
Ecofeminist political economy

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Abstract: This paper will argue that ecofeminist political economy can make a major contribution to green economics. Ecofeminist political economy sees women's work and lives, like the natural world, as being externalised by current economic systems. Through an analysis of the gendering of economic systems, the paper explores alternative ways of conceptualising the provisioning of human societies. Central to this is a critique of conventional notions of 'the economy' and its dualist framework that only values marketable aspects of humanity and nature. The paper identifies the core elements of an ecofeminist analysis, including women's work as body work in biological time, and the necessarily embedded and localised nature of this work. From this perspective the paper goes on to explore conceptions of an embodied and embedded economics that would not be exploitative of women and nature.

Keywords: ecofeminist political economy; provisioning; women's work.

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1 Introduction

Ecofeminist political economy provides an analysis of the current destructive relationship between humanity and non-human nature through an understanding of women's position at the boundaries of economic systems. From this perspective women, or rather women's work and lives, like the natural world, are externalised and exploited by the valued economy. The phrase valued economy is used here to represent all economies that value human activities in money or prestige terms. The most ideologically dominant at present is the capitalist market economy, but most human economies have been gendered. While some green economists do take account of women in their analysis (Scott Cato and

Kennet, 1999), the main argument of this paper is that green economics in general, can be strengthened by an understanding of ecofeminist political economy. Perhaps more importantly, if green economists do not take on board these arguments, there will be a danger of replicating gender inequality in any future green economy.

Ecofeminism, as its name implies, brings together the insights of feminism and ecology (Mellor, 1997a; 2006; Salleh, 1997; King, 1993). 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. However, attaching the notion of political economy to ecofeminism makes an explicit statement about the approach taken. Much early ecofeminist literature asserted that women's identification with the natural world stemmed from their female natures (Plant, 1989; Diamond and Orenstein, 1990), although this view was challenged by later ecofeminists (Sturgeon, 1997; Sandilands, 1999). Some ecofeminists have argued that nurturing work creates a particular way of thinking. Ruddick (1989) sees a relationship between 'maternal thinking' and a more peace-orientated attitude, while Warren (2000) refers to an 'ethic of care' associated with women's work. However, both stress that the association is with the kind of work done and not the particularity of being a woman. Ecofeminist political economy starts not from women's natures, 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).

From this perspective the marginalisation of women's lives within 'the economy' is not accidental. However, women's position in relation to the economy is complex. Women are 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 'women's work', the range of human activities that have historically been associated with women. Women's work is the work that has historically been associated with women, both inside and outside of the market place. Women's work is the basic work that makes other forms of activity possible. It secures the human body and the community. If a woman enters valued economic life she must leave her woman-life behind; childcare, domestic work, responsibility for elderly relatives, subsistence work, community activities. Economic life is therefore limited and partial in relationship to women's lives (Folbre, 1993; Himmelweit, 2000; Stark, 2005). The role of gender in the construction of economic systems means that 'the economy' does not relate to the totality of human active labour and natural resources. What the modern economy represents is a boundary around limited activities and functions in which the process of valuing and male-ness are connected. The more work is valued, the more male-dominated it becomes. The more necessary and unremitting it is, the more female-dominated it becomes.

2 Dualist economics

From its earliest days feminist economics has argued that orthodox economics is a theory written by men about men (Ferber and Nelson, 1993; Nelson, 1996). It ignores women's work and women's issues (Folbre, 1993). As a result, women are pushed to the economic

margins (Kuiper and Sap, 1995). This has led feminist economists such as Donath (2000, p.115) 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.

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

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 needs 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 the social reciprocity in communal societies as represented in non-market economies (Waring, 1989). Left entirely out of consideration are the wider life of the body and the human and natural life-cycles. There is no space for the young, the old, the sick, the tired, the unhappy. It is in this subordinated world that the analysis of women's work and its marginalisation in the valued economy can be materially linked to the marginalisation of the natural world.

3 Gendering economies: time, space and altruism

What is important about women's work and relevant to green economics is that it is embodied and embedded. Women's work is embodied because it is concerned with the human body and its basic needs. Broadly it is the maintenance and sustenance of the human body through the cycle of the day and the cycle of life (birth to death), in sickness and in health. It is mainly caring work: child care, sick care, aged care, animal care, community care (volunteering, relationship building), family care (listening, cuddling, sexual nurturing, esteem building). Women's work is embedded because it is, of

necessity, local and communal, centred around the home. In subsistence economies it is embedded in the local ecosystem. What makes women's work embedded is its nature. As well as being caring, body work is work associated with 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. The element of presence is that much of women's work is watching and waiting, being there, being available, dependable, always on call. When women's work is taken into the valued economy its pay rates and conditions of work are poor (nursing, catering and cleaning).

The interesting question about women's work is why is it not valued? Why are there no historical monuments to the woman weeder, grinder, spinner, water carrier? What is even more interesting is the way women's economic activities have been lost to history (Barber, 1994). The modern economy has as its ideal man-the-breadwinner. The true history is woman-the-breadmaker after she has planted, harvested and ground the grain. 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 (Mellor, 1992). Men's activities tended to be much more intermittent, ritual and leisure-based. If this is the case, how have men come to dominate economic systems? The answer lies in the process by which economic systems are constructed. Economic systems do not relate to human labour directly, they relate to valued labour. It is the process of valuing and male-ness that are connected. Women's work in the unvalued economy is based on boundaries of space and time. As embodied and embedded work, women's work takes place in limited space. It remains close to home. Those doing domestic duties cannot move far from those responsibilities and this restricts opportunities in the valued economy. In contrast to its spatial limitations, women's work is unlimited in terms of time. Women's work never ends. 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. There is some evidence that women take paid work as a break from the demands of domestic life (MacDonald *et al.*, 2005).

Unlike work in the valued economy, much of women's work is unrewarded in money terms, although it may be intrinsically rewarding. There is also an expectation that those servicing the family should put their own needs last. Why 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. They have worked throughout history for little recognition. For many it has been a labour of love, but it can also be seen as an imposed altruism (Mellor, 1992, p.251). Most women feel they have little choice but to do this work, as there is no-one else to do it. While it 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. Women have been persecuted as witches and been disproportionately subject to infanticide. They have suffered domestic violence in most cultures (Agathangelou, 2004).

One of the most notable factors in contemporary societies is that in prosperous economies women are increasingly refusing to undertake women's 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.

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

Contemporary economics represents a public world as defined by dominant men, based on male experience. From the perspective of ecofeminist political economy it can be seen as 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. He is fed and rested. 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 a version of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. While he appears to exist in a smoothly functioning world, the portrait in the attic represents his real social, biological and ecological condition. 'Economic man' is the product of an ahistoric, atomised approach to the understanding of human existence (Feiner, 1999; Ferber and Nelson, 1993). What economic man transgresses is the world of the body and nature, that is, the world of ecological and biological time.

The ME-economy is disembodied from the daily cycle of the life of the body and from the human life cycle as expressed in women's work. It is also disembedded from the ecological framework: The life-cycle and daily cycle of the body cannot be accommodated in the fractured world of the valued economy. This is because the body represents *biological time*, the time it takes to rest, recover, grow up and grow old. The ME economy is disembodied from the daily cycle, the ideal ME-economy worker comes to work fed, cleaned nurtured and emotionally supported. It is also disembodied from the life cycle, the ideal ME-economy worker is fit and healthy, not too young or old. The ideal ME-economy worker does not do women's work, and has no routine responsibility for others. He/she is mobile and easily disembedded from community and local attachments.

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. Preferably the ME-economy locates its polluting industries and toxic dumps in poorer communities (Bullard, 1994). As a disembedded system, the ME-economy is disconnected from the life-cycle of its environment. This represents a disengagement from *ecological time*, that is, the time it takes to restore the effects of human activity. The life-cycle of renewal and replenishment within the eco-system. If there is any possibility of renewal.

Its disembeddedness from the limitations of community and environment means that the ME economy exists in unlimited space and time. It is a 24-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). Participation as a consumer requires access to money. What is produced and circulated is determined by 'market forces', that is, a combination of effective demand and profitability. There is no distinction in the modern market economy between needs and wants. Needs cannot be prioritised over wants and needs that are not backed by effective demand in the market or through public expenditure (also determined by male-dominated institutions) will not be met. The modern economy may meet many basic needs but that is not its primary purpose. Its aim is to achieve profitable financial exchange, it is not directed towards meeting human needs on an equitable and ecologically sustainable basis.

5 Externalising nature through women

From an ecofeminist perspective 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. What is important about the exclusion of women's lives from the notion of the economic is that women have become the repository of the inconvenience of human existence. Moreover, the pattern of exclusion that affects women is in turn related to other exclusions and marginalisations, in particular those of non-western, non-commercial and non-white economies and people. The marginalised world of women's lives also represents the derided world of nature (Salleh, 1997). As the dominant half of a dualism, the valued economy rests on unacknowledged and unvalued support structures. In particular these are 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. Ecofeminist political economy therefore, offers an explanation of how a destructive economic system is constructed. Destructiveness is central to its fundamental dualist structure.

From an ecofeminist political economy perspective 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, market systems, the ME-economy has gained control of land, resources and productive systems. In particular, it controls the sources of sustenance for the majority of the world's people as well as other species. People have little choice but to engage with it if they want to survive. 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. The public sector, particularly since the failure of the command economies, accepts that its actions are limited by the structures of the globalised, capitalist market economy.

An analysis of women's work can expose the link between unsustainable economic systems and the embedded nature of human existence. The basic ecofeminist case is that dominant men have created male-dominated socio-economic systems that have not incorporated the embodied and embedded nature of human existence. Instead, this has been rejected and despised as women's work. Valued economic systems have therefore been erected on a false base. Ecofeminists such as Henderson and Mies have seen the valued economy as a small tip of a much greater sustaining whole. For Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999), 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. For Henderson (1996) the market sector is the icing on a cake. 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 valued economy is not acknowledging is the precariousness of its seemingly transcendent position; its immanence in the sustaining systems that underpin it (Mellor, 1997a). As Plumwood (1993) 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 misunderstands the conditions of his own existence and lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of Earthian existence." (p.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 *et al.*, 2002). Despite this power, it is a system in which people do not feel economically secure or happy (Lane, 2000). Given the parasitical nature of the economy, it is not surprising that it cannot give people, even the rich, a sense of personal security.

6 A green and feminist economics

A green economics from the perspective of ecofeminist political economy would therefore want to start from the need to overcome the dualism in economic thinking and the economy. Feminist economists have argued that the notion of the economy needs to be changed from the narrow focus on market determination and rational choice, 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). An ecologically sustainable economy would start from the embodiment and embeddedness of human lives, from the life of the body and the ecosystem. This means that a provisioning economy would start 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. 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.

The embeddness of women's work also resonates with the 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 cooperative 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.

While women's work should be the starting point for a green economy, this does not mean that the traditional domestic arrangements should prevail. If there is to be gender equality, provisioning and personal well-being would need to rest in the social reciprocity of society as a whole and not necessarily in family structures. This is not to say that families would not exist, but it cannot be assumed that they are the only means of carrying out women's work and basic provisioning. In a local economy (however this is defined geographically) what would be the opportunity for social and geographic mobility, an important aspect of women's liberation? How would services that support body work such as hospitals be organised? If there is a subsistence system, would it make women's lives harder? What would be the structure of the local economy? Would there be private ownership of resources and/or family based self-provisioning? Women have historically found themselves disadvantaged over ownership and control of land in agricultural communities and in families (Agarwal, 1994).

While there are gender issues in pursuing a local economy solution, an equally pressing problem for green economics and ecofeminist political economy is the globalised dominance of the capitalist market system (Kovel, 2002). 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 value 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) and one of these is the mechanism of valuation that has historically marginalised women and nature.

7 Finding transformative spaces

The basis of the dualist economy is valuation and the medium of that valuation is the money system. Externalisation means that women's work and environmental damage are not valued in money terms. This is not to say that there is a simple solution through money valuation. Giving the environment a money value, *as environmental economics has tried to do, has not stopped it, it might even have encouraged it*. There are also strong arguments against 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). However, rather than a specific approach such as citizens income, much more broad ranging approaches to the money system are being debated (Harmer, 1999; Daly, 1999; Douthwaite, 1999; Robertson, 1998; Lietaer, 2001; Robertson and Bunzl, 2003). 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 *et al.*, 2002; Mellor, 2005).

Central to an analysis of money issue and circulation as a possible transformative space for a feminist and green economies, is 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. 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.

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 with no direct access to the means of sustenance, is that most people have no choice but to engage with them. They 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.

Even though the mechanism of money creation is now largely understood, Daly (1999, p.142) 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".

What ecofeminist political economy has identified is that the valued economy is parasitical upon other aspects of human and natural existence. Its failure to acknowledge its true resource base means that these are both exploited and damaged. While the money system does not represent the only determinant of the functioning of the valued economy, it does influence economic direction and priorities. It is a major mechanism in creating the dualised economic system. To make the issue of new money subject to democratic control would not be a full solution to building an egalitarian and ecologically sustainable economy, but it could begin to challenge the destructive priorities of the market system. It would also challenge the false boundaries of the dualised economy and begin the process of creating a provisioning system that will meet human needs and enhance human potential without destroying the life of the planet.

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