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Title: Challenging Economic Boundaries: Ecofeminist Political Economy*

Abstract

Ecofeminist political economy brings together feminist and green thinking to present a fundamental challenge to conventional economics. It sees current economic systems as setting gendered boundaries that exclude and/or marginalise women's work and lives. This, in turn, is linked to the way in which contemporary economies destroy the environment. This paper explores the ecofeminist challenge to conventional notions of 'the economy' and presents the alternative concepts of provisioning and sufficiency. It shows how ecofeminist political economy links both time and space in seeing women's work as body work that is necessarily embedded in the local environment. This perspective is contrasted with the dis-embodied and dis-embedded economics of the money-based, capitalist, market system. It argues that exposing the bounded and dualist nature of 'the economy' opens the possibility of radical alternative perspectives.

Introduction

Ecofeminism, as its name implies, brings together the insights of feminism and ecology (Mellor 1997a, Salleh 1997). Feminism is concerned with the way in which women in general have been subordinated to men in general. Ecologists are concerned that human activity is destroying the viability of ecosystems. Ecofeminist political economy argues that the two are linked. This linkage is not seen as stemming from some essentialist female identification with nature, for which some early ecofeminists were criticised (Sturgeon 1997, Sandilands 1999), but from women's position in society, particularly in relation to male-dominated economic systems (Mies 1998, Mellor 1997b, Salleh 1994). What ecofeminist political economy explores is the gendering of economic systems. It sees a material link between the externalisation and exploitation of women and the externalisation and exploitation of nature (Perkins 1997, Perkins and Kuiper 2005). For ecofeminist political economy, 'the economy' is a bounded system that excludes or marginalises many aspects of human existence. The role of gender in the construction of economic systems means that what the modern economy represents is a boundary around limited activities and functions in which the process of valuing and male-ness are connected. This paper will explore the implications of that statement and offers some alternative perspectives on what 'the economy' could mean.

Dualist Economics

From its earliest days feminist economics has argued that orthodox economics is a theory written by men about men that ignores women's work and women's issues (Ferber and Nelson 1993, Nelson 1996). As a result, women are pushed to the economic margins (Kuiper and Sap 1995). This has led feminist economists such as Susan Donath to see at least two economies and two economics. Instead of mainstream economics with its 'single story' of competitive production and exchange in markets she calls for a 'distinctively feminist economics' based on the 'other economy' representing care, reciprocity, the direct production and maintenance of human beings (2000:115).

What the modern economy represents is a bounded system that embraces activities and functions which are valued predominantly through price (represented by money forms) but also by prestige. Both within and outside of the boundaries of the valued economy are human activities that have much lower, or no, value. This is a position shared with much of the natural world. This forms the basis of the dualistic economy as represented below:

HIGHLY VALUED	LOW/NO VALUE
Economic 'Man'	Women's work
Market value	Subsistence
Personal wealth	Social reciprocity
Labour/Intellect	Body
Skills/Tradeable Knowledge	Feelings, emotions, wisdom
Able-bodied workers	Sick, needy, old, young
Exploitable resources	Eco-systems, wild nature
Unlimited growth, consumption	Sufficiency

At the heart of this dualism is the fact that what in the west has become known as 'the economy' is carved out of the complexity of the whole of human and non-human existence (Mellor 1997b). The valued economy takes only what it needs from nature and human life to fuel its activities and only provides products and services that are profitable. This is well recognised in green economics (Martinez-Alier 1987, Soderbaum 2000) but perhaps less recognised is the importance of women's work and lives in the subordinated dualism. What is unvalued or undervalued by the economy is the resilience of the eco-system, the unpaid and unrecognised domestic work of women and social reciprocity, particularly as represented in non-market economies (Waring 1989).

Women's position in relation to the valued economy is complex. Women can be present in the economy in large numbers as consumers and employees. There are women who do well economically, and some women exploit and oppress each other and the environment. What ecofeminist political economy focuses

upon is not women per se, but 'women's work', the range of human activities that have historically been associated with women both inside and outside of the market place. Women's work is the basic work around the human body that makes other forms of activity possible. It secures the body and the community. If a woman enters valued economic life she must leave her woman-work behind; childcare, domestic work, responsibility for elderly relatives, subsistence work, community activities. Economic life is therefore limited and partial in relation to the whole of women's lives (Folbre 1993, Himmelweit 2000, Stark 2005).

The ME-economy: the social construction of 'economic man'

From the perspective of ecofeminist political economy, contemporary economics represents a public world as defined by dominant men, a male-experience economy, a ME economy that has cut itself free from the ecological and social framework of human *being* in its widest sense. Its ideal is 'economic man', who may also be female. Economic man is fit, mobile, able-bodied, unencumbered by domestic or other responsibilities. The goods he consumes appear to him as finished products or services and disappear from his view on disposal or dismissal. He has no responsibility for the life-cycle of those goods or services any more than he questions the source of the air he breathes or the disposal of his excreta. 'Economic man' is the product of an ahistoric, atomised approach to the understanding of human existence (Feiner 1999, Ferber and Nelson 1993). Like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, economic man appears to exist in a smoothly functioning world, while the portrait in the attic represents his real social, biological and ecological condition.

The ME-economy is disembodied because the life-cycle and daily cycle of the body cannot be accommodated in the fractured world of the valued economy. The ideal ME-economy worker comes to work fed, cleaned nurtured and emotionally supported. (He) is fit and healthy, not too young or old. (He) has no routine responsibility for others and is easily disembedded from community and local attachments if necessary. The ME economy is also disembedded from its ecosystem; it is not limited by local growing seasons. It does not acknowledge ecological limits and draws on the resources of countries around the world. It is not concerned about resource depletion, other than in its impact on the sustaining of the economy itself. It is not concerned with the loss of resources for future generations, loss of habitat for other species, loss of biodiversity, the loss of peace, quiet and amenity, unless it can be sold. It is only concerned with toxicity and pollution if there are economic impacts and locates its polluting industries and toxic dumps in poorer communities (Bullard 1994).

Its disembeddedness from the limitations of community and environment means that the ME economy exists in unlimited space and time. It is a twenty four hour economy with a global reach. However, at an individual level it is bounded by the working day. For the employed worker there is a time when work stops. The motivation for participation in the ME-economy is mixed. There is payment for

work (although this varies) and status and prestige, at least in comparison with being outside the economy. The British government has gone so far in seeing participation in the economy as representing what it means to be a citizen, that it describes the unemployed as 'socially excluded' (Byrne 1999). This diverts attention from the more important notion of economic exclusion where capitalist market economies have captured many of the necessities for human existence. As Perelman argues, 'virtually no land ownership in the world has either honest or honourable origins' (2003:147). Bringing the means of sustenance within the circuits of capital means that access to goods and services requires economic participation. Those who control the means of sustenance, feel no obligation to take responsibility for the needs of the society (s) within which they operate.

Gendering Economies: Time, Space and Altruism

Ecofeminist political economy expands on earlier criticisms of the disembedding of the economy from society, emphasising in particular the dimensions of space and time. Women's work is spatially embedded because it is, of necessity, local and communal, centred around the home. Those doing domestic duties, reflecting bodily needs, cannot move far from those responsibilities. In subsistence economies women's work, and subsistence work generally, is embedded in the local ecosystem. In contrast to its spatial limitations, women's work is unlimited in terms of time as represented by repetition and presence. Work that is routine and repetitive has no end. Once the task has been undertaken it must start again: cooking, cleaning, fetching and carrying, weeding. Its routine nature means that it endlessly recycles and it must be done when needed, by day or night. The sick must be nursed when they are ill, the children when they wake. Presence is the commitment to 'be there'. Much of women's work is watching and waiting, being available, dependable, always on call, so much so, that many women take paid work as a break from the demands of domestic life (MacDonald et al 2005). However, when women's work is taken into the valued economy its pay rates and conditions of work are poor (nursing, catering and cleaning).

Heterodox economists have been concerned to embed economics in the real world and not in abstracted models (Lawson 1997). For ecofeminist political economy, women's work represents the fundamental reality of human existence, the body's life in *biological time*, the time it takes to rest, recover, grow up and grow old. Equally there is a time-scale for the environmental framing of human activities. *Ecological time* is the time it takes to restore the effects of human activity, the time-cycle of renewal and replenishment within the eco-system (if there is any possibility of renewal). In its link to the biological time of the human body women's work also reflects the time-bound nature of the natural world. The most important question is, if women's work is so central to human existence why is it not valued? Why is the economy not focussed around the life of the body? It is not because women's work has been marginal in human history (Barber 1994).

Studies of women's activities in gatherer-hunter and early agricultural societies show that women's work was much more important than that of men in the provision of calories while men's activities tended to be much more intermittent, ritual and leisure-based (Mellor 1992). It is not that women's work is marginal, it has been marginalised. Gendering is fundamental to the construction of 'the economic'.

'The economy' does not relate directly to human labour or need. It relates to certain resources, activities and products that are valued, mainly in money terms. It is the process of selectively valuing human activity that reflects male domination. Much of women's work remains formally unrewarded, although it may be intrinsically rewarding. Why, then, have women undertaken women's work? Why through history have they not refused? Partly it is the nature of the work. It is necessary, remorseless work. If it is not done suffering will ensue quite quickly. Women in this sense have been altruistic. For many it has been a labour of love, but it can also be seen as an imposed altruism (Mellor 1992:251). Most women feel they have little choice but to do this work, as there is no-one else to do it. There is also an expectation that those servicing the family should put their own needs last. While women's work may be carried out as an expression of love and/or duty, for many there is fear of violence and/or lack of any other economic options. In their historical association with the life and needs of the human body, women have been seen as weak, emotional, irrational, even dangerous and subject to domestic violence in most, if not all, cultures (Agathangelou 2004).

The evidence that such altruism is imposed is the fact that when they can, women escape from such work. Birth rates are falling dramatically where women have the opportunity to make social and economic choices and marriage is often delayed. Women are also challenging male dominance, particularly in levels of education. However, this will not necessarily change the destructive nature of contemporary economies. Although women are joining the economy and at higher status levels, they are joining an economy that is already gendered. Women's work still needs to be done either through the formal economy or through informal paid or unpaid work in the home. The priorities of the formal economy are not challenged and there is no mechanism in the market that can distinguish needs from wants.

Externalising nature through women

The core argument of ecofeminist political economy is that the marginalisation of women's work is ecologically dangerous because women's lives as reflected in domestic and caring work represents the embodiedness of humanity, the link of humanity with its natural being. As formal economic systems have been constructed women's work has become the repository of the inconvenience of human existence. Moreover, the pattern of exclusion that affects women's work is in turn related to other exclusions and marginalisations, in particular the

resources and labour of non-western, non-commercial and non white economies and people. The valued economy is a transcendent social form that has gained its power and ascendancy through the marginalisation and exploitation of women, colonised peoples, waged labour and the natural world increasingly on a global scale (Braidotti et al 1994, Harcourt 1994, Mies 1998, Wichterich 2000).

Through mechanisms such as violence, patriarchy, nepotism, colonialism and market systems, the ME-economy has gained control of land, resources and productive systems. It controls the sources of sustenance for the majority of the world's people as well as other species (Kovel 2002). People have little choice but to engage with it if they want to survive. Destructiveness is central to its fundamental dualist structure. Distorted patterns of ownership and control and unequal currency values mean that labour and resources can be bought cheaply. No moral responsibility is taken by the beneficiaries of the ME-economy as all negative outcomes are put down to market forces. From the perspective of neo-classical economics, market forces are natural laws, they cannot be challenged. Coleman in his critique of what he describes as 'anti-economics' asserts the essential nature of positive economics which he describes as 'the Tradition' and declares that 'no-one, we contend will ever discover that the market despoils' (2004: 232). For Coleman conventional economics represents the people's will 'economics denies that the rights of nature should be enforced over the common opinions and wishes of humankind. Democracy....trumps nature' (2004:172). However, economic choice can never represent the people's will, only effective demand on the part of those that have access to money or credit. Coleman also ignores the fact that 'economics' is a very partial and limited conception of human activities.

Ecofeminist political economy argues that as the dominant half of a dualism, the market economy has been erected on unacknowledged and unvalued support structures, in particular, the resilience of ecosystem, unpaid (or low paid) body work and social reciprocity. The link between women's subordination and the degradation of the natural world lies in women's centrality to the support economies of unpaid domestic work and social reciprocity, that is, the home, the community and the local environment. Ecofeminists such as Hazel Henderson and Maria Mies have seen the valued economy as a small tip of a much greater sustaining whole. For Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies, the valued economy is the tip of a great ice-berg, below the water line is the invisible economy that includes the world of unpaid work and subsistence and natural resources (1998). For Hazel Henderson the market sector is the icing on a cake (1996). Beneath the icing lies the public sector, the non-market sector and 'Mother Nature'. The filling of the cake is the informal 'cash' economy, which in practice forms a large part of the world's money-based economies. What the market economy is not acknowledging is the precariousness of its seemingly transcendent position; its immanence in the sustaining systems that underpin it (Mellor 1997a). As Val Plumwood argues, the dualist and gendered economic system is highly unstable because it does not acknowledge its dependency:

‘After much destruction, mastery will fail, because the master denies dependence on the sustaining other: he misunderstanding the conditions of his own existence and lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of Earthian existence’ (1993:195)

The ME economy as a growth-oriented capitalist market system, has claimed hegemony over economic systems, including the public sector, and over economic thought (Hutchinson, Mellor and Olsen 2002). Despite this power, it is a system in which people do not feel economically secure or happy (Lane 2000, Layard 2005). Given its parasitical nature, it is not surprising that the capitalist market economy cannot give people, even the rich, a sense of personal security.

Re-framing the Economy: Provisioning for Sufficiency

Feminist economists have argued that the notion of the economy needs to be changed from the narrow focus on market determination and rational choice and even the productivist focus of left economists, to a much wider notion of human activities in meeting their needs. The concept they favour is ‘provisioning’ which covers all aspects of human needs including nurturing and emotional support (Nelson 1993, Power 2004). While a good deal of this has passed to the market in modern economies, a lot remains in the home and the community (Folbre and Bittman 2004). A provisioning economy would start from the embodiment and embeddedness of human lives, from the life of the body and the ecosystem, from women’s work and the vitality of the natural world. Prioritising the life-world of women’s work would mean that patterns of work and consumption would be sensitive to the human life cycle. Necessary production and exchange would be fully integrated with the dynamics of the body and the environment. The provisioning of necessary goods and services would be the main focus of the economy in which all work would be fulfilling and shared. Central to this would be the idea of sufficiency and not the dynamics of the market or the profit-motive.

The drive for a provisioning economy would be direct utility, not the need to make guns to buy butter. There would be a clear base for identifying sufficiency rather than endless consumption. Provisioning would be based on prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable, ‘putting the last first’ (Chambers 1983). Priorities would be determined by the most vulnerable members of the community, not its ‘natural’ leaders as defined by economic dominance.

The embeddedness of women’s work also resonates with a strong theme within green economics for a return to local provisioning (Hines 2000). For some this means dropping out of the valued economy entirely and moving towards subsistence as a means of production, the small scale, non-market and home spun (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999 Bennholdt-Thomsen et al 2001). There is also considerable enthusiasm for alternative economic forms such as LETS, time banks or other mutual or co-operative structures (Douthwaite 1996,

Douthwaite and Wagman 1999, Raddon 2003). Following the logic of women's work, social solidarity would be the basis of economic security, a local economy would be based on secure patterns of reciprocity. However, without a gender analysis of economic systems there is a danger that women's roles will once more be subsumed and treated as a given, particularly, the role of the family in any possible alternative needs to be addressed. Throughout history men have exploited women's domestic labour and their main instrument has been patriarchal power within the family. Women have historically found themselves disadvantaged, for example in the context of ownership and control of land in agricultural communities and in families (Agarwal 1994).

Whether it is desirable or not, it is unrealistic to hope to turn the clock back to a more homespun existence. While capitalism is not concerned with supplying the *necessities* of life, it is based on institutions engaged in denial of access to the means of sustenance for the majority, so that the minority can pursue power and status through predatory competition. Central to capitalism is the privatisation of resources for sustenance. Challenging and changing property ownership and the capitalist economy will not be easy. It is a powerful structure with vested interests, but it is also a structure that has absorbed wants as well as needs. To dismantle it wholesale would cause extreme hardship to many people. This is not an admission of defeat or a failure of radical nerve, it is a compassionate position. The means must reflect the ends. One way forward is to look for transformative spaces within current economic structures (Gibson-Graham 1996, Langley and Mellor, 2002). The most important aspect of the ME-economy against the subordinated half of the dualism is that it is valued. Some of this value is represented in prestige, but in modern economies the most important mechanism of valuation is the money system. It is money value that polices the boundary between what is seen as part of 'the economy' and that which is marginalised and externalised.

The Institution of Money

As Geoffrey Hodgson has reminded us, economists must not forget history (2001) and the history of money is particularly instructive. It is an institutional form in its own right, as revealed by the increasingly recognised insight that the money system has its own independent dynamic (Wray 2004, Ingham 2004). This is not to say that other aspects of the valued economy are not vitally important, such as patterns of ownership and control. However, given the historical establishment of property ownership and the entrenchment of the capitalist market system, a direct challenge to private property and the market, while politically desirable, will be difficult to achieve in the short term. However, the money system is possibly more vulnerable and open to critical analysis. It is, and has been, a source of instability and insecurity. It demonstrably has no basis for its value, particularly given its inflationary history, and currently virtually uncontrolled credit issue. Also, the money system, unlike private property is already acknowledged to be within the public sphere of influence, and therefore

could be subject, if politically desired, to democratic control. For Victoria Chick the money system is essentially social, where 'social organisation influences monetary circulation' (1992:164). She also sees 'a mutuality of state and social support of money in the modern western economy' (Chick 1992:142)

Given that money is central to the realisation and allocation of value in contemporary economies, and it is the main mechanism dividing the dualist economy, money access and circulation is a vital issue for ecofeminist analysis (Hutchinson, Mellor and Olsen 2002, Mellor 2005). In a system where priorities are driven by 'effective demand' access to money is a core political issue. The importance of seeing money as a social institution is that its issue and circulation cannot be seen as 'natural'. In an early statement Culbertson argued, 'the progressiveness, efficiency, and stability of an economy ...depends largely upon the quality of judgement applied by the suppliers of funds. This fact is not sufficiently appreciated. The reason for this is that people tend to accept whatever pattern of economic events emerges as inexorably ordained by fate, rather than seeing it as determined by institutions and habits of behaviour that could have been quite different' (Culbertson 1963:152). This understanding is vital because of 'the central role of financial decisions *in allocating the resources of the economy*' (Culbertson 1963:151 italics in the original). Chick also points out that 'money confers on those with authority to issue new money the power to pre-empt resources' (1992:141).

Contemporary thinkers are looking closely at how the money issue system works, particularly today, when most new money is issued as credit. As Herman Daly points out, an understanding of how banks create money is comparatively recent (1999:142) and Steve Keen argues that neo-classical economics still theorises banking as a barter between savers and borrowers (2001:289). Given the prevalence of debt-based money issue and the virtual non-existence of fractional reserve banking, the money currently issued into our society is effectively created out of nothing. In Galbraith's well recorded worlds, 'the process by which banks create money is so simple that the mind is repelled. Where something so important is involved, a deeper mystery seems only decent' (1975:29). As James Tobin has pointed out 'a long line of financial heretics have been right in speaking of "fountain pen money" – money created by the stroke of the bank president's pen when he approves a loan and credits the proceeds to the borrower's checking account' (1963: 408). Victoria Chick defines bank deposits as 'privately issued forms of money' (1992:141).

Even though the mechanism of money creation is now largely understood, Daly argues that its impact has not been addressed, 'although today the fact that commercial banks create much more money than the government is now explained in every introductory economics text, its full significance and effects on the economy have still not been sufficiently considered' (Daly 1999:142). This is particularly important given the fact that 'money creation has become a source of private income' (Daly 1999:141). As new money in the economy is effectively

produced out of thin air, there is a strong case for putting that money into the hands of the people as whole, rather than into the market. As Chick has argued, the key issue is whether money is 'a creation of the state or of private consensus' (Chick 1992:141). The irony of the current situation is that money creation is effectively in private hands through commercial decisions in the banking system, but the state still retains responsibility for managing and supporting the system, albeit at arm's length through central banks. It is therefore politically important to make public the fact that society collectively bears ultimate responsibility for the failures of the commercial money creation system, but has no influence on the overall direction of how finance is invested or used. In the process, government issue of money through borrowing is frowned upon while companies like Long Term Capital Management, ENRON or even the Channel Tunnel can be 'bailed out' almost indefinitely. Perelman points to the irony that while 'the financial system can bail out a Long Term Capital Management for a few billion dollars...nobody knows how to recover depleted energy sources or to rescue devastated environments on a global scale' (2003:93).

Perelman here points to the limitations of the money system. Externalisation means that women's work and environmental damage are not valued in money terms, but there is no simple solution through an extension of money valuation. Giving the environment a money value will not stop the damage, it might even encourage it. There are also strong arguments against incorporating domestic work into the formal economy, for example by paying women wages for housework (Malos 1980), on the basis that this will entrench women's work as a low paid job. A possible way around this would be to have a non-gendered citizen's income (Lord 1999) possibly linked to the more broad ranging approaches to the money system that are being debated (Harmer 1999, Daly 1999, Douthwaite 1999, Robertson 1998, Lietaer 2001, Robertson and Bunzl 2003, Mellor 2005).

In capitalised money systems, money/credit issue is a means by which those who have control over, or access to, the money-creation process can establish ownership and control over the means and direction of production. In a commodified market system, money is the means by which property and value are accumulated. The core feature of 'total' money economies, where the bulk of the population have no direct access to the means of sustenance, is that most people have no choice but to engage with them. People have to work for wages if they want to eat. Money is not just a medium of exchange or a store of value, it enables the basic circuits of economic life. Within a capitalised money economy, therefore, access to money becomes a crucial question, together with the allocation of money-based value. What is important in this discussion is not the particular form of money, but how it has come to dominate modern economic systems with the patterns of exclusion that ecofeminist political economy has identified. That becomes not only an issue of gender equality and the valuation of environmental damage, but a question of right to livelihood and economic democracy.

Conclusion

Ecofeminist political economy argues that the capitalist market is disembodied and disembedded, carved out of the totality of human existence within the natural world. Through the analysis of women's work it shows how the dualist 'economy' fails to acknowledge its true resource base and the way it is parasitical upon sustaining systems, including the environment. As a result these are exploited and damaged. This paper has described how ecofeminist political economy challenges the false boundaries of the dualised economy and seeks to begin the process of creating a provisioning system that will meet human needs and enhance human potential without destroying the life of the planet. A particular focus is the money system, which, while it does not represent the only determinant of the functioning of the dualist economy, does influence economic direction and priorities. It was argued that to make the issue of new money subject to democratic control could begin the process of building a non-gendered, egalitarian and ecologically sustainable economy.

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*This paper is a version of a paper published in Issue 1/2 International Journal of Green Economics