

### The Inflation of Housework

The literature on the economic effects of inflation is filled with pious asides about who is "hurt" by inflation -- the usual litany includes the creditors, those on fixed income, and those who consume disproportionate amounts of goods that have gone up in price relatively quickly. Inflation is seen only as a price crisis, never as a work crisis. But who is responsible for purchasing these inflating goods? Who in the American economy can tell you the price of flour, meat, or vegetables without consulting the consumer price index? Whose job is it, in fact, to manage the declining real income of workers in America? The housewife's major work in the twentieth century is "consumption management,"<sup>1</sup> which in inflationary periods means purchasing the household's standard of living on a fixed budget in the face of rising prices.<sup>2</sup>

Time spent on consumption management in housework has increased dramatically in the modern period, even while "labor-saving devices" have cut down on time spent on other housework, such as food preparation and clean-up.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than assume that the increased time spent in "marketing and record-keeping" or "shopping and managerial tasks" is due to the increased loneliness<sup>4</sup> of the housewife, or due to a Parkinson's Law-type phenomenon,<sup>5</sup>

I will argue that inflation increases the real work in housework: it increases the time spent in budgeting, purchasing, and managing consumption, as well as time spent in food preparation, and other anti-inflation work.

It is clear to most consumers that since inflation means paying higher prices while living on a falling or steady real income, inflation also means more work.

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In a 1978 study of consumers, Shama found a majority agreed that stagflation meant that "there are more cents-off coupons in newspapers," that they "spend more time (on average) shopping," and they agreed that "I must work harder to be able to afford my present way of life."<sup>6</sup>

There are many components to this increased work burden. There is more work spent on budgeting and purchasing of necessities. Shama's sample of consumers overwhelmingly agreed on certain typical responses to stagflation: "Become more of a comparative shopper" (88.9%), "shop for 'specials' and bargains more than I used to" (83.0%), "look for cheaper products (e.g. private labels)" (60.9%).<sup>7</sup> In other words, as prices rise fast and unevenly, the consumer has to spend more time comparing goods, gathering information about prices and comparative virtues of known and unknown brands. The budgeting work may become more and more unpleasant in the inflationary crunch; a majority of respondents indicated that they "argue about financial matters."<sup>8</sup> Stretching a tight budget by clipping, saving and buying with cents-off coupons, while extremely time consuming, may be effective, although industry is worried that some consumers are not doing their housework properly: they estimate that they lose \$100 million per year in fraudulent coupon redemptions.<sup>9</sup>

One particular budgeting strategy which is effective in inflationary periods is to stockpile goods on "special," or against the future expected price increases. This strategy is impossible for the poor - who have neither the extra money for such investment nor the storage facilities in their homes. These difficulties are compounded by inner city residence, with less access to cheap retail outlets.<sup>10</sup>



In addition to increased time spent on budgeting, product comparisons and coupon-clipping, more time is spent on the shopping itself, as purchases are spread over more stores, in order to "bargain hunt." Some consumers have even shifted towards shopping in the "inconvenient stores," cash-and-carry outlets or food cooperatives. Not that the conventional large supermarket is any time-saver -- the retail food specialists admit that "the large supermarket...cannot be heralded as a time-saver," given their large floor area (30,000 square feet, on the average) and cost-cutting moves by retailers, reducing check-out personnel and baggers." The rich seem to be switching from the supermarkets to the higher priced "convenience stores,"<sup>12</sup> while middle income and poor buyers shop in the time-consuming and expensive supermarkets (their profit margins average 30 - 40%),<sup>13</sup> or the time and energy consuming but less expensive warehouse food outlets or cooperatives. One of the most time-saving (and energy efficient) methods of shopping, telephone ordering, is rarely mentioned anymore, perhaps since Hoover's World War I message to housewives to give up telephone marketing in favor of personal marketing, to gain "actual knowledge of prices and abundance or scarcity of foods..."<sup>14</sup>

So inflation means more housework, because it means more work in budgeting and shopping for the household's necessities. But the content of the market basket shifts as well, and this spells more work. Consumer food expenditures shift in two ways: the proportion of home-prepared meals to meals eaten outside the home increases and the amount of the relatively more expensive "convenience foods" declines relative to the more time-consuming but cheaper self-made foods. According to recent analyses of consumer expenditures, the proportion of expenditures on food prepared at home had been declining through the 1960's until 1973, when rapid food inflation began to cause an increase in the proportion of food prepared at home.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, a recent food industry



survey noted the declining sales of fast food restaurants and gourmet-convenience foods for home use, and the increased demand by consumers for less prepared staples, such as flour, corn meal, etc. <sup>16</sup>

Given that housework increases as people eat at home more and go out to eat less, the content of their home consumption must be examined. As Business Week noted, during the present inflation people are shifting away from the high-cost prepared "convenience" foods, towards the less processed foods requiring more work to prepare. As Shama's consumers noted, since stagflation <sup>17</sup> they "became a do-it-yourself person." As the USDA in 1953 noted, ready-to-serve meals took the least time to prepare and cost the most, partially prepared foods next in these rankings, and totally home prepared foods cost the least in money and the most in time. They also found that the home prepared meals ranked highest in taste acceptability, followed by the partially prepared <sup>18</sup> meals and the ready-to-serve were least acceptable.

Not all consumption managers can follow this strategy of coping with inflation by preparing more food from basic foodstuffs and avoiding the high priced processed foods. This particular time-money trade-off is often limited by another strategy used against inflation pressures: returning to the labor force. The recent rise in the labor force participation of wives and the uncounted entry of wives into the "underground economy" is in part due to the pressures of inflation on the household budget. <sup>19</sup> But taking a new job or a second job reduces the time available for increased household work, and traditionally has been the rationale for the use of the more expensive "convenience" foods -- a familiar conflict for working women.



When the need for extra income to purchase higher priced necessities cannot be satisfied by labor force work, the consumption manager may be obliged to apply for some form of welfare -- another form of work, considering the time, energy and regulation it entails. Even a simple program such as food stamps imposes days of work on the recipient, in registration and documentation of need (although replacing the food commodity distribution scheme, which entailed further hours of work to use the commodities palatably).

All of the methods mentioned so far are ways of coping with inflation; they mean more housework. When pressure on the consumer budget intensifies, or when particular items shoot up in price, consumers shift from coping to resistance. Resistance has taken the form, historically, of boycotts, public protests and riots. While the Boston Tea Party is highly publicized as it climaxed the anti-English tax movement, the subsequent riots over price increases during the American Revolution have received much less attention. Rapidly rising prices and low incomes in 1777 led to starvation, riots, vandalism and other resistance. Items that were price-controlled were rationed tightly by shopkeepers and there was greater interest in receiving wages in "eatables." 20

Later, in 1837, rising prices provoked food riots, notably the New York flour riots. Civil War price inflation stimulated riots in Mobile, Savannah, Richmond and other cities. 21

Rising prices of kosher meat led immigrant Jewish women in New York in 1902 to boycott their butchers and to march through the city streets burning the overpriced meat. 22

Less spectacular than the riots, but still quite popular, are food boycotts, especially those in recent years against meat and coffee, as shoppers decided their price increases were unjustified. The boycotts indirectly impose more household work, since using substitutes for the boycotted items may require new nutritional learning and new culinary skills. The meat boycotts underscored this problem, as consumer advisors



introduced the boycotters to the intricacies of complementary amino acids and protein calculus, demystifying the vegetarian diet.

Beyond coping with inflation by budgeting more closely and shopping more exhaustively, beyond spending more time preparing cheaper foodstuffs, and beyond the food riots and boycotts, the inflation-pressed consumption worker may resort to illegal means of stretching the budget. Although the whole shopping arena is riddled with fraud, from misleading packaging to unsafe products, "...climaxing the ordeal (is) the checkout counter, where investigations have shown a large proportion of retail dishonesty occurs by expert manipulation of the cash register..."<sup>23</sup> Industry sources have tried to estimate how much consumer fraud costs them: \$1 billion dollars per year in fraudulently cashed checks, \$100 million per year in fraudulently redeemed coupons, and a high estimated cost of shoplifting, passed on to the consumer as price hikes, to a tune of \$150 tax per family per year. Although retailers spend an estimated \$2 billion per year on "store security,"<sup>24</sup> outright theft may not be the most difficult consumer fraud they face. An interesting study of middle-income housewives in the south-eastern United States tried to gauge their responses to various fraudulent consumer activities. In their rather exhaustive list of possibilities, they inquired about the following:

"A new, higher price sticker has been placed on a product. A customer is able to peel back the sticker and notices that the older price is lower. The customer completely peels off the new sticker and pays the lower price for the product." <sup>24</sup>

Whereas most respondents usually scored active frauds (shoplifting, etc.) as more grave than passive frauds (for instance, allowing cashiers to make mistakes in consumer's favor), this fraud, certainly active, had the highest percentage of approval and a very low percentage who thought it was definitely wrong.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, an overwhelming majority indicated that their friends committed this crime (82,2%). When asked what management should do about



this crime, the highest percentage of all "nothing" responses were given,  
and no respondents at all said "notify the authorities."<sup>27</sup> The most  
reasonable explanation of wide shopper acceptance and participation in the  
fraud of "peeling price tags" must be their perception that stores are  
unjustly raising prices and that self-reduction of price increases is  
justified. It is a crime peculiar to an inflationary period, when prices  
are rising so fast that stores don't wait for their inventories to sell at  
the former prices but mark-up everything in stock.

Even from this rather cursory look at the impact of inflation on housework,  
two major themes must emerge. The first is a re-affirmation of the large  
quantity and critical importance of the work in housework. Housework is no  
longer pure production (like spinning flax) but consumption management takes  
a lot of time, effort and is crucial for the maintenance of living standards,  
particularly in inflationary times. Furthermore, it should be clear that  
inflation is a major weapon in business's attack on waged and unwaged  
workers in modern society.



## Notes

1. Dr. Andrews, describing the housewife as "the one who controls spending...largely responsible for the quality of life secured by the family income" called housewives the "directors of the family's consumption," and elaborated on the central importance of her work. See "The Home Woman as Buyer and Controller of Consumption," in Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, vol. 143, May 1929, p. 41. In this paper, I use the term consumption manager to refer to the work of planning, budgeting, shopping, and preparing the household's consumption needs. I don't use the term housewife here, although consumption management is largely women's work, because I intend to focus on the real work in consumption, rather than the role of housewife, which includes many other responsibilities.
2. One of the few analyses of this consumption work from a radical perspective (rather than the more typical home economics perspective) is Weinbaum and Bridges, "The Other Side of the Paycheck: Monopoly Capital and the Structure of Consumption," Monthly Review, Vol. 28, No. 3 July/August 1976, pp 88-103.
3. See the evidence compiled by K. Walker, in "Homemaking Still Takes Time," J. Home Economics, Vol. 61, No. 8, Oct. 1969, p. 622, or the conclusions of J. Vanek in "Time Spent in Housework," Scientific American, Nov 1974, pp. 116-120. The jump in time spent in "marketing and record-keeping" is especially obvious between the 1952 sample and the 1967-8 sample, when full-time urban homemakers double their time spent on this consumption work.
4. This argument is advanced most convincingly by Ann Oakley in Housewife and H. Gavron in The Captive Housewife.
5. This idea that housework expands to fill the time available is refuted well by Vanek's argument on occupational status/day of week work load comparisons of housewives' work time. See Vanek, "Time Spent in Housework," p.120.
6. See A. Shama, "Management and Consumers in an Era of Stagflation," Journal of Marketing, July, 1978, p. 49.
7. Ibid, p. 51.
8. Ibid.
9. See Wall Street Journal, April 12, 1976, p. 30, "Grocery Coupons are Seen Threatened by Growth of Fraudulent Redemption."
10. See A. Andreassen, The Disadvantaged Consumer, Free Press, 1975, pp. 47-49.



11. See Gordon Bloom, "The Future of the Retail Food Industry: Another View," Journal of Retailing, Vol. 54, No. 4, Winter 1978, p. 5.
12. Their sales volume increased by 20% in 1977 alone. See Bloom's figures.
13. Ibid, p. 6.
14. Herbert Hoover, Ladies Home Journal, August, 1917: 25.
15. Rogers and Green, "Changes in Consumer Food Expenditure Patterns," Journal of Marketing, April, 1978, p. 15.
16. These trends outlined in "Food: A Consumer Swing Back to Basics," Business Week, Jan. 14, 1980, pp 62-65. They seem to contradict Vanek's hopeful findings that "the opportunity to eat out has been equalized." (Technology and Culture, July 1978, p365. Of course, since all humans eat, and since some of the same companies own the fast food eateries, the convenience food industries, and the basic foods industries, this simply means they re-adjust their pricing strategies.
17. Shama, Ibid, p. 51.
18. U.S.D.A., Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, "Time and Money Costs of Meals Using Home and Prekitchen-Prepared Foods," Oct. 29, 1953 conference statement.
19. See, for example, G.L. Bach, The New Inflation, p. 14, for entry into the regular labor force, and recent work by P. Gutmann and E. Feige on the "underground economy."
20. For more detail, see R. Morris, Government and Labor in Early America, especially pp. 127-209.
21. For documentation, see Gutman, Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, Vintage, 1977, pp 59-63.
22. Extracts from New York Times coverage in Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby, America's Working Women, pp 184-186. Likewise the Depression of the 1930's stimulated food riots and food stealing by the unemployed, although this was not, strictly speaking, due to rising food prices...
23. "Rip-offs--New American Way of Life," U.S. News and World Report, May 31, 1976, p. 29.
24. Wilkes, "Fraudulent Behavior by Consumers," Journal of Marketing, Oct. 1978, p. 67, for this data.
25. Ibid, p. 68.
26. Ibid, p. 71. For comparison, 98.6% thought returning goods after using them was definitely wrong; 58% thought price tag peeling was definitely wrong.
27. Ibid, pp., 72, 73.