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Is There a Feminist Economic Methodology ?

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This paper discusses feminist economics from a methodological perspective. I discuss and illustrate the feminist critique on mainstream economics, and the first alternatives formulated by feminist economists. I try to define feminist economics by contrasting it to ‘gender economics’. This distinction allows us to highlight the differences with mainstream economics, which are mostly of a methodological, ontological and epistemological nature.

This paper also addresses the link between feminist economics and feminist theory. I discuss briefly the main developments in feminist theory which have influenced feminist economics. Although some constituents of feminist theory have been taken up by feminist economics, I argue that only part of the developments in feminist theory are currently been discussed, or integrated in feminist economics. However, the distance between feminist theory and feminist economics appears to be created in two ways, as there seems to be hardly any interest in feminist economics among scholars in feminist theory. Once more, methodological and epistemological issues are of central importance to explain this observation.

An earlier paper on this topic was presented at the Workshop on Realism and Economics, University of Cambridge, February 22, 1999. I benefited from comments by Sarah Bracke, Steven Fleetwood, Tony Lawson and Roland Pierik. I also want to thank the women from the Belgium-based feminist research group AFOK for our joint struggle to understand feminist theory and produce feminist knowledge.

Introduction

What is feminist economics? How does it relate to mainstream economics and to feminist theory? What is its methodology, and to what extent is it different from mainstream economic methodology and in line with methodologies used in feminist theory?

Feminist theory works both within mainstream theories, as well as over different disciplines. Within economics, feminist inquiry resulted fairly recently in the emergence of feminist economics. The development of feminist economics has been build both on insights from feminist theory, as well as on growing disapproval by feminists of dominant practices in mainstream economics. As will be shown in this paper, much of it has to do with methodological, epistemological and ontological questions.

In what follows, I will try to answer the question what the methodology in feminist economics consists of, whether it is substantially different from mainstream economics, and how it is related to feminist theory. I also introduce the concept of ‘gender economics’, which shares some characteristics with feminist economics, but basically operates within the neoclassical ontological and methodological framework.

I will start by giving a flavour of feminist economics (section 1). Then I go back to the roots of feminist economics by focusing on feminist critiques on mainstream economics (section 2). I discuss the alternatives which are offered and being further developed by feminist economists (section 3). Next, I turn to feminist theory, and discuss its relation with feminist economics (section 4). I end by presenting some unanswered questions and provisional conclusions (section 5).

This paper will mostly focus on the dialogues between feminist economics and neoclassical economics and feminist theory respectively. I will not explicitly consider the similarities and differences with heterodox economic schools of thought, like Marxist/socialist economics, (old or new) institutional economics, Austrian economics, Keynesian economics, evolutionary economics or critical realism. This should not be interpreted as if I would think this is an unimportant task. It is the bare consequence of time and energy constraints and limited familiarity with those schools. However, I hope that this paper contributes to a broader understanding of feminist economics amongst both mainstream and heterodox economists, and thus indirectly contribute to discussing these issues as well. At the same time this paper wants to provide a methodological introduction to feminist economics for non-economic feminist scholars.

1. What is feminist economics?

Feminist economics developed at a much slower pace (and still lags behind) feminist schools in other disciplines. As Seiz (1997:179) puts it rightly, “during the 1970s and 1980s, while other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities were being challenged (and to varying degrees transformed) by feminist scholarship, there was a mere trickle of feminist work in economics.”

Feminist economics is a very young field within economics, which is still looking for its own definition.¹ As the field is so young, and the number of books and articles are still quite limited, there is no canon, nor are there canonical authors.

How is feminist economics to be defined? Ferber and Nelson (eds., 1993:i) write “[We] want to retain and improve economic analysis by ridding the discipline of the biases created by the centrality of distinctively masculine concerns.” Seiz (1995:111) sees the tasks of feminist economics as twofold. First, to “counter “untruths” promulgated by economists (and others)”. Second, “to produce better, “truer” accounts of the world that can help us understand the workings of -and eliminate- unjust social relations.” Kuiper and Sap (1995:3) articulated the absence of a general definition by putting “feminist economics is what feminist economists do”. In November 1997, I did an attempt to formulate a definition of feminist economics by contrasting it with “gender economics” (on which I shall return). I asked the members of femecon-L, the e-mail list maintained by IAFFE, how they defined feminist economics, and how we could distinguish it from gender economics or the economics of gender. The few responses that came basically stated that there is no general accepted definition of feminist economics.

What if we apply the definition “feminist economics is what feminist economists do?” Feminist economics in principle covers all fields that can be studied in economics, although it is probably much harder to conduct feminist research on the price structures of bonds and auctions than on labour economics or on what is included in the national account system. What makes it different from mainstream economics, as well as from most other heterodox economics, is the persistent questioning of the underlying gender dimension of particular

¹ The fact that feminist economics is still a young field can be illustrated by some institutional facts. In the USA, the first organised public discussions on what would later be baptised “feminist economics” took place at meetings of the Southern Economic Association and American Economic Association in 1989. These resulted in 1992 in the establishing of the *International Association for Feminist Economics* (IAFFE). World-wide, IAFFE has some 600 members. The journal *Feminist Economics* saw daylight in 1995 and the number of books on this subject are probably storable on an average bookshelf. See www.iaffe.org and www.feministeconomics.org.

phenomena, or the gender implications of a policy proposal or policy change. Some examples are the analysis of the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes to the standard of living of women vis-à-vis men, decision making between partners within the household, issues of care work, an analysis of the underlying assumptions and values of different social security and tax systems, gender discrimination in labour or consumption markets, the gender division of labour (paid versus unpaid work), the exclusion of predominantly female work from the national accounts, the relationship between teenage pregnancy and governmental fiscal and social policies, the measurement of within-household inequality or the measurement of gender inequality in general. Some of the work is historical, and history of economic thought makes up an important part of feminist economics. Although this list can in no way be fully representative, some issues are obviously central to feminist enquiry in economics: dynamics within the household, the consequences of policy on women, and the questioning of some “male bias” in dominant economic concepts and generally accepted ideas and assumptions in economics.

Note that the notion of *gender* can be used very differently within feminist work. Sometimes, gender is used in a minimal or *thin* definition, where it merely isn't more than “counting women” or splitting up figures according to sex. The use of this thin definition of gender has become widespread over several mainstream economic sub-fields the last years, and it is not at all a sufficient condition for a feminist approach to economics. For feminist analysis, a thicker conceptualisation of gender is necessary. In that case, gender points at the *powerdifferences* between men and women in society, and the *structures and constraints* that make these power-differences occur and persist. It also connects differences in power between men and women to power-differences between different entities, races, age-groups, social classes, groups with different sexual preferences and so on.

Feminist economics has developed on a growing dissatisfaction by feminists on the methodology, epistemology and (implicit) ontology which neoclassical economics uses, as well as the almost absolute authority which neoclassical economic methodology claims. In that light, the best introduction to feminist economics seems an exploration of its critique on the mainstream approach, which will be presented in the next section.

2. The feminist critique on mainstream economics

Feminist economics has criticised the incorrectness of several mainstream ontological assumptions and the limitations of its methodology, as well as the priorities it has on what economists should consider their fields of inquiry. In what follows, I will discuss the most important elements of this critique.

2.1. What is economics?

Mainstream economics can be defined in two ways: either by the domain it studies, or by the methods it uses. In the first case, economics is defined around concepts of the market and individual agents with stable, exogenous preferences making rational maximising choices. In the second case, economics is seen as any research using formal, mathematical models of optimisation under constraints, which in applied research is supplemented by quantitative econometrical analysis. Nelson (1996:22) presents a useful distinction on how the demarcation line between the core and the margin of economics is drawn within the discipline. The domain of the core is the public (market and government), individual agents and efficiency, while the domain of the margin is private (the family), society and institutions, and equity. The methods used and valued in the core of the discipline are perceived as rigorous, precise, objective, scientific, detached, mathematical, formal and general. On the other hand, the methods used at the margin are seen as rather intuitive, vague, subjective, non-scientific, committed, verbal, informal and partial. Nelson describes the key-assumptions of the core as agents who are individual, self-interested, autonomous, rational and acting by choice. The key assumptions of the margin would be agents who are social, other-interested, emotional and acting according to nature. Finally, the gender/sex associations related to the core are masculine and men, while those related to the margin are feminine and women.

Feminist economists react against the narrowness of the mainstream definition, both if defined by its domain, as well as by its method. Although there is certainly no consensus among feminist economists on what the domain for economics should be, they argued how the definition of economics has narrowed over time, and formulate alternative definitions which are more *inclusive*. Nelson (1993, 1996) argues for a definition which focuses on provisioning the necessities of life, where qualitative differences between goods and services could be taken into account. She refers to Amartya Sen's capability approach, which is in economics

the work that would come closest to this definition (Nelson 1995:33-35). Several authors have urged to redefine economics by taking the constraints on choice more seriously, and looking at the institutions and social aspects that influence and frame choices.

In my reading of the literature, one of the main differences between mainstream economics and feminist economics is that the latter wants to produce knowledge and insights that are *relevant*, either to improve our understanding of the world as it is, or to help solve the problems women, children and men are faced with. Much of the criticism of feminist economists on mainstream economics are motivated by or argued on the basis of the irrelevance of the mainstream work to explain real-world issues (e.g. Bergmann 1995; Ferber and Nelson (eds.) 1993). This could explain why feminist economics are so opposed to define economics based on methodology: the focus should be on which phenomena we want to understand, and which problems we want to try to find a solution for. What the appropriate method for these research questions should be, should only be decided after we know which questions we want to answer.

2.2. Ontological conceptualisation of human behaviour

The first neoclassical assumption questioned by feminist economists is the ontological conceptualisation of the human agent, hence the assumption on human nature. England (1993) calls this the conceptualisation of persons as ‘separate selves’: Humans are seen as autonomous individuals who behave selfishly on the markets, are not interpersonal comparable, and have stable and exogenous preferences. This separate selves model is assumed for (almost) all human behaviour on the markets, but in very contrast to that, people are assumed to be completely altruistic in the family.

Within mainstream economics, the sub-field ‘new home economics’ uses those assumptions to study human behaviour within the household (mainly consumption, labour force participation and fertility decisions). Becker (1991) can serve here as a prototype². Becker

² One could argue that by taking Becker as an example for mainstream economists, I misrepresent the real nature of the mainstream. This critique would assume that Becker is far more extreme in being androcentric and producing science that does not reveal anything about women’s interests. Although I do recognise that mainstream economists should not be seen as a homogeneous group either, and some authors are quite more inclusive towards gender and feminist issues as others, I think that Becker is ultimately not more extreme than many other mainstream economists are. The difference is that as Becker studies families and couples, we are more directly and openly confronted with the absurdity of several of his conclusions and general male bias of his work. Other economic work appears to be less male biased *on first sight* but basically is not less androcentric. For example, macro-economics uses for much of its research the concept of GNP and growth. It has been argued

uses “an economic or rational choice approach” (Becker 1991:ix) to explain how partners behave within marriage. In his model, he relies on the typical neoclassical assumptions of maximising behaviour, stable preferences and market equilibria. These assumptions together with the mainstream economic toolbox lead him to conclude that we can expect gender labour specialisation to occur (where the women specialises in household work while the husband works on the market) and that this is optimal (because efficient). He further “proves” that women do better under polygamy than under monogamy. Some of Becker’s assumptions are, as Woolley (1996:115) notes, simply offensive. For example, Becker claims that “... the average divorced person can be presumed to be more quarrelsome and in other ways less pleasant than the average person remaining married, because an unpleasant temperament is one cause of divorce” (Becker 1991:139-140).

Feminist economists have argued that these ontological assumptions on human nature both in relation to family members as well as in relation to others, are exaggerated and hence form a misrepresentation of reality. Furthermore, these assumptions are androcentric in the sense that they are biased in favour of men’s interest. Starting from those assumptions leads to the conclusion that the optimal arrangement for families is the traditional family with a gender division of labour: the man specialises in market labour while the woman specialises in household labour (Becker 1991). These assumptions make it impossible to draw attention to the fact that this traditional family arrangements are potentially at the disadvantage for women, both in their families as well as on the labour markets³.

2.3. On mainstream methodology

Many critiques by feminist economists which are discussing the irrelevance of much of mainstream economic work to understand reality and provide insights to improve the quality of live for people, ends up discussing the mainstream methodology⁴. For example, in her

by feminist economists, that the work that is not included in the GNP, is primary work done by women. Unpaid work is not seen as productive, and not perceived as adding to the growth of the economy or the material well-being of a nation.

³ For different arguments on the potential dangers of specialisation in household labour, see Bergmann 1981, Okin 1989, Folbre 1994, Robeyns 2000a, 2001 and Steil 1997, among many others.

⁴ At this point, it might be useful to distinguish explicitly “methodology” from “technical questions regarding methods”. This second groups encompasses econometrics, questionnaire design, quantitative data analysis, ... In many Graduate schools in economics, this is called “methodology”. Of course, these are totally different questions from the ones posed in “methodology” in philosophy of science. This second kind of “methodology” discusses how scholars try to gain knowledge, and how we should try to gain knowledge, on a more meta-theoretical level.

critique on Becker's theory of the family and his claim that women do better in polygamy, Bergmann (1995:145) claims that Becker's believe in mainstream methodology, next to political motives, can explain the fact that he takes his results so seriously. Some neoclassical economists are aware that they use greatly simplified accounts of the world, and know that these models do not describe reality, nor allow us to draw general analyses of societal processes. However, other economists do not see any problem in drawing general conclusions and policy recommendations from highly stylised models. As Rebecca Blank (1993:134) writes: "too often, during a seminar or a conversation with a colleague, I've suddenly realised with surprise 'he really *believes* all this stuff about individuals constantly making fully informed and rational choices accounting for all expected lifetime costs and benefits'. It never occurred to me, even in graduate school, that this model was meant to be more than a partial picture of reality. (...) The analytical cleanliness and mathematical manipulability of the economic model, while enormously attractive intellectually, was never convincing enough to overcome my intuitive reaction: 'This model should never be confused with reality'."

The trouble with Becker, and also with many neoclassicals who write on issues that are very complex, like human behaviour, is hence twofold. First, they use disputable assumptions, rooted in androcentrism. Second, they start from disputable assumptions to make a very simplified analysis to get results which are then used to explain *real and very complex phenomena* (like the gender division of labour). The feminist critiques on Becker, like England (1993), Bergmann (1995) and Woolley (1996) are ultimately in the first place an attack on his claim that his analysis would be able to explain reality in all its complexity.

Becker's "preposterous" results (Bergmann 1995) are just one example of real world phenomena which neoclassical economics can not explain with its methodological toolkit. This does not, however, imply that feminist economists would dismiss all neoclassical economics, even when they don't consider themselves as purely neoclassicals.

3. Feminist alternatives to mainstream economics

The answers and alternatives which feminist economists formulate are very diverse. However, it is possible to distinguish between two kinds of feminist economic work: gender economics and feminist economics. In this part, I will describe what I understand under those terms, and argue why it is necessary to make this distinction.

3.1. Playing the game by the rule of the boys: feminist neoclassical economics – alias gender economics

When moving away from mainstream economics into the direction of feminist economics, the easiest and most modest possibility is to “beat masculine economics at its own game (pardon me) by a more conjective choice of postulates” (McCloskey 1993:77). McCloskey gives as an example the extensions of the Beckerian model of family behaviour made by McElroy and Horney (1981). They used the same neoclassical methodology, but view the household as a bargaining game among two players over the allocation of public and private goods. In other words, they interchanged the assumption of an altruist benevolent dictator whose preferences can serve as preferences for all members of the family, to individuals with conflicting interests and individual preference functions. This extension of mainstream modelling of intra-household behaviour has known a great interest among feminist economists.⁵

It remains a point of discussion among feminist economists to what extent neoclassical economic practice can be improved only by moving attention to subjects of research that particularly concern feminists or women, and by changing postulates - but, while in both cases remaining within the neoclassical methodology, of modelling, heavy use of mathematics and advanced econometric applications. Reading through the literature I conclude that the majority of feminist economics would not dismiss neoclassical economics, but would extend it with insights, results and methodologies which are currently not accepted within neoclassical economics. However, some economists who do consider themselves as feminist, or who work on gender or family issues, stick to the proclaimed superiority of the neoclassical framework, and see no reason to alter its fundamentals.

Two examples can illustrate this. In her inaugural speech at the official assumption of professor in economics of the household at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, Maassen van den Brink (1998:6) writes that neoclassical economics is one of those rare theories that in her simplicity can absorb everything. According to her, there is nothing that could not be explained by neoclassical economic theory. Gustafsson (1993:3) claims that “feminist economists will improve neoclassical economics by lifting the male bias and thereby possibly reveal mechanisms that might increase the overall efficiency of the economy”. But

⁵ For a list of references, see Woolley 1996.

she also argues against the view that we have to fully refute neoclassical economics and build an alternative feminist economics.

3.2. Feminist economics versus gender economics

In this respect, it could be interesting to use insights from feminist theory on the different values and notions attached to the words 'gender' and 'feminist'. My claim, (in line with feminist theory), is that the symbolic meaning or the *perceived* degree of ideological content of 'gender economics' or 'feminist economics' are fundamentally different. Feminist research and research on gender have the same domain of study: the differences a phenomenon makes for men vs. women. Feminist research, however, has a very explicit goal which gender research has not: to ask into question existing hierarchies, authorities, norms, traditions and conventions, to deconstruct existing canons and question how current (scientific) practices support the status quo, both in society as well as more narrowly in the scientific community. Or: feminist economics uses gender in its thick description, where gender is seen in terms of power relations and as a structure in society.

Gender economics could hence be defined as economic research on gender that fits within mainstream economics, both with respect to methodology, as well at a large extent to the ontology underlying mainstream economics. Within gender economics, gender is almost always used in a thin version. Gender economics could ideal typical be seen as the research in mainstream economics that is involved with issues which particularly concern women (fertility, child care, gender discrimination,...) or the household and families (intra-household bargaining, risk spreading by female heads of household in poor rural areas, gender discrimination in food consumption or health expenditures in developing countries, ...). Hence, the topics covered in gender economics appear to be a subset of the topics covered in feminist economics. All feminist or gender related topics, for which the mainstream methodology is not suited, will be ignored by gender economists. Either they will reformulate the problem in a narrow way, in which it might lose several of its dimensions, or the problem will be labelled as a non-economic problem, and passed on to the discipline where they believe it 'belongs'.

How about the accepted methodology? Whereas feminist economics in principle encourages methodological pluralism and by its favouring of interdisciplinary research a priori rejects no

methodological approaches, is this not the case for gender economics. On the methodological level, gender economics is a sub-field of mainstream economics.

How about the ontological assumptions underlying gender economics? Gender economics does hardly reflect on methodological or ontological issues, thus sharing the same unquestioned acceptance of the dominant ontological ideas as mainstream economics does. For example, gender economics sticks to methodological individualism and stable and exogenous preferences. This also explains why the notion of ‘gender’ is used, and in fact can only be used in its thin definition. A thicker definition of gender would imply questioning power relations and mechanisms and structures making and sustaining gender relations. I do not think that this can be done if one sticks exclusively to methodological individualism and exogenous preferences.

From the perspective of looking at science as a community where social processes occur as in every other community, this difference between ‘gender research’ and ‘feminist research’ is important. Gender research does not question existing scientific practises to such a degree that they would have to be changed fundamentally. Feminist research, however, is troublesome as it basically questions every practice, every assumption, every dominant epistemology, every notion of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ research. As a consequence, researchers on gender studies are mostly tolerated, while feminist researchers are often unwanted and if possible even removed.⁶ This pragmatic reason alone can be sufficient for some feminists to stick to the mainstream approach and label their research “gender economics” instead of “feminist economics”.

Without any doubt, there is in general an aversion to the word “feminist” among economists. Ferber and Nelson (1993:8) speak of “the preponderance of antifeminist and a-feminist views among economists”. This is certainly partly reducible to the general belief in society that there are no problems of gender justice or gender inequality left, which makes feminists redundant. Given this hostility of most scientific communities towards feminist researchers, shifting from “feminist research” to “gender research” can be seen as a good strategy, or sometimes the only left strategy, to do research on feminist issues without being kicked out. In this respect, I believe it is better to use a separate term that refers to the content of “feminist neoclassical economics”, which I call here “gender economics”.

⁶ Anecdotal personal stories on feminist-related conferences and workshops, or among members of women’s groups at universities, suggest that this might be the case. Unfortunately, as far as I know no “scientific” evidence for this exists, as I don’t know any scholar who studied feminist and anti-feminist attitudes amongst economists, and the consequences for professional feminist economists.

Another distinction concerns the audiences feminist economists and gender economists direct themselves to. While gender economists engage in mainstream economic academic discussions, feminist economists direct their attention much more to inter- and multi-disciplinary discussions. This distinction in audience can be seen as both a consequence, as well as a possible cause of the methodological distinction between gender and feminist economics: methodological pluralism is a necessary condition to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue, and an interdisciplinary dialogue also fosters and encourages methodological pluralism. I suspect that this link should be seen as both a consequence as well as a cause, where interdisciplinary dialogue and methodological reflection and experimentation affect each other in a dynamic way.

The following table summarises the differences between gender economics and feminist economics:

	Gender Economics	Feminist Economics
Difference with mainstream	introduces gender instead of gender-less individuals, and makes policy analyses gender-aware	differs; can be marginally to radically different, in all aspects
Use of 'gender'	in its thin definition	in its thick definition
methodology	mainstream	pluralist
ontology	marginally different from mainstream	incompatible with several mainstream assumptions
acceptance by economists	yes	often not
audience aimed at	mostly neoclassical economics	interdisciplinary audience, neoclassical economics sometimes included

To sum up: the different ontological, epistemological and methodological issues posed by feminists both criticise mainstream practice and conflict with the neglect of this inquiry by mainstream economists. This is exactly what makes gender economics more accepted than feminist economics: gender economics can be integrated into mainstream practises, which is mostly not the case for feminist economics. As a consequence, the feminist critique that mainstream economics can not (or only inadequately) address certain issues and problems, will in many cases also hold for gender economics.

3.3. Is there a need for (non-mainstream) feminist economics?

I argued so far that a part of gender-related research in economics, namely “gender economics” is consistent with the mainstream approach, while a substantial part of it is criticising (at least some aspects of) mainstream economics. Furthermore, there are feminist analyses and elements found in other heterodox schools. Therefore, the question should be asked: is feminist economics not in part mainstream economics concerned with women, and in part heterodox economics concerned with feminist issues? Or: is there something genuine distinct about the feminist methodology and approach to economics? I do think there is.

First, feminist economics makes a *systematic* gender analysis of an economic issue. This means that gender is not by-the-way mentioned in an analysis. This very superficial addressing of gender in economic research is often done to anticipate a critique of gender blindness or gender biases. However, this does not address the profound gender-related dynamics, structures and constraints at stake, and could therefore more often be seen as smoke screening than really tackling the problem of androcentric biases in economics. One could argue that it only serves as a token mentioning of gender.

It has also been argued that being heterodox does not suffice for being alert for gender differences. Folbre showed that (at the beginning of the 1980s) Marxist thought is neglecting the gender relations in the household as much as the neoclassicals did (Folbre 1982). She also suggested that Marx and Engels pushed aside feminist concerns in order to affirm their work as scientific (Folbre 1993). Similarly, the subject index of recent books on evolutionary or institutional economics or critical realism, show that feminist issues are of very little *explicit* concern. This would not imply that these schools would not be compatible; my claim is only that if no *explicit and primary* attention is paid to feminist concerns, gender and feminist issues are most of the time neglected, even when *in principle* they could have been integrated.

Second, in line with feminist theory in general, feminist economists incorporates values in an explicit manner in their research. The share of feminist economists doing normative economics appears to be significantly larger than the same share among mainstream economists. Most feminist economists also do not believe that any work in economics can be totally value free. The question is more whether one is willing to see the values underlying a research which appears at first sight value free, and whether one is prepared to formulate them explicitly.

Thirdly, feminist economics does not have a canon,⁷ and promotes a constructive and open critical dialogue among the community of feminist economics. The composition of the volumes edited by Ferber and Nelson (1993) and Kuiper and Sap (1995) are ‘proofs’ of a genuine commitment of feminist economists to have an open dialogue with both people belonging to the mainstream, as well as with non-economists or economists who are situated far away from the mainstream. The journal *Feminist Economics* has a section (named *Dialogue*) specifically devoted to critics on earlier published articles. The editor, Diana Strassmann, has in her editorials repeatedly stressed the willingness of the journal to go into dialogue with people from all positions.

Mainstream economists could counter-argue that some mainstream work is also conceptualised in dialogue form, where scholars are commenting on other’s papers. While this is certainly the case, I believe that the crucial difference is the selection of those commentators. The mainstream work I have seen in this dialogue form, had commentators who were basically innocent: they would not challenge the paradigm of the economic science, nor would they ask questions concerned with epistemological or ontological questions, let alone argue in a jargon that is totally different. There are many examples where this is done in feminist economics.⁸

Fourthly, this tolerance and commitment towards pluralism also takes place on the methodological level. Solow (1993:157) points at the fact that in neoclassical economics, the dominant use of formalism can be “an instrument of intellectual terrorism”, or that “the notion that all serious argument is formal argument can be a way of dodging serious discussion of the choice of a model”. One could expect that a similar reaction against formalism occurs among feminist economics. This is certainly not true. The diversity of the articles published in *Feminist Economics* can serve as a serious indication of this respect for a pluralistic use of methods. Arguments of authority do not count when a method is selected for a specific research. My impression is furthermore, that feminist economics mostly make the choice of their method dependent on the context and subject of their research, and -if this improves the understanding of what is been studied- try to use several methods in the same research. Moreover, they are not prevented by disciplinary arguments to stay within the discipline of

⁷ In November 1997, I asked on femecon-L whether there were canonical texts on feminist economics. The answers I got, all referred to its absence. Of course, there are often mentioned books, like Ferber and Nelson (eds., 1993), Folbre (1994), Kuiper and Sap (eds. 1995) and Nelson (1996). However, I believe that this is not because they are declared “canonical”, but only because that those books are *all there was* written (at that moment) on the subject.

⁸ See for example Lamos (1995), Longino (1993) and Williams (1993).

economics to look for appropriate methods. Several feminists have used methods for economic research that were stemming from anthropology, psychology, philosophy or sociology, or are trying to improve on existing methods (Berik 1997; Kim 1997; Olmsted 1997; Riach and Rich 1998; Robeyns 2001; van Staveren 1997).

My impression when looking at the wide range of methodologies used in feminist economics, is not, like Julie Mattheai (1996:23) claimed, that “Feminist and anti-racist denote normative perspectives but no specific theoretical framework or methodologies”. We could indeed be tempted to make this conclusion, if we see the broad spectrum of methodologies used in feminist economics. However, I would argue that “the” methodology of feminist economics is to make the choice of the most appropriate methodology dependent on the context, and on the research questions to be answered. “Appropriate” means simple to select that methodology, regardless of the discipline it originates from, that can produce good science. The meaning of “good” again depends on the context, and there only concrete examples can decide which is the right methodology.⁹ Just as many feminist doubt whether we should look for general theories, they also doubt whether we should look for “general methodologies”, which would be superior in all cases.

Feminist economics simply wants to make *all* knowledge visible, also the knowledge that is non-quantifiable, which might arguable be of special importance for feminist concerns and gender issues. Issues of power, oppression and domination are of specific interest to feminists. Although these issues might to some extent be visible by quantitative and formal methods, experience learns that in the end, verbal theoretical argumentation or qualitative analysis might be necessary to detect and explain this.

4. Feminist theory and feminist economics

Can feminist economics be seen as being a part of feminist theory? Yes and No. On the one hand, feminist economics has undoubtedly incorporated insights from feminist theory. But on the other hand, there are indicators that there is only little interest for feminist economics in feminist theory and - to a smaller extent- vice versa.

⁹ Examples of how a “good” method was selected in concrete cases of feminist economic research, can be found in Berik 1997, Kim 1997, Olmsted 1997, Riach and Rich 1998 and van Staveren 1997.

4.1. Integrating diversity

As feminist economics lagged behind feminist theory, it could learn from the “mistakes” made by feminist theory. Feminist economics learnt from feminist theory not to see women as one category, and denying other identities that oppress persons, like their race, age, sexual preference, nationality, etc. In my reading of the literature on feminist economics, there has been a substantial effort to create space for other voices (Strassmann 1995), like those of lesbians and gays (Badgett 1995a,b; Badgett & Hyman eds., 1998), for non-whites (Barlett 1997, Matthaei 1996), for poor women of the South (Deere 1995; Agarwal 1995) or even for contributions that are conventionally not considered as “academic”, but which can improve (insights on) feminist economics (Coleman 1996; Polanyi 1996). In her major contribution on feminist political economy, Folbre (1994) develops a theory of choice and constraints taking gender, race, age, nation, class and sexual preference into account. Not surprisingly, she argues: “Needless to say, many radical feminists would disagree with this refusal to put gender ‘first’. But in my view, the real contribution of feminist theory lies in its efforts to reconceptualize the relationship between different forms of social inequality, rather than simply to empower women.” (Folbre 1994:268).

4.2. Feminist standpoint theory

Many insights from feminist theory and feminist epistemology are integrated into feminist economic research, be it in a rather implicit manner. This is certainly the case for standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory considers the androcentrism in the mainstream sciences as pervasive so that the strategy of “add women and stir” will not be sufficient to lift these biases. This epistemological theory does not believe that applying the existing rules more strictly will offer us better science. Standpoint theory starts from the assumption that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged position. Although different definitions and stronger and weaker versions of standpoint theory exist, they all start from the idea that different perspectives are possible, and that every observer or producer of knowledge should be aware about his or her own location and the relation with life experiences. This makes the idea of a fully detached observer impossible, but sees producers of science explicitly as embodied.

Several versions of standpoint theory stick to valuing some concept of rationality and advocate a certain kind of objectivity, which tries not be so biased and partial as the usual concept of objectivity in the mainstream sciences. For example, Harding (1995) advocates that standpoint epistemology can be a path leading to “strong objectivity”, which she contrast with the “weak objectivity” of mainstream sciences. Her claim is that the methodology underlying the classical notion of objectivity does not have any tools to detect widespread cultural assumptions, values and interests, like the androcentric ones criticised by feminists. Feminist research does not, as it is often seen by mainstream scholars, introduce political assumptions, values and interests into otherwise value-neutral research; it only makes explicit the ones that are already there.

This insight that all knowledge is partial and situated and hence that all research is to some extent influenced by one’s own social and historical location, is integrated in quite a bit of work in feminist economics. For example, Pugol (1995:19) starts her analysis of values underlying statements on women by neoclassicals with the words: “Let us remember, as feminist economists, that the personal is political and the political is economic. As a woman, as a feminist, as a lesbian, as a survivor of the discipline of economics, my identity, and the experiences I have encountered in this discipline for twenty-five years inform my analysis of economic theory.”

4.3. Notions of good science

Feminist economists have also integrated insights developed by feminist theory on objectivity and corresponding notions of good science. “Good” classical science should be done by a detached observer, who creates enough distance between him/herself, and the subject or object of study. Furthermore, the methods developed by classical science, based on positivism, are the only way to guarantee that no value judgements will interfere in the scientific process. Value-freeness is a necessary condition to make science objective. Only an objective, value free science, done by a detached scientist, is good science. Classical science claims that in this way, we can get to know reality, which is objectively perceivable.

Feminists scientists have argued strongly against this classical notion of “good” science. Most feminists believe that there is no reality which is fully objectively observable. Some of them, belonging to the most radical post-modern strand, claim there is no reality at all, and certainly not observable; others claim that there is one reality, but that every individual can only have a

partial and biased understanding of it. Furthermore, all scientific work is value-laden, and there is no such a thing as a detached researcher. Rather, feminist epistemologists have argued that all knowledge is socially and historically situated. This means that it does matter who is the producer of the knowledge, and where she or he is located. The knowledge we create is structured by our own interests and values, and by our social and historical locations.

4.4. Post-structural feminist theory

Insights from post-structural feminism, on the other hand, seem much less integrated in feminist economics. Post-structural feminist theory points explicitly at connections between science and power. Post-structural theorists are difficult to describe, and form a very heterogeneous coalition. Their common point of departure is the post-structural definition of power: language and other mediators are very important in constructing power-relations. Scientific work should then be regarded as “text”, and one should deconstruct¹⁰ this text, in order to see the underlying power-relations.

The little interest of feminist economists for post-structural research might be explainable by the fact that the methodological gap and the differences in assumptions on objectivity and ontology between mainstream economics and post-structuralist feminism are too big, too deep and too wide. While feminist economists seriously challenge and reject several of the fundamentals of mainstream economics, most of them insist on keeping a dialogue with the mainstream. Although there are mainstream economists who will not want to engage in a dialogue, some mainstream economists are within the mainstream at the margin or they are at the core but respect differences in research, and thus are open for dialogue. However, the language and jargon of post-structural theorists and the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions are too exotic for mainstream economists, and even for feminist economists. Nevertheless, very recently some feminist economists have started to argue that feminist economics can improve by paying more attention to post-structuralist theories (e.g. Hewitson 1999).

¹⁰ Williams (1993:144) defines deconstruction as follows: “Deconstruction is the process of analysing the conventions used to create meaning. Deconstruction reveals the ideological nature of text, i.e. how a particular discourse poses as universal, general, and objective.”

4.5. Interdisciplinary research

Feminist economics shares with feminist theory in general a deep interest and belief in the potential value of interdisciplinary work. Feminist theory has been developed over disciplines, and often used methodological tools from one discipline to formulate a feminist critique in their own discipline. For example, the deconstruction theory as developed in literature sciences and (French) philosophy, was later on used to formulate feminist critiques in almost all other arts and social sciences.

Feminists do not only use methods over disciplines, but bring disciplinary insights together to answer questions. Feminists in general believe that many phenomena in the social sciences and arts can not be studied within one single disciplinary framework. This stands in sharp contrast with the dominantly accepted idea in mainstream sciences that a disciplinary approach is “better” or “higher quality” science, and that interdisciplinary work inevitably lowers the quality of research.

Feminist economics hence uses a more problem-oriented than discipline-oriented approach. An illustration can be the work I did on the question whether a basic income or citizen’s income would be a desirable social policy for women.¹¹ While I only entered the basic income debate at least a decade after it had taken off, hardly any author in the field bothered about the gender dimension - in contradiction to audiences of public lectures and debates, who often raised this question. At first, I tried to study this problem purely as an economist, but I soon figured out that this could not give a realistic account on what was really at stake. Although I certainly based my analysis on economic theory and did make use of my training as an economist, my ultimate research results can hardly be put in any single discipline, and involves lots of sociology, politics and applied ethics.¹²

¹¹ A basic income or citizen’s income is an unconditional income given to every individual, and is usually proposed as part of a global change in the tax structure. The main reason why some economists find it interesting, is the fact that it could at the same time reduce unemployment without boosting poverty, and it would give people more freedom to make choices for paid work, unpaid work, self-employment, training or education, voluntary work, and so on.

¹² It is therefore no surprise that (the original Dutch version of) this work was published by an interdisciplinary research unit (Robeyns 1998). A full account of the study can be found in Robeyns 2000b and 2001.

4.6. Is feminist economics a part of feminist theory?

Feminist economics is apparently not very well represented or integrated within feminist theory. This might be due to the shift “from things to words” (Barrett 1992) in feminist theory. Barrett (1992) and Kemp and Squires (1997) argue that over the last two decades, there has been a notable shift within feminist theory from the social sciences towards the arts. While in the seventies and eighties, most feminist research was concerned with the social, economic and broadly “material” position of women, this has changed in recent years to give more attention to aspects of visuality, representation, the place of the body in life and in knowledge, and the symbolic meaning and representation of events and phenomena.

But this can not explain everything. Why was there, for example, in the first place no feminist inquiry in economics when feminist inquiry took off in other disciplines in the 1970s?¹³

My impression (which especially here can be rather biased and situated) is that there is overall limited interest in economics among feminist theorists. Besides the “shift from things to words”, I see two other possible explanations. First, economics in general appears rather inaccessible for other social scientists and scholars from the humanities, for example by its intense use of mathematics and econometrics. Second, economists are (perceived by other scholars as) on average rather conceited and claim superiority over other social sciences. This arrogant attitude might be sufficient for feminist scholars to simply neglect the economic discipline.

In general, there is less attention in feminist economics for epistemological and methodological issues than in feminist theory - although, without any doubt, much more than in mainstream economics. For example, feminist economists are hardly involved in the debates on feminist epistemology. They appear more to be “consumers” of the insights brought forward by feminist epistemology, than actively participating in those debates.¹⁴

5. Unanswered questions and provisionally concluding remarks

This paper left many questions unanswered. By way of summing up, I would like to make some conclusions - which must be provisionally, as feminist economics is still in some kind of take-off phase.

¹³ An exception is the feminist critique within Marxist economics which developed in the 1970s.

Feminist economists have criticised mainstream practise for three main reasons: the androcentrist character of its assumptions, the hegemonics of the mainstream methodology which is unsuited to answer certain questions of particular interest for feminists, and the often gender biased or gender blind results of mainstream economic work. It is clear that feminist economics is a field which is still trying to find itself, and is very much in development. I believe that the distinction between feminist economics and gender economics can help us to better understand the development of feminist economics and its relation to mainstream economics. However, I wonder whether most economists working on gender issues are fully aware of the major distinctions between gender economics and feminist economics.

I have also argued that feminist economics has been build on some major insights from feminist theory and epistemology. However, I think there are many unanswered questions with regard to the relation between feminist economics and feminist theory: Why did feminist inquiry in economics only started decades after it did in other sciences? Why is there so little interest of feminist scholars in feminist economics? Is it true that there is a rather general disapproval of post-structuralist feminist theory by feminist economists? Why is this the case, and is this a lost opportunity for economists to gain interesting insights and knowledge? And what could be learned by a more intense debate about epistemological issues amongst feminist economist?

Although there is much work to be done on the junction of feminist theory and feminist economics, the results this interaction in other disciplines has generated make me hopeful for some challenging and interesting results. Feminist inquiry in other disciplines did change something fundamentally. The question remains, whether feminist economics will be able to enlarge its influence on mainstream practice, grow in its interaction with other disciplines, remove androcentric biases in the social sciences and transform its practice to make it more relevant for the study of the lives of children, women and men.

¹⁴ This should, of course, not surprise, given the limited tolerance of this kind of inquiry in mainstream economic institutions - their main employers.

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