

Think of All the Jobs Central Heating Destroyed

Written by Donald Boudreaux.

The 'simple life' wasn't so simple – and, compared to modern life with all of its 'complexities,' the 'simple' life was also sure as hell difficult, dirty, dreary, and dangerous. In his brilliant 1993 book *Pursuing Happiness: American Consumers in the Twentieth Century*, Stanley Lebergott describes how central heating revolutionized American life:

The development of central heating in the 1920s has often been instanced as one more example of how American materialism overwhelmed the simple life. Indeed it did. It ended the simple family chore of cutting and hauling fifteen to twenty tons of wood for stove and fireplace, with the housewife then having to carry much or all of it into the house. (As late as 1919 half of all farm women carried in their firewood. Many also had to chop logs or branches into kindling.)

But note the job destruction that is rampant in modernity! Central heating of homes destroyed countless millennia-old jobs of chopping and hauling wood. What's a poor family to do in light of this calamity?

Well, central heating – along with running water, electricity-powered household appliances such vacuum cleaners, ranges, refrigerators, and freezers (with the latter later becoming self-defrosting), commercial dairies, inexpensive prepared foods, and other modern conveniences – released women from the dullness of housewifery so that they could contribute their skills to strangers in commercial markets (and, of course, earn extra monetary income from these contributions).

The best way to deal with the man-made frictions is to eliminate them rather than pointing accusing fingers at labor-saving innovations and screaming "Stop!"

Did women entering the workforce displace some men from particular jobs? Of course. But did women entering the workforce also cause the pattern of specialization to change? Of course. Did women entering the workforce – that is, did labor-saving innovations such as central heating and disposable diapers – cause a permanent increase in unemployment or "shortage" of gainful employment? Of course not. Nor did the increased entry of women into the commercial workforce cause wage stagnation (although it might have

contributed to the statistical *illusion* of such stagnation). And yet people continue to worry that today's new labor-saving devices and techniques (such as driverless cars, 3D printers, and better inventory-control methods) are somehow different from the countless such devices and methods that have been put into use throughout history and, thus, will indeed cause a permanent increase in unemployment or absence or "shortage" of gainful employment.

While I agree that there are unfortunate 'frictions' in labor markets - some natural, some man-made - I doubt that the natural frictions are worse today than in the past, and I insist that the best way to deal with the man-made frictions is to eliminate them rather than pointing accusing fingers at labor-saving innovations and screaming "Stop!" or "Slow down!"

Originally published at FEE.org.