The Study of Economics: A Feminist Critique

By MARIANNE A. FERBER*

The small representation of women and minorities among students of economics has been noted for some time. While the proportion of B.A.'s earned by women in psychology rose from 36.7 percent in 1949–1950 to 70.8 percent in 1988–1989, in sociology from 50.6 percent to 68.8 percent, and even in mathematics from 22.6 percent to 46.0 percent, in economics it has increased from only 7.6 percent to 32.5 percent. The share of Ph.D.'s earned by women in 1988–1989 was 56.2 percent in psychology, 50.9 percent in sociology, 26.6 percent in business, 19.4 percent in mathematics, and 19.0 percent in economics. Hence, general sexism in the classroom[1] does not appear to be the main culprit, nor do the explanations that mathematics requirements inhibit women's entry into economics or that women are uninterested in business-related fields seem convincing. Instead, one must look to factors specific to economics. Evidence that women students do not perform as well as men in introductory economics courses (John J. Siegfried, 1979; Gordon Anderson, et al., 1994), although they have higher grades overall, further adds to this conclusion.

For these reasons there has been considerable interest among feminist economists in the "chilly classroom climate," for women and minority students in economics courses. In this paper, the focus is on the small representation of women among economics faculties, the biased subject matter, and the narrow approach of traditional economics. The number of women faculty can only be increased gradually as their representation among graduate students and new faculty hires increases. However, the subject matter can be changed more rapidly, as the consciousness of instructors and authors of textbooks is raised, and the challenge to the traditional economic approach appears to be making more progress than most of us dared to hope only a few short years ago. Thus, in spite of the remaining problems, there is reason to believe that in economics, as in most other disciplines, women's progress will eventually accelerate.

I. The Small Representation of Women

The dearth of role models and mentors has been pointed to as a problem. In 1988–1989 women comprised only 10.1 percent of economics faculties, and 8.5 percent at graduate institutions; among full professors they comprised only 4.8 percent and 3.3 percent, respectively. Evidence that graduate students are more likely to get to know faculty of the same sex well, and that whether they have come to know any faculty members well increases their success in completing the Ph.D (Helen M. Berg and Ferber, 1983) suggests that the absence of women faculty tends to make a difference. More recently, a preliminary report (Philip Saunders, 1993) shows that women students did better in undergraduate economics courses taught by female instructors while, interestingly, the performance of men was about the same whether the class was taught by male or female instructors. The absence of role models does not, however, appear to be the only problem.

II. Subject-Matter Bias

A review of nine best-selling texts shows there has been progress in removing subject-matter bias, but also that there is room for substantially more improvement. For one, only 5 percent of individuals men-

* Public Policy Institute, Radcliffe College, Ten Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, and Department of Economics and Women's Studies, University of Illinois.

[1] This sexism ranges from the greater attention of teachers to boys to the use of sexist language and disparaging illustrations of incompetent women.

tioned (including noneconomists) are women, ranging from 0 percent (Michael Parkin, 1990) to 15 percent (Edwin G. Dolan and David E. Lindsay, 1991), suggesting that there has been little change in this respect. Further, topics of special importance to women and discussions of significant differences between men and women are still all too frequently ignored. A few examples suffice to illustrate this point.

More than half of the texts make no mention of the rise in women's labor-force participation, arguably one of the most important economic developments of the last 50 years; two mention it only as a purported reason for lower productivity. Several of the books fail to note that unpaid work is excluded from GDP; one mentions household production under the heading of "leisure"; none discusses ways of calculating its value, or the need for such information.[2] About half the books discuss income distribution without remarking on the disproportionate representation of minorities, women, and especially children among the poor. Households and families as institutions receive almost no attention, in spite of the proliferation of research on the "new home economics." Finally, women and minorities are generally portrayed in stereotypical occupations.

Individual instructors are not, however, powerless. They can choose a text that does somewhat greater justice to issues of race and gender, and can make their sentiments known to publishers and authors. Both are likely to be influenced by this strategy.

III. Feminist Critiques of "The Economic Approach"

Sins of omission, such as those cited above, have long received attention. More recently, feminist economists have also challenged mainstream economics in other respects. For the most part, they do not see the story of economics as "yesterday's blunders now corrected" (Mark Blaug, 1962 p. ix). Like many other feminists, most of them emphasize "holism, harmony and complexity rather than reductionism, domination, and linearity" (Hilary Rose, 1986 p. 72).

Even some prominent mainstream economists have been casting a jaundiced eye on the narrow neoclassical approach. For example, Rebecca M. Blank (1993 p. 133) says that she was startled to realize that many economists "really believe all this stuff about individuals constantly making fully informed rational choices accounting for all expected lifetime costs and benefits" and believes that this goes a long way toward explaining why 99 out of 100 students in introductory courses are likely to find the economic approach sort of crazy, though perhaps interesting. Only the one remaining student is likely to become an economist.

Harvey Leibenstein (1969) proposed the novel concept of X-efficiency and pointed out that, unlike the usual model of autonomous, optimizing agents, the behavior of interacting individuals is determined by differences in personality and varying conditions. Equally unorthodox is Robert M. Solow's (1990) suggestion that wages may be the result of commonly accepted rules of equity and of institutional controls, both of which constitute substantial hurdles to the operation of equilibrating forces. He then goes further and argues that wages have to be regarded as an independent variable, likely to be important in determining the productivity of labor.

These challenges to established dogma are not unlike those posed by feminists. Yet Blank (1993) fails to note that the model of the detached, rational maximizer is particularly inappropriate for young women making traditional career choices, because they have been socialized to believe that, whatever else they plan to do, they will have to assume primary responsibility for family members who need care. The same is true for young people, especially members of minorities, who believe that they have little or no choice because they have grown up in the inner city or a rural slum, where unemployment is rampant, and good jobs virtu-

[2]For instance, one needs such information to get reasonable estimates of the poverty levels of diverse households.

ally nonexistent. Nor does Blank suggest that the one student who finds this model congenial is unlikely to be a woman or a member of a minority group.

Similarly, Leibenstein (1969) discusses X-efficiency in the context of the firm, but he appears to be unaware that it is particularly applicable to the family. And Solow (1990) does not note the obvious relevance of his analysis to the notion of comparable worth, a concept well-nigh universally condemned by neoclassical economists as unwarranted interference with the market, where wages are presumably determined by workers' productivity.

These omissions help to explain why such critics, who have most likely increased the appeal of economics to students who would not be attracted to the orthodox model, are not likely to have made many converts among women and minorities. Feminists and "Africanists," (Rhonda M. Williams, 1993), may be more successful in this respect. They explicitly begin from the premise that ideology is, at the very least, bound to make a difference in what problems are selected for research, how research is operationalized, and how findings are interpreted (Francine D. Blau, 1981). They also analyze issues previously entirely neglected, or forced into especially inappropriate molds, and question much of the established dogma. Again a few illustrations will suffice.

First, the central character of mainstream economic analysis is the rational, autonomous agent who trades with others in order to maximize a utility or profit function. He is the very image of the completely autonomous man, independent of all natural needs and social influences, and the fundamental question of economic theory is the investigation of how he makes choices in a world of scarcity, given unlimited wants. Even macroeconomists now tend to base their work on theories of the individual, rational agent. Feminists believe this perspective contributes little to an analysis of oppressive institutions, and nothing to an understanding of caring services, freely provided. Many prefer a paradigm, harking back to Adam Smith's (1776 [1986 p. 159]) production and distribution of all "the necessaries and conveniences of life," that emphasizes "provisioning" as well as choice.

Second, formal mathematical modeling has been granted the high ground among possible methods, contributing to greater rigor, but also to abuses, such as using formal models to "prove" the existence of perfectly competitive markets (Katrina Alford, 1993), and the training of a generation of graduate students as "idiots savants, skilled in technique but innocent of real economic issues" (Anne Krueger et al., 1991 pp. 1044–45). As Gerard Debreu (1991) acknowledges, this approach has not merely flavored the subject, but has considerably influenced its content. Feminists, on the other hand, recognizing that models are necessarily metaphors, and that formal modeling is only one route toward better explanations and greater understanding, favor a richer and more varied menu of methods. Notably, Donald N. McCloskey (1993) and Diana Strassmann (1993) have pointed to the importance of "story telling," Ann Jennings (1993) among others has emphasized the role of institutions, and Julie A. Nelson (1993) has noted the contribution that qualitative analysis can make.

Third, Gary Becker's (1981) "new home economics," extols the virtues of specialization within the family. This has been challenged as a blatant justification and reinforcement of the status quo.[3] The early criticisms included Ferber and Bonnie G. Birnbaum (1977) and Isabel V. Sawhill (1977). Among other objections, they charged that the dependence of the homemaker on the wage-earner is ignored, that the image of the benevolent head of the household is not always realistic, and that there is circular reasoning when neoclassical economists claim that women specialize in housework because they earn less in the labor market and then turn around to say that they earn less in the labor market because they specialize in housework.

[3]Barbara R. Bergmann (1987 pp. 132–33) suggests that "to say that the 'new home economists' are not feminist in their orientation would be as much of an understatement as to say that Bengal tigers are not vegetarians."

Finally, Paula England (1982) forcefully contested Solomon W. Polachek's (1976) view of occupational segregation as the result of voluntary, rational choices of women, pointing out that they are paid less at the beginning of their career as well as rewarded less for experience, and that there is no evidence that interruptions are penalized more in other occupations, or that single women, who presumably are far more likely to stay in the labor market, are less inclined to choose traditionally female occupations. Further, Myra H. Strober (1984) and Barbara F. Reskin and Patricia A. Roos (1990) offered an alternative explanation, which essentially points out that women are relegated to jobs that men do not want.

Again, instructors who are constrained by the fact that they are expected to teach enough of mainstream economics to enable those students who decide to go on to successfully tackle more advanced courses, nonetheless can make the course more interesting to those who are not ready to accept unquestioningly the established orthodoxy, and more challenging to those who are ready to accept it, by following the presentation of the established orthodoxy with a thoughtful and carefully presented critique.

REFERENCES

Alford, Katrina. "What is a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This? Gender and Economics." Unpublished manuscript presented at the "Out of the Margin" Conference, Amsterdam, 1993.

Anderson, Gordon; Benjamin, Dwayne and Fuss, Melwyn. "The Determinants of Success in University Introductory Economics Courses." *Journal of Economic Education*, Spring 1994, *25*(2), pp. 99–119.

Becker, Gary S. *A treatise on the family.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univeristy Press, 1981.

Berg, Helen M. and Ferber, Marianne A. "Men and Women Graduate Students: Who Succeeds and Why2" *Journal of Higher Education*, November-December 1983, *54*(2), pp. 629–41.

Bergmann, Barbara R. "The Task of Feminist Economics: A More Equitable Future," in Christie Farnham, ed., *The impact of feminist research in the academy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 131–47.

Blank, Rebecca M. "What Should Mainstream Economists Learn from Feminist Theory?" in Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond economic man: Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 133–43.

Blau, Francine D. "On the Role of Values in Feminist Scholarship." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Spring 1981, *86*(2), pp. 538–40.

Blaug, Mark. *Economic theory in retrospect*. London: Heinemann, 1962.

Debreu, Gerard. "The Mathematization of Economic Theory." *American Economic Review*, March 1991, *81*(1), pp. 1–7.

Dolan, Edwin G. and Lindsay, David E. *Macroeconomics*. Chicago: Dryden, 1991.

England, Paula. "The Failure of Human Capital Theory to Explain Occupational Sex Segregation." *Journal of Human Resources*, Summer 1982, *17*(3), pp. 358–70.

Ferber, Marianne A. and Birnbaum, Bonnie G. "The New Home Economics: Retrospects and Prospects." *Journal of Consumer Research*, June 1977, *4*(1), pp. 19–28.

Jennings, Ann L. "Public or Private? Institutional Economics and Feminism," in Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond economic man: Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 111–29.

Krueger, Anne et al. "Report of the Commission on Graduate Education in Economics." *Journal of Economic Literature*, September 1991, *29*(3), pp. 1035–53.

Leibenstein, Harvey. "Organizational or Frictional Equilibria: X-Efficiency and the Rate of Innovations." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, November 1969, *83*(4), pp. 600–23.

McCloskey, Donald N. "Some Consequences of a Conjective Economics," in Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond economic man: Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1993, pp. 69–93.

Nelson, Julie A. "The Study of Choice or the Study of Provisioning? Gender and Definition of Economics," in Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond economic man: Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 23–36.

Parkin, Michael. *Economics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990.

Polachek, Solomon W. "Occupational Segregation: An Alternative Hypothesis." *Journal of Contemporary Business*, Winter 1976, *5*(1), pp. 1–12.

Reskin, Barbara F. and Roos, Patricia A. *Job queues, gender queues*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990.

Rose, Hilary. "Beyond the Masculinist Realities: A Feminist Epistemology for the Sciences," in Ruth Bleier, ed., *Feminist approaches to science*. New York: Pergamon, 1986.

Saunders, Philip. "The Influence of Gender, Nationality, Experience, and 'Warm-Up' on Beginning Instruction Performance." Unpublished manuscript presented at the Midwest Economics Association Meetings, Chicago, March 1994.

Sawhill, Isabel V. "Economic Perspectives on the Family." *Daedalus*, Spring 1977, *106*(2), pp. 115–25.

Siegfried, John J. "Male–Female Differences in Economic Education: A Survey." *Journal of Economic Education*, Spring 1979, *10*(2), pp. 1–11.

Smith, Adam. *The wealth of nations*. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776; excerpt in Robert L. Heilbroner, ed., *The essential Adam Smith*. New York: Norton, 1986.

Solow, Robert M. *The labor market as a social institution*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.

Strassmann, Diana. "Not a Free Market: The Rhetoric of Disciplinary Authority in Economics," in Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond economic man: Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 54–68.

Strober, Myra H. "Toward a General Theory of Occupational Sex Segregation," in Barbara F. Reskin, ed., *Sex segregation in the workplace: Trends, explanations, remedies*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1984, pp. 144–56.

Williams, Rhonda M. "Race, Deconstruction, and the Emergent Agenda of Feminist Economic Theory," in Marianne Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond economic man: Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 144–52.