BOOK REVIEW:

“A HISTORY OF FEMINIST AND GENDER ECONOMICS” BY GIANDOMENICA

BECCHIO

REVIEWED BY

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A History of Feminist and Gender Economics, by Giandomenica Becchio, 2020

The underrepresentation of women in the history of economics is not a new fact but has recently become a renewed subject of inquiry. The recent publication of a handbook on women's economic ideas and experiences (Madden & Dimand 2019) as well as new research on the history of the economics profession (Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, Cherrier & Singleton 2020) has helped move the research agenda away from what Harding called the "add women and stir" approach (Harding 1987, quoted by Becchio on p.187). Still, there is a lot of work that needs to be done, including on gendered aspects of economic ideas and approaches, to which historians of economics have been blind. In this context, Becchio's book represents a much-needed contribution, especially on the history of the analysis of gender in economics as well as on the history of feminism.

Divided into four chapters, the book is organized chronologically: it covers the period from the late 19th century to today. Each chapter can easily be read on its own, however. The two first chapters cover the period from the end of the 19th century until the postwar period: the first describes the political economy of what was called "the woman question"; the second narrate the history of home economics and household economics, when the focus shift from a harmonious family to the household as a heterogeneous economic unit. The book's principal originality lies in producing an analytical history of gender and feminist economics in the third and fourth chapters. Feminist economics is defined as the development of a body of knowledge since the 1970s on the economic aspect of systemic inequalities that affect women. Gender economics refers to the application of neoclassical economics to a set of issues related to the family and the economic position of women. While developed in the last forty years, these two different streams of literature became institutionalized separately in the 1990s. The American Economic Association assigned a JEL code to the field of "gender economics" in 1990 (J16, within the category of "demographic economics"), Feminist economics was eventually recognized as an autonomous field in 2006 (B54), within the category of Heterodox approaches (p.123). The history of this state of affairs, and the intrincating relations and tensions between gender as an object of study and feminism as a critical approach to economics is the subject of the entire book.

Following the introductory chapter, Becchio reconstructs the early occurrences of the "woman question" within political economy, classically starting with the liberal tradition in Victorian England. A second section is devoted to the early history of feminism in relation to the civil rights movement in the United States as well as the activist tradition of social reform. These parts cover a well-known literature in the history of economic thought. The innovation in this first chapter, however, is to develop a substantial analysis of the history of feminism and political economy in German-speaking countries (p.33-55). Becchio draws, although briefly, some links to the development of female entrepreneurship (p.70-71).

The second chapter offers a large overview of the history of home and household economics in the United States. The history of the home economics movement from late 19th century to the interwar period is followed by descriptions of household economics and the emergence of “new home economics” starting in the 1960s. While home economics considered the household as a homogeneous unit, household economics, especially in the works of Hazel Kirk, Margaret Reid, and Elizabeth Hoyt, became about enquiring into the black box and analyzing decisions *within* families. The main contribution in this chapter is to explore the relations between the institutional aspects of the profession and the production of knowledge. In the case of home economics, Becchio narrates how women found a (separate) home in economics relying on the production of a ‘feminine’ expertise on women’s issues. While still a feminized field, household economics became more and more recognized and institutionalized around the work of men. An application of standard microeconomics to the family, it constitutes the origins of the neoclassical approach to gender issues.

The third chapter is devoted to the history of feminist economics. This chapter is, to my knowledge, one of the first attempts to write a comprehensive history of feminist economics as a field.¹ Becchio provides elements for an institutional history of feminist economics from activism within the economics profession in the 1970s to the creation of the International Association of Feminist Economics in 1992 and the academic journal *Feminist Economics* in 1995. Two analytical sections provide a synthesis of the core of feminist economics scholarship as well as its relation to other heterodox approaches. One of the main threads of the chapter is to insist on the distance between a neoclassical approach to gender issues (the “economics of gender”) and feminist (critical and pluralist) views that led eventually to institutional separation.

The last chapter is the least structured part of the book and the most difficult to grasp. A first section introduces a brief history of gender as a “cultural category” to explain the transition from women’s studies to gender studies. It is made-up of an overview on recent contributions in both the economics of gender and feminist economics. A last and somehow unrelated section provides a collection of stylized facts on gender inequalities in “the world economy”—the section focuses on wage, employment and entrepreneurial gaps between genders.

Overall, Becchio fulfills the objectives she sets out for her book. Her selection of events and authors sheds light on “the interconnection between the “woman question” and political economy” (p.4) over a long period of time and she offers a contextualization of both gender and feminist economics (her second stated objective). This contextualization is, however, more analytical than historical. Regarding her third objective to describe the “fundamental role of classical liberalism” in feminist history, “against the idea that feminism is mainly related to socialism”, I think this objective does not make sense from

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¹ There are many histories albeit written from insiders, not historians. Conrad (2018) is an excellent insider’s history of the scholarship, the movement and the field of feminist economics.

the outset, especially in the history of economic thought. Indeed, it is my impression that the literature on the history of feminism in our field has been nearly entirely focused on the legacy of liberal feminism, in works written by white individuals, from the dense analysis of Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill's thought, to the more recent feminist movement in the 1970s.

However, the book is very useful on another type of distinction. The tension between two approaches – one that is looking at the radical transformation of the field of economics itself and one that is looking at the integration of gender within the scope of standard economic theory and methods – is one of the main threads of the book. Becchio treats this tension both analytically and in terms of institutional organization. I wish she had included more than she did the positions in-between, the exposed convergences and breaks, that do not fit this binary opposition; but overall the exposition of the nature of these two strands of literature is very useful and well executed.

A History of Feminist and Gender Economics is an important addition to the literature. I nevertheless want to highlight two limitations of the book. It is a very engaging read for the many details it provides on a wide range of women's and feminists' economic thought and the rich scholarship on gender issues. For this reason, it is a formidable resource. However, the reader may feel overwhelmed at times with what reads more as series of vignettes than a larger historical narrative. The selection and succession are sometimes not self-evident and the author does not spend time explaining her choice of corpus and sources. The second limitation of the book is a missed opportunity: the book does not apply or question gender as an analytical tool for doing the history of economics. Interestingly, Becchio points out that the field – still largely oriented towards the history of great men – has been more open to insights from feminist philosophy (Weintraub 1993) than from feminist history or women or gender history. While Becchio reviews the main theoretical perspectives on feminism, references to history and to the history of science are missing. The main consequence is that the book does not engage with historiographical debates over the canon and method of the field.

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