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Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics

Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson (eds.)

University of Chicago Press, 1993. ISBN: 0–226–24201–3, $12.95.

In *Beyond Economic Man*, a number of essays are presented in which the authors assess what it would mean if women—their scholarship, their concerns, and their roles in economic life—were more central to the economics discipline. Most of the contributors are female economists; although one sociologist, one philosopher, and one male economist also appear in a distinguished line-up.

I would recommend this book as a useful way for economists to get some initial insights into the topic. The main authors and discussants range from friendly skeptics to committed feminists. After reading the book, I still find myself closer to the first camp than the second. However, in this review I would like to sample and respond to some particularly interesting points made in several of the chapters.

In the opening essay, "The Study of Choice or the Study of Provisioning? Gender and the Definition of Economics," Julie Nelson argues that since the time of Adam Smith, mainstream economics has unnecessarily narrowed its scope of inquiry, especially in our century. In particular, the most esteemed contributions are now expected to take a highly mathematical form, and to focus on the economics of choice, largely in market settings. Nelson agrees with several other writers in this volume that such a narrowing of the discipline of economics has its roots in Cartesian

Reviewer

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reasoning, where knowledge was thought confined to that which could be abstracted from physical reality and emotion. Only such knowledge was said to be objective, and it was identified with "masculine" thinking.

Nelson offers a substitute for Lionel Robbins' classic definition of economics as the analysis of how humans attempt to meet various ends through exchange, by choosing from among scarce means with alternative uses. She suggests, instead, that economics is the study of how humans provision themselves. (Judging by a later chapter, I take it that this definition has much in common with the ideas of Veblen.) Such a definition clearly includes the study of market transactions and contracts, but would not exclude other activities important for human survival, like child care provided by families, and gift-giving, in addition to exchange. It would allow for practitioners to distinguish between needs and wants for certain purposes and to consider the relationship between provisioning and the earth's capacity to sustain the human "household."

While I am sympathetic with many attempts (including Nelson's) to prevent economics from being narrowed to the domain of pure equations, this is a critique shared by others. I am not sure why we should expect, as do most authors in this volume, that a feminist critique of economics will be any more successful than others (post-modernist, or Christian, for example) at dislodging "mathematicized" choice from its elitist place in the discipline.

To Nelson's credit, she explicitly rejects *replacing* the economics of choice (whose emphasis is on abstract logic, associated with masculine attributes in our culture) with some alternative "feminine" way of knowing. It is a broadening, she argues for. Nonetheless, I am left a bit puzzled by her very open-ended, alternative definition of economics: "the study of how humans, in interaction with each other and the environment, provide for their own survival and health." Such a definition would seem to make economics embrace the study of virtually all human endeavors, including religion, family, politics, medical care, engineering, etc. Although economists often do have useful insights into each of these realms, their expertise most often involves applying neoclassical reasoning about how scarce means are being organized to meet unlimited wants.

Nelson is aware that those who would broaden the field of economics are accused of making economics a kind of sociology. She fears no such problems, since economics concentrates on the social provisioning of the "necessaries of life," which is not the primary focus of sociology. I am not convinced, because the provisioning of necessaries could entail virtually anything by any means—material or immaterial, by exchange or fiat, using spiritual or natural resources, and employing communal or market processes. Furthermore, Nelson does not offer any distinctions between the domains of ecology and economics, which leaves open a different kind of muddying of the boundaries of economics.

The next two essays, "The Separative Self: Androcentric Bias in Neoclassical Assumptions," by Paula England, and "Not a Free Market: The Rhetoric of Disciplinary Authority in Economics," by Diana Strassmann, share a common observation—namely, that mainstream economics tends to presume self-interested motivations for human activity outside the home, but altruism at home. Such a distinction, says England, has had the effect of making the work of women "invisible." Why? Because economic values produced in the market place are not seen to be dependent on the non-market work of women—raising children, volunteering, and doing other things that develop and maintain emotional connections among people. During the nineteenth century, women's non-market work was left unexamined by political and economic theorists for another reason. Such activities were deemed to be "part of nature" and not part of the social and moral domain (where autonomous choices were presumed) suitable to their inquiries.

Writers in this volume give due credit to the "new home economics," of Becker et al., for finally attending to the non-market domain of the home. However, their models are criticized for taking the household to be characterized by altruism. The standard treatment of the household as represented by a benevolent patriarch is *useful* to economists because it allows the family to be modeled as a single agent, whose head takes all members' utility into account. However, it has the effect of covering up the extent to which relatively greater power over household resources in the hands of men can significantly affect their not-so-benevolent allocation among family members. Thus, for example, in many Third World countries, where husbands exercise overwhelming economic and social power, the needs of women and children are often tragically ignored.

This particular feminist criticism of neoclassical economics certainly does have important implications for economic policy formulation in developing countries. In fact, economic policy which did *not* take power differences within the household into account could easily produce inappropriate taxation and spending decisions. For instance, it might appear to be the epitome of efficient use of scarce educational resources to charge equal school fees for both girls and boys, allowing families to decide for themselves whether to send sons and daughters at differential rates to school. However, the outcome of such a laissez-faire approach in Third World countries has typically been that boys attend school at a higher rates than girls. A few years ago, the government in Bangladesh decided to promote the education of girls by offering reduced fees to girls. The World Bank has rightly lauded this, and other policies aimed at reducing the education gap between boys and girls, precisely because studies clearly show that overall health, education, and family planning are enhanced in nations where mothers have had at least a primary education.

Of course, mainstream economists can take such interdependencies into account when evaluating the costs and benefits of any given program. However, Strassmann's point is that the neoclassical model itself does *not* well explain the existing family practices which have produced less education (as well as lower nutrition) for girls than boys. Why not? Because it presumes altruism by male heads of households, and ignores the impact of power on the allocation of household resources.

The last essay I want to comment on is Nancy Folbre's, "Socialism, Feminist and Scientific." She describes the theoretical and policy contributions made by early socialist feminists, like William Thompson, Anna Wheeler, and August Bebel. They differed with the main voices of "scientific socialism." By analyzing production and power relations not only in the market but also within the working class family, they were able to show that oppression of women is not simply an outgrowth of capitalism which would end with its collapse. Thus, Folbre is able to make a critical point about socialist economics similar to that made by England and Strassmann about capitalist economics—namely, that households are not routinely scenes of patriarchal benevolence. Such an observation is interesting, since it counters the implicit socialist "story," that revolutionary social change should aim at remaking the economy in the image of an extended family. In this sense, all socialism is utopian.

My reservations about this book are quite similar to those expressed in several commentaries included in the last chapter. It is not clear to me how feminism can, or should, revolutionize the practice of economics. Those who are persuaded that it does will need to translate their critiques of mainstream economics into alternative models which are capable of empirical testing and have the potential to generate useful insights for economic policy. Some essays which I have not reviewed here delve into the historical patterns of dualis-

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tic thinking which have supposedly left the activities and motivations of women outside "masculine," mainstream economics. Of course, any kind of hierarchical dualism fails to capture the complexity of real life, not only across gender, but across culture and time. A feminist critique by itself would appear to fall prey to the same oversimplification as would a non-Western critique. It is not clear that women as a group have more in common than do Africans, the poor, or the elderly for the purposes of redefining and remodeling economics.

As a survey, *Beyond Economic Man* does help identify the points at which feminist thinking can enlarge economists' sense of the scope of their discipline and the analytical methods they employ. Furthermore, because it includes representatives of neoclassical, socialist, institutionalist, and post-modern economic schools, it has something to teach a wide spectrum of economists. ■

Telecommunication Policy for the Information Age: From Monopoly to Competition

Gerald W. Brock

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. ISBN: 0–674–87277–0, $45.00.

In this volume, Brock provides a detailed and painstaking history of telecommunication policy in the United States during the long and uncertain transformation from near-monopoly to today's quasi-competitive structure. Drawing on his six years of experience on the Federal Communications Commission staff, Brock guides the reader through the key regulatory, congressional and judicial decisions that shaped the industry during this critical time.

The most memorable feature of the book is a metaphor: the "Swimmers and the Boat" model. Brock believes policies that seem chaotic and decentralized can be quite desirable in an environment of highly limited information. He likens the state of current policy to the location of a large floating boat. Swimmers surround the boat in the water, each with a different idea of where the boat should be. In a random fashion, first one swimmer and then another has anopportunity to push the boat in a favored direction.

REVIEWER

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