When the Kitchen was Hot, and Women were Not: Nixon Serves Up the Capitalist View of Women

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In June 1959, the so-called “kitchen debate” between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was hailed in American news reports as a victory not only for Nixon, but for the consumerist way of life. Nixon’s political star rose on the basis of his perceived tough stance against communism, as he and Khrushchev vehemently disagreed at every moment of the debate—except one. This talk focuses on a little-noticed moment of agreement as the two world leaders paused before the RCA-Whirlpool “Miracle Kitchen of the Future,” a display enhanced by an array of technological gadgets and young women modeling bathing suits. Duly reported in the New York Times transcript of the event, but as an “interruption,” this moment of levity suggests that the conceptual link between sex and technology was as salient as Marshall McLuhan had argued it was, and not only in capitalist consumer systems. It also demonstrates the critical role of women to both economies and suggests that though those roles differed in important respects, they were united in their reliance on the technical automation of the “wifely” role.

Frances J. Ranney is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, where her research centers on classical rhetoric, feminist theory, and critical theories of technology focused on gender-technology interactions.