

Survey Article: Feminism in the Dismal Science*

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DESPITE its shortcomings, the “dismal science” has been perhaps the most powerful and successful policy discourse in recent history, and its impact on the evolution of other disciplines has been profound. Current political debates resound with neoliberal arguments about the values of “free markets,” sustained by neoclassical economic analysis. In academia, rational choice theory (RCT), with its central category of Rational Economic Man (REM), has spread from its birthplace in economics to become a force to be reckoned with in fields as varied as sociology, law, and political philosophy.

Sustained feminist engagement with economics as an academic discipline and policy science began rather later than in other disciplines. This is not entirely surprising for two reasons.

First, unlike many other disciplines in which some diversity of views is tolerated—providing some institutional space for reflective and dissenting voices—the discipline of economics is overwhelmingly dominated by a single paradigm, neoclassical theory, and a single methodology that puts an extreme emphasis on sophistication in mathematics. Nothing in a typical economics education or in professional life encourages the study of the philosophy and history of the discipline itself, so most economists accept these emphases uncritically. Discussions that attempt to challenge these foundations are most often thought of as “not economics” and simply ignored.

Second, as we will discuss at length in this essay, the dominant definitions of the discipline, the assumptions of its pre-eminent models, its chosen methodology, and most of its findings and policy prescriptions are very heavily laden with *androcentric* bias. That is, to the extent that one can identify certain topics and approaches as being culturally associated with either “masculinity” or “femininity,” it is clear that economics consistently reflects only the

*We thank the Editor, Bob Goodin, and three anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The essay is the better for their efforts. We also thank feminists in economics for not giving up on our refractory discipline.

“masculine” side. Therefore it requires a high degree of self-confidence and tolerance for conflict for a feminist to choose to enter such an environment—and even more to persist.

The purpose of this essay is to survey for political philosophers the issues being raised, and insights being set forth, by feminists who have persisted in contributing to economics in recent decades, and particularly in the last dozen or so years.

We have chosen in the first part of this essay to concentrate on an area of important overlap between economics and political philosophy: their common roots in classical liberal philosophy with its emphasis on individuality, reason, freedom, and the “public” sphere.¹ There is a strong family resemblance between some feminist political philosophers’ critiques of the liberal idea of the detached individual moral agent² and feminist economists’ critiques of his even thinner and more hollow brother, REM. In the same vein, feminist political theorists have deconstructed the powerful binary metaphor of the public/private split, examining this metaphor’s complicated—and constitutive—relationship to the gendering of both ideas and institutions.³ These arguments resonate with feminist economists’ attempts to challenge the conventional definition of economic activity as market-based production and distribution, occasionally leavened by “government intervention,” but neglectful of unpaid work done within households and communities. Hence, the first part of this essay focuses on how definitions of economics in terms of RCT and markets can be transformed through the adoption of a more sophisticated, non-dualistic way of thinking.

In the second part of this essay, we give an example of how such feminist analysis makes visible—and provides tools for analysis of—an important area of life-sustaining activity: in this case, the labor of care. Awkwardly situated between what are perceived as the very different realms of “love” and “money,” the work of (usually female) childcare workers, social workers, nurses and the like has traditionally been seen as not quite fully “economic,” in a neoclassical sense. This is because neither the provision of, nor the need for, care is consistent with the image of economic agents as self-interested and autonomous. The adoption of more sophisticated methods of analysis beyond REM and RCT is required to address the serious economic problems now affecting the care sector in many countries.

In the third part of the essay, we survey the broad sweep of feminist economics, including insights into specific policy questions and economic methodology. Feminists’ contributions to economics are diverse, reflecting the

¹Indeed, recently in this journal Carole Pateman connected variants of both liberalism and economics, noting that libertarianism is “a political theory that goes hand in hand with neo-liberal economic doctrines and global policies of structural adjustment and privatization” (2002, p. 20).

²For two examples among many, see Benhabib (1987) and Tronto (1993).

³See, for example, Elshtain (1981), Landes (1998) and Pateman (1988).

now near universal recognition that the plural “feminisms” better captures the variety of intellectual and political activity collected under this description.

It is important to stress at the outset that redress against androcentric biases in economics does *not* consist of simply replacing them with gynocentric ones—for example, simply rejecting classical liberal thinking, and emphasizing instead such notions as communal identification, emotion, constraint, and family life. While some have made such arguments,⁴ as we will show, feminist economists (and others) more commonly aim to develop *alternatives* to such dualistic thinking, seeing the tendency towards binary and “either/or” conceptions as itself a major cause of problems. Dualistic thinking opposes reason to emotion, universal to particular, public to private, objective to subjective, mind to body, culture to nature, freedom to necessity, active to passive, and—significantly—masculine to feminine. Feminists point out that these oppositions are also hierarchical: dominant traditions in political and economic theory value terms on the left of the oppositions listed above over those on the right, systematically devaluing the feminine-identified pole.⁵ Accordingly, *exploring* and *contesting* the relationships between conceptual dualism and institutional form, gender identities, and the experiences of women and men as social groups are major parts of continuing feminist work in the social sciences.

I. FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF THE DEFINITION(S) OF ECONOMICS

Conventional economics has two overlapping and not entirely compatible self-definitions. One focuses on the model used: economic analysis is the mathematical modeling of individual choice under constraint, regardless of the subject of discussion—which may be marriage, voting behavior, or biological evolution. The other is empirical-institutional: economics is the study of the operation of markets for goods and services. Thus, setting aside occasional but influential sorties into other disciplines, most practicing economists typically theorize market interactions as individual choices, using mathematical models. Feminists have criticized both the model (of optimizing choice behavior) and the boundaries of the conventional empirical object (the market) of the reigning economic paradigm.

A. ECONOMICS AS THE SCIENCE OF CHOICE

If economics is the science of rational choice, the defining “chooser” is *homo economicus* or Rational Economic Man (REM). A descendent of Jeremy Bentham’s pleasure maximizer, REM knows what he wants, calculates the costs and benefits of different means of achieving his ends, and acts consistently to

⁴See, for example, Noddings (1984).

⁵See, for example, Harding (1986) and Lloyd (1993).

pursue these ends according to their relative importance to him, constrained only by the resources and given range of alternatives at his disposal. As one feminist economist continues describing his characteristics:

He has no childhood or old age; no dependence on anyone; no responsibility for anyone but himself. The environment has no effect on him, but rather is merely the passive material, presented as “constraints” over which his rationality has play. He interacts with society without being influenced by society: his mode of interaction is through an ideal market in which prices form the only, and only necessary, form of communication.⁶

Feminist critics have focused, first, on the assumption that agents are radically autonomous and self-interested, and, secondly, on investigating the notion of “rationality” underpinning this model.

i. Autonomy and Self-Interest

In the first instance, feminist (and other⁷) critics point out that REM is simply an erroneous account of human behavior. That all models abstract from complex reality is one obvious counter to this critique. Drawing on the critique of dualisms outlined above, a feminist rejoinder points out that REM is an abstraction with a systematic masculine or androcentric bias: REM’s attributes—autonomy, self-interest, instrumental rationality—are those of a masculine, “separative” self.

These assumptions deny elemental forms of human connectedness such as empathy and altruism, and the impact of social environments on the formation and evolution of the preferences that guide behavior. Analyses based on these androcentric assumptions, then, have significant blind spots.

An early essay in feminist economics, for example, showed how three assumptions based on the “separative self” have had profound implications for the way the discipline constructs accounts of behavior and institutions.⁸ The first assumption, that levels of well-being (“utility”) cannot be compared across persons, is a kind of anti-normative norm. By insisting on the radical subjectivity of the personal utility calculations that underpin REM’s choices, economic analysis cannot deal adequately with the questions of resource distribution with which it should be concerned. The politics of conventional economics are hidden behind the argument that we cannot know which of two persons—and by extension which of two groups—gains more from a given exchange.⁹ The second assumption, that the tastes (or preferences) of economic actors are exogenous and unchanging, denies the roles of families and socialization in the creation of

⁶Nelson 1996, p. 31.

⁷Other critics of the neoclassical idea of rationality include Hargreaves-Heap (1989), Hollis and Nell (1975), Sen (1977) and Varoufakis (1991).

⁸England 1993. See also Nelson (1993, 1996).

⁹England 1993. Economists also rely on a distinction between positive and normative argument to sidestep judgment on distributional questions.

preferences, and creates an impoverished model for the treatment of such topics as the perpetuation of prejudice or the formation of career aspirations. The third assumption, that actors are selfish, denies the existence of selective altruism in market behavior. The author pointed out, for example, that “when male employees collude in order to try to keep women out of ‘their’ jobs,” such selective altruism can help explain why discrimination against women persists in competitive markets even when the cost of hiring women is lower.¹⁰

It has become increasingly clear, however, that merely switching the emphasis over to the idea of a feminine “soluble” self characterized by connectedness, altruism, and emotion would simply reinscribe a dualism rather than lead to more adequate conceptualizations. Individualistic notions of autonomy and self-interest are not, in fact, *opposed* to communitarian or romantic notions of merger and altruism, but instead integrally *depend* on them as their necessary complement.¹¹

For example, when conventional economists initially turned their attention towards domestic life, they assumed that family behavior could be modeled on the basis of a “soluble” self. Economics maps the separative/soluble dualism onto a market/family divide, such that different notions of the self underpin economic theorizing in different contexts. Accordingly, neoclassical economics populates the market with selfish, separative selves, and the family with altruistic, soluble selves. The school of “New Home Economics” posited a single family utility function with a “head” of the family who oversees the production and distribution of resources within the family. The head was labeled the “altruist” and the individuality—the unique needs, preferences, or individual power—of all family members were assumed to be simply dissolved into a single, indivisible family unit.

Models of household behavior based on the assumption of a soluble self, like models of the market based on the separative self, have significant problems. First are the blind spots created by replacing the assumption of perfect selfishness with the assumption of perfect altruism. Just as economic actors in markets can act altruistically, so can actors in the family act selfishly. Denying the existence of selfish behavior in families can, for example, obscure the family head’s use of power in pursuit of his own interests, to the detriment of his spouse and children.¹² As one feminist commentator pointed out, “it is only on the

¹⁰England 1993, p. 46.

¹¹England 1993, 2003. Nelson 1996, 2003. England and Nelson, in the early 1990s, simultaneously and independently came upon the terms “separative” and “soluble” in the work of theologian Catherine Keller (1986) and began applying them to REM. The connections between feminist political philosophy and feminist economics are also direct here. In developing their interpretations of REM, both cite political philosopher Seyla Benhabib in addition to feminist authors whose work has been influential in both disciplines, including Carol Gilligan, Evelyn Fox Keller, Nancy Chodorow and Genevieve Lloyd.

¹²England cites empirical research showing that in families “where women have more access to and control over economic resources (relative to men), more is spent on children,” and notes that

unreasonable assumption that one or both [spouses] have a completely soluble self that dissolves into the will of the other that we can imagine no conflicts of interest.”¹³ Second, the assumption that economic agents are altruistic in the family is patently inconsistent with the assumption that agents are selfish in the market; most people are both members of families and participants in the market, and to posit that agents display totally divergent motivations, capacities, and behaviors in the two domains is simply implausible.¹⁴

The market/family divide is not the only frontier on which notions of separate and soluble selves have been used in a complementary fashion within conventional economics. Recent feminist work has showed how the neoclassical “theory of the firm” displays the same dualistic approach. In conventional economic thought, firms are entities that are assumed to be radically separate from their environment (that is, their customers, creditors, communities, and so on) and able to make rational choices. Firms are, then, seen as radically “separative”—as REM writ large. What about the people—managers and employees—who populate firms? In conventional theory, they are much like the members of the conventionally envisaged family: their individual interests and motivations are assumed to be dissolved away, leaving them interested only in single-mindedly serving the firm’s presumed purpose of maximizing shareholder wealth. That is, while the firm is assumed to be separative, the people who make it up are, in complementary fashion, assumed to be soluble.¹⁵

Similarly, on the public sector front, many economists, particularly in the areas of macroeconomics and public finance, are in the habit of drawing policy recommendations from their research. These recommendations are often based on an implicit assumption that “the government” is a unitary agent interested in maximizing “social welfare.” On the other hand, when economists explicitly study government, we tend to swing to the other extreme, assuming that the government is made up of autonomous individuals who are all completely self-seeking opportunists. The first case makes “the government” a separative institutional “self” made up of completely public-spirited, or soluble, politicians and administrators. In the second, a radically separative model is applied to each of the individuals who make up the government.

Can there be non-dualistic ways of thinking about economic identity, agency, and interests? Economic agents—people—exhibit and require both autonomy and connectedness, self-interest and altruism. Feminist economists argue that

“This evidence is inconsistent with a view that altruism is so pervasive in the family that who controls resources doesn’t affect whose wishes prevail” (2003, p. 50).

¹³England 2003, p. 47.

¹⁴England 2003.

¹⁵Nelson, 2003. “Principal-agent” models and “new institutionalist” theory in economics, both fairly recent developments, have gone farther than conventional economics in recognizing that firms have important internal organizational structures and behaviors. The alternatives proposed, however, tend to be limited to images of hierarchy and arms-length contract. More fully relational possibilities are not discussed.

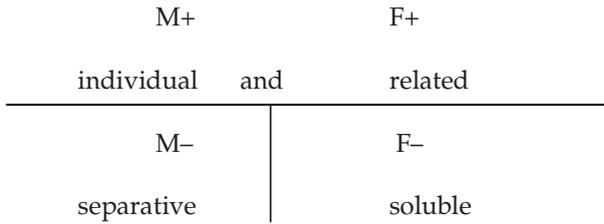


Figure 1. The “Gender/Value Compass”

understanding how the economy works requires models that can recognize this—models based on a *relational* rather than a strictly separative/atomistic and soluble/holistic ontology. A relational ontology recognizes human *interdependence*, and aims to transcend the dualistic approach to agency. Positing neither separative nor soluble selves, a relational ontology supports a notion of self-in-relation. One feminist economist has proposed the “gender/value compass” in Figure 1 as a way of visually distinguishing between healthy and balanced and unhealthy and extreme modes of separation and connection. The left side of the diagram shows traits stereotypically associated with masculinity (“M”) and separation, while the right side shows traits stereotypically associated with femininity (“F”) and connection. The bottom two cells illustrate the negative (“-”) extreme of a separative-soluble dualism, in which no individuality-respecting relatedness is possible. The upper section illustrates the possibility, when neither separation nor connection is taken to an extreme, of a complementarity of positive (“+”) traits of adequate individual differentiation along with adequate openness to influence—that is, of selves-in-relation.¹⁶

From a relational perspective, subjects are neither completely self-sufficient nor subsumed by group identification or social determination, and can have varying and complex motivations in their economic (and other) interactions. Families, firms, and political institutions could then all be understood as places of both cooperation *and* competition, and of both autonomy *and* responsibility.

ii. Rationality

In a similar vein, feminist economists have been among those calling for a richer conceptualization of *rationality*, beyond the calculating instrumentalism of REM. Feminist economists have, for example, noted the resemblance between certain brain-damaged patients, described in a recent popular work by a neuroscientist, and REM. These patients possessed all the usual characteristics

¹⁶Nelson 1992 (see also 1996, 2001, 2003). In political and moral philosophy, relational ontology and the idea of self-in-relation has been elaborated by feminists interested in the ethics of care, among others. See for example Sevenhuijsen (1998), Tronto (1993), and various contributions to Held (1995).

associated with rationality, yet they were unable to maintain human relationships or hold down jobs—in short, they could not conduct normal human lives.¹⁷ As summarized by one feminist economist,

Due to the neural damage that affected the moral and social dimensions of their rationality, they lost the capacity to understand values, to experience emotions, to deliberate on alternatives and to engage in human interaction. . . . The portrayal of rationality in neoclassical economic theory resembles the pathological form of behaviour described in some peculiar cases in neuro-biology.¹⁸

The possibility of more adequate images of human reasoning is an open area for further exploration by feminist economists.

B. ECONOMICS AS THE SCIENCE OF THE MARKET

Neoclassical economics has also often been defined in terms of an object domain—“the economy”—of which it claims to provide an authoritative account. On this conventional account, the economy comprises market-based interactions. Markets are presumed to be the location of exchanges between firms, interested in maximizing profit, and consumers, interested in maximizing utility.¹⁹ Formally, both production and consumption take place somewhere off to the side of economic analysis, which focuses instead on how agents *acquire* the goods and services they either use as production inputs or consume. At any rate, most economists concentrate on market-based activity and its regulation. Feminist economists have contended that this understanding of the proper domain of economic analysis is also biased by dualistic thinking.

Feminist economists argue that many life-sustaining goods and services are simply not produced by firms and exchanged in markets. In fact, much is produced and distributed within ties of family and community, and mostly by (unpaid) women. Thus the conventional definition of “the economy” is androcentric. Here an economist’s version of the public/private split, expressed as a dualism opposing the market to the household, betrays masculine bias. By defining the economy as comprising firms and markets, conventional economics fails to recognize—to value—domestic work, the care of children and other household members, shopping, and home maintenance. These activities contribute enormously to maintaining household standards of living, and to the viability of the economy overall. Feminist-inspired macroeconomists have revealed that this activity generates the equivalent of between 32 and 96 per cent

¹⁷van Staveren 2001, Nelson 2002. These examples from work by Antonio Damasio (1994) have also captured the attention of some philosophers; see, for example, Nussbaum (2001).

¹⁸van Staveren 2001, p. 22.

¹⁹We noted earlier that the two definitions of economics are “overlapping and not entirely compatible.” Yet they are intrinsically linked; when economic methods are applied to institutions and practices other than markets for goods and services proper (such as marriage or voting behavior), these institutions and practices are treated conceptually *as if* they are markets or exchanges.

of the gross domestic product of most advanced capitalist countries,²⁰ and that women perform between 62 and 82 per cent of it.²¹

The dominance of the separative idea of the self in economics has contributed to this obscuring of domestic activity, particularly caring. As feminist economists have argued, the idea of a self-sufficient individual conceals the labor of Others (women, members of subordinated races) on which the appearance of self-sufficiency depends.²² Unlike REM, real humans *do* have childhood and old age, are dependent, and have responsibilities.

If economics is not to be defined by either rational choice modeling or by markets, then how could it be defined? One proposal is to think about economics as the study of how humans organize themselves to provide for the sustaining and flourishing of life. Such a definition encompasses both choice behavior and behavior strongly shaped by habit and social institutions, and both market and non-market activities.²³ But in seeking to develop a more adequate practice of economics along the lines of such a definition, it becomes immediately apparent that we must begin investigating in greater depth a whole realm of life-sustaining activity that conventional economics has shortchanged: the economics of care.

²⁰OECD 1995, pp. 45–57. See also Ironmonger (1996). (Of course, production equivalent to 96 per cent of GDP means that the value of household production is almost half the value of total production, not that the value of household production is 24 times greater than market production.) One reader of an earlier version of this essay understandably enough found these estimates “absurdly squishy,” and some background information and explanatory commentary may be useful here. Since the early 1990s, the United Nations System of National Accounts has recognized—but not included—the contribution to household welfare of goods and services produced within households for final consumption therein. Instead, work towards developing “satellite accounts” for non-market household production has proceeded (see United Nations 2000). Measures generally rely on detailed household time use data collected by national statistical agencies, and procedures for collection of this data are at varying levels of development around the world. Economists typically use time use data to calculate the value of household production in one of three ways. The “opportunity cost method” values household time at the rate household members would receive in the labor market for their time. The other two “replacement cost” methods assign values to household work by calculating the cost of buying equivalent goods and services in the market. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses (OECD 1995, pp. 15–16), and results in a different estimate of the value of housework. The combination of different time use data collection practices and different methods of calculating the value of the outputs of that labor explains part of the “squishiness” our reader observed (see OECD 1995, pp. 45–57). Moreover, the average time spent in unpaid housework does vary between nations, leading to a further stretching of the range of values the OECD found in its international survey (see OECD 1995, pp. 21–43). Accordingly, international differences in social policy also explain some of the observed divergence. In Scandinavian countries, for example, where public services are well developed, average time spent in unpaid work is significantly lower than in other countries such as Italy and Germany. Public services both reduce/replace unpaid labor time and increase the total value of market production relative to household production, hence their strongly deflating effect on the value of household production.

²¹As measured by time spent in “non-market household production,” see OECD (1995, pp. 45–57). Differences in the activities included as non-market household production, and differences in social policy regimes explain the international differences between men’s and women’s contributions.

²²Grapard 1995.

²³Nelson 1993.

II. AN EMERGING FEMINIST ECONOMICS OF CARE

The study of care as an activity with important economic and sociological implications has burgeoned across the social sciences since the mid-1990s. Most analysts of care argue that care is both a *motivation* (and so relevant in analysis of rationality and agency) and an *activity* (and so relevant in analysis of the “economy”). Though feminists in many disciplines have been theorizing care,²⁴ the feminist *economics* of care explores a particular set of related conceptual and policy questions.

First, many feminist economists focus on caring *labor*. A person performs caring labor when s/he expends time and energy directly meeting the needs of the person s/he is caring for (the caree), out of a sense of affection or concern for that person. On this account, both the meaning and quality of caring labor depend on the carer’s other-directed motivations and the caree’s beliefs about these motivations, in the context of a particular caring *relationship*.²⁵ Importantly, feminist economists cite evidence that a caring relationship can develop even when the carer is *hired* to care for the caree, challenging the conventional dualistic account of instrumental, arms-length exchanges in markets and altruistic relationships within families.²⁶ What differentiates paid and unpaid care empirically is less the quality of the relationship established than the way caring labor is allocated: by particularistic relationships in the private domain of the family, and by market or administrative mechanisms in the public domain.²⁷

Second, feminist economists are concerned with the implications both for women’s welfare and for the ongoing viability of the “care economy” of the way caring work is assigned, and the low wages paid caring work receives. All experience childhood dependence, and many experience old age. However, caring labor is less evenly distributed, with responsibility for the care of the young and the aged, and those with various physical and emotional dependencies in between, falling disproportionately to women. Women pay quite concretely for assuming caring responsibilities. Many forgo market income to perform unpaid care, while most of those employed as paid carers earn less than workers in jobs with similar requirements for education and skill.²⁸

Various explanations have been offered for this pay differential. Conventional economists tend to argue that caring work is “unskilled” and/or that, since

²⁴Indeed, care has become a pivotal—albeit hotly debated—category in feminist thinking in economics, political and moral philosophy, and social policy analysis. For a good overview of debates within moral and political theory, see Held (1995) and Sevenhuijsen (1998); for an exploration of care as a concept in welfare state analysis, see Daly and Lewis (2000).

²⁵Folbre 1995; Folbre and Weisskopf 1998; Himmelweit 1999, 2000.

²⁶Himmelweit 1999. See also Nelson (1999).

²⁷Himmelweit 1999. See also Folbre and Weisskopf (1998), and Badgett and Folbre (1999).

²⁸England and Folbre 1999. Concluding a survey of evidence on what they call the “care penalty,” England and Folbre write “We know of no studies that have included a measure of a concept resembling caring work in an earnings regression and not found a negative effect” (1999, p. 43).

workers presumably freely “chose” low-wage caring jobs, they must “prefer” this combination of work characteristics and wages to what they could get at alternative jobs. Feminist economists have argued, in reply, that caring labor is skilled, but in ways not recognized by conventional approaches based on the image of separative selves and models of technical efficiency in production. New ways of conceptualizing and measuring productivity and work performance are required to capture adequately the skills, effort, and responsibility that go into the caring work provided by nurses, social workers, childcare workers and the like.²⁹

Feminist economists have also suggested that low wages can also be due to a depressed level of *effective* market demand (that is, demand that is backed up by money). Effective demand could be lower than socially optimal because much care has a “public good” nature—that is, it is something that everyone benefits from (for example, having children brought up to be healthy and productive) but for which it is infeasible to directly charge a price to each person for his or her part of the benefit received. Effective demand may be further lowered by the fact that many recipients (for example, the severely ill) are not in a position to demand (and pay for) services for themselves. Low effective demand could also be attributable to historical and social developments that have created an expectation that these jobs *should* pay low wages—that care should be “naturally” forthcoming and therefore free, or (as will be discussed below) that care is of better quality when it is protected from monetary motivations.³⁰

A third and related question taken up by feminist economists is that of designing policies that would assure a secure supply of high quality care. Along the way feminist economists are making a distinctive contribution to ethical debates about the appropriate limits to markets.³¹ Since the 1960s, social liberalization and market expansion have attenuated the power of the cultural assumptions and institutional arrangements that assign caring roles to women. These developments have provoked fear about the ongoing supply and quality of caring labor. Such expressions of anxiety come from both sides of the political spectrum: conservatives promote “family values” while those on the left—including some feminist political philosophers—fear that the market will “crowd out” authentic care.

²⁹Meagher 1994, 2002a; Meagher and Healy, 2003.

³⁰Folbre 1994a and 1994b; Nelson 1999; England and Folbre 1999.

³¹Political philosophers have been much exercised by this issue. There are two somewhat distinct questions, only one of which is directly relevant here. The less relevant question is whether markets distribute resources justly, or should the market mechanism be “limited” by political intervention in income distribution? The other more relevant question is what sorts of activities, processes, and interactions should be bought and sold as “services” in markets? In this literature about “commodification,” prostitution, gestational surrogacy, and more recently care have received much attention. See, for example, Anderson (1993), Held (2002), Radin (1996). For discussions by economists, see Folbre and Weisskopf (1998), Folbre and Nelson (2000) and Nelson and England (2002).

The tricky issues of whether increasing the role of markets in allocating care, and increasing the wages of caring workers would damage the quality of care have received careful examination by feminist economists. Conventional wisdom predicts that the quantity of care supplied will increase if price (that is, the wage paid) increases, so maintaining a given *quantity* of care simply requires carers to be better paid. Yet conventional wisdom also suggests that the *quality* of care might fall when the price rises, because carers may become motivated more by money than love.

The arguments for keeping the pay of carers low hinge on the dualistic association of market exchanges with selfish individualism and extrinsic motivation, and of non-market interactions with altruism and intrinsic motivations. Within this framework, “money” and “love” are opposites, such that money threatens to corrode ties of affection and obligation.³²

Once again challenging dualistic thinking, some feminist economists point out that *actual* markets are “domains of rich and complex social relationships . . . in which the movement of money is only one dimension.”³³ The “movement of money” does not necessarily override other aspects of interactions such as caring connection. In the first instance, the desire for decent pay can arise from motivations other than selfish acquisitiveness. Because many—perhaps most—paid carers also have unpaid caring responsibilities, caring “for the money” may be how they are best able to meet the needs of their dependents.³⁴ Moreover, high pay can even reinforce intrinsic motivations by providing the worker with an expression of acknowledgment and appreciation.³⁵

Thus love and money can be *complementary* motivations and goods in provisioning within and between families and markets. And increasing the wages of caring workers may not have destructive consequences for the quality of paid care. Indeed, the quality of (appropriately organized) paid care might improve, as caring workers come to enjoy fair acknowledgment of their contributions. The living standards of many women and children would certainly improve. A number of feminist economists now choose to study how public, private, and market institutions and incentives can best be designed to support both decent wages and quality care, rather than beginning with the idea that care and money are incompatible.³⁶

Of course, the issue still arises about where resources to fund truly decent levels of care, provided by people who are fairly paid, would come from. That such programs would be expensive is not in doubt. Two feminist economists from the United States have, for example, estimated that the cost of a program of subsidized childcare with incentives for quality improvement would cost \$26.4

³²Folbre 1995, p. 83.

³³Nelson 1999, p. 46.

³⁴Nelson 1999, p. 49.

³⁵Nelson 1999, pp. 46, 47.

³⁶England and Folbre 2003; Nelson and England 2002.

billion over current government spending if it covered the entire country.³⁷ While such proposals are often treated as being utterly out of the realm of financial feasibility, this dollar figure pales when compared with U.S. federal spending on highway projects or the military, and similar programs are already in place in countries such as Sweden, Australia, and France. Oddly, some of the very economists who emphasize that the discipline is about “choice” often fail to see provision of care as an issue amenable to discussion about priorities and resource allocation.

III. THE DIVERSITY OF FEMINIST ECONOMICS

While the issue of how, conceptually, to move beyond the traditional (and masculine-biased) fixation of economic thought on choice and markets is perhaps the issue in feminist economics most related to political philosophy—since both fields share a legacy of liberalism—a review of the field would be deficient if restricted to these issues. People who identify themselves as feminist economists focus on a wide range of subject matters and reflect a diversity of methodological viewpoints.

Feminist economics, as an international movement within (though overlapping outwards from) academe, came together in the early 1990s with the formation of the International Association for Feminist Economics in 1992, and initial conferences on feminist economics in the U.S. and in the Netherlands during 1993.³⁸ This blossoming, however, grew out of two earlier streams of activity, one beginning in the 1970s and concerned about how women were represented (or failed to be represented) within economic thought and policy analysis, and the other gaining ground in the late 1980s building on feminist scholarship critiques of gender bias in the other academic disciplines. Since the 1990s, the field has broadened into new areas of study.

A. THE INITIAL ISSUES: WOMEN, ECONOMIC THOUGHT, AND ECONOMIC POLICY

Before the 1960s and the rise of the women’s movement, women’s experiences in households and labor markets had been completely ignored by mainstream economists. A “household,” in most economic analysis, was (and, regrettably, often still is) considered to be a unitary entity (synonymous with an “individual” or “consumer”) whose behavior was simply determined, as mentioned above, by the choices of its “household head.” The definition of “workers” was limited to *paid* employees. Workers were generally assumed to be male—articles on labor economics frequently used data only on males, while failing to mention this

³⁷Helburn and Bergmann 2002, p. 213.

³⁸See Ferber and Nelson (1993) for an early volume of essays and Kuiper and Sap (1995) for essays from the Netherlands conference.

limitation. Work done in households was not considered real “work”—individuals were assumed to choose to divide their time between paid labor or “leisure.” Female invisibility was almost complete.

i. The Economics of the Household

Even when “women’s issues” did at last begin to receive some limited attention, the outcomes were initially not at all feminist. For example, when adherents of the University of Chicago-inspired “New Home Economics” school applied rational choice theory to household issues, they arrived at the conclusion that women’s exclusive specialization in household work could be explained as their free and advantageous choice.³⁹ It was further generally assumed that distribution within the household was either equitable or simply uninteresting.

Early feminist works in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, challenged these models of unitary, harmonious households.⁴⁰ Since then, the idea that households might include two agents engaged in “bargaining” have become mainstream. Mathematical models first developed to study bargaining situations between employers and unions, or between competing companies or countries, have been adapted to the case of bargaining between two spouses. This increased attention within the mainstream to intra-household phenomena may represent the most significant effect on it, so far, of feminist criticism. The model of the unitary household is still assumed in very many applications, however, and the bargaining models remain highly restrictive in their assumptions about human behavior and well-being.⁴¹ Increased attention has also been given to the intra-household distribution of resources.

By the 1970s and 1980s, the economic value of unpaid work, which had usually gone unrecognized in national accounting and policy-making, began to be discussed—along with questions of what is meant by “economic value” and whether the recognition of unpaid work is good or bad for women seeking greater independence. Feminist economists have continued to work on this issue.⁴²

ii. Labor Market Discrimination

Initial discussions by neoclassical economists of sex differences in occupation and pay in labor markets also tended to justify these as natural outcomes of male/female differences in abilities and preferences. Women were paid less, it was

³⁹For example, see Becker (1973, 1974).

⁴⁰Ferber and Birnbaum 1977, McElroy and Horney 1981, Bergmann 1980. Since literatures in many of the areas mentioned are now extensive, these and all other citations given in this review of diversity in feminist economics should be taken simply as *examples* of available work.

⁴¹For an example of a “bargaining” model making the mainstream, see Lundberg and Pollak (1996). For a critique of such models see Seiz (1991).

⁴²For an example of an early work, see Ferber and Birnbaum (1980). Waring (1988) brought the issue to popular attention. For examples of recent developments, see OECD (1995), Ironmonger (1996) and Wagman and Folbre (1996).

reasoned, because they chose to invest in less “human capital” (that is, education and training) due to their expectations of spending time out of the labor force raising children. Or the male/female wage gap was explained as the result of women’s preferences and the “theory of compensating wage differentials.” According to this explanation, women put a higher priority on good working conditions (for example, jobs closer to home or with more opportunity to express care) than on high wages, while men are willing to take less pleasant jobs for higher pay. These theories left no room for discrimination *per se*. In fact, it was often argued, discrimination *could not* persist in competitive markets since any employer who failed to hire the most productive workers would be making sub-optimal decisions, and would soon be driven out of business. These arguments were used, consistent with other manifestations of the mainstream bias towards “free market” solutions, to justify policy *inaction* on labor market issues.

Early work by feminist scholars, on the other hand, drew attention to the reality and persistence of sex discrimination in labor markets.⁴³ Since then a large literature has grown up around this issue. Labor economists in many countries have undertaken many empirical studies of wage differentials between men and women by applying the statistical technique of regression analysis to large datasets. Such analyses typically find that factors such as education, experience, and occupation only explain part of the wage gap between men and women. Yet mainstream economists who prefer to believe that “market forces” are stronger than “social biases” still find ways to avoid interpreting these results as evidence of discriminatory employer behavior. The remaining gap may be attributed, instead, to variations in some *unobserved* characteristics of the worker (such as “effort” or “ambition” which women are thought to have less of). Or it may be attributed to “societal” discrimination that affects the aspirations or dedication that individual workers bring to their (presumably unbiased) employers.

Alternative sources of data, such as that available through court cases, interviews, case studies of wage-setting decision-making, ethnography, and detailed-level occupational analysis, tend to give a clearer picture of persistent discrimination.⁴⁴ However, the evidence provided by these forms of data tends to be dismissed by the profession, due to a combination of “free market” bias (causing economists to conclude on theoretical grounds that there is no discrimination, *before* consulting the evidence) and a stringent methodological narrowness.

B. THE ADDITION OF THE METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Mainstream economics, particularly in its most highly prestigious forms, is currently characterized by a near-sole reliance on mathematical reasoning as the

⁴³Bergmann 1986; England 1982; Hartmann 1976.

⁴⁴Bergmann 1989; Kim 2000; Meagher 1994.

means of creating knowledge. Finding new variations to be played in the abstract modeling of optimizing rational choice, and achieving sophistication in the use and development of economic modeling and econometric methods are the achievements most rewarded by the profession.⁴⁵ The data used in empirical work is always quantitative, and has typically been collected by others—usually government agencies. Economists, heavily armed with mathematics, tend to like to think of ourselves as “scientific” and “rigorous”—as doing work more related to “hard” fields like math, statistics, and physics than to “soft” areas like sociology, political science, and (yes) philosophy.⁴⁶

Some scholars of households and labor markets took—and some continue to take—what Sandra Harding has called a “feminist empiricist” approach, believing that “social biases [are] correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry.”⁴⁷ Such researchers have continued to develop the sorts of models and use the sorts of data that are most readily accepted in the profession. Others, however—especially beginning in the late 1980s—began to question the particular forms of scientific inquiry sanctioned by the economics profession. Issues of interdependence, tradition, social norms, and power did not seem to be adequately addressable from within neoclassical rational choice theory and a purely mathematical methodology. Qualitative and original data seemed to be dismissed by the profession even in cases when they could be very relevant and enlightening. Feminist scholars began to search for more adequate means with which to understand economic life.

During the 1980s feminist physical scientists, and philosophers and historians of science revealed the gender biases deeply embedded in modern conceptions of the scientific project.⁴⁸ The identification of objectivity with detachment, and the attendant model of an active, knowing subject exerting control over a passive object of knowledge were shown to be metaphorically connected with images of male/mind/activity and female/matter/passivity. Feminist critiques were also arising, during this period, within the other social sciences and humanities. Within the economics profession, the fact that some (limited) attention was brought to the rhetoric of economics during this period helped open up—at least a tiny bit—discussion of the social nature of economic discourse.⁴⁹ These streams

⁴⁵Sometimes non-economists have difficulty understanding the import of this statement. It might be helpful to glance at articles in a leading journal, such as the *American Economic Review*, to get a feeling for how mathematical sophistication is considered essential for respectable publication. The *AER*, however, is considered to be a relatively accessible journal, and requests that its authors write for a non-specialist audience. The ratio of mathematics to verbal reasoning or historical reference rises even higher as one moves to journals such as *Econometrica* or the *Journal of Economic Theory*.

⁴⁶The “gender/value compass” may be useful for rethinking the hierarchy between so-called “hard” and “soft” knowledge; see Nelson (1996) for elaboration.

⁴⁷Harding 1986, p. 24.

⁴⁸Harding 1986; Keller 1985; Merchant 1980.

⁴⁹McCloskey 1985.

of analysis, in addition to stimulating the critiques of Rational Economic Man and the focus on markets (discussed earlier in this essay), gave rise to a feminist critique of the single-minded reliance on mathematical abstraction as the source of “rigor” in economics.

Taking up this theme in the 1990s, a number of feminist economists have argued that, while quantitative methods can be useful, the hegemony of a highly restrictive methodology in the discipline has left it impoverished. Rather than relying on mathematical logic to provide a feeling of “scientificity,” many feminist economists have turned to notions of objectivity based in the idea of expanding knowledge communities. That is, knowledge is found to be either reliable or not reliable through examination by a community beyond the individual researcher; avoidance of bias means that this group should be as wide and diverse as possible. Rather than discouraging the use of verbal analysis, qualitative data, and insights from related fields such as history, psychology, and sociology, these scholars argue that such methods, done well, add needed richness to economic reasoning. Even among practitioners exclusively reliant on quantitative methods, a decreased valorizing of abstraction *per se*, and increased attention to such concrete issues as data quality and replication, could also improve the practice.⁵⁰

Some feminist economists have also broken with quantitative methodology dominant in the discipline in order to explore the overlap of feminist economics with issues in philosophy,⁵¹ the history of economic thought,⁵² social work and social policy,⁵³ or postmodern/poststructuralist theory.⁵⁴

That Marxist or socialist analysis has almost no place within the discipline of economics as practiced at most universities in the North is a fact often surprising to academics outside the discipline. The explanation for this fact is that mainstream economists generally consider any discussion of alternatives to private property, market-oriented economic systems to be “political” rather than “economic,” and hence outside their purview. Some leading feminist economists originally trained in the Marxism of the 1970s or earlier—in the few economics departments where it was taught—have in the decades since tended to drop a strict reliance on Marxian categories of thought (although they have maintained an awareness of the importance of power in explaining economic outcomes). As a result the bulk of the contemporary discussion of “socialist feminism” is, in fact, being carried on by scholars trained in other fields.⁵⁵ Collaboration and discussion with feminist scholars across the economics/“non-economics”

⁵⁰MacDonald 1995; Nelson 1993 and 1996; Pujol 1997.

⁵¹See, for example, Barker and Kuiper (2003), Meagher (2002b), Nelson (1992, 2001) and Woolley (2000).

⁵²Dimand et al. 1995.

⁵³Meagher 2002c; Meagher and Healy 2003.

⁵⁴Hewitson 1999.

⁵⁵For example, Donna Haraway’s background is in philosophy and biology, Nancy Hartsock’s is in political science, and J. K. Gibson-Graham’s is in geography.

disciplinary divide, about both the possibilities and limitations of Marxist thinking, remains limited.⁵⁶

C. NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN FEMINIST ECONOMICS

The concern with women's experience and the methodological critique of the discipline came together in the in early 1990s. As one commentator put it in 1998, "From quiet rumblings on the fringes of several economics conferences in the 1980s, feminist economics has evolved into a full-blown insurrection, complete with its own organization (the International Association for Feminist Economics), its own journal (*Feminist Economics*), and its own manifesto (*Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*)."⁵⁷ Soon individual works and anthologies, of national and international scope, began to multiply. New areas of research have arisen. One of these areas has been the investigation of caring labor, as discussed earlier.

Another area receiving increasing attention has been that of gender and globalization. Many feminist economists want to counter the worldwide takeover by neoclassical economics not only of economics departments, but also of governments and international organizations, such as the World Bank and the IMF, through promulgation of neoliberal or "free market" policies. A number have been active in studying the effects of economic restructuring on the well-being of women, men, and children in countries of both the South and North.⁵⁸ In many countries, for example, countries needing loans have been pressured to increase the role of private markets while cutting back food subsidy, health, and/or education programs. Feminist economists point out that such cuts have often disproportionately affected women, since in poor countries females tend to manage family food budgets, tend the sick, and are the first family members to be taken out of school. The use of low-wage female labor by multinational corporations and their subcontractors has been another area of study and debate.

Issues of race and of sexual preference have been increasingly explored. Labor market discrimination tends to take different forms among and between white women and black women, for example, and heterosexual women and lesbians.⁵⁹ On an international scale, issues of nationality and caste have also been examined.⁶⁰ Some work has demonstrated areas of overlap between feminist concerns and ecological economics.⁶¹ Both women's traditional work and the natural environment, for example, have tended to be treated as free and invisible services within the dominant economic paradigm. Other feminists have turned

⁵⁶One attempt is in Nelson and England (2002). (Nelson is an economist and England a sociologist.)

⁵⁷Steinberger 1998, p. 57.

⁵⁸Elson 1991; Beneria 1995.

⁵⁹Badgett 2001; Saunders and Darity 2003.

⁶⁰Brewer et al. 2002.

⁶¹Perkins 1997.

their attention to economic pedagogy, investigating how the classroom “climate” and teaching methods might benefit from feminist insights.⁶²

It has become increasingly clear that the double bind of low wages in often sex-segregated labor markets combined with sole responsibility for caring for dependents at home is behind much of the poverty of women and children. Hence many feminist economists (often collaborating with other social scientists) have become very active in policy analysis related to labor markets, childcare, and social welfare transfers.⁶³ In a number of countries, feminist economists have been active in preparing “gender budgets” and/or “status of women” reports and using them to keep women’s issues alive and visible in government policy-making processes.⁶⁴

The literature on feminist economics is now broad. For example, an encyclopedia on feminist economics published in 2000 drew together contributions on 99 topics from 88 authors in eight countries.⁶⁵ A 2003 edited volume includes essays on feminist theory, caring labor, business ethics, racial inequality, globalization, education, policy analysis, and postcolonial thought.⁶⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

Feminist economics has evolved into a sophisticated and diverse field, producing work ranging from critiques of inherited (classical) liberal intellectual categories, to quantitative analysis of wage gaps, to analysis of the policies of international economic institutions, and more. But what has it accomplished?

Our sense, at this time, is that feminist economics has been relatively more successful on the policy front, raising awareness of women and women’s concerns within policy-making organizations, than in transforming academic economics. Many big economic players now give at least lip-service to the idea of attending to the gendered outcomes of their policies, and some do more than give lip-service.⁶⁷

Academic economics departments, on the other hand, have tended to remain single-paradigm bastions, closed to intellectual—and often even demographic—change. Female full professors—much less feminist full professors—are exceedingly scarce in top-ranked economics departments. Doing explicitly feminist work is still professionally risky for untenured economists, and few graduate programs have the faculty necessary to produce new scholars in the field. While some feminist faculty have achieved professional security, in other

⁶²Aerni and McGoldrick 1999.

⁶³Albelda and Withorn 2002; Helburn and Bergmann 2002; King 2001; Nyberg 2000; Rubery et al. 1999; Stark 1995.

⁶⁴Budlender et al. 2002; Himmelweit 2002; Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2002; Sharp and Broomhill 2002.

⁶⁵Peterson and Lewis 2000.

⁶⁶Ferber and Nelson 2003a.

⁶⁷For example, World Bank 2001.

cases promising feminist economists have been forced out of the faculty of economics departments. Some have found other bases (such as sociology, cultural studies, or policy research institutes) from which they can continue their work. Reviews of economics research articles and textbooks show that they, overwhelmingly, continue to display the biases in subject matter, assumptions, and methods that feminist economists have been critiquing.⁶⁸

To give a more qualitatively rich example of how feminism has, so far, differentially affected the disciplines of economics and political philosophy, we compare recent discussions from each profession about the state and future of their respective fields. From the side of political philosophy, a recent paper in this *Journal* reported a conversation about key developments in political philosophy among eight distinguished scholars at the University of Cambridge—six men and two women.⁶⁹ From the side of economics, the Winter 2000 issue of a blue-ribbon economics journal contained a special “millennium” section intended to “look back at the key developments in the economy and economic thinking” and at “the future of the subject of economics.”⁷⁰ Of the handful of topics brought to the table for discussion by the Cambridge group, one was “feminism.”⁷¹ The millennium issue of the economics journal, on the other hand, confirms the continuing near invisibility of the feminist concerns within academic economics. *Not one* of the 21 authors (20 men, 1 woman) mentioned feminism as a concern at all, even when discussing topics on which feminist insights would be highly relevant. While—even setting methodological questions aside—at least the dramatic changes in women’s participation in paid labor over the last century would surely seem to qualify as a “key development,” this topic was covered in a mere two sentences. As we pointed out in the introduction, the single-paradigm and rigidly “masculine” character of mainstream economics makes it particularly difficult to get feminist concerns “on the table” in economics.

Lest political philosophers feel too self-congratulatory, however, we note that in the Cambridge discussion some of the interlocutors suggested that the most significant theoretical advances of feminism were accomplished in the 1970s, with little progress since. One suggested that the key insight of feminism for political philosophy was the expansion of “liberal values of individualism, autonomy, equality, etc.” to “encompass women.”⁷²

We hope that this review of feminist advances in economics, especially since 1990, and especially the insights concerning the shared roots of economics and political philosophy in the dualistic thinking that characterizes classical

⁶⁸For a review of the progress of feminist economics from 1993 to 2003, see Ferber and Nelson (2003b).

⁶⁹Skinner et al. 2002.

⁷⁰Krueger, De Long and Taylor 2000, pp. 4, 5.

⁷¹In discussion of another topic—“social choice theory” (an adaptation of RCT)—several philosophers, like many feminist economists, drew attention to the narrowness of choice theoretic concepts of rationality and action.

⁷²Raymond Guess in Skinner, et al. 2002, p. 12.

liberalism, might contribute to ridding the field of political philosophy of its own remaining androcentric biases.

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