

A Decade of Feminist Economics

A Review of Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson (eds.) *Feminist Economics Today. Beyond Economic Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Pp.209 + ix. ISBN 0-226-24206-4 (cloth) and 0-226-24207-2 (paper).

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In 1990, Diana Strassmann organised a panel at the American Economic Association meetings entitled “Can Feminist Economics Find a Home in Economics?” April Aerni and Jean Shackelford invited members of the audience to join an emerging network, which was transformed into the International Association For Feminist Economics (IAFFE) in 1992. The following years saw the first edited books on feminist economics as we know it today: *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics* (Ferber and Nelson 1993) and *Out of the Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics* (Kuiper and Sap 1995). IAFFE also launched the journal *Feminist Economics* in 1995, which has since been edited by Diana Strassmann.

This is a good time to take stock and ask how feminist economics has fared. The title of Ferber and Nelson’s follow-up volume, *Feminist Economics Today*, suggests that such an evaluation is precisely their aim. *Feminist Economics Today* consists of an introduction by Ferber and Nelson, and eight chapters. The introduction sketches the emergence and subsequent development of feminist economics. It also points to some problems, some minor (for example the lack of an appropriate JEL code), but some major, the most difficult being the limited impact on mainstream economics. Ferber and Nelson conducted a survey of the heads of economics departments in the USA to assess their familiarity with feminist economics. They also collected personal

experiences from IAFFE members worldwide. Based on these surveys, Ferber and Nelson conclude that while feminist economics is flourishing in terms of its internal production, and in terms of the growing interest and involvement of scholars in adjacent disciplines, “there is a widespread perception that feminist economics has barely caused a ripple within the increasingly conservative core of the profession” (p. 29). I very much enjoyed reading this introductory chapter, which will be valuable for anyone who wants to have a concise introduction to the field and its recent history.

In chapter 1, Paula England, an economic sociologist, revisits her critique (published in the 1993 volume) of the conceptualisation within orthodox economics of people as ‘separate selves’, that is, individuals who are selfish, have exogenous preferences, and among whom interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible. England now sees “the important feminist project to be formulating a view that is critical of both the separative self and its often tacit and subordinated companion, the soluble self. We need to reject the false dichotomy of individual versus relationship” (p. 39). In Chapter 2, Paula England and Nancy Folbre extend the new institutionalist literature to the social organisation of care. The new institutionalist literature emphasises the ways that values, norms and preferences help coordinate individual decisions. By using the metaphor of the contract, England and Folbre give an interesting analysis of how a number of problems in the care sector can be better understood, such as the problem of missing and incomplete markets, monitoring and enforcement problems, and the issue of endogenous preferences. In chapter 3, Julie Nelson extends England’s analysis on the separative/soluble dichotomy to the economic theories of the firm. Firms should neither be seen as completely separative, having profit maximisation as its only concern, nor as soluble, being unable to resist the market forces. Instead, Nelson argues, firms should be conceptualised as

“individuals-in-relation.” Nelson shows in this chapter that feminist economics is not limited to issues of women and gender, but can also include analyses of economic phenomena with tools widely used in feminist theory, such as the deconstruction of reductionist dichotomies.

In Chapter 4, Lisa Saunders and William Darity Jr. analyse how economic theory about racial inequality and gender inequality relate, and how they could mutually benefit from incorporating each other’s insights and concerns. Lourdes Benería reminds us in Chapter 5 that markets have been socially constructed, as Karl Polanyi argued fifty years ago. She notes that economists who endorse Polanyi’s call for markets to be subordinate to democratic forces, and for economic development and transformation to be based on a comprehensive view of humanity, would benefit from the insights offered by feminist economics. In Chapter 6, Myra Strober argues that neo-classical economics is ill-suited to convey the complex goals of education. Feminist economics, on the other hand, is better equipped to contribute to the economics of education, as it stresses the nonmaterial world, has a broader conception of value and well-being, and is sympathetic to a shift in focus from choice and markets to provisioning. In the most autobiographical essay of the book, Rebecca Blank and Cordelia Reimers describe how their identities as feminists have influenced their work as mainstream economists (chapter 7). Their examples show that being a feminist might influence the topics that an economist chooses to study, even if she does not self-identify as a heterodox feminist economist. Finally, in the last chapter, S. Charusheela and Eiman Zein-Elabdin give a very helpful introduction to postcolonial thought, and discuss the differences and similarities between postcolonial thought and feminist economics. They also give an overview of the emerging literature on feminist postcolonial economics.

Do these eight chapters give a good sense of “Feminist Economics Today”, as the title proclaims? I am not entirely sure. While most chapters are insightful and inspiring, this book has two shortcomings. First, with the notable exception of the chapters by Lourdes Benería, S. Charusheela and Eiman Zein-Elabdin, and to a lesser extent also the introduction, this book is in subtle and less subtle ways US-centric. The topics are all important for economics as practiced in the USA, but not always for people in countries that have different political priorities and different social and economic institutions. In addition, the local examples and institutional specifics are virtually all from the USA. For example, Nelson’s chapter on the firm refers to US legal cases and legislation (pp. 88-89) and the US business culture in general, leaving it unclear whether the analysis applies to business economics in other post-industrialised societies, let alone less developed countries. Saunders and Darity’s chapter on racial inequality is replete with references to the US, and the authors never question whether racism might require different theorising for those countries where ‘race’ is in a different way entangled with ethnicity, religion and migration. For example, I would expect that the social institutions that create and reinforce racial inequalities in Europe might be very different, and that the interplay of race with caste in countries such as India would also require a different analysis. Instead, the authors develop what they present as ‘universal’ theorizing of racial inequalities based on the particular experience of the USA. Strober’s chapter on education again breathes universal theorising, but is explicitly US-centric (without even bothering to explain American terminology to non-US readers, such as ‘K-12’, p. 145). Her analysis will not apply to the majority of the world’s children and educators, who live in precarious conditions. Several of the examples in the chapter by Blank and Reimers also refer to

the US and will be hard to understand for anyone without knowledge of American institutions.

The USA-centrism of this book is not merely annoying for the non-American reader. It is epistemologically troubling, for two reasons. First, feminist economics started out as a critique of the androcentrism of economics, that is, a critique that economics presents itself as a universal science, but *de facto* focuses on the lives and interests of men, and ignores, downplays, or distorts those of women. *Feminist Economics Today* successfully continues this line of critique of androcentrism, but falls into another trap of false universalisms, namely that of US-centrism. This is theoretically and epistemologically problematic, as feminist economics aspires to be inclusive. Instead, this book presents a portrait of feminist economics as being primarily conducted by economists based in the USA, and concerned with American interests. It would have been more correct if this book was called *Feminist Economics Today: An American perspective*, just like a book on feminist economics written primarily by European Economists, and covering European issues, has been called *Gender and Economics: A European Perspective* (Dijkstra and Plantenga 1997).

The second reason why the US-centrism in this book is troubling, is the fact that the field of feminist economics is much less US-centric. Indeed, the journal *Feminist Economics* has painstakingly tried to avoid such US-centrism – and has, in my view, succeeded very well in doing so. *Feminist Economics* has editorial policies which aim to avoid such biases, e.g. by sending out each paper to a referee based outside North America, and by requiring all particularistic terms (e.g. Medicaid or K-12) to be explained. Moreover, it strongly encourages submissions from non-western countries, and indeed publishes a fair number of non-US papers.

A further shortcoming of this book is its weak overall coherence. Some individual chapters are very interesting, but the whole did not provide more than the sum of its parts. Perhaps the problem might be that different parts of the book address different audiences. This is a tricky thing to do, since the assumptions and discourse used within gender-biased mainstream economics, mainstream feminist economics, and non-mainstream feminist economics are so different. In the last ten years, feminist economics has established itself as a mature body of thought, and there is a common basis and frame of reference. Anyone who has put aside his or her prejudices against the word 'feminist', opened up her (methodological) mind, and made the effort to find out what feminist economics has to offer, can easily discover that feminist economics has a strong and convincing critique on the genderbiasedness of the discipline, and will discover the value of feminist economics research. But most non-feminist economists, whether mainstream or heterodox, apparently prefer to be prejudiced and/or ignorant. The data in Ferber's and Nelson's introduction, and also data from Frances Woolley's (2004) recent study of citations patterns, clearly show that mainstream economics for the most part ignores feminist economics. Mainstream economists today know little more about feminist economics than they did ten years ago. If feminist economists want to address other economists, they are still at square one, despite all the great work that's been done within this field. On the other hand, feminist economists themselves have covered a great distance since 1993, and there is an emerging core of shared methodological and ontological assumptions (Nelson 1993, Power 2004). This enormous gap between the level of discourse among feminist economists, versus the discourse with non-feminist economists, can easily lead to a situation whereby voices are radically different depending on the audiences addressed. Something similar has happened in *Feminist Economics Today*, where

some papers are focused on critiquing mainstream assumptions and models (England, Nelson, Strober), while others seek to analyse what feminist economics have in common with, or can learn from, other heterodox approaches (Saunders/Darity, Charusheela/Zein-Elabdin). Two papers are advancing the agenda of feminist economics itself (England/Folbre and Benería), while one chapter tries to convince feminist economists that individuals can be both feminists and mainstream economists (Blank/Reimers). *Feminist Economics Today* tries to talk to all these groups at the same time, and thereby loses focus and strength.

The fact that the internal coherence of this book could have been better is unfortunate, but also understandable given that the knowledge gap between feminist and non-feminist economists on feminist economics issues has increased over time. I only wish that every new book on feminist economics did not have to start from square one if seeking to address a broader economics audience, including non-feminists. There are, unfortunately, no signs yet that this is happening, and Julie Nelson and Marianne Ferber are to be applauded for persisting, against the odds, in trying to introduce some basic feminist insights to a wide audience, even if a large part of that audience remains as prejudiced and unreceptive as ever. *Feminist Economics Today* is an invitation to any economist who has decided to find out what feminist economics is all about. I would recommend all economists not to miss the boat this time.

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