Feminist Economics

The foundation of neoclassical economics is the idea of the individual, the rational economic man trying to maximize his utility in the markets. He is separate from other individuals, actively strives to consume the most that he can, and is not affected by nor affects the decisions of others. Feminist economics criticizes this portrait used by mainstream economists because it plainly does not reflect reality. Neoclassical economics is unable to explain the gendered distribution of income and the impact the structure of the family has on income, fracturing the way we view opportunities for economic growth. Feminist economics emphasizes social and cultural context as well as non-market processes in order to reveal a more comprehensive view of the economy that better matches the total human experience.

Men have historically dominated the discipline of economics. Men consistently pursue Ph.D.s in economics more than women (Nelson 1992: 109) and are usually studied for general trends, such as the increasing income gap, over women (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 258). Understanding why women have such a modest presence in economics in comparison to men requires examining the way in which economics is defined and described. The fundamental actor in neoclassical theory, the economic man, shows the gendered nature of the theory. The most obvious sign of this is that the actor is explicitly described as a man, not a woman or
a gender-neutral figure. The actor is also described as a rational individual. This presents a problem because of dualistic thinking. Words like “rational” and “individual” are associated with “man” and in direct contrast with words like “emotional” and “social” that are associated with “woman” (Jennings 1993: 121). The dualistic associations are hierarchically organized, placing masculine qualities above feminine qualities (Jennings 1993: 122).

It is important to note that gendered characteristics are not biological, but almost entirely cultural (Nelson 1992: 105). They extend from culturally constructed gender roles that carry over to the way economics is viewed. Economics deals with masculine concepts like “activity, choice, and competition that are identified...with masculinity” (Nelson 1992: 110). In this way, the language used to describe economics excludes concepts and roles that are culturally feminine, such as “the collective, passivity, determinism, and cooperative social relations” (Nelson 1992: 110). Dualism provides insight into why the family and social context is left out of neoclassical analysis; both the family and anything social are considered to be feminine and cannot fit into the masculine discipline of economics.

Feminist theory examines the use of dualistic language with historical social developments. Much of the gendered language of dualism is a result of social perspectives developed centuries ago. The femininity of the domestic sphere began to develop around the seventeenth century, when distinctions between public and private emerged (Nicholson 1986; Jennings 1993: 117). Men became associated with the public sphere, while women were left in the private sphere. This only intensified with industrialization, as production was moved away from the private
household (Jennings 1993: 118). Women’s roles became increasingly more domestic and familial, work that’s productivity could not be measured in the public economic market. In fact, women were encouraged to not be productive. The social status of men became dependent on their wives’ inactivity as status was determined by one’s “ability to consume without personal effort” (Veblen 1899; Jennings 1993: 112). Women of the highest social status were used “as idle objects for the display of men’s wealth,” constraining them to participation in social activities and the home only (Veblen 1899; Jennings 1993: 112). In this way, social gender norms reinforced women’s role in the domestic sphere and exclusion from the “masculine” public sphere.

Interest in social and historical context is not uniquely feminist; institutional economics is especially interested in this as well. Feminist and institutional economists are particularly concerned with family structure. Neoclassical theory’s description of the economic man completely ignores the role of the family and other social obligations. Nelson states, “he has no childhood or old age, no dependence on anyone, no responsibility for anyone but himself” (1992: 115). While there certainly are individuals that choose to live this way, this portrait is wildly far from the reality of most individuals and reveals a major flaw in neoclassical economics. Feminist theory criticizes neoclassical economics for its failure to analyze the impact that the family and specific social contexts have on an individual’s income and productivity (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 458). The so-called “black box” of the family ignores the structure of the family, particularly the role of women within the family. Neoclassical theory’s attempt to reflect social and economic conditions actually
reproduces and strengthens the social structures that it tries to describe. Using neoclassical discourse becomes performative as its use recreates ideology that devalues the work and position of women. Women’s access to income and labor market participation is often disregarded when examining the income, or endowment, of the family. The shift from the extended family to the nuclear family has also had a significant effect on household incomes (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 460).

One particularly important aspect of the family structure that goes unobserved by neoclassical economists is domestic work and familial obligations within the household. “Feminine” household work, including childrearing, is not measured by the market and is, therefore, undervalued, despite the fact that factors like childrearing and education have a significant impact on that child’s future income. In fact, all members of society benefit from domestic work (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 461). Without nonmarket work, there could be no time for market work, yet it still goes undervalued because it is not paid work. Because women’s domestic work goes unmeasured, it is almost as if wives are being exploited by their husbands (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 461).

Analyzing the family structure through both an exploitative and non-exploitative model is distinctly Marxian and shows the common ground that the Marxian school shares with the feminist. Marxian economics, like institutional economics, also shares an interest in historical context in order to describe the markets. One concept Marxian economics is particularly consumed by is distribution. It is well known that there is a growing income gap in the United States and other developed countries. However, neoclassical economists are adamantly
against closing this gap in the present, believing that it would stifle economic growth “largely because income redistribution reduces incentives for work and investment” (Okun 1975; Albelda and Tilly 1999: 459).

Inequity of distribution is a general trend, but also a gendered trend. Income distribution between women have also “become more unequal, but in the context of rising average female wages” (Blau 1993; Cancian et al. 1993; Albelda and Tilly 1999: 458). Despite rising averages, today, women still do not make the same income as men. Historically, women’s wages have been significantly lower than men’s wages because of women’s restricted access to income (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 457). However, this fails to provide a substantial reason for why women’s incomes would not be equal to that of men in 2013. A likely cause for the gendered income gap is gendered roles rooted in dualistic language. Women are emotional, not rational; women are inactive, not active; women are nurturing, not competitive; and women understand the family, they do not understand markets. The hierarchical nature of dualism portrays that which is feminine as inferior to that which is masculine, associating women with negativity (Nelson 1992: 122). Because of cultural constructions, women can be seen as less competent and less responsible, leading to an unequal distribution between men and women for an equal body of work in the market place.

Women also face an unequal distribution within the private household. Feminist theory explores how power can be a determinate of a woman’s access to income and resources within her family. Women are often left to do unpaid, nonmarket domestic work, while men earn a measurable income. This can give men
more power over the family’s resources because they are doing work that is publicly recognized and captured by the market. Non-market domestic work performed by women can be seen as inferior to the market work of men because it is not publicly recognized and therefore, makes the work of many women seem less valuable than the work of men. In many cases, women can gain power through entering the labor force. Albelda and Tilly state, “access to paid work itself shifts power balances in the family. Women who earn wages, on average, gain decision-making power within the family, and those who earn more wages gain more power” (England and Kilbourne 1990; 1999: 461). Because of the link between power and wages, feminist theory is in favor of supportive welfare programs. Some theorists argue that welfare provides incentives not to work. However, programs in countries such as Sweden provide single mothers with supportive social welfare that encourages them to stay in the labor market (Albelda and Tilly 1999: 462). The success of welfare programs depends greatly on the surrounding social context. For example, single mothers can be provided government aid, but in the United States “that aid is often provided in a way that is designed to control women (especially poor women) or paternalistically ‘protect’ them,” taking away their power as an economic figure (Abramovitz 1996; Albelda and Tilly 1999: 461). The need to control or protect women, once again, comes out of gendered roles and metaphors; women are seen as dependent and unfamiliar with the public sphere (Jennings 1993: 121).

Feminists believe that it is crucial to change the use of language in order to achieve a more equal distribution between men and women. Although many of the dualistic words associated with femininity are perceived as negative, we can shift
our understanding of these words to create positive and beneficial meanings. Nelson explores the dualism of the masculine “hard” and the feminine “soft.” We immediately perceive hard as “strong” and soft as “weak.” However, we can view strong as “rigid” and weak as “flexible,” which “suggests that rigidity is a potential hazard for a discipline that concentrates too much on the achievement of masculinity rather than the achievement of good argument” (Nelson 1992: 112).

Feminist theory calls for careful examination of “the cultural origins of knowledge” in order to prevent this dualistic thinking (Jennings 1993: 116).

Language is a major barrier for women in the discipline of economics as well as other settings associated with masculinity, such as economic development. Discourse on economic development fundamentally excludes women because of the masculine association to business. Welfare policies generally value income and employment levels over a more comprehensive approach that focuses on the achievement of capabilities, which are the ability to reach acceptable levels of healthcare, education, and social wellness (Sen 1984; 1985; 1992). The value placed on market place over capabilities disregards the social experiences of most women and fails to properly achieve policy goals. In this way, neoclassical discourse is again performative, reproducing inequitable structures that devalue the work of women and trivialize their experiences.

Feminist theory works to uproot culturally defined roles in order to create a greater sense of equity. Dualistic language, developed both socially and historically, establishes an environment that discourages women and anything feminine. The neoclassical concept of the economic man not only employs dualism, but describes
an unrealistic portrait of the world. Tearing down the boundaries of gender can provide a more comprehensive view of human behavior for ignoring fundamental economic factors within human lives because of their “gendered nature” does not allow realistic or effective policies to develop. Feminist theory calls for social and cultural awareness as well as equity in order to provide a more realistic and more humanistic way to sustain the economy.
References:


