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## 2. Feminist economics as a theory and method

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### I INTRODUCTION

Several years ago while teaching at a liberal arts college, I had a conversation with a colleague at a similar institution regarding the long-run economic viability of institutions such as ours. I mentioned I was a 'feminist' economist, to which he politely replied that was just a good economist. My use of the modifier feminist seemed to him utterly unnecessary. So why is it necessary? This is really a variant of an old question first put in this form by Simone de Beauvoir; she asked in the introduction to the *Second Sex* why it was necessary that she be described as a female philosopher (de Beauvoir, 1949 [1974]). Her answer was that women are defined with reference to men, but men are not defined in terms of reference to women. Men are human beings. Of course so are women, yet somehow they remain different.

The same is true for feminist economics. It is defined in reference to economics unmodified, whether it is neoclassical, Marxist, or institutionalist. Economics is the study of human beings and economic processes; feminist economics, because it puts women at the center, is somehow different. I agree that it is both different and necessary because – even with decades and decades of scholarship, teaching, and activism – questions about women's roles in economic life endure. More importantly, despite the advances that elite women have made in economics, politics, and society in general (although there is still a long way to go before gender equality is reached, even for this group), women still bear a disproportionate bulk of the burdens of poverty, social and economic exclusion, and the ecological damage caused by climate change. Feminist economics is absolutely necessary to change this.

The many different chapters in this volume attest to the myriad and varied roles women play in economic life in both the private and the public sectors. This chapter does not attempt to provide a definitive answer to the question of what feminist economics is; rather, it examines the underlying epistemological foundations and methodologies that characterize feminist economics. It begins with a brief exploration of feminist economics and its epistemological and methodological differences and similarities to economics unmodified (Section II). I then examine some of the epistemological and methodological debates within feminist economics itself (Section III). Section IV offers a brief speculation of the philosophical future of feminist economics. Section V concludes.

### II FEMINIST ECONOMICS: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES TO MAINSTREAM ECONOMICS

Feminist economics is a pluralistic and sometimes interdisciplinary knowledge project that works toward a transformation of economics. This transformation entails critically

examining the dimensions of gender, race, ethnicity, caste, and class embedded and naturalized in economics unmodified. Although much of what I have to say will also apply to the institutionalist and Marxist approaches to women's economic issues, I will couch this section in terms of what is commonly referred to as neoclassical or mainstream economics. For most economists and lay people, neoclassical economics *is* economics.<sup>1</sup>

In this version of economics, the economy is seen as an entity comprised of rational economic agents. These individuals maximize their utility subject to the constraints placed on them, prices, incomes, and in more complex models, time. Formal mathematical models trace the consequences of the decisions made by consumers and firms. These consequences are determined at the margin by comparing the marginal, or incremental, benefits and costs. Equilibrium prices and quantities for commodities and for factors of production are determined by the intersections of their respective supply and demand functions and any imbalance between demand and supply exerts pressures on prices to adjust to new market-clearing levels. In the absence of market imperfections, the price system will result in an economically efficient allocation of resources.

The epistemological aspects of the neoclassical approach are characterized by a commitment to the notion that adherence to a rigidly prescribed 'scientific' methodology based on the concepts of self-interested individualism, contractual exchange, and constrained optimization results in unbiased economic science. Mathematical modeling is at the center of the project because that is where the claim to science lies. As Gerard Debreu put it in his 1990 Presidential address to the American Economic Association meeting, 'A global view of an economy that wants to take into account the large number of its commodities, the equally large number of its prices, the multitude of its agents and their interactions requires a mathematical model' (1991, p. 3).

Feminist economists have been critical of the assumption of self-interested individualism and the lack of any interactions, except those organized according to the principles of self-interested contractual exchange, because these assumptions excluded considerations of the dependent children, the elderly, and the infirm (see Strassmann, 1993; Folbre, 1995; Folbre and Nelson, 2000). Using gender as an analytical category, feminist economists show that unquestioned and unexamined masculinist values are deeply embedded in both theoretical and empirical economic scholarship. Absent feminist analyses, economics rationalizes and naturalizes existing social hierarchies based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Although this is especially true of issues germane to women's lives such as labor market segregation and the wage gap, the feminization of poverty, and the provision of domestic labor, it is no less true of issues such as international trade and macroeconomics. All economic phenomena are likely to have asymmetric impacts on women and men since they occupy different social locations.

Much of feminist economics can be categorized as feminist empiricism, a type of feminist science practice that has its origins in the work of feminist scholars in biology and related life sciences.<sup>2</sup> Scholars recognized that standard answers to many questions involving sex and gender reflected a distinct androcentric and/or sexist bias (Harding, 1986). For proponents of this approach, the problem is not science, but rather that researchers are simply not doing good science. In this case, mainstream economists are not doing good economics. Androcentric biases and blind adherence to the ideologies of free markets can be eliminated if the economics community would seriously examine their implicit assumptions and values. This would lead to better economic practice in the

sense of being less biased and more objective. Feminist economists and the inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups are necessary to this endeavor because they are the ones most likely to notice the gendered asymmetric effects of economic theories and policies that are hidden by conventional theorizing.

A popular radio show in the US, *MarketPlace*, provides an excellent example of the problems using purely abstract models peopled by rational economic agents rather than people differentiated by various categories of social difference. In an episode, one of the Freakonomics bloggers, Stephen Dubner (2012), made a compelling case for sending plastic flowers rather than real flowers for Mothers Day.<sup>3</sup> The host of the show, Kai Ryssdal, demonstrated his feminist sensibilities immediately by revealing, in a sort of 'man to man' way, that he left this particular task to his wife. But, never mind. The point is that Dubner made an excellent case, based on neoclassical microeconomic principles, that sending real flowers was simply not a 'green' thing to do after the costs and benefits of transportation and storage were taken into account. I agree completely.

As Dubner pointed out, nearly all cut flowers are imported from the equatorial parts of the world and the carbon footprint associated with this particular type of international trade is enormous. What he left out, though, was any consideration of the workers who planted, weeded, and cut the flowers. They are mainly young women and due to the use of pesticides and fungicides the work is terribly dangerous to their long-term health. In Dubner's cost-benefit analysis these costs to the workers were simply not important. I would argue that it was precisely because they are women in the global South that they remained invisible. This is just one example of why we still need 'economics modified' – feminist economics.

Feminism provides the conceptual framework that allows feminist economists to reveal the androcentric, classist, racist, and heterosexist values that have shaped economics (Barker, 2005a). It also allows us to put the work that women do at the center of the analysis rather than at the margin. Feminist economics is about people and so gender, race, ethnicity, caste, sexuality, and class matter. Domestic labor is recognized as real work that is essential to the reproduction of the labor force. Its value can be accounted for and when it is, estimates show it is equivalent to approximately 33 percent of GDP (Cloud and Garrett, 1996). Moreover, women bear a disproportionate share of the burden of domestic labor. Rachel Krantz-Kent (2009) found that in the 2003–07 time period women spent an average of 10.8 hours more per week doing unpaid household work than did men. Feminist economics also interrogates, among other things, questions about the social devaluation of work associated with women, the feminization of the labor force both nationally and internationally, the race and gender wage gap, and the importance of caring labor (Barker and Feiner, 2004).

As I have argued earlier, feminist economists are faced with the same dilemmas that other feminist researchers in other social sciences face: the instability of women as a category; the intersectionality of gender, race, class, nationality, and sexuality; and the relationship between the researcher and the people or phenomena being studied (Barker, 2005a). However, its objects of study – such as the division of labor by sex, race, ethnicity, class, and nation; the value of unpaid household labor; the supply of caring labor; and women's roles and status in labor markets – mean that feminist economists face these dilemmas in ways that are particular to their discipline. It is about women, but it is not only about women. It studies 'women's work', but destabilizes that designation. It

presumes to speak for the well-being of poor women and their families, but does so from positions of relative power and privilege. It inherits the scientific prestige of economics and, to a certain extent, questions the methodologies that accord it its status as a science.<sup>4</sup>

This last issue is perhaps the most pressing. Feminist economists are trying to both transform the discipline and work within it. We work within a discipline that calls itself 'the queen of the social sciences', and its scientific status is derived from its 'rigorous', read mathematical, modeling and by a strict allegiance to the separation of positive (what is) and normative economics (what ought to be). Although this distinction has been thoroughly debunked in both the philosophy of science and feminist economics literature, it remains a truism in most introductory economics textbooks (Sen, 1973; Ferber and Nelson, 1993; Putnam, 2002). Textbook authors justify this by saying that economics relies on models and all models must simplify (Walsh, 1987). However, as Vivian Walsh points out, these authors never discuss the implicit values that determine what is put in the model and what is left out. Feminist economists have explicit values: gender equity, racial equality, environmental sustainability and so forth. We recognize that economics is not about elegant models and theories, but rather it is about the lives of actual living people and their descendants. The dilemma for many feminists is how to explicitly reveal these values while working within the discipline. To borrow a phrase from anthropology, we are insider/outside to the profession.

Feminist economists want a seat at the table; that is to say, we want to influence public policy at both the local and global levels. To do so we must speak not only the language of feminism but also the language of economics. It is this latter requirement that creates the tension because it is a language that is distinctly unfriendly to feminist concerns (Barker, 2005b). Still, tremendous strides have been made. The journal *Feminist Economics* continues to thrive; the work on engendering macroeconomic models continues (despite a lack of an institutional home), and the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) remains a healthy organization with an annual conference each 'summer' (located both within and outside North America) and a continued presence at the Allied Social Science Association/American Economic Association annual meetings. One distinctive feature about both the journal and the conferences is the heavy reliance on modeling (the theoretical side) and on quantitative measurement (the empiricist side).

Formal modeling, reliance on stylized facts and mathematical models and quantitative empirical work all contribute to the reputation of economics as a science. Understanding the economy as an isolated phenomenon, which can be understood separately from culture, power, and ideology, is a commitment to a particular epistemological view. That is to say, it is a way of knowing that assumes that phenomena can be best understood by breaking them down into their component parts. Given the complexity of economic phenomena, an economic model is a mathematical map that isolates the relevant variables and deduces the causal relationships between them. Econometrics provides the tools necessary to empirically verify hypothesized causal relationships.

For examples I will use the abstracts from three articles in a recent special issue of *Feminist Economics* dealing with unpaid work, time use, poverty, and public policy to illustrate the use of formal modeling by and of empirical studies in feminist economics. The abstracts are useful because they illustrate how the authors are speaking both the language of mainstream economics and the language of feminism.

The first by Elissa Braunstein, Irene van Staveren and Daniele Tavani is titled, 'Embedding care and unpaid work in macroeconomic modeling: a structuralist approach,' and the abstract is quoted in full below:

This study embeds paid and unpaid care work in a structuralist macroeconomic model. Care work is formally modeled as a gendered input into the market production process via its impact on the current and future labor force, with altruistic motivations determining both how much support people give one another and the economic effectiveness of that support. This study uses the model to distinguish between two types of economies – a 'selfish' versus an 'altruistic' economy – and seeks to understand how different macroeconomic conditions and events play out in the two cases. Whether and how women and men share the financial and time costs of care condition the results of the comparison with more equal sharing of care responsibilities making the 'altruistic' case more likely. (Braunstein et al., 2011, p. 5)

I chose this abstract for three reasons: first, because the authors are highly respected feminist economists and it is an innovative and important article; second, because it shows how to speak the dual languages of feminism and economics; and third, because it is an excellent example of theoretical work in feminist economics. It explicitly values gender equity, it uses gender as a category of analysis and it offers concrete public policy solution. Its innovative use of a structuralist model allows the authors to explicitly consider how the 'social structures of production matter for economic outcomes' (p. 6).

In this case, it allows them to show that gender equity, in the sense of a more equal sharing of 'reproductive responsibilities' makes an 'altruistic' outcome more likely. The altruistic case results in better economic outcomes because productivity at work 'depends on the extent to which one is supported and replenished at home' (p. 10). Thus, the feminist insight, from a wide variety of academic disciplines, that both care work and an equitable sharing of reproductive labor are important to the social good is demonstrated using language that is acceptable to the mainstream.

The second article is by Chang Hongqin, Fiona MacPhail and Xiao-yuan Dong and is titled, 'The feminization of labor and the time-use gender gap in rural China'. I choose it for the same reasons as above, but this one illustrates the empirical dimensions of feminist economics:

This contribution investigates the impact of economic development on the feminization of labor in rural China between 1991 and 2006. Using data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS; 1991–2006), this study estimates time use in three sectors (farm, off-farm and domestic) and analyzes the contribution of four features of economic development to changes in time use. Women's share of paid and unpaid work has increased in both the farm and off-farm sectors and migration is a critical determinant. Economic development is associated with a rise in absolute work time, although not an increase in the time-use gender gap. Measuring the feminization of labor with time use rather than labor force participation data may be relevant to feminist analyses in other regions and countries, since it enables a more nuanced evaluation of the impacts of economic development on changes in the well-being of women. (Hongqin et al., 2011, p. 93)

The authors make a compelling case for investigating the effects of the feminization of labor in rural China and couch their arguments in terms of women's well-being and overall economic well-being. The feminization of labor is an established feature of economic development and is generally measured by the increase in women's labor force participation, but it has contradictory effects. In increasing women's access to wages the

feminization of labor potentially increases their well-being; however, to the extent that it increases their total work time it decreases their well-being.

Hongqin et al. use accepted econometric and statistical methods to estimate changes in total work hours and show that women 'still provide more hours of total paid and unpaid work than men . . . the data also show that women continue to provide more unpaid hours per day than men do in the domestic sector' (p.107). This indicates that women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid household labor. However, the authors also show that economic development is associated with a shift in time-allocation patterns that may have a positive effect on women's well-being. So, while the authors do not solve the contradictions, their analysis illuminates the features of economic development that increase women's well-being.

These two articles are both excellent contributions to the literature and to economic knowledge that can benefit women and their families. They are also typical of the two types of articles that characterize contemporary feminist economics, at least as represented by *Feminist Economics*, the official journal of the organization. Their ability to write in both the language of feminism and the language of economics will contribute to the establishment of feminist economics as a legitimate field of economic inquiry, and I have no doubt will aid many fledging feminist economists on their journeys toward job offers, tenure, and promotion.

Feminist economists working in this tradition have made considerable strides in changing some of the androcentric assumptions and adding important but previously overlooked economic variables. The radical edge of this work, however, is blunted in the sense that it reinscribes the mainstream prescription of what economics is and what economics is not. It is about theory, understood as mathematical modeling, and it is about empirical testing, understood as measurement and establishing causal relationships.

A second important line of feminist economic inquiry further broadens the field by incorporating history, institutions, and other actual rather than only stylized facts. It uses descriptive statistics and qualitative arguments to show what mainstream economics leaves out about the lives of women.<sup>5</sup> It is interdisciplinary in that it draws from other social sciences such as anthropology, gender studies, sociology, and history as well as advocacy groups. It is also heterodox in that it draws on the insights of both institutionalism and neoclassical economics. I would argue, however, that it is primarily disciplinary in terms of the phenomena it examines: the influences of race, class, and gender on labor force participation, occupational segregation and the gender wage gap, domestic labor and social reproduction, public policies, and economic globalization.

The abstract for 'Welfare-to-work, farewell to families? US welfare reform and work/family debates' by Randy Albelda provides an excellent example of the language and methodology of this approach:

There are large research, policy and economic gaps between the ways US researchers and policy makers address the work/family bind amongst middleclass professionals and poor lone mothers. This is clearly seen in US welfare reform, an important piece of work/family legislation in the 1990s. The new rules make the work/family binds worse for low-income, poor mothers and do not alleviate poverty. With its clear expectation that poor mothers be employed, the legislation opens up new avenues to revamp low-wage work for breadwinners and to socialize the costs of caring for family. Closing the literature gap may help to close the policy gap, which, in turn, would promote more income equality. (Albelda, 2001, p. 119).

Through a careful analysis of the history of social insurance and social assistance programs dating from 1935, Albelda shows that they have all been shaped by the notion that men are the breadwinners and women are the caretakers. However, the underlying presumptions behind social protection programs no longer hold. Women have increased their labor force participation; there has been a decline in married couple families, and a growth in single-mother families. Moreover, the number of jobs that would allow one breadwinner to support a family has declined. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, these demographic changes, plus an increase in African American women's use of government assistance led to a political consensus that poor mothers must become more reliant on their own wages. Anti-poverty programs were replaced by work-support programs, and poor women were required to find paid employment if they wished to keep childcare assistance and health insurance while they transitioned to paid work.

Among the many problems with this policy change is that poor women do not have enough time or other resources to adequately care for their children, perform other necessary household tasks, participate in paid employment, and navigate the bureaucracy of government support programs. The predictable result is that children get less parental care. All other government assistance programs share this notion of 'free time' and thus 'intensify the time poverty that single mothers already face'. This article provides important and useful insights into the ways that the rhetoric around self-sufficiency and family values leads to policies that are ill-suited not only to poor women turning to government assistance for their survival, but also to the needs of the working poor in general. It is an example of using empirical facts to construct a feminist argument around an important policy debate that is central to the well-being of many women today.

### III EPISTEMOLOGY, INTERDISCIPLINARITY, AND FEMINIST ECONOMICS

Methodologies in feminist economics that use accepted economic concepts and categories to frame feminist arguments for women's economic and social equality are well positioned to propose concrete public policy solutions that work toward these goals. There is much to be gained by remaining within this disciplinary framework in that it provides a common language that legitimates and valorizes feminist approaches. However, I would argue for an approach that is interdisciplinary in both its methods and in its subject matter. Why?

First, an interdisciplinary approach would be contextual and intersectional. It could conceptualize economics not as an isolated aspect of the social world, but rather as an integral part of culture, politics, and competing and contradictory ideologies. It could incorporate insights from other disciplines and fields such as cultural studies, queer studies, and social theory. Most importantly, it would invite an analysis of the relationship between power, knowledge, and privilege.

As I have argued earlier, feminist economists have had only limited success in challenging the hegemony and prestige of neoclassical economics (Barker, 2005a). We are not alone here. Marxists, institutionalists, Post Keynesians, and other heterodox schools have likewise had little success in this endeavor. And it could be the case that no amount of 'better' science and analysis will ever replace the scientism that characterizes neoclas-

sical economics. Because neoclassical economics does one thing very, very well: it articulates the ideology of contemporary capitalism in a manner that makes it seem natural, inevitable, and beneficent. Neoclassical economics does not 'speak truth to power', but on the contrary, accommodates and naturalizes it. Answering this challenge entails an examination of power, knowledge, and privilege, including the power and privilege that attaches to feminist economics. The modernist position within which the intellectual – embedded though she may be within social institutions of power and control – could still step outside of power and find a neutral vantage point from which to take an ethical, oppositional stand will no longer suffice (Sandoval, 2000).

The empiricist epistemology shared by the vast majority of feminist economists presupposes a separation between the real and the metaphorical in which the former refers to material objects in the world and the latter to discursively constructed systems of meaning and value. As I have previously argued, many, if not most, feminist economists would argue that it is only the real that is relevant to the feminist economics project (Barker, 2005a). Lourdes Benería, a prominent feminist economist, articulates this position clearly. She argues that postmodern work emphasizing identity, difference, and agency have enriched our understanding of identity politics, postcolonial realities, and the intersections of gender and race. This scholarship has, however, 'run parallel' to changes on the material side of life, particularly the resurgence of neoliberalism (Benería, 2003, p. 25). The problem, according to her, is that postmodern work tends to deemphasize the economic and generate an imbalance between the need to understand economic reality and 'the more predominant focus on 'words,' including issues such as difference, subjectivity and representation' (p. 25). It is not that work on these issues is wrong, but rather that it needs to be linked to an understanding of the socioeconomic aspects of life. This is the task for feminist economics.

Benería is not alone in making this argument. Consider the comments of Julie Nelson, another prominent feminist economist. In an essay that discusses the range of work in feminist economics, she notes the lack of deconstructionist or poststructuralist scholarship relative to the humanities (Nelson, 2000; see also Nelson, 1995). This is not a problem in her opinion. Indeed, she argues that poststructuralist thought creates barriers for scholars not educated in 'obscurant literatures/techniques', and 'promulgate[s] a bloodless and lifeless view of the world and fail[s] to take into account lived experience' (2000, p. 1180).

The importance of the contributions of Benería, Nelson, and other members of the feminist economics community to understanding the material dimensions of women's lives is uncontested. It is not my intention to disparage them here. Rather, my intention is to argue that analyses of identity and representation, knowledge and power, and authenticity and culture are crucial to understanding economic and political structures. It is to argue for a rethinking of the empiricist position and a valorizing of postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theoretical commitments (Peterson, 2003). Although there are differences among these three theoretical commitments, for the purpose of this chapter I will use the term 'post-positivist' to refer to them as a group that shares particular significant ontological and epistemological assumptions.

A post-positivist approach to feminist economics and feminist political economy would, at a minimum, entail a commitment to the notion that the material and symbolic are not radically separate. The feminist economist Gillian Hewitson (1999) puts it most



clearly. She argues for a rejection of an empiricist view of language in favor of one that sees language as a system of relationships within which meaning is produced. Metaphors are not just descriptive, they are productive and a referential view of language masks these productive effects. For economics, including feminist economics, this means that underlying processes of the economy are constituted through economic discourse. While this is certainly a minority view among feminist economists, I will argue that it is an important perspective to bring to the table.

The concept of discourse refers not only to language, but also to social institutions and practices. Since power constitutes and legitimates itself through a variety of institutions and discursive practices, it is important to understand that knowledge production is 'power laden and power producing' (Peterson, 2003, p. 24). Considering the relationship between knowledge and power is a way to emancipate knowledge production from the subjugation of science and to create alternative knowledges that are capable of opposition to and struggle against the coercion of a unified, formal, and scientific discourse (Foucault, 1980). Again, this is not to argue against science, empirical investigations, systematic inquiry, or comparative studies. As a practical matter in today's political and cultural climate we need to emphasize the importance of good science, especially good economic science. Nonetheless, I want to argue for recognition of the contingent and local nature of the claims of economics and to explicitly acknowledge the situated position of feminist economists who are simultaneously both inside and outside of economic discourse (Barker, 2005b).

#### IV POST-POSITIVIST APPROACHES TO FEMINIST ECONOMICS

There are a handful of scholars trained in feminist economics who engage in interdisciplinary work with other scholars in cultural studies, feminist and queer studies, and social theory. The work that has emerged from these conversations opens up feminist economics to a more radical transformation of what we think of as the 'economy', and raises questions that were heretofore obscure. Take one familiar issue, for example: caring labor. As I have argued previously, the distinction in feminist economics between caring labor and other forms of domestic labor, articulated in terms of feelings of genuine nurturance and affection, is problematic for several reasons (Barker and Feiner, 2009). It masks the ways in which domestic labor is racialized and feminized and it restricts the concept of care metaphorically to the domestic sphere, which makes it a private rather than a collective issue and reinforces heteronormative scripts about appropriate family forms.

Suzanne Bergeron (2009) has noted the implicit heteronormative assumptions in feminist economics and demonstrated how common it is within feminist economic scholarship to assume that households, the site of where most domestic labor is done, comprise two heterosexual adults who conform to 'dominant gender scripts' (p. 55). Similarly, Colin Danby has argued that heteronormativity and race have long been linked in US history. Normal, healthy, and private realms were 'contrasted to pathological personal, familial and kin practices that do not merit the social or juridical support that 'normal' private life receives. Efforts by abjected groups to cross over this division and achieve respectability simply mark its existence and importance' (Danby, 2007, p. 41). The

importance of these insights from queer theory to the discussions of domestic labor is that they aid in explaining two important, but overlooked questions in the literature. The first is why some groups are entitled to be cared for and cared about while others are not afforded this privilege (Barker, 2012). Perhaps more important is the question asked by the post-positivist feminist sociologist Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez: 'why is domestic work linked to the dehumanization of those who work to ensure that others have agreeable surroundings for living and recreating life?' (2007, p. 72).

Understanding this question entails interrogating the role that feminism plays in maintaining race, class, and caste privilege. Women in the global South, like many black and Latina women in the global North, have demonstrated a deep ambivalence toward white, western feminism. Theorists and activists such as Audre Lourde (1984) and bell hooks (1984) argue that feminists need to deal with differences among women, differences that arise from differing oppressions, especially racial oppression. Others argue that for the majority of the world's poor women, the class oppression created by globalization and the international division of labor is far more devastating than gender oppression (Mies, 1986). Similarly, the academic construction of 'Third World Women' has been shown to be a problematic construct of liberal feminism (Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1997; Barker, 1998; Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela, 2004). Taking these considerations seriously means that feminist scholars need to examine the implicit values and ideological claims that are embedded in their analyses and interrogate the roles they play in maintaining and reproducing the unequal social hierarchies.

Let me illustrate this last point by examining a familiar issue: the relationship between women's education, women's empowerment, and economic growth. The importance of education for girls, women, and other disenfranchised populations is taken as axiomatic. For example, goal three of the Millennium Development Goals, Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, has as its first target the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Similarly, a World Bank publication on the education of girls in the twenty-first century states that 'educating girls is one of the most cost-effective ways of spurring development. [It] creates powerful poverty-reducing synergies and yields enormous intergenerational gains' (Phumaphi and Leipziger, 2008, p. xvii). The report goes on to say that 'greater investment in girls' education is vital for increasing female participation and productivity in the labor market' (p. xviii).

Now let me be very, very clear: I am most definitely not arguing against the importance of education for girls and women. I do think, however, that the way in which it is framed by the United Nations, the World Bank, and various NGOs can be problematic in the sense that it reproduces the very power structures and inequalities that feminists challenge. This argument is aptly developed in an article by S. Charusheela (2009) in which she analyzes a conversation between the philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the Africanist feminist philosopher Nikiru Nzegwu. Nussbaum uses the capabilities approach developed by economist Amartya Sen to develop a universalist ethics. Literacy is one of Nussbaum's essential capabilities and she argues that women's education ought to be a central task for feminists today. For Nussbaum, not only is literacy important in its own right, it is essential for women's economic empowerment. Charusheela argues, however, that Nussbaum's argument rests on implicit assumptions about the structure of institutions that organize the production of knowledge and culture. What Nussbaum

overlooks is that it is these same institutions and the types of education they provide that 'exclude subaltern groups and privilege educated elites' (p. 1140).

Drawing on Nzegwu's work, Charusheela goes on to argue that not only did illiterate Igbo women play strong political and social roles in Igbo society and claim a long tradition of organized political protest to maintain their status, but that it was the '*literate* privileged women from the emerging upper classes who showed a lack of political consciousness through an internalization of Western patriarchal norms in the colonial period' (Charusheela, 2009, p.1142, original italics). Not all education is the same in either its content or its methods. I would argue that just as trade schools and technical colleges in the global North filter individuals into different segments of the labor market (or into the permanent ranks of the unemployed), education and literacy campaigns in the global South fulfill the same function. In this case education produces workers for the factories and sweatshops necessary for global capitalism on the bottom and a small handful of the elite to fulfill the technocratic professions on the top. Thus while education is empowering, literacy and the lack thereof also justify unequal political, social, and economic conditions.

One of the important contributions of postcolonial scholarship in general has been to show the ways that the colonizers of the 'new world' used education to inculcate western patriarchal values into a class of indigenous elites. It was through education that colonized populations internalized the values and belief systems of the colonizers. What multiple and contradictory functions do the educational policies advocated by the World Bank and other similar institutions play in the global political economy of today? The Bank does acknowledge that 'schooling as an institution may marginalize and diminish the power of local indigenous knowledge', but its answer is to give children the space to 'reclaim their power and right to be heard as experts about their own gendered and sexual lives' (Mannathoko, 2008, p. 134; see also Bergeron, 2006). To do so, however, they must speak within the discursive framework of the educated elites if their voices are to be heard and intelligible. The problem does not have an easy solution because while education is necessary for the emancipation of women today, it is also a process through which the values associated with global capitalism are internalized. This is another example of how a critical and interdisciplinary approach can contribute to feminist economics.

Finally, interdisciplinary, post-positivist approaches to feminist economics allow feminist economists to connect to what J.K. Gibson-Graham (2008) has termed an 'ontological project'. That is, the way we think about, talk about and represent economic phenomena discursively constitute the phenomena we study. It allows us the potential to bring new and alternative economies into being and to imagine a way out of dualisms such as private/public, family/market, and nation-state/global governance.

## V CONCLUSION

This is not to say that everyone has to do everything. If we are reading this book, it is because we are scholars or academics or activists who are committed to our work. That commitment engenders the really good, progressive work. What I am arguing for is a pluralistic approach to feminist economic methodology that takes seriously critical

evaluations of the dialectic between power and knowledge and between the material and the symbolic.

This does not mean that feminist economists should give up either the tools or prestige of economics. To resist power and work for social change, we need to speak the language of power, in this case the language of high-status economics. It is, however, important to recognize that this is only one language, one system of knowledge production. Its elite status and hegemonic influence stems not from its superior fidelity to the real, but rather from its connection to power (Barker, 2005b). This likewise entails replacing the notion of science as representation with the notion of science as a set of practices (Harding, 2003, 2008; Peter, 2003). Thus, the methodological pluralism I am advocating is a radical one. It is one in which the goals of feminist economics – to improve the lives of women and create a more just and equitable society – are facilitated by a variety of seemingly incommensurate interventions, tactics, and discourses.

## NOTES

1. See Barker (1999) for an examination of some of the foundational critiques by both institutional and Marxist critics.
2. There is an extensive literature on this in the feminist epistemology literature. See Barker (2004) for a summary.
3. Personally I prefer silk or cloth flowers.
4. This, in turn, has the potential to demonstrate the disparity between the social, cultural and political authority enjoyed by mainstream economics and its manifest failings as a science.
5. There are many excellent examples of this approach in feminist economics, and there are several anthologies that provide a good guide here. See, for example, Ferber and Nelson (1993), Kuiper and Sap (1995), Mutari and Figart (2003), Barker and Kuiper (2009), and Beneria et al. (2011).

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