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# Jessica Peixotto, a Home Economist Not Thrilled by the Thrift Culture

Juliette Blayac<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The values of thrift have shaped the cultural and economic history of the United States. This morality advocates the practice of industry, frugality, self-sacrifice, and the accumulation of savings as a means of enriching the individual and society. From the 19th century to the early 20th century, American political economists preached these virtues. Jessica Peixotto (1864-1941), the first woman professor of economics at Berkeley, conducted a study of the cost of living of a group of university professors in 1927. She considered them an extremely thrifty but relatively poor social group. The purpose of this article is to explain this contradiction put forward by Peixotto. I examine how, in the early 20th century, the thrift culture took a practical turn with the Home Economics movement founded by Ellen H. Richards to educate women. Peixotto's study shows that professors' wives apply the precepts of thrift very well, making exemplary management of household resources. Thus, the problem lies in the low level of faculty salary. I argue that Peixotto shows an original point of view, linking thrift to poverty and thinking about the consequences of a thrifty ethos on the negotiation skills of university professors.

**Keywords:** Thrift; Peixotto; Home Economics; Consumption, Professors, Women

**J.E.L. codes:** B10, B25, B54, N32

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## 1. Introduction

In 1927, Jessica Peixotto (1864–1941) wrote about her colleagues, university professors at Berkeley<sup>2</sup>: “most of them professed allegiance enforced or real to “Poor Richard’s” rules of spending” (Peixotto 1927, 36). What does it refer to? The expression originated in Benjamin Franklin’s 18th-century *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, published annually for 25 years from 1732. In his autobiography *The Way to Wealth* (1758), Franklin explains that the adventures of Richard Saunders served to encourage the practice of thrift, i.e., “industry and frugality as the means of procuring wealth and thereby securing virtue.” (Franklin cited in Yarrow 2014, 18). To Peixotto, professors were cautious in their spending for the sake of saving.

This thrift morality was not peculiar to their social group but was part of American culture. Beginning in the 18th century, it continued to spread throughout the 19th century, relayed by moralists and clergymen (Tucker 1991). 19th-century political economists such as Francis Wayland (1845) and Amasa Walker (1867) also spread the thrift morality by justifying it economically. Thrift, seen as a present sacrifice of consumption, enables the accumulation of productive capital through savings, thus enriching both the individual and society.

There was a consensus on a causal link between thrifting and enrichment. Yet the university professors studied by Peixotto in *Getting and Spending at the Professional Standard of Living: a study of the Costs of Living an Academic Life* (1927) find it difficult to “make both ends meet” (Peixotto 1927, 4). Far from becoming richer, it seems this profession has become poorer over the years.

My ambition is to shed light on this paradox (thrifty and still poor) by analysing Peixotto’s research. She argues that the thrift displayed by the social group is the cause of their wage stagnation. Indeed, as salaried employees, professors depend on their profession’s social evaluation and standard of living. However, a thrifty employee has an ascetic lifestyle, which does not play in his or her favour in salary negotiations.

Peixotto was the first woman to complete a Ph.D. in political economy<sup>3</sup> at UC Berkeley in 1900 and the first to become a full professor in 1918. Professor of social economics, her teaching focused on the study of different aspects of poverty. She taught classes such as *The Control of Poverty*, *The Child and the State*, and *Crime as a Social Problem*. During the war, Peixotto was appointed to the Council of National Defense’s Department of Child Welfare under Julia Lathrop’s supervision. In 1923, for her work on cost-of-living studies, she was appointed director of the Heller Committee for Social Research in California, and in 1932 she was made one of the vice-presidents of the American Economic Association (Dimand, Dimand, and Forget 2000; Edleson 2020). Her career influenced many researchers who published *Essays in social economics*, in honour of Jessica Blanche Peixotto (Grether 1935). As Peixotto’s colleague and friend since his time at Berkeley, Wesley C. Mitchell wrote the foreword.

While several articles have discussed Peixotto’s career and thought, such as Dorfman (1949), Cookingham (1987), and Dzuback (2009), none has made one of her studies its central object, even if, according to Horowitz, Peixotto’s 1927 “study was the most intensive

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<sup>2</sup> Professor in the singular is gendered masculine in the rest of the article as in Peixotto’s study, reflecting a social reality of the time. It should be pointed out, however, that Peixotto was not the only female professor; many others held university positions and were active in academic associations, including economic ones (May and Dimand 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Her thesis is entitled “*The French Revolution and Modern French Socialism: A Comparative Study of the Principles of the French Revolution and the Doctrines of Modern French Socialism*” (1901).

examination of middle-class budgets done in the United States in the first four decades of the twentieth century” (Horowitz 1985, 141). This article contextualises Peixotto’s study in the history of American economic thought, specifically on the question of thrift. This choice of perspective enables us to account for her reasoning and results as an economist.

Peixotto decided to study her colleagues, her own profession, and, therefore, herself. In so doing, she acknowledges that, as an economist, she is part of the economic world. Hirschfeld (1997) describes this unconventional methodology as a “Conversational Stance.” Nevertheless, Peixotto pre-empts any criticism of the invalidity of her results, asserting that this scientific study is impartial (Peixotto 1927, xi).

Her study follows the publication in the University of California Chronicle of an article entitled “What Are the Prospects of the University Professor’s Wife?” (1922), written by nine women married to Berkeley professors. Their point is clear: their husbands’ salaries have become particularly unbearable and must be increased. Peixotto supported these women and, in return, relied on their valuable assistance to ensure household involvement and the proper conduct of her investigation. The centrality of professors’ wives in this study highlights their major role in the thrifty management of household resources. Here women’s role is inherited from the two-sphere theory (Kerber 1988), which associates the public sphere with masculine values and the home with feminine values. But it also reflects the shift at the turn of the 20th century from the home as a unit of production to a unit of consumption. Women were then entrusted with the practical and moral management of the home.

The Home Economics movement created by Ellen H. Richards was born at the same time, at the Lake Placid Conferences 1899–1908. Through the scientific education of women in various fields, such as hygiene, nutrition, and consumption, the Home Economics movement aimed to improve living conditions in American homes. Supporting Home Economics at Berkeley, Peixotto taught the Household as an Economic Agent and chaired the Committee on Domestic Science from 1909 to 1913, which led to the creation of a Home Economics department at Berkeley in 1916 (Nerad 1999, 143).

The emergence of the economics of consumption linked to the Home Economics movement was the subject of two recent dissertations by Le Tollec (2020) and Philippy (2022). However, these works do not address the major influence of thrift culture on the Home Economics movement. From its origins in domestic manuals in the 19th century to the creation of the Journal of Home Economics in 1909 and the Bureau of Home Economics in 1923, Home Economics spread the precepts of thrift. Together with the American Society for Thrift, founded by Simon W. Straus in 1913, it contributed to the transition from thrift as a sermon to genuine thrift education for women and children. This education in efficient spending, avoiding all forms of waste, and building up savings, was achieved in particular through the distribution of standard budgets.

Peixotto’s study enables us to evaluate the thrift education of professors’ wives in budgeting home expenses. The results are positive: the model was followed properly. The problem lies in the amount of professors’ salaries rather than in their management. This article shows how, for Peixotto, the thrifty ethos of professors is ultimately irreparably linked to the impoverishment of the profession. Thrift has a negative impact on professors’ negotiating skills, leading to a low pay scale, and is not conducive to rising living standards.

## **2. Thrift as a virtue to embrace in American economic thought**

American economic thought in the 19th century was steeped in morality, and in this case, thrifty morality. While Benjamin Franklin influenced political economists, they were also

influenced by Adam Smith's work<sup>4</sup> (Dorfman 1949, 80). As far as thrift is concerned, Smith introduced in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) his ideal economic actor, the prudent man who, through the practice of thrift, gets wealthier and wins the admiration of his peers:

“In the steadiness of his industry and frugality, in his steadily sacrificing the ease and enjoyment of the present moment for the probable expectation of the still greater ease and enjoyment of a more distant but more lasting period of time, the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation’ of the impartial spectator” (Smith 1759, 314)

Thus, Smith highlighted thrift as a laudable moral behaviour in his moral philosophy treatise. His prudent man practices a frugality that leaves room for necessary consumption but excludes the temptation of frivolous consumption, considered unproductive. The sobriety of his lifestyle enables the prudent man to accumulate savings, subsequently directed towards the acquisition of productive goods. These are the assets that will allow future wealth creation and the enrichment of the thrifty agent. Smith then identified another character, the poor man's son, who, out of admiration for the rich and his desire to attain the same level of wealth, practices the virtues of thrift to the utmost. A self-discipline applied in such proportions cannot but provoke his peers' admiration as well<sup>5</sup>:

“Hence arises that eminent esteem with which all men naturally regard a steady perseverance in the practice of frugality, industry, and application, though directed to no other purpose than the acquisition of fortune.” (Smith 1759, 273)

Thrift is an admirable virtue because it advocates values that are conjoined with the Protestant Reformation. The individualistic values of thrift were disseminated in the United States in the 19th century through the economics manuals of evangelical Protestant authors, for whom political economy was linked to religion and morality. Francis Wayland, president of Brown University from 1827 to 1855, taught students moral philosophy and political economy, as was the tradition at the time (Frey 2002, 215). He published two textbooks based on his lectures, *The Elements of Moral Science* in 1835 and *The Elements of Political Economy* in 1837, based on his lecture notes. Both became standard references in economics teaching. The author saw his two works as complementary and the religious and moral aspects of his political economy were confirmed as soon as he mentioned enrichment by thrift in the introduction:

“It is obvious, upon the slightest reflection, that the Creator has subjected the accumulation of the blessings of this life to some determinate laws. Everyone, for instance, knows that no man can grow rich without industry and frugality.” (Wayland 1837, 3)

In the following section of his manual, Wayland (1837, 138) extended the individual reasoning of thrift to the societal level. According to him, a nation's prosperity depends on two elements: the collective intelligence of a nation -measurable by its scientific advancement or its ability to exploit the country's natural advantages- and “the purity of its moral character” which “depends {on} the justice of its laws, its respect for individual rights, security of property, individual and social virtue, together with the industry and frugality which are their invariable attendants.” (Wayland 1837, 138). Thus, if a country nurtures in

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<sup>4</sup> Other non-economic British works have influenced American thinking. Peixotto mentions “the Smilesian paths of thrift” (Peixotto 1927, 36) that the professors follow. It refers to the famous English thrift' preacher Samuel Smiles (1812–1904), author of *Self-Help* (1859) and *Thrift* (1875). In the preface to the latter, he wrote, “Thrift is the basis of Self-help, and the foundation of much that is excellent in Character.” (Smiles 1859, 5).

<sup>5</sup> Smith acknowledged the economic success of such behavior but warned of the consequences of perpetual work and frugality on happiness (Leloup 2002, 81).

people the qualities of “Industry and Frugality, Virtue and Intelligence” then “no nation, with the ordinary blessing of God, can long be poor.” Wayland (1837, 161).

Another “extremely popular” (Dorfman 1949, 50) political economy textbook in the 19th century was Amasa Walker’s *Science of Wealth* published in 1867. In the preface, Walker (1867, xi) set forth his highly moral and religious view of political economy. He quoted several churchmen, including Bishop Whately: “no theological seminary should be without its chair of Political Economy”. The practice of thrift as a means of personal enrichment appeared in Chapter VI, titled “Definition of Capital”. In this part, the accumulation of capital is described through a “familiar illustration” of a man who owns nothing except his clothes, not even tools for work. The worker is nevertheless hired, but only for one day, since the rest of the work on the farm requires that he be equipped. With his daily salary, he adopts a meritorious, thrifty attitude since “he chooses to lay them out [his earnings] in an axe, rather than on any object of comfort or pleasure. He has practiced self-denial.” (Walker 1867, 20). This choice of productive consumption, the fruit of the sacrifice of his present desires, enables him to acquire the necessary capital, the axe, for the following day’s work. The pursuit of this practice leads him to accumulate a significant amount of capital and prosper as a farm worker: “he can by thrift, provide for his immediate bodily wants; pay for his clothes ( ... ) and become the possessor of a pick and shovel; scythe and rake.” (Walker 1867, 20).

In a 1907 article entitled “Influences affecting the development of thrift”, Alvin S. Johnson (1874–1971) continued this reasoning. Trained by John Bates Clark, Johnson helped found the New School for Social Research. His article confirmed the doxa of thrift that ran through the 19th century: “It is over a century since political economy elevated the lowly quality of thrift to the rank of a cardinal virtue” (Johnson 1907, 224). Although economists were unanimous, none of them has studied the conditions favouring the appearance of thrift among economic agents. For Johnson, several criteria were important, in particular, investment possibilities. He took the case of the farm worker, whose thrifty behavior finds its *raison d’être* when land is cheap: to buy his own farm. Other conditions also influence the development of thrift, such as an individual’s aptitude to thrift, as well as the standards of living associated with his social class:

“From the foregoing discussion it appears that what the average man will save depends in large measure upon the kind of investments open to him, although there are exceptional individuals who will be equally thrifty whatever the conditions of investment. I shall now endeavor to show that what the average man will save depends in large measure upon the prevailing standard of living, although there are exceptional individuals who shape their economic conduct with little reference to social standards.” (Johnson 1907, 237)

Using a similar framework as Johnson, Peixotto characterised the professors’ attitudes towards thrift. First, the university professor had an unusual relationship with his work and his salary. Happy to simply be left to practice his profession, he perceived his salary as a bonus and not as his career’s purpose, which for him is the progress he can make in his search for truth.

“The vast majority of those who go into it feel a genuine “call” to the work. The reward lies within the processes and the products of a chosen task ( ... ) More than pay, members of academic faculties covet time to work and a place to work.” (Peixotto 1927, 6)

The social group is thus made up of individuals who are not looking for economic success and the purchases it allows. As with the farmers, there is no Veblenian consumption among the professors, their standard of consumption is straightforward and follows “a theory that deprecates personal display, that scorns quantity consumption, above all competitive

consumption” (Peixotto 1927, 7). Professors are shaped by an ancient tradition of scholar isolation that prevents them from coveting the standard of living of another social group:

“All traditions in academic circles are colored by the fact that the profession began in the cloister where the rule of an isolated life consecrated to an appointed task modified all other aspects of spending. Thus, the precept handed down to the men and women who go into academic life today implies in general a renunciation of “worldly” spending” (Peixotto 1927, 4–5)

Second, professors accumulate savings that are intended for both tangible and intangible capital. Demonstrating individual thrift by nature, reinforced by their class standards, this group invests heavily in intangible capital, notably insurance. This further proves their frugality since, according to Johnson (1907, 230), intangible capital is the least enticing to thrift for. Daily sacrifices are justified by the pleasure derived from visible, workable capital, like a tool or a piece of land. The social group of university professors is thus marked by its capacity to privilege the future at the expense of present pleasure. In the “Investments, Insurance, Savings” category of the family budget, Peixotto writes:

“The facts demonstrate beyond question that the habit of foresight controls the group as whole. Whether they are poor or are already well protected by outside resources, the overwhelming majority of the families invest nevertheless.” (Peixotto 1927, 190)

While professors are driven to invest in intangible capital, their biggest investment remains a tangible and enjoyable asset: their home.

“The academic standard for housing can best be described by the English term, “house proud” ( ... ) As a class they will insist upon owning a home in a good neighborhood with at least six rooms and usually more. Housing is, what clothes and food are not, a vital item in this class standard of life, a supreme source of ‘psychic income’” (Peixotto 1927, 127–128)

The expression “Psychic Income” is originally taken from *The Nature of Capital and Income* by Irving Fisher (1906), who, like Johnson, argued that tangible capital must be the source of a continuous flow of pleasure. For the social group of professors, homebound by their research work, home is this source of daily pleasure. Furthermore, it is this capital that primarily secures the representation of their social status and its respectability.

The period known as the Progressive Era (1890–1910) saw the emergence of a “managerial thrift” among economists, who advocated efficiency in industrial production to increase output. This idea was present in the work of Richard T. Ely, Henry Ford, and Frederick Winslow Taylor (Lears 2011, 230). Thrift, in its horror of waste, was also at the origin of the Conservation Movement. Along with Thomas Nixon Carver, Ely helped write one of the movement’s founding books, *The Foundations of National Prosperity: Studies in the Conservation of Permanent National Resources* (1918)<sup>6</sup>.

With the United States’ entry into World War I and its concomitant need for funding, the government launched a veritable pro-thrift campaign that became patriotic. This campaign continued after the war. In 1920, the government introduced National Thrift Week, celebrated in January in honour of Benjamin Franklin’s birthday. That same year, The American Academy of Political and Social Science also mobilised, publishing a lengthy volume called *The New American Thrift*. Edited by Roy Blakey of the Treasury’s Savings Division, the publication contains more than forty articles. Contributors to the issue include Johnson “The Promotion of Thrift in America,” Benjamin R. Andrews, home economist with “Thrift as a Family and Individual Problem Some Standard Budgets”, Carver with “The Relation of Thrift

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<sup>6</sup> To read more about the economic side of the conservation movement, see Vianna Franco and Missemer (2022).

to Nation Building” or S. W. Straus with “Promotion and Practice of Thrift in Foreign Countries”.

Peixotto’s study is firmly rooted in a tradition of American economic thought permeated by the thrift question. Nevertheless, thrift was until then approached in a normative, moralistic way, but not in a practical one. Building up savings requires vigilance and knowledge in managing household resources. The Home Economics movement undertook women’s education to thrift. This education could be transmitted to the following generations through the intermediary of mothers but also through the work of reforming school curricula that Simon W. Straus’ American Society for Thrift committed to.

### **3. From a moral ideal to a practical guide: Home Economics and thrift movements**

The moral ideal of “Industry and Saving” that was disseminated in the culture of the United States also forged the Home Economics movement. From its origins in domestic advice books in the 19th century to its institutionalisation in the early 20th century, Home Economics aimed to educate women in thrift. Indeed, women were the target audience. In the “Thrift Program 1921–1922”, the American homemaker was fervently encouraged to “put her personal and household affairs on such a business-like basis that every penny possible may be saved and that her money may be used to the best purpose for herself and her country’s welfare” (cited in Elias 2008, 88). As possibilities for shopping and wasting peaked, women had to learn more than ever before how to consume wisely. The Home Economics movement has therefore placed the art of consumption at the heart of its project (Le Tollec 2020; Philippy 2021, 2022).

Another thrift education movement also became institutionalised during the same period: the American Society for Thrift. The goal of the American Society for Thrift was to educate children in thrift by reforming school programs, so that the next generation of Americans would save more than the last. The two movements complemented and supported each other: children were educated in thrift at school, mostly by women, for example, in a Home Economics class, and at home mothers continued this education by applying the thrift precepts learned by one of the many Home Economics relays.

In the years 1899–1908, Ellen H. Richards organised The Lake Placid Conferences, co-hosted by the couple Annie R. Dewey (born Godfrey, 1850–1922), and her husband Melvil Dewey (1851–1931), director of the New York State Library. Conferences took place on the shores of Mirror Lake in the State of New York. They gathered a growing audience but still almost exclusively female (although the economist Irving Fisher was one of the few men to attend). They were motivated by the belief in the need for a scientific approach to household operations. This series of conferences made it possible to define the objective of the movement: the education of American women in various fields, such as hygiene, nutrition, and clothing, in order to improve the living conditions of American homes (Philippy 2022, 176–179).

In 1909, the American Home Economics Association and the Journal of Home Economics were created (“Announcement” 1909). In its early days, the movement focused on scientific developments in hygiene and nutrition following the academic path of its founder, Richards, the first woman to graduate in chemistry from MIT (and the first female graduate from MIT at all). Home Economics was taught to American girls in high school and college, shifting from practical lessons to more theoretical content. For example, high school girls received cooking lessons, and university students received nutrition lessons.

In *Thrift: The History of an American Cultural Movement*, Yarrow (2014, 29) clearly notes the role played by the Home Economics movement in the spread of thrift culture. But the collaboration between Home Economics and thrift movements goes beyond a general



mobilisation intended to support the war economy. As the home economist Agnes S. Donham illustrated:

“Since the home is the center of all life and good home life is vital to the life of the nation, home economics touched thrift movement on every side. It deals with every question which touches the home; the welfare of the child, social, mental and physical; the development of family relationships; and the science of nutrition and textile, as well as the so-called practical subject of household management, foods, clothing, and shelter.” (Donham 1928, 13)

For Goldstein (2012, 2–3; 60–61), 19<sup>th</sup>-century female authors such as Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880), who wrote books of domestic advice for women, can be considered the first generation of home economists. In her book, *American Frugal Housewife* - dedicated to those who are not ashamed of the economy (1829), Child is particularly explicit in showing the ideological connection between thrifting and Home Economics:

“The true economy of housekeeping is simply the art of gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing be lost. I mean fragments, of time, as well as materials. Nothing should be thrown away so long as it is possible to make any use of it, however trifling that use may be; and whatever be the size of a family, every member should be employed either in earning, or saving money. If you would avoid waste in your family, attend to the following rules, and do not despise them because they appear so unimportant: “Many a little makes a mickle.”” (Child 1829, 3)

Indeed, according to the separate spheres theory (Kerber 1988), American society was marked during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a gender division. Men were the breadwinners, while women were confined to the domestic sphere. Women were the guardians of the morals of the home and its management. In the chapter “The Frugal Lady”, Tucker (1991) shows that women had to be frugal, thrifty, and efficient to achieve the Puritan model of morality<sup>7</sup>. This role was crucial, as they were also responsible for the moral upbringing of the children and, thus, for their future thrifty behaviour.

Catherine Beecher was also a prominent author amongst the first generation of home economists. In her book *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), she clearly supported the centrality of Christian morality in the effective management of time and money by housewives. It is particularly eloquent in her chapter entitled “On Economy of Time”: “Christianity teaches, that, for all the time afforded us, we must give account to God; and that we have no right to waste a single hour.” (Beecher 1841, 181). In the chapter that follows “On Economy in Expenses”, the term “wise” is found and, when associated with expenses in a broad sense, it is characteristic of thrift culture:

“It is impossible for a woman to practise a wise economy in expenditures, unless she is taught how to do it, either by a course of experiments, or by the instruction of those who have had experience ( ... ) Yet every woman is bound to do as much as is in her power, to accomplish a systemic mode of expenditure, and the regulation of it by Christian principles.” (Beecher 1841, 185–86)

Child and Beecher's books were, like Benjamin Franklin's work, true bestsellers in the U.S., being reissued more than fifteen times each. Both were very influential, and their ideas spread to female communities. With the institutionalisation of the movement in schools at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thrift moved from a code of conduct to a practical instruction. Home economics teaching in primary and secondary schools saw the application of Benjamin Franklin's thrifty philosophy to the various aspects of household management: food, clothing, and household maintenance (Elias 2008, 34).

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<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, in this chapter, he never referred to Child (1829).

In 1913, Straus and the American Society for Thrift make thrift education their main agenda. He was originally “the creator of commercial real estate mortgage bonds that financed many of America’s early skyscrapers” (Yarrow 2014, 36), but as Americans acquired the reputation of being terrible spendthrifts, unlike their European neighbours (Garon 2012, 85), he became a fervent thrift preacher. It was commonly said that a French family could live on what an American family wasted.

This Chicago-born thrift movement held its first “International Congress for Thrift” in San Francisco in August 1915. Hiram Johnson, Governor of California from 1911 to 1917, decreed August 11<sup>th</sup> as “Thrift Day” on this occasion. UC Berkeley was also immersed in this culture since its dean, of 1899 to 1919, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, spoke during the congress (Straus 1920, 103–118) to support it. In 1920, Straus published *History of the Thrift Movement in America*. In the preface, the editor and the American Society for Thrift’s chairman, Arthur H. Chamberlain, stated that “No man in our century has done so much towards bringing the people to a realising sense of the crime of wastefulness, and of the absolute necessity for the proper practice of economy, as has the author of the present book” (Chamberlain 1920, 8).

In his book, Straus noted with regret that Americans saved less than Europeans, even though their salaries were higher:

“In the United States a great store house of wealth was placed in our hands, and our wastefulness was the natural result. Meanwhile, the resources in European countries were limited, the ratio of population to land areas was large, the wage scale was low and practices of thrift resulted as a matter of necessity.” (Straus 1920, 93)

European thrift education was ensured by low wages. Since necessity did not lead to thrift in the United States, thrift education had to go through a different channel: school. Straus’ primary concern was children’s education, so naturally, he turned to the National Education Association. He convinced them to create the National Committee on Thrift Education, which Chamberlain chaired. The aim was to rally teachers to the need to include thrift in all curriculum subjects, especially domestic science (Straus 1920, 167).

Home Economics then shared the same desire as the American Society for Thrift: to contribute to the formation of the American citizen’s thrifty ethos. In the 1925 *Bulletin of the Bureau of Education* written by home economics specialist Emeline S. Whitcomb, entitled “Contributions of home economics to citizenship training”, thrift was an integral part of the program along with nutrition, home and family, hygiene and clothing (Whitcomb 1925, 40).

The cooperation between Home Economics and the American Society for Thrift was seamless. Although the Straus movement addressed all citizens in matters of thrift regardless of gender, the Home Economics targeted women particularly and was central to the formation of thrifty households.

In 1914, a year after the creation of the American Society for Thrift’s, the *Journal of Home Economics* published an article on the benefits of cooperative buying in which the position of Straus’s association was relayed (Arnold 1914). Group buying met both the Home Economics and Straus criteria of protecting consumers from unfair prices, thus increasing the efficiency of their budget, with the ultimate goal of saving money.

This natural cooperation was facilitated by the First World War and the instrumentalization of thrift culture by the government. The Bureau of Home Economics published a series of Thrift Leaflets (Goldstein 2012, 65). As early as 1922, the *Journal of Home Economics*’ editorial (‘Editorial’ 1922, 34) promoted the National Thrift Week, established in 1920. So does the editorial of the 1923 issue, in which Donham reaffirms thrift as the underlying philosophy of home economics:

“Wise spending of time, strength, and money; Wise choice of goods and pleasures; wise use of materials, leisure, and opportunity; all make for thrift. National Thrift Week should remind every home economist afresh that our profession is built upon a definition of which such thrift is the basis.” (Donham 1923, 31)

The morality of thrift is at the heart of the home economics movement. As it became more institutionalised, its objective of practical thrift education became more and more assertive. This education involved the dissemination of standard household budgets, which are discussed in the following section.

#### **4. Peixotto’s assessment of thrifty education of professors’ wives**

The Home Economics movement educated girls and women in the precepts of thrift by addressing the main categories of household consumption. For example, women would learn to make their own canned vegetables in season or to distinguish the most resistant fabrics. To ensure that these savings efforts were not in vain, the home economics program would develop another tool: the budget. Housewives would have standard budget guidelines to respect in the distribution of household expenses. This part highlights the strict adherence of women professors to these norms but also the weight of consumption choices, or rather non-consumption choices, that rest on them.

Peixotto linked Ellen H. Richards’ thrifty budgeting with “banks and other agencies suggesting methods of thrifty spending” (Peixotto 1927, 142). This was not the first time Peixotto linked Home Economics to the thrift movement. In her course, *The Control of Poverty*, Home Economics appeared in the section “movements for training in thrift” (Peixotto et al. 1923, 32). She displayed ambition to break away from those ideal budgets by providing a descriptive and, therefore, realistic approach: “This data should, in however slight degree, serve to swing discussion of the art of spending from the abstract and normative foundations on which it now rests, to a more concrete and positive basis” (Peixotto 1927, x).

In Richard’s seminal *The Cost of Living*, thrift is quite clearly the ideal American households must pursue the nation’s betterment: ““home” is the germ of AngloSaxon civilisation, the unit of social progress; that no community rises above the average of its individual homes in intelligence, courage, honesty, industry, thrift, patriotism.” (Richards 1899, 5) Later, in the *Thrift by Household Accounting and Weekly Cash Records Forms* preface (1916), published by the American Home Economics Association, Richards is quoted (1899): “The temptation to spend for things pleasant but not needful or even beautiful, either for the household or for personal gratifications are many, and it requires some moral support, such as an account book or some great ideal to strive for, to keep the pocketbook closed.”. Indeed, in this purpose, Richards had established an ideal budget: the wage should be divided into 25% for food, 20% for rent, 15% for maintenance expenses such as fuel, 15% for clothing and 25% for what she called “higher life”, a category that includes books, church, charity, travel but also and especially savings and insurance (Richards 1899, 37).

Therefore, Home Economics’ teachings included content on keeping accounts that allowed the homemaker to save as much as possible, in addition to educating the consumer on the wisest choice of food or clothing. Donham published an article in the *Journal of Home Economics* entitled “controlling expense by standards”, once again to mark National Thrift Week 1927. She developed the importance of teaching thrift through budgets “The teaching of budgets emphasises the ethics of spending. To live by a budget is to develop and practice a system of wise choice in the purchase of goods and in the use of the income.” (Donham 1927, 1–2).

This notion of “wise” choice is notably present in Hazel Kyrk’ (1886–1947) dissertation *A Theory of consumption* (1923). Kyrk, a professor in the University of Chicago’s

Department of Home Economics and, from 1929, also in the university's Department of Economics, was a major economist in the field of economics of consumption. In her dissertation, she criticised an overly radical reading of the thrift "Industry and Saving", which left no room for consumption as an economic activity. She then developed a notion of "wise spending" without breaking with the culture of thrift since it is a consumption that minimises waste (Kyrk 1923, 280).<sup>8</sup>

Home economists were at the forefront of family budgets, while contemporary economists, with some exception as Mitchell (1912), considered this discipline trivial (Le Tollec 2020, 28). The national enthusiasm for thrift following the First World War made it possible to establish the expertise of home economists in this field. In *The New American Thrift* (1920), Benjamin R. Andrews (1879–1958) gave his female colleagues credit for their help in preparing a standard budget that helped households save money:

"The chief credit for them [standard budgets] is due to Mrs. Alice P. Norton, editor of the *Journal of Home Economics*, who was ably assisted by Miss S. Maria Elliott of Simons College. Acknowledgment should also be given for the advice and suggestions of many of the foremost home economists in the United States." (Andrews 1920, 18)

As a professor of Household Economics at Columbia University, Andrews was one the rare male home economist. Particularly close to the home economics movement, he attended Lake Placid Conferences and published articles in the *Journal of Home Economics* such as "For the Homemaker. Family Account Books" (Philippy 2022, 202, 208). As a J.B. Lippincott Company's editor, for the Lippincott Family Life Series and Home Manuals, Andrews published home economics manuals to encourage a thrifty household behaviour. For example, in the editor's note of *Economics of the Family*, written by C.W. Taber and Ruth A. Wardall, head of Home Economics Department at the University of Illinois, Andrews stated: "If people were only trained to handle money more skilfully, we would all become a Mr. Thrifty—and a Mrs. Thrifty or a Miss Thrifty—and our town would become a Thrifty Town and, incidentally, a Happy Town." (1923, vii).

In Elliott's or Wardall's standard budgets, savings were the first line of account in the table. Workers were expected to save 10% of their wages every month. These savings were not the result of a salary surplus at the end of the month but were the first item to plan for. However, these budgets provided for nothing but subsistence and a most austere lifestyle. Under these conditions, saving this much prevented enjoyment of life and, above all, it did not leave room for the purchase of new goods, which corresponds to the increase in living standards. In the study "Minimum Quantity Budget Necessary to Maintain a Worker's Family of Five in Health and Decency," carried by the Bureau of Labour Statistics and the help of Caroline L. Hunt from the Office of Home Economics, the choice "to err on the side of conservatism" is acknowledged (1920, 6).

The budgetary constraint thus rested on the wives who had to manage the household with an extremely limited budget. Indeed, the professor's salary was theoretically designed to ensure the family's daily needs in accordance with the expectations of his social class. However, the professor's wives in charge of the home management were the primary victims of this salary which did not keep up with inflation and even less with the increase in living standards. They saw their daily life transformed more and more harshly into a series of accounting challenges and domestic work. A group of nine women, led by Dorothy Hart Bruce, published in *The University of California Chronicle*, in October 1922 an article

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the biography and work of Kyrk see Hirschfeld (1997), Van Velzen (2003), Le Tollec (2020), Becchio (2020) and Philippy, Betancourt and Dimand (2023) in the special issue of RHETM to be published end of 2023.

entitled “What are the prospects of the university professor’s wife?”. As the title suggests, Bruce portrayed an austere lifestyle:

“The professor’s wife, even presupposing freedom from illness and from dependents, must choose between childlessness on the one hand, and, on the other, the anguish and humiliation of many years of debt; the never-lightened burden of too great physical labor; the inability to give her children the thing she knows are important, the inevitable chocking of her intellectual and artistic qualities. These realities are her life day by day and year by year.” (Peixotto 1927, 48)

Peixotto chose to study the account schedules of the families. This data was collected during interviews conducted by social workers, students of Peixotto and by the nine wives of professors (Peixotto 1927, 30). The success of this study and its methodology can therefore be partly attributed to them. Indeed, as Chapin points out in *The Standard of living among workingmen’s Families in New York City* (1909), the difficulty of this type of work lies in the choice and the size of the sample. Chapin succeeded by choosing a socio-professional category as broad as those of New York workers to exploit the reports of 391 families out of the 642 received. Peixotto, despite such a limited socio-professional category, remarkably obtained the reports of 96 families. Chapin had to eliminate some of the reports received because they didn’t meet the sample criteria or had been filled in incorrectly. Peixotto did not suffer from the latter problem, as she relied on scientifically-minded, educated women:

“The interviewers reported none of the tendencies usual in studies of this sort. No one wanted to exaggerate or underestimate his expenditures though many deplored the nature of the cold facts they gave. The desire was not so much to make a showing, good or bad, as to furnish the real facts and to await the interpretation of the data.” (Peixotto 1927, 48)

The claims of professors’ wives were based on the minimum wage established by Peixotto in 1920, ensuring a decent standard of living for a family of professors with three children (Bruce et al. 1922, 526). However, no member of the University received this salary of approximately \$7000 a year.

According to Peixotto, the wives of professors were making both ends meet thanks to “Thrift, particularly in the purchase of food and clothing, is evidently an inherent part of their scheme of things,” or further, “The 96 families of this academic group elect to save, for save they must, chiefly on food and clothing” (Peixotto 1927, 198). The families fell within the ideal budgets recommended by Richards (1899, 35), to which Peixotto compares them. They managed to spend 8% less than the 25% allocated for food and 6% less than the 15% standard on clothing that Peixotto calls “rigid” (Peixotto 1927, 142).

Professor’s wives were excellent students of home economics who exceeded Richards’ expectations in this regard. However, homemakers spent more than recommended on the house and the “higher life”. Peixotto criticises this category defined by Richards, which includes in this study nearly half of the ordinary, almost mandatory expenditures on health, savings and insurance: “That division of the budget euphemistically called “higher life” and supposed to represent the field of choice” (Peixotto 1927, 278). Thus, spending on new consumer goods, which straddle the line between luxury and a new standard, has no place.

In order to meet a thrifty budget, professors’ wives had to endure “the never lightening burden of too great physical labour” (Peixotto 1927, 177). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, making clothes but especially maintaining them was long and difficult physical labour (as was maintaining the house). “Subcontracting” these tasks to a maid or an industry in town considerably increased the family’s expenses. Women therefore took upon themselves these tasks so massive that their husbands and children can anecdotally come to their aid: “From this review of domestic service, it would appear that the heavy work of household administration remains upon the shoulders of the housewife, shared perhaps by her husband and children in “free” hours.” (Peixotto 1927, 179). Given their husbands’ meagre salaries,

professors' wives often also contributed to the household's financial resources, either through a family allowance or through a professional activity such as being professors themselves. Wage work did not exempt them from housework: "But there are always the wives who do both. One woman taught for five months of the year and, at the same time, did all her own work including the laundry" (Peixotto 1927, 177). They applied thrift to the letter at the expense of their person: "If budget studies mirror the facts, she carries this mass of duties along with her self-denial in clothes, as most women carry it, quietly, courageously, as matter of course." (Peixotto 1927, 177).

Thus, Peixotto concluded that Mrs. Bruce's claims were founded (Peixotto 1927, 250). Following a thrifty lifestyle on a limited budget meant making many sacrifices, the brunt of which fell on women. Before the appliance revolution, women sacrificed their physical health in an attempt to maintain a decent standard of living. The problem was not poor budget management by women but their husbands' low salaries.

## **5. Professors and thrift: from not spending to not getting**

The professors' wives were, by homogeneity, of a social level equivalent to that of their husbands, that is to say, an educated and bourgeois social group. However, when they marry them, they do not engage in "Ladylike" activities (Peixotto 1927, 42) but rather do all the chores around the house while dressing in an extremely strict manner. Why do professors earn so little, given their level of education? This section intends to shed light on Peixotto's analysis of the level of professor salaries.

Peixotto (1927, 36), in her study, referred to Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), in particular to the tendency for the standard of living to go as high as earning power. Veblen has already pointed out in his book the ambiguity of the economic status of professors. Professors, by virtue of their academic success, are considered as a high social class, in the same way as doctors, lawyers, etc., without having the financial legitimacy. They are therefore condemned to relative poverty, since they are constantly compared to higher standards of living than those allowed by their salary:

"Because of a presumed superiority and scarcity of the gifts and attainments that characterize their life, these [academic] classes are by convention subsumed under a higher social grade than their pecuniary grade should warrant. In any modern community where there is no priestly monopoly of these occupations, the people of scholarly pursuits are unavoidably thrown into contact with classes that are pecuniarily their superiors." (Veblen 1899, 112–113)

Peixotto confirmed in her study the relative poverty of professors, which fuelled her concern about the profession's attractiveness and its sustainable recruitment. From her first study conducted with her colleagues at Berkeley, "Cost of Living Survey: Report to the California Civil Service Commission" (1923) to that of 1927, Peixotto's aim was to support a fair remuneration of civil servants to avoid the civil service losing its best elements. Nevertheless, the previous section on the management of professors' budgets completely contradicted Veblen's claim:

"The high standard of pecuniary decency in force among these superior classes is transfused among the scholarly classes with but little mitigation of its rigor; and, as a consequence there is no class of the community that spends a larger proportion of its substance in conspicuous waste than these." (Veblen 1899, 112–113)

Peixotto's cost-of-living study made it clear that faculty wives followed the budgetary guidelines of home economics to maximise household savings. The problem of the professor's household was, therefore, not one of "spending" but of "getting." Professors did

not earn enough to live a decent life, and according to Peixotto, their Poor Richard's way of living was partly responsible for this, significantly weakening their bargaining power:

“So far as the faculties themselves are concerned, low salaries in universities derive, in part at least, from the typical academic man's theory of spending and from his will and power to make a bargain, that is, his capacity for estimating and asserting the social value of his work, - his occupational self-respect, so to speak.” (Peixotto 1927, 4)

Peixotto's thoughts on professor's salaries go beyond classical analyses on a macro level of worker supply and demand, and on a micro level of worker productivity. Indeed, the productivity of a professor is impossible to quantify, and the supply and demand model would not explain the low level of wages. Theoretically, the demand for professors would follow the increase in the number of students enrolled in the last decades and would therefore put upward pressure on salaries since the supply, which depends on the years of training, would respond slowly. Peixotto put forward another theory, that of the worker's capacity to negotiate in relation to the standard of living of his corporation, “the measure of decency and suitability in material comfort, (diet, dress, dwelling, etc.) which is traditional and habitual in a group” (Peixotto 1927, 44) according to the definition she took from William Graham Sumner, the first American professor of sociology at Yale University.

The standard of living of a group is affected by the relationship to the expenditure of the individuals constituting it. As we have seen previously, professors are historically disinterested in their material conditions. Since the Middle Ages, the profession has been characterised by a precarious situation, with no fixed salary, and by the beginning of the 19th century, it retained the model of celibacy and a cloistered life (Peixotto 1927, 24–25). Heirs to this tradition, professors are loyal “to Poor Richard”, “to a creed that ties success in the search for truth with simple living” (Peixotto 1927, 5–6). How does this attitude affect his bargaining power?

In the first part and its characterisation of the professor's thrift, professors are the opposite of merchants: bad negotiators, evolving outside the economic spheres and its practices. The practice of thrift, a central value of the social group, further damaged professors' negotiating capacity. In the context of the living wage, workers received what the employer and society judged to be the minimum necessary for expenses to satisfy primary needs and social status. Professors have for decades displayed strictly minimal needs, disdaining conspicuous consumption. Their salary is then determined by a purely social evaluation, which results from the esteem in which a profession is held and the needs workers display to exercise their work in a respectable manner. Professors, living according to the principles of “plain living and high thinking”, display a minimal standard of living that influences the way they are perceived in society. Peixotto explains that the public characterises the professor in an exaggerate way, as being extremely respected, a knowing being, dominating by his knowledge the rest of humanity, or represented as an “absent-minded beggar” (Peixotto 1927, 9). In both cases, the professor is not seen as a being with material needs, a phenomenon for which he is admired or mocked:

“Mild disdain on the one hand or high estimate of spiritual sufficiency on the other both lead easily to thinking that as a matter of course low salaries suffice for this cloistered life.” (Peixotto 1927, 10).

The professor, by not claiming anything, by assuming his position of being “like the minister and government official, be a poor relation among professionals” (Peixotto 1927, 35), sends the same signals to the market as the “weak” workers. In the early 20th century in the U.S., weak workers included women and migrant workers, i.e., workers who couldn't claim wages as high as other white workers. Women, like professors, were considered single and did not receive family wages like breadwinners. Migrant workers have no choice but to

accept lower salaries, justified by a lower standard of living than the American one. The professor, content with a bachelor's salary and a more austere standard of living than the American, exerts no upward pressure on his salary:

“The market value of the scholar is the result. The community treats this professional who higgles rarely or not at all as it always treats the meek, especially those meek whose additional peculiarities lead them to be primarily interested in arranging and explaining known phenomena of absorbed in the search after new contributions to knowledge.” (Peixotto 1927, 9)

This thrifty ethos, in individualistic philosophy, goes against the unionization of professors:

“Certainly the best academic man is not lacking in “proper pride” but, to all but a minority, group action looks like a repellant duty to be avoided as far as possible. In face of innuendo or bald statement about the professor's lack of prestige or fair income, most academic men prefer a proud humility to a retort.” (Peixotto 1927, 7)

Unions, which had been proliferating in the United States since the turn of the century, had a key role in organising workers to demand higher wages. To do without them was depriving oneself of an important professor bargaining lever. The profession eventually realised this and began to organise. In 1920, the American Association of University Professors, founded in 1915, created the Committee Z entitled “The Economic Condition of the Profession and Income Tax Questions” (“Committees for 1920” 1920). After the publication of her study, Peixotto chaired the Committee Z from 1929 to 1931 and remained a member until 1933<sup>9</sup>. A survey commissioned by the Yale University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors was published in 1928 on the financial conditions of their professors. This survey cited Peixotto's study several times, while going beyond her work in comparing salary advancement between professors and an equivalent profession in the private sector (e.g., chemistry professor and engineer). The results of the comparison were simple enough: the industry paid much better.

As living standards continued to rise, with the introduction of new consumer items such as cars, the relative poverty felt by professors continued to grow. Thrift exhorts an old-fashioned way of life in this consumerist society. It threatens the attractiveness of the profession and, thus the quality of future recruitment. So, for the well-being of their homes and the prosperity of their profession, professors need to act on their pay scales.

## 6. Concluding remarks

With *Getting and Spending at the professional standard of living* (1927), Peixotto signed a resolutely engaged text. She took up the cause of professors' wives, backing up her argument with a scientific study. Her contribution is the evaluation, albeit in a sample of educated women, of the thrifty precepts of Home Economics.

Peixotto was determined to shake up the profession of its economic condition. The purpose of this study was to back up her colleagues' salary claims with data. Peixotto shed light on a fundamental aspect of thrift's impact on employees. Her reasoning questioned the causal and positive link between thrift and enrichment observed since the 18th century which was economic doxa at her time. While efficient management of household resources has enabled professors' families to make ends meet with dignity, rising living standards called this compromise into question.

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<sup>9</sup> See “Committees for 1929” (1929); “Committees for 1930” (1930); “Committees for 1931” (1931); “Committees for 1932” (1932) and “Committees for 1933” (1933).



With the advent of the consumerist society and, in particular, household appliances, synonymous with time and energy savings for women, the thrifty moral discourse became harder to maintain. An example of this was the discussion of the roundtable “Family Budget”, Peixotto chaired on the occasion of the Thirty-ninth Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association in 1927. This included economists and home economists as Mr. Frey, a trade unionist, pointed out that “school education has taught us facts about cleanliness, which means water, gas and heater expenses, together with the repair and upkeep of the hot and cold water system. ( ... ) Education has taught us the need of keeping foods sweet in the refrigerator and the ice man takes his per diem” (Peixotto 1927, 137–38). This illustrates the internal contradictions of home economics: which educated citizens to new standards of life, while teaching them to thrift and engage in rigorous austerity.

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