainly contributed to the low employment of women economists in the 1930s: (1) a phenomenon of gender discrimination; (2) the development of *social work* as an academic object; (3) the development of home economics as an academic object; (4) the growth of the federal state through its new departments that recruited abundantly in the fields of agriculture, home economics, consumerism, etc. (Forget 2011, 23-24). These four elements framed the political economy's relationship with home economics, within which consumption represented a disciplinary dividing line. Studying consumption from the home, and not from the market, reflected a methodological posture anchored to domestic science, which was then the only disciplinary landmark available to women economists interested in studying consumption:

“When I, an economist by training, with all my teaching in economics, was asked to join a Department of Home Economics to give work in economics,

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<sup>3</sup> The award's jury was composed of J. Laurence Laughlin, John Bates Clark, Edwin F. Gay, Theodore E. Burton, and Wesley C. Mitchell. Economist Frank H. Knight had also won this prize for his thesis defended in 1916, which would be published under the title *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* (1921) On the Hart, Schaffner and Marx Prize, see Madden (2018).

<sup>4</sup> We contacted the University of Chicago's Archives, which do not appear to have Kyrk's original manuscript in their possession. In fact, Kyrk sent to Chicago's library the edited version of the *Theory of Consumption*.

I assumed that it was in economics as the economists use the term. I am not competent to give anything else.” (Kyrk 1946).<sup>5</sup>

Although Kyrk was trained as an economist, and identified herself as such, she, like many other women at the time, specialized in household’s study, family sciences, or women’s work. In her *Economic Problems of the Family* (1929 [1933]), she made it clear that she was interested in domestic issues from an economic perspective, not from the domestic arts point of view:

“Nor should the title ‘Economic Problems of the Family’ be construed as ‘Home Economics’ broadly, covering technical and practical questions of nutrition, childcare, care of the house and selection of clothing, furniture and household equipment. The problems dealt with are ‘economic’ in the academic sense of that term.” (Kyrk 1929 [1933], xix).

Kyrk considered herself part of the academic economics and took distance from the first generation of home economists, which were associated with the ‘practical’ issues of the home and therefore considered less rigorous and less scientific. In addition, in the 1920s, the context of socialism distrust tended to make any radical political adherence suspect and potentially damage those who claimed it overtly. The compatibility of a fringe of the movement at the turn of the century with cooperativism and socialism (although not explicitly claimed by most of them) was undoubtedly perceived as an additional reason to take distance from this previous generation, and thus avoid being exposed to suspicion. In the 1920s, many women’s groups were suspected of socialism or even communism, including some home economists or consumer defense associations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Hazel Kyrk to Dorothy Dickens dated January 29, 1946 (Cornell University Library Archive, Special Collection, Department of Household Economics, Box 1, folder 6).

<sup>6</sup> On this point, see particularly the notorious “*Spider-Chart*” published in 1924 in Henry Ford’s *Dearborn Independent*, which listed in the form of a spider’s web map an alleged Bolshevik network of influence led by women and women’s associations and by Jewish bankers.

Identifying household economics as a social science mirroring political economy thus contributed to moving away from the social reform anchoring to a more neutral positioning close to economics. At the same time, this positioning made visible the existence of two “spheres” that reflected a gendered disciplinary division: a male one (economics), associated with production and the outside world, and a female one (household economics), associated with home and consumption.<sup>7</sup>

One can easily imagine why the issue of her gender arose when she wrote to her mentor, the economist Leon C. Marshall, informing him that she was looking for a job and asking, “if, by any chance, opportunities for employment suitable for my sex and capacities come to your knowledge” (quoted in Beller and Kiss 1999, 5). But in his response, Marshall lamented that the administration was only looking for men. In 1921, Marshall told her, “It is a funny job market this year. There has really been a very heavy demand for men though at rather low wages and practically nothing for women.”<sup>8</sup> She finally obtained a teaching position at Iowa State College. Still, in 1925 she was offered a position in the Department of Home Economics at the University of Chicago, which she accepted on the sole condition that she also be affiliated with the Department of Economics, an affiliation she did not obtain until 1929 (Folbre 1998, 47-48).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Kyrk’s interest in household and family economics certainly at least partially resulted from the discrimination she suffered from being a woman. In Chicago, she became an important pole of attraction for studies on consumption and *economic approaches to the family*, supervising women PhD students in household economics,<sup>10</sup> such as Margaret G. Reid (who

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<sup>7</sup> In his famous book *Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill already spoke of the women’s “sphere of action” (Mill 1869 [2006], 162). But it was in the 1960s that the feminist history literature forged the concept of sphere separation and examined its changing uses (see Merrett, 2010). On the idea of the “female sphere” in the history of economic analysis, see Nancy Folbre’s work (1998; 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Marshall to Kyrk, dated August 15, 1921 (quoted in Kiss and Beller 2000, 27). The following year Marshall reported to Kyrk, “I have mentioned your name in two or three cases where they said they wanted a ‘man’ but nothing definite has happened yet.” (Letter from Marshall to Kyrk, dated March 14, 1922; quoted in Kiss and Beller 2000, 27).

<sup>9</sup> She was promoted to full professor in 1941.

<sup>10</sup> According to Le Tollec (2020), Kyrk supervised nine doctoral theses at Chicago between 1930 and 1945 (p. 48).



would later become the first female distinguished fellow of the AEA in 1980)<sup>11</sup>. Her work soon became the flagship of this field then called the *economics of consumption*, which diffused through important figures like Elizabeth E. Hoyt or Theresa McMahon, who were also strongly influenced by Kyrk. By the end of the 1920s, Kyrk would be known as the essential reference in this new field and participating in nation-wide empirical studies at the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the USDA Bureau of Home Economics (see e. g. Stapleford 2007).

### **3. First-Generation Home Economists and the Development of Consumption Economics**

Two decades before Kyrk's book was published in 1923, the American home economics movement became professionalized through the structuring of a network for the production and dissemination of knowledge directly addressed to the American households. This movement is, in essence, a peculiarity unique to the United States in terms of its scope and its organic integration into the country's history as much as into that of its institutions. Home economics as a discipline or a program of education for young women was also present elsewhere (notably in Europe or Latin America), but its professional structuring and its significant and lasting influence on society is an American singularity. Home economists were mainly made up of educated white women settled for the most part in the eastern part of the country (as New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Wisconsin),<sup>12</sup> who aimed to improve women's practices in their households. The term "domestic economy" was already in use in the 18th century and the domestic advice manuals' tradition can be traced back to the

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<sup>11</sup> Although Reid's early work was about the measurement of domestic work, she produced major works on consumption. As Yi (1996) and Trezzini (2012; 2016) have demonstrated, her subsequent works had a crucial influence on Milton Friedman Permanent Income Hypothesis and Franco Modigliani's Life-Cycle Hypothesis.

<sup>12</sup> The eastern part of the country represented the epicenter of the movement as a professional organization, and until the end of the century the educational offer in home economics was very little developed in the west. California was undoubtedly one of the few Western states that saw the development of home economics teaching from the 1880s onwards.

early 19th century in the US. But by the years 1890-1910, Ellen Swallow Richards (1842-1911) sought to give home economics a different tone by moving it away from a definition in terms of domestic arts and structuring it as a professional movement to promote a modern and scientific vision of domestic knowledge (Weigley 1974; Stage 1997; Philippy 2021). The terms “home” and “economics” were not chosen randomly and reflected a twofold objective: to assert the field both beyond the domestic sphere, deemed to be unproductive and to which women were confined (home); and to position it within the social sciences (economics).

### **From Home Economics to Consumption Economics**

In the years following the creation of the American Home Economics Association in 1908, the movement led by Richards developed and structured its academic establishment. Since the 1910s, the federal government had accelerated its involvement in the development of home economics research and teaching. In particular, the Smith-Lever Act passed in 1914 allowed for the creation of cooperative extension services within the Department of Agriculture, which contributed in particular to the teaching and dissemination of practical knowledge related to agriculture and home economics in partnership with the land-grant colleges. The aim of the cooperative extension services was to directly address rural populations outside of universities in order to work towards improving their living conditions. The system was completed three years later by the Smith-Hughes Act (1917), which made it possible to standardize a uniform educational model and to allocate more funds to vocational education, to which domestic education was attached.

By the 1870s, home economics was being taught at very few institutions of higher learning and received little recognition. In 1871, Iowa State College (where Kyrk taught in the 1910s) became the first institution of higher learning to offer a home economics program, to be followed in the years that followed by Kansas State College (1873) and Illinois Industrial

University (1874). Until the 1900s, the number of home economics programs grew relatively gradually, but it was not before the 1910s that such courses expanded. By 1915, almost all land-grant universities offered a set of home economics courses attached to a Bachelor's degree, and a Master's degree in twenty universities (Craig 1945, 29). The University of Chicago was likely the first to award a doctorate in home economics (*ibid.*), but it was in the late 1910s that doctorates in home economics became more common (Rossiter 1982, 172), reflecting both the growing appeal of the discipline to women who wished to pursue an academic career, and the success of home economics in entering an academic life. At the time, home economics represented a particularly important *disciplinary refuge* for women, whose academic careers' perspectives were limited in other disciplines. As Rossiter noted, in 1911 women made up less than 10 percent of faculty members in coeducational universities, and home economics was the only discipline in which they could obtain a regular professorship (*ibid.*, 110). By 1910, virtually every land-grant college had a home economics department (Ferrar, 1964, 12), which included courses entitled "consumption economics" or "economics of consumption." However, in the 1910s, these courses were still rather rare, and it would not be before the 1920s that their number sharply rose (Harap, 1935; 1938).

### **Reception of Kyrk's Theory**

Kyrk defended her PhD in economics at the University of Chicago in 1920. Her dissertation was supervised by Chicago economist and demographer James A. Field (1880-1927), who worked on population issues. As we mentioned it earlier, Kyrk's thesis was originally titled "The Consumer's Guidance of the Economic Activity," and won the Hart, Schaffner, and Marx Prize in 1921, allowing its publication as a book in 1923 by Houghton Mifflin Company under the title *A Theory of Consumption* (see Madden 2018). At the time of its publication, Kyrk's theory was rather well received. Two reviews of the book were published in economic journals.

The first one by Zenas C. Dickinson, who wrote a review in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* the following year (Dickinson 1924). Dickinson questioned whether Kyrk's book could be fully characterized as a theory of consumption because its scope may be too narrowly circumscribed to the study of desires, thus neglecting other methods of investigation available. However, Dickinson praised the work for its quality and concluded that "Miss Kyrk's essay, then, is a real contribution toward such a comprehensive treatment, and is, moreover, a needed stimulus to further researches [sic] along many lines." (Dickinson 1924, 346). Another review was written by Scottish economist David H. MacGregor in *The Economic Journal* in 1926. MacGregor praised Kyrk's work as a "commendable contribution" (ibid., 242) which sheds light on the crucial subject of the economics of consumption. Although he had wished that Kyrk would have fleshed out her critical account of marginalism, he recognized the value and usefulness of the book. Although the few scholars who wrote reviews were positive about Kyrk's book, most economists either ignored or were unaware of it.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, Kyrk's theory had a much wider diffusion among scholars interested in home economics, but also agricultural economics (see e.g., Warren Waite). Following the book's publication, the number of textbooks and books on "consumer economics" exploded. In his article "The Development of Consumer Economics" (1942), Walter J. Matherly, Dean of the University of Florida, observes the multiplication of these works (called "special texts on consumption," 60) since the 1920s. Matherly separates the texts into two groups: those written by home economists, and those written by so-called general economists (Matherly 1942, 60). The works of home economists would be characterized by the fact that they would mainly put forward the difficulties of the consumer vis-à-vis the producer in their analysis of

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Knight wrote notes on Kyrk's chapter 7 book about value. Knight seemed to agree on several points and reflected on how Kyrk's theory relates to Dewey's pragmatism and Cooley's approach (about which he is surprised that Kyrk does not make explicit reference to the latter). See Frank Knight Papers, University of Chicago Archives. Box 10, folder 3, "notes on Hazel Kyrk's Chapter in 'A Theory of Consumption'" (circa 1923).

consumption, thus favoring consumer education, while general economists would rather emphasize the consumer's role in economic life and his or her protection on the marketplace.

In the 1920s-1930s, works on consumption economics sometimes took very different forms, ranging from socio-historical examinations (see e.g., Theresa McMahon) to empirical studies of consumer spending (see e.g., Jessica Peixotto), or straightforward educational work (see e.g., Leland Gordon). However, it should be noted that most of these works have had a rather limited academic impact, although some of them (such as those of Kyrk, Waite, Reid, for example) found a central place in courses on consumption's curriculums in secondary schools and universities (see Harap 1935; 1938).

### **Kyrk's Escape from Home Economists**

Despite Kyrk's theory being acknowledged as institutionalist, most of the existing accounts neglect its anchoring into the late 19th-century home economics movement in an agreed-upon sense (Dorfman 1959; van Velzen 2001; Le Tollec 2020).<sup>14</sup> This partial account overlooks the crucial period of intellectual maturation at the turn of the century and misses a key part of the tradition that shaped and framed her work in a period when home economics had gained great popularity in the US. Kyrk's economics of consumption took root in the home economics movement's progressive endeavor to improve women's household practices. However, this underestimated influence is at least partially due to Kyrk herself who took distance from first-generation home economists, especially because they were still too associated with domestic tasks, which contradicted her own ambition to develop an economic analysis of the household.

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<sup>14</sup> In the book edited by Stage and Vincenti (1997), Kyrk is mentioned only twice (see p. 101 and p. 105) and is presented as a woman economist interested in the study of consumption not situated in their history of the home economics profession. For comparative accounts on Kyrk with other (household) economists, see Tadajewski (2013), van Velzen (2001), Zuckerman and Carsky (1990), Trezzini (2016), Bankovsky (2020).

Just like Richards sought to make home economics more scientific, Kyrk wanted to make the study of the household a proper economic subject. By contrast with first-generation home economists, she was trained as an economist, and consumption was one of the main themes favored by women economists then (along with labor or working conditions for example). The 1910s represents a slow but enduring movement of home economics' teaching spreading that followed the development of the American domestic goods market. In 1912, Marion Talbot (1858-1948), a former student of Richards at MIT, co-authored *The Modern Household* with Sophonisba P. Breckinridge (1866-1948), in which they explicitly updated home economics' endeavor by articulating an ideal image of the housewife with that of the modern consumer. At the University of Chicago, they established four courses reflecting specific dimensions of consumer *study* and *practice* through a consumer education program.<sup>15</sup> Courses on consumption were still occasional at the university level in the 1910s. Chicago and Iowa State College were the two main places offering elaborate courses. Talbot and Breckinridge exemplify the generation that worked firsthand to develop and grow consumer education courses within home economics curriculum (Le Tollec 2020, 42-48).

As rightly pointed out by Hirschfeld (1997), home economics' specificity was that it adopted a methodological posture and a discourse in the tone of a conversation. Following the feminist analysis framework developed by Julie Nelson, Hirschfeld shows that home economists' methodology corresponds to values usually attached to feminine traits (intuitive, subjective, verbal, informal, etc.). As such, Kyrk's expert posture (like that of other economists of consumption) conveyed an ambition to address their message directly to American households, and particularly women. The issue of consumer protection was considered the public authorities' responsibilities—for they are responsible for setting up the necessary legal

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<sup>15</sup> The four courses were entitled: "The Organization of Retail Markets," "The Consumption of Wealth," "The Economic Basis of the Family," "Public Aspects of the Family." (East 1982, 275).

framework—but the educational mission was, at least up until the 1920s, still bearing upon this mode of feminine conversation. After the Bureau of Home Economics’ founding in 1923 (in the USDA), “bureau home economists” conducted studies and wrote “bulletins” that would be sent to professional associations, households, teachers, experiment stations. Despite this institutionalization movement that relied on empirical data, the conversational mode remained, although it adopted a more scientific tone.

Richards had laid the groundwork for a modern conception of home economics, centered around a scientific image of the woman in the home working for the progress of the nation. After Richards’s death in 1911, the movement’s ambition to establish itself as a scientific discipline took multiple directions. While nutrition became a major theme that could make use of chemistry to inform the public with knowledgeable information, the *art of choosing* represented the growing subject of home economists’ attention. This took the form of consumer education programs, that is, good practices applicable to everyday life in the home (see Kyrk 1923, chap. 11, and Kyrk 1930). The challenge of this teaching was twofold: on the one hand, to offer students theoretical bases for understanding consumption in its economic and socio-anthropological dimensions, emphasizing, for example, the role played by advertising, or more generally by giving an overview of how markets work; on the other hand, to give concrete information and advice to help them *consume wisely*, in the technical sense of purchasing practices. The aim to answer this “buying problem” contrasted with Kyrk’s ambition: addressing the issue of consumption in the household from an economic standpoint, thus making it a “choice problem.”

#### **4. Kyrk’s Institutional Approach to Consumption**

In this section, we argue that Kyrk’s theory is more than an atypical contribution to institutionalism (see e. g., Rutherford 2011; Dorfman 1959) but reflects the congruence of

epistemological and gender issues at a crucial period in the emergence of consumerist society. Kyrk sought both to respond to a theoretical void left by economists, and at the same time to support women in their new role as modern consumers. Her theory originates in a dual critique of the classics and the marginalists,<sup>16</sup> although she concedes to the latter their interest in the consumer. According to her, the marginalists' aim, that is, the construction of a demand theory would suffer from the same epistemological problem as the classics: their inability to study consumption for anything other than a theory of value. While the classics had mainly focused on production, the "marginal utility school," on the other hand, showed an interest in desires' consequences on the market, taking the consumer as its starting point. Although a few economists contributed to making a place for the study of consumption in the discipline,<sup>17</sup> the works they produced did not adequately describe the consumer choice process:

"It is fairly well established that they built their theory of human conduct, their so-called theory of consumption, upon a philosophy and psychology long since discredited and discarded. Men do not act, it is said, in the way the marginal theorists described them as acting. We cannot recognize ourselves or our fellows in the hedonistic, individualistic calculators whom they described, not find in their account any trace of the complexity of motives, impulses, and interest which lie behind market activities." (Kyrk 1923, 16).

Kyrk indicated that the marginalists constructed their analysis from the perspective of a theory of exchange value and price. They were looking for the root cause of *market value*, but this goal of theirs does not necessarily require an explanation of the basis of consumer choice, since the *expression of choice* alone is sufficient to construct a theory of price (Kyrk 1923, 6-11).

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<sup>16</sup> At the time, the term "neoclassical" was not yet clearly established. Kyrk explicitly used the term "The marginal utility school" (see for example Kyrk 1923, 16-18). It was not until the 1930s and 1940s that its use effectively became an encompassing extension of marginalism (Aspromourgos 2008).

<sup>17</sup> In particular, she cites the work of William Stanley Jevons, Simon Nelson Patten and the later work of George Pendleton Watkins (see Kyrk 1923, 16).



However, Kyrk observed that the marginalists' attempt to formulate behavioral laws was problematic because they were based on a hedonistic philosophy and psychology that she considered empirically false thanks to the new evidence brought by the "new psychology."<sup>18</sup> This problem might be inconsequential for their theory of prices but will prevent the proper formulation of an explanatory theory of consumption.

"This faulty and abstract explanation of choice, this unreal account of life and of the forces which are behind consumers' activities, may or may not affect the validity of their doctrine as a theory of exchange value or price, but it undoubtedly does affect the adequacy and acceptability of their theory of consumption." (Kyrk 1923, 16).

Kyrk's critique of marginalism is more an attempt to go beyond it, contrasting a radical critique like that of Veblen (1899). She disconnected, on the one hand the epistemological critique linked to the issue of realism, and, on the other hand the possibility of a theory of consumption. For her, the construction of a *demand theory* does not necessarily require realism but constitutes a distinct objective from the production of a *theory of consumption*. A good theory of consumption, on the other hand, should be able to situate the role and choice of the consumer in a dynamic representation. As producers are guided by the search for profit, consumers can be exploited in many ways, such as through monopolies, fraud, or lack of information. Consequently, the theory must consider the evolution of these interactions that govern the power relationship between consumers and producers.

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<sup>18</sup> "Psychological study has developed, and while rejecting the older theories of human behavior and its motivation, has replaced them with new material and new explanations of human behavior which illuminate much that was hitherto dark in the conduct of men. Philosophical and scientific thought has taken a new trend and has contributed that developmental or evolutionary viewpoint so important for the social sciences, which leads to the genetic method of gathering data, and the pragmatic view of the conclusions based thereon. Complementary and incidental to the growth of the 'new' psychology and the 'new philosophy,' has come about the study of the individual, not as an isolated unit, but as a social animal, a member of social groups, a part of a complicated social organization." (Kyrk 1923, 147).

Kyrk's theory perspective resulted from the material, social and intellectual context of its time. The emerging of a national market combined with the shifting role of women (from domestic producers to consumers) and the absence of an economic framework to account for it led her to rely on the institutionalist critique to bring about a new positive and normative theory of consumption. By contrast with Veblen's critics of the economic order, she rather called for a reform of the power relationship between consumers and producers. Veblen and Kyrk have two different targets. On the one hand, Veblen proposed a critique of the social order based on a study of conspicuous consumption's function, reflecting the material context of the late 19th-century marked by consumption that produced social positioning, and for the most part reserved for the wealthiest households. On the other hand, Kyrk offered an epistemological critique that highlighted the usefulness of an explanatory theory of consumption choices, inscribed in the context of the 1920s development of the market for household goods for the middle classes. In contrast to Veblen, who perceived (conspicuous) consumption in a rather negative way, Kyrk understood it as a promise of modernity that needed to be addressed properly. The conception of what consumption meant for one and for the other thus referred to specific historical contexts that reflected distinct theoretical needs and consumer identities.

To replace the marginalist theory of value based on hedonistic psychology, Kyrk developed a theory of value that was based on the Deweyan concept of the "*valuation process*."<sup>19</sup> The valuation process can be associated with an *instrumental* rationality that emphasizes the adequacy of means to ends, rather than a rationality of validity of choices: "Fundamentally, the valuation process in its generic aspect is this constant attempt of human interests and purposes, inborn and acquired, to realize themselves through the means at hand." (Kyrk 1923, 152). Kyrk did not want to merely replace hedonism with the new psychology as a psychological basis,

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<sup>19</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1921). According to Susan van Velzen, Kyrk may have had access to an early version of Dewey's text since it was published at almost the same time as Kyrk's (van Velzen 2001, 24).

but rather invited us to consider economic choice as a process that was composed of several types of motivations. Reporting a quote from British philosopher John S. Mackenzie (1860-1935), she stated that:

“This involves a constant process of discrimination and choice ranging from the most impulsive and least volitional to the most deliberate and rational. The conclusion, therefore, to which we are led is that motives are neither constituted simply by pleasure and pain, nor simply by dominant desires, passions, or impulses, nor simply by reason, but that they depend upon the nature of the universe within which they emerge” (Kyrk 1923, 152).

It is in the interaction with his environment and through the play of habits that the individual gives value to the objects that surround him. The process of evaluation “results from the spontaneous activity of the human organism with its inborn tendencies and its acquired interests.” (Kyrk 1923, 167). Taken in this broad sense, this instrumental rationality makes it possible to offer an explanatory scheme for choice based on other influencing factors than the pains and pleasures utilitarian matrix. It thus becomes possible to account for both the internal limitations specific to the psychological influences to which the consumer is subject and the external limitations illustrated by the influence of the exercise of corporate power. In other words, Kyrk depicts the consumer’s choice in relation to his or her inner psychosocial limitations and to the producer’s means to guide it. For this, she approached the study of consumption in explicitly Veblenian terms.

## **5. Final Remarks**

Kyrk’s theory of consumption is the product of two intellectual movements in vogue in the United States during the progressive era: on the one hand, the home economics movement and, on the other hand, American institutionalism. However, in approaching the issue of

consumption she went well beyond these two influences and reinterpreted them: she positioned herself as a “true” economist and took distance from the home economics movement associated with domestic tasks. And at the same time, she developed Veblen’s analysis by offering a consumer education program that contrasted with Veblen’s more critical depiction of the economic order. At the time, Kyrk’s contribution was crucial because it represented a meeting point between pressing social and epistemological issues. Depicting the consumer was not a theoretical matter only but addressed the burning questions that emanated from the changing role of women in American society from domestic producers to modern consumers. However, Kyrk goes beyond these two influences and reinterprets them: she positioned herself as a “true” economist and took distance from the home economics movement associated with household tasks. And at the same time, she developed Veblen’s analysis by offering a consumer education program that contrasts with Veblen’s more critical image of the economic order. By reintegrating the contribution of Kyrk into its context, this article brings some light to the intersection of the history of women (in the academy, in society, in the home), and to the professionalization of the economics discipline. Kyrk’s theory is not just an atypical contribution to institutionalism (Rutherford 2011; Dorfman 1959) but reflects the congruence of epistemological and gender issues at a crucial period in the emergence of consumerist society. Kyrk sought both to respond to a theoretical void left by economists, and at the same time to support women in their new role as modern consumers.

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