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Dear Colleague:

Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe argued for the existence of two spheres--domestic (women's) and public (men's). Ostensibly, the domestic sphere was inferior to the public one; in fact, however, the two sisters saw the domestic sphere as central to the human venture and that it would expand to take up the whole world. The idea was fantastic in the 1840s, but one hundred and fifty years later, something like the triumph of the domestic sphere appears to be happening.

The domestic sphere is one of limits and constraints, devoted to the maintenance and propagation of life. Its processes are characteristically repetitious--e.g., cooking, eating, and washing up, which have to be done over and over again. The cycle of production and consumption is characteristically short, and a key activity is the sober one of management. As against this domestic sphere were the public spheres, which in classical antiquity meant winning immortal fame in the agora or forum; in the Renaissance period, glorying in the pomp and power of the city-state; and in the nineteenth-century, establishing political and business empires.

Hubris is an ever present temptation in the public sphere; its transcendental thrust always seems to lead to excess. Fortunately, the public sphere is about to be swallowed up by the domestic one. Here is the evidence: (1) In our time, all products, and not just food and clothing, are quickly consumed: cars and watches have no more permanence than kleenex and chicken soup. The cycle of making and consuming is characteristically short, but now it is short everywhere and not just in the house or on the farmstead. (2) The science of Domestic Economy (Beecher's term) is now the science of ecological management. How to conserve limited resources, feed the human family, and where to put the garbage have become critical questions, calling forth our best minds. Not the warrior, the master architect, or the ambitious statesman, but the sober housewife must now be our model if we are to survive. (3) A decline of interest in the universe, as our eyes turn increasingly to the recycling processes of our own planet. Where are the Jules Vernes and H. G. Wellses of our day? Stephen Hawking? But he is a popularizer of his science, not an esteemed writer of science fiction. (I thank Valentin for this idea). (4) The rising importance of the discipline of geography, which defines itself as the study of the earth as the home of human beings. We geographers are the home economists of our day, but "home" for us is the earth itself and its parts, and "home" for us (as it was for the Beecher sisters) a moral-social, and not simply a material-economic, reality.

Best wishes,

