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Book Review: The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics¹

Jamin Andreas Hübner²

It is difficult to overestimate the prevailing influence of neoclassical economics in academia and society at large over the past century. However, as the substantial problems to this orthodoxy have been regularly challenged,³ the alternatives (e.g., Marxist, institutional, heterodox) have also grown in influence and importance. Feminist economics represents just such an alternative perspective.

The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics makes apparent that feminist economics is more than simply a school or ideology—and it certainly can't be banally pigeon-holed into a mere extension of “inequality” studies. Feminist economics is, first, an essential way of looking at the world that simply pays attention to half the population instead of systematically neglecting and subjugating them to the (supposedly more important) world of male productivity; neoclassical economics was created by men, directly serves men in countless ways, and is overwhelmingly dominated and propagated by men. It is unfortunate that an economic theory and set of practices that take women into account and seek to undo the damage of a singular and exclusive perspective is not considered normal, but rather a separate school (an “option”). Secondly, feminist economics is highly developed. The contributions in the *Handbook* make it clear that there is already a long history of feminist economics inclusive of practices, focus, and theoretical framework—and, perhaps more importantly, is changing the face and specific aspects of the economics discipline in general.

As a handbook, the volume brings readers up to speed on what has been happening in feminist economics over the last half century and most recently. With a strict 5,000-word limit for the volume's 50 chapters, readers can digest important ideas and scholarly material in a way that isn't overwhelming. The five sections of the volume are Core Concepts and Frameworks; Methods, Methodology, and Measurement; Resources for Provisioning; Institutions and Policies; and International Governance and Social Provisioning.

The editors note that “the social provisioning approach (SPA) in feminist economics outlined by Power (2004) provides [a] useful methodological starting points to analyze and improve the conditions of living for all. In the SPA, economic activity encompasses unpaid work as well as paid work; human well-being is the yardstick of economic success; power differentials, agency, and the processes that generate economic outcomes are part of the analysis; economic outcomes and processes are shaped by gender, which intersects other social identities; and scholars of feminist economics make explicit their ethical stance in analysis (Power 2004)” (p. 3). They also note the important “purge” of “social” aspects of economics in the early 20th century; feminist economics retrieves the social science aspects of economics, which is needed in a reductionistic,

¹ Berik, G., & Kongar, E. (Eds.) (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics*. London: Routledge.

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³ See Diane Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters: What Economics Is and What It Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Robert Skidelsky, *What's Wrong with Economics? A Primer for the Perplexed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Yanis Varoufakis, *The Foundations of Economics* (London: Routledge, 1998); John Weeks, *Economics of the 1%* (London: Anthem Press, 2014).

profit-oriented system of capital-backed STEM obsession—and in a field where “the criteria used to judge ‘good economics’ are masculine-biased” (p. 5).

Readers will find critical reflection on a plethora of topics and debates—from political economics and Marxism (p. 34 ff), the meaning of patriarchy and its relationship to capitalism (p. 55 ff), unpaid labor and the caring economy (p. 63), ecology (p. 64, 264), intersectionality (p. 66, 118), the capability approach (p. 72), human rights (p. 81), collective action and citizenship (p. 102), quantitative methods and measurements (p. 129-78), discrimination (p. 179), the gig economy (p. 189), poverty in the Global South (p. 198), global trade (p. 207), migration (p. 223), sex work (p. 234), regional/national studies, studies in the change from socialism to market economies (p. 254), household decision-making (p. 293-311), crisis (p. 360), degrowth (p. 369), property rights and wealth (p. 312), partner violence (p. 321), and other topics. It’s impossible to summarize these contributions in a review, so a few more subjective reflections on the volume will have to suffice.

As already stated above, the sheer depth and breadth of the field is impressive—at least when one compares feminist economics with respect to its popular presentation as merely supplemental. When teachers use, for example, Colander’s *Economics* introductory textbook,⁴ they become familiar with basic feminist economic issues at the end of each chapter—something that most other textbooks lack. But even there the impression is still somewhat scattered, anecdotal, and misleading—since feminist economics (with the other non-neoclassical schools) are (quite literally) marginalized to afterthoughts and addenda, which leaves the bulk of economic theory and practice intact, as if it was somehow neutral regarding issues of gender to begin with. There are, thankfully, economics textbooks with a pluralist model, which include either repeated or dedicated (i.e., whole chapter) feminist analysis.⁵ But even there, readers are led to see feminist analysis as part of a pick-and-choose smorgasbord of methodologies—tools in a toolbox—as opposed to an essential perspective and practice that lacks the inherently dehumanizing aspects of “normal” economics. All this is to say that feminist economics still isn’t taken seriously, and a handbook such as this one will hopefully lead to more change in an overwhelmingly masculine discipline.

I found chapter 26, “Market reform in transition economies” particularly fascinating, given how vividly one can witness the impact of theory and the social construction of gender as societies and economies are re-booted/revamped. Similarly, the final chapter on cooperatives was an excellent contribution; it is difficult to overstate the important role of cooperatives in offering a successful concrete alternative to neoclassical theory, capitalist economies, and patriarchal institutions, not least because of their sustained presence and influence, with over 1 billion members worldwide, ILO education mandates, and UN recognition in 2012 (the “International Year of Cooperatives”). It is a successful form of socialism that explicitly addresses power, has an early history of gender awareness and feminist sympathies, and functions within a variety of both theoretical and political frameworks.

⁴ David Colander, *Economics*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2019).

⁵ See Geoffrey Schneider, *Economic Principles and Problems: A Pluralist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2021); Lilian Fisher, et. al., *Rethinking Economics* (London: Routledge, 2017).

There was not enough discussion, perhaps, regarding the half-century long experiment of gender egalitarianism in the USSR and the problem of sexual abuse within the academic field of economics. Regarding the former, a few pages mentioned it in passing (p. 254-56), but with little analysis. On the latter, there are mentions of gender discrimination in the field and its dominance by men, but little on how female-identifying persons are regularly sexually harassed, sometimes assaulted, and dehumanized in other ways by male economic professors. Should this handbook have been published after the disturbing revelations in Fall 2022 regarding #MeToo, #EconToo and #EconTwitter, I think we would have seen a chapter on this important subject; while women academics face frequent harassment and obstacles in general, it would be helpfully to explore how deeply entrenched these practices are in a discipline that is so consistently dominated by men.

Unlike other handbooks I've reviewed by Oxford, Cambridge, and Routledge, *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics* more frequently adopts a critical theory of gender that includes transgender persons—though there is surely a plurality of ideologies regarding gender amongst the contributors. The study of trans women in economics departments and as part of intersectional analysis is an area that is slowly beginning to gain attention, as it should.

All in all, *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics* is persuasive, useful, encyclopedic, and thoroughly researched. We can thank the editors and contributors for their tireless work on this subject that will hopefully persuade and motivate more people inside and outside the discipline to take their participation and/or resistance in the ongoing program of sexism and patriarchy more seriously, and hopefully work together in creating a more just world.