

RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY
OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT
AND METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND METHODOLOGY

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RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT
AND METHODOLOGY VOLUME 41D

**RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY
OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND
METHODOLOGY: INCLUDING A
SYMPOSIUM ON HAZEL KYRK'S:
A THEORY OF CONSUMPTION
100 YEARS AFTER PUBLICATION**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>About the Editors</i>	ix
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Volume Introduction</i>	xiii

PART I
A SYMPOSIUM ON HAZEL KYRK'S *A THEORY OF*
***CONSUMPTION* 100 YEARS AFTER PUBLICATION**
Edited by Rebeca Gomez Betancourt

Chapter 1 Introduction to the Symposium 100 Years After the Publication of “A Theory of Consumption” By Hazel Kyrk (1923) <i>Rebeca Gomez Betancourt</i>	3
Chapter 2 Hazel Kyrk's Intellectual Roots: When First-generation Home Economists Met the Institutional Framework <i>David Philippy, Rebeca Gomez Betancourt and Robert W. Dimand</i>	7
Chapter 3 Hazel Kyrk's <i>A Theory of Consumption</i>, Veblen's Business and Industrial Concerns, and W.C. Mitchell's Essays on Spending and Money: Conceptual Links <i>Zdravka Todorova</i>	27
Chapter 4 Hazel Kyrk, Eugenics, and Consumption Standards <i>Edith Kuiper</i>	47
Chapter 5 Hazel Kyrk, The Economics of the Social Relevance of Consumption and John Maynard Keynes' Consumption Function <i>Attilio Trezzini</i>	69
Chapter 6 What Should Families Want? From Hazel Kyrk to Margaret Reid and Beyond <i>Miriam Bankovsky</i>	95

**PART II
ESSAYS**

- Chapter 7 On the Integration of Institutional Themes and Neoclassical Formalism: Locational Economics as a Case Study in Pragmatic Empiricism**
Yue Xiao and Joseph Persky 119
- Chapter 8 Nutter and Buchanan Did Not Turn Against Tuition Grants for Segregated Schools in 1965: A Comment on Fleury (2023) and Levy and Peart (2023)**
Daniel Kuehn 139
- Chapter 9 Response to Kuehn: Buchanan on the Rules for Public School Funding: Additional Thoughts**
David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart 153

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VOLUME INTRODUCTION

Volume 41D of *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* features a symposium reflecting on the significance after 100 years of the publication of Hazel Kyrk's *A Theory of Consumption*. The symposium, guest edited by Rebeca Gomez Betancourt, features contributions from David Philippp, Rebeca Gomez Betancourt and Robert Dimand, Zdravka Todorova, Edith Kuiper, Attilio Trezzini, and Miriam Bankovsky.

The volume also includes a new research essay by Yue Xiao and Joseph Persky, as well as Daniel Kuehn's criticism of two of the essays published in *RHETM* Volume 40C as part of the roundtable on David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart's *Towards and Economics of Natural Equals*. Levy and Peart respond to Kuehn's critical essay.

The Editors of *RHETM*
Luca Fiorito
Scott Scheall
Carlos Eduardo Suprinyak

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PART I

A SYMPOSIUM ON HAZEL KYRK'S
A THEORY OF CONSUMPTION
100 YEARS AFTER PUBLICATION

Edited by Rebeca Gomez Betancourt

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM 100 YEARS AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF “A THEORY OF CONSUMPTION” BY HAZEL KYRK (1923)

Rebeca Gomez Betancourt

Université Lumière Lyon, Lyon, France

We are pleased to present this symposium on Hazel Kyrk’s book *A Theory of Consumption* on the 100th anniversary of its first publication. Consumption was then, and remains today, a fundamental topic in economics. It is also complex since, as noted by Kyrk herself, the study of consumption is essentially a study of human behavior.

Before the appearance of Kyrk’s work, not much had been written on consumption. Following its publication in 1923, the book soon became the flagship of the female-dominated field then known as the “Economics of Consumption” and a canonical milestone in the history of Household Economics. Over the last couple of decades, scholars interested in women’s history and its relation to the household and economics have demonstrated both the importance and significance of Kyrk’s work (Bankovsky, 2020; Kiss & Beller, 1999; Le Tollec, 2020; Tadajewski, 2013; van Velzen, 2003). However, for most historians of economics, her contribution remains at best unclear, at worst unknown.

Yet, through the theoretical and empirical research she pursued during the 1920s–1940s, Kyrk produced a highly innovative and influential body of work,

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Hazel Kyrk’s A Theory of Consumption 100 Years after Publication
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ranging from institutional theory to the production of empirical data on consumer spending. Both at the University of Chicago and within different departments of the US federal administration, she developed new approaches to address a broad array of issues including consumers' choice and education, household production and time allocation, the status of women, the working conditions of women and children, wages, profits, marketing, and advertising, among others. Kyrk's neglected contributions and her influence over the profession during this formative era deserve to be once again brought to light.

WHY WRITE ABOUT HAZEL KYRK?

First, because she wrote one of the first books on the theory of consumption, explaining the social basis of consumer behavior during a period when mass consumption was increasing, thus introducing dramatic changes to the international economic system.

Second, Kyrk was a Professor of Economics and Home Economics at the University of Chicago, during a time when the department underwent its transition from institutionalist to mainstream economics.

Third, she was the Supervisor of Margaret G. Reid, another prominent figure in the history of Home Economics.

Fourth, she devoted part of her career to support the work of other women. Kyrk served on the board of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League and worked at the Bryn Mawr College Summer School for Working Women between 1922 and 1925.

Fifth, to better appreciate the kind of economics and economists that existed in the United States during the 1920 and 1930s, apart from the well-known institutionalist economists, and thus to know more about the contributions made by home economists to the profession.

THE STORY OF THIS SYMPOSIUM

This symposium started from the research and curiosity of three recent PhD students in the history of economics who wrote their dissertations on the subject of Home Economics: Agnès Le Tollec (supervised by Philippe Fontaine), David Philippy (supervised by Harro Maas), and Juliette Blayac (co-supervised by Claude Diebolt and myself). [Le Tollec \(2020\)](#) paints a broad picture of the Home Economics movement and its changes over different generations. [Philippy \(2021\)](#) focused on the contributions of Ellen Richards to the economics of consumption. Finally, [Blayac \(2023\)](#) is currently working on Jessica Peixotto and her relation to thrift culture and consumption economics in the United States.

The symposium also gathered momentum following a suggestion from Andrea H. Beller, who both worked with Kyrk and wrote about her, and vividly recommended we should pay homage to the centenary of the book. The project took shape through discussions with some of our feminist economist colleagues – Nancy Folbre, Edith Kuiper, Evelyn Forget – who published a special issue of

Feminist Economics in 2010 on another important home economist: Margaret Gilpin Reid.

David Philippy, Robert W. Dimand, and I first organized a session on Hazel Kyrk as part of the program for the 2022 Conference of the History of Economics Society. We then invited colleagues who had already done some work on family economics (Miriam Bankovsky, La Trobe University), consumption economics (Attilio Trezzini, University of Roma), and eugenics and the Progressive Era (Edith Kuiper, SUNY New Paltz) to participate in a session co-sponsored by the International Association for Feminist Economics and the History of Economic Society during the 2023 Allied Social Science Associations (ASSA) meetings in New Orleans. Giulia Zaccchia, Nancy Folbre, Shoshana Grossbard, William Waller, and Felipe Almeida served as designated discussants for this session – we extend our sincere thanks to them for detailed comments and suggestions that led to significant improvement in the papers. The last step in the process came with the workshop organized by David Philippy and me at the University of Cergy Advance Studies and Agora Research Center on May 30, 2023. Besides the contributions published as part of this symposium, the workshop also featured papers by Juliette Blayac on Jessica Peixotto, Marianne Johnson on the engagement of Kyrk’s students with the measurement of income distribution, and Manfredi Alberti and Piero Francesco Asso on Kyrk and the rise of empirical research during the interwar period. We look forward to seeing these three papers published very soon.

THE CONTENTS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

The symposium features five articles covering the contents of Hazel Kyrk’s book. David Philippy, Robert Dimand, and I discuss the background for the emergence of Kyrk’s economic thought, pondering over the question of how to place Kyrk among both institutionalists and home economists. We illustrate some of the close intellectual connections between the first generation of home economists and different members of the institutionalist camp, from Veblen to Kyrk’s supervisor at the University of Chicago, James Alfred Field. The second paper covers similar terrain, with Zdravka Todorova analyzing the links between Hazel Kyrk’s *Theory of Consumption*, Veblen’s *Business and Industrial Concerns*, and W. C. Mitchell’s *Essays on Spending and Money*.

The third article, by Edith Kuiper, deals with Hazel Kyrk’s research on consumption standards, showing how eugenic reasoning impacted her theoretical work only superficially but did structure her research on consumption, due to a focus on the white middle-class family as the unit of analysis for consumer behavior. Attilio Trezzini, in his turn, explores the elective affinities between Kyrk’s notion of the social relevance of consumption and John Maynard Keynes’ hugely influential formulation of the consumption function. Finally, Miriam Bankovsky reads side by side two of Kyrk’s major works – *The Theory of Consumption* and *Family and Economics* – to answer the normative question of what families *should* want.

We wish the five contributions to this symposium will add to our knowledge of this important intellectual movement and one of its foremost exponents,

Hazel Kyrk, while also improving our understanding of interwar economic debates in the US beyond the landmark works of Irving Fisher, Frank Taussig, and the leaders of the institutionalist movement.

We thank the editors of *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* – Luca Fiorito, Scott Scheall, and Carlos Eduardo Suprinyak – for kindly accepting our proposal to organize and publish this homage to the legacy of Hazel Kyrk and hope you will enjoy reading these pages on a woman economist who contributed so much to our knowledge of consumption economics.

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CHAPTER 2

HAZEL KYRK'S INTELLECTUAL ROOTS: WHEN FIRST- GENERATION HOME ECONOMISTS MET THE INSTITUTIONALIST FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

In the years following the publication of A Theory of Consumption (1923), Hazel Kyrk's book became the flagship of the field that would later be known as the economics of consumption. It stimulated theoretical and empirical work on consumption. Some of the existing literature on Kyrk (e.g., Kiss & Beller, 2000; Le Tollec, 2020; Tadajewski, 2013) depicted her theory as the starting point of the economics of consumption. Nevertheless, how and why it emerged the way it did remain largely unexplored. This chapter examines Kyrk's intellectual background, which, we argue, can be traced back to two main movements in the United States: the home economics and the institutionalist. Both movements conveyed specific endeavors as responses to the US material and social transformations that occurred at the turn of the 20th century, notably

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the perceived changing role of consumption and that of women in US society. On the one hand, Kyrk pursued first-generation home economists' efforts to make sense of 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 focused on "wise" and "rational" consumption. This chapter studies 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 developed in 1900–1920. Our account of Kyrk's intellectual roots offers a novel narrative to better understand the role of gender and epistemological questions in her theory.

Keywords: Hazel Kyrk; home economics; women economists; institutionalists; consumer economics; economics of consumption

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the key intellectual influences that shaped Hazel Kyrk's (1886–1957) early theoretical work by exploring the context in which it was formulated. Although Kyrk was fully trained as an economist and gained a PhD in economics from the University of Chicago, her gender framed her way of approaching economics and the disciplinary trajectory of her career, initially in home economics with only belated joint appointment in economics. Historians of economics interested in gender and feminist economics have established how certain topics or disciplines (like the household, family, or consumption) were favored by or attributed to women, leading to the exclusion of these subjects from the rest of the economics discipline (see, e.g., [Becchio, 2020](#); [Dimand et al., 2000](#); [Folbre, 1998](#); [Forget, 2011](#); [Kuiper, 2022](#); [Madden & Dimand, 2018](#); [May, 2022](#); [Pietrykowski, 2009](#); [Rostek, 2021](#); [Stapleford, 2004](#)).¹ However, little has been said about the relationship between the theoretical content Kyrk developed and the gender debates of the time.

This chapter focuses on Kyrk's *A Theory of Consumption*, which was published in 1923 and marked a pivotal moment in the study of consumption, as well as in the changing status of women in both society and academia. We analyze the foundations and nature of Kyrk's theory and demonstrate that it converged epistemological (i.e., the need to theorize consumption) and gender (i.e., the transformation of the role of women in the home) discussion of the 1920s. In the context of the emergence of the consumer society, Kyrk's theory was an endeavor to offer a realistic depiction of consumer choice. She opposed the marginalists' theory of demand inherited from the late 19th century, arguing that they had reduced the study of consumption to the study of demand, rather than investigating 'why people consume the way they do.' Kyrk aimed at producing a theoretical analysis of consumer's behavior by looking at the social and psychological context in which consumption takes place. To do so, she relied on an institutionalist framework and a pragmatist conception of value to advocate for a realistic account of consumer choice. Before explaining the exact nature of her theory and the extent