

## **Feminising the Economic and Economising the Feminine: Gendered Spheres of Economic Geography**

There is perhaps no era of modern life and academia that has been as thoroughly challenged and dissected by feminist thought as that of 'the economic'. It comprises a majority of feminist literature, and has had a wide reaching impact on policy with particular regard to work and the workplace. Indeed I feel it is no exaggeration to state that the feminist critique has completely redefined the boundaries of what constitutes the economic realm, to the extent that in contemporary debate it is impossible to properly discuss economic issues in isolation from cultural and political influences. The notion of the rational and faceless economic actor has been broken down and proven false. This is perhaps the biggest triumph of feminism, yet these debates are still marginalised and labelled as 'other' or post-modern critiques by the majority of economic writings. Even so, as Oberhauser (2000) notes "two decades ago, a chapter on feminism in an economic geography reader would have been unlikely".

Many of the textbooks and readers studied here have chapters written by feminist authors, but to what extent do these ideas permeate other parts of the books? Have feminist writers managed to challenge our notions of the economic, or are the dominant teaching aids marginalising contemporary thought in a token chapter, and raising another generation of patriarchs? This essay will question the portrayal of five of the key areas of economic geography in standard textbooks for undergraduates and assess the impact and perceptions of feminist thought within them to analyse the extent to which they recognise that women have a different economic experience to men. The main books surveyed will be 'Global Shift' (Dicken 1998), 'Spatial Divisions of Labour' (Massey 1995), 'The Geography of the World Economy' (Knox et. al 2003), and 'Geographies of Economies' (Lee and Wills 1997).

## **Rethinking History**

One of the most important methods utilised in feminist writing is the processes of creating an alternative history that redresses the balance of the past which is usually written by white middle class men about historical white middle class male figures. This perpetuating process is what Livingstone describes as presentism, the telling of history in terms that enable an understanding of the present (Gregson and Rose 1997). In geography one example of this is by raising the profile of women who made significant explorations and published their findings (Domosh and Morin 2003). In 'Global Shift', Dicken agrees with the notion of understanding the past; "it is impossible to understand the current situation without at least an outline knowledge of what has gone before" (Dicken 1998). The way in which history is perceived is however strongly dependant on the notions of those who portray it.

In conventional writings of the economic system which are perpetuated in key undergraduate texts, history starts with the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. Before this there is only mention of primitive forms of trade (Knox et. al 2003), or in the case of Dicken (1998) essentially nothing. While Knox et. al (2003) give an brief account of the history of human civilisations through the ages, including the first uses of tools and cultivation, they do not note that it was almost certainly women who developed these innovations (Cockburn 1985). So even before the era of industrial society, history is painted as being gender neutral and essentially faceless, and there is only one economic system for each era, which must be equally applicable to all members of the population. Hence we miss crucial detail in the gendered history of development.

Feminist histories have aimed to redress this balance by showing that in the pre-industrial era women had much greater autonomy, and were masters of particular crafts, such as beer making and weaving (Domosh and Seager 2001, Rose and MacKenzie 1983). The industrial society made both these items (and many others) capitalist activities, and removed them from the non-economic realm of home work. By properly understanding the history behind these processes, feminist geographers are able to comprehend the spatial separation of home and work which has emerged in present society, as will be discussed briefly later. The feminist history of the economy has deconstructed the notion that a capitalist system is all pervasive, and has always existed. When the merchant system is described by Dicken and Knox et. al, it is not emphasised that only a very few were part of this

economic system as most were occupied in subsistence farming. Judith Still (1997) demonstrates that traditionally very few people were part of a trade or economic system; in ancient Greece only the upper classes had a financial sphere. Yet the perception of society gleaned from the textbooks is that the economy is something that everyone participates in, and has always been part of everyday life for men and women alike.

By showing that the dominant discourse of economic segregation and universal assimilation is a recent and contentious creation, feminism is already breaking down the solid notions of how the economic discourse is perceived. But what is this economic sphere? What is this entity we describe as 'the economic'?

### **Reshaping the Economic**

When we read descriptions of the economy, we are frequently presented with notions of the economy as being something that is organic and alive (Gibson-Graham 1996) or as a physical sphere with some processes that fall inside, and some outside of its realm (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). In general, the conventional economic sphere encompasses processes of trade, work and exchange or “any activity that [relates] to the production and distribution of wealth” (Hewitson 2001). Many authors have noted that there are many crucial processes that are typically left out of these definitions, factors such as knowledge, natural resources, and work that is not paid, which may not be easily quantifiable as inputs to an economic system, but have a direct effect on processes that make money.

Geography should be very good at redrawing the boundaries of what should be classed as 'economic' as it is a strong multidisciplinary subject. Geography can bring in ideas from outside economic academia, such as notions of culture, power and politics. Feminist geography is especially good at this, as it has attempted to pull apart traditional economic discourses (McDowell 2000), a practice that has roots in the efforts to describe housework. Marx was one of the earliest to realise the value of domestic work at home (typically performed by women) which although usually unpaid, had an important value in replenishing the wage earner for work the next day. Traditional notions of the economic sphere which Dicken, Knox and others describe do not include the value of unpaid work, or black market economies. Henderson (1991) has put forward a contemporary image

for the economy, as a layer cake in which the bases are natural resources and unpaid work. The icing, representing the traditional market economy, rests on top of all these processes, it is even seen as relying on volunteer and black market activities.

One can even attempt to break down the notion that home, work, paid and volunteer time are distinct things. For example many people in managerial roles often take paperwork home with them to work, and may work overtime on a Sunday, without being paid, to finish a project that is due on Monday. To the extent that some jobs demand tasks to be completed on schedule regardless of paid hours, it is difficult to draw a boundary between where work is performed, and the extent to which voluntary work forms a significant part of a waged salary. The main textbooks make very little mention of such notions, because there is a strong focus on manufacturing industries, the traditional economic geography fodder. The key focus of these textbooks is on work that is traditionally male dominated, such as industry and high-tech development, and not farming, services or domestic labour.

The key texts in the economic geography field are not very good at stating what their definition of 'the economic' is, so it is difficult to assess what aspects they include. Yet a brief survey of the issues that are being discussed in these books shows that there is very little inclusion of what are seen as marginal 'marshlands' at the edge of the economy that represent home and family processes, voluntary work and the role of consumers (Gregson 2000). These are issues that feminist geographers are especially interested in, and all have important spacial issues. Yet there is not even acknowledgement of the existence of debate on the boundaries of the economic sphere in these texts; Dicken and Knox et al. seem to assume prior knowledge of what the economic is. However 'Geographies of Economies' is slightly better in this respect, and provides several chapters exploring notions of the economic, including the influence of culture, politics and power.

Knox et. al (2003) also discuss the blurred areas between social and political influences, albeit briefly. They note the importance of considering the effect that culture, society and political systems have on economic organisations and their spatial dimensions. Feminist authors are keen to highlight this difference too, as many aim to show that the economic sphere is not the rational and solid object we are taught to visualise, but something that is created and influenced by people, who each have unique emotional and cultural reasons for acting. Yet Knox et al. do not go far enough in this

regard, as the prevailing tone in the book is still of grey faceless processes where the actors are obscured.

### **Faceless governments and businesses**

In books such as *Geographies of the World Economies* (Knox et. al 2003) and others including *Global Shift* (Dicken 1998) workers are described as human, often victims of industrial processes, while the echelons of command are portrayed as faceless, and hence genderless. Economic geography tends to describe processes of change that are considered to often be part of an inevitable process. In this way an old system, for example Fordism, is replaced by a new, and hence better system, such as Post-Fordism (Gibson-Graham 1996). These processes are rarely described with specific references to case studies, and when examples of companies are given, the decisions they take are corporate, and not representative of a particular managerial team. Hence the role of the individual actor has been removed from the picture of capitalist change, and with it the role of gender bias. The same is less true of governments; as frequent references are made to periods like the 'Thatcher/Reagan era', yet these terms still portray a unified, particular way of behaviour.

The effect of dehumanising the decision making progresses is a serious issue to feminist geographers, as it obscures the male orientated nature of governments and company directors. Little has been written on the effect of this specifically on economic geography, although when supposedly genderless entities and processes are described in academia like this, feminist thinkers have argued that the discourses usually represent male thinking (WGSG 1997). In such cases, as in most academic writing, the processes being described are seen as scientific, neutral and impartial. For example the term Fordism is used to describe kinds of mass producing industry that use a production line based labour division (Knox et. al 2003), as it was a notion used by Henry Ford in his factories. By dehumanising the term, it is easy to forget that Ford was not a rational actor, for example he had strong links to the Nazi party (Wikipedia 2004).

The same dehumanising processes applies for other important actors in the economic market. The World Bank, IMF, NGOs, TNCs and labour unions all are presented as having a unified corporate face which discusses the fact most have male dominated boards of directors. In each organisation the appointment of directors or senior management is a very political issue where a candidate's personal

opinions on policy can radically change the outlook and strategies of the whole institution. For example the new chief economist of the IMF (male of course) is a fierce advocate of controversial structural adjustment techniques, so his appointment is a very political issue (BBC News 2004).

The role of the state is increasingly being analysed in economic geography, as companies can invest in a myriad of places across the globe, the local differences in state control and policy can have direct effects on the establishment of new businesses. While some authors have argued that the state has decreasing power to influence economic society, O'Neil (1997) writing in 'Geographies of Economies' is one of many that take a different view, and he argues persuasively that the state is as important as ever. He does acknowledge that governments are fluid and represent a multitude of different views, but does not discuss gender, or other minority representation in democracies. Politics is often perceived as being a male occupation because it requires male gendered qualities such as aggression and ambition, and these governments can create gendered identities and landscapes in the state (WGSG 1997).

As states are usually responsible for enforcing laws on minimum wages, labour practices, and equal opportunity (all policies that have great importance for female workers), a male biased government may place less emphasis on these issues. Governments can also be corrupt, and a dehumanised face of the state again implies impartiality and rationality to a system that in reality encourages power seeking and personal advancement. In all the economic geography textbooks, notions of government action rarely feature beyond the supposed dichotomy of free market or interventionist systems. Yet in a world market where whole countries are sometimes competing with each other for investment opportunities, unveiling the irrational and patriarchal systems of governance is crucially important for studying economics.

### **The New International Division of Labour**

Perhaps the biggest issue in economic geography is the processes by which firms globalise and take advantage of production and consumption patterns in a global market. This is the one area of economic geography where the key text (at least with a UK focus) is written by a woman: Doreen Massey and her book 'Spatial Divisions of Labour' (1995). The significance of Massey's work is obvious through the number of other authors that quote her, and the number of chapters she has

written in other texts: for example in 'Geographies of Economies' and 'Economic Geography Reader'. Yet it could be argued that her work might be best described as gender aware, rather than feminist.

Her article entitled 'Flexible Sexism' (Massey 1991) shows that she is strongly opposed to sexist writing in academic literature, through a deeply critical interpretation of two supposedly post-modern textbooks. 'Space, Place and Gender' (1994) also has strong feminist writings. But primarily her work has a much broader scope and most of her work falls outside the label of feminist writing. One gets the impression that this is how geography textbooks should be written, not with token chapters by recognised feminists so that editors can claim to have covered the gender issue, but with ideas that are integrated in all aspects of the debate.

Having mentioned this, it is important to note that Massey's writing does not present the more radical post-capitalist (but never anti-capitalist) feminism of Gibson-Graham; it takes the approach of including women within economic literature, rather than calling for a radical overhaul of the patriarchal system. Cameron and Gibson-Graham would define Massey as a conservative reformer, as she fits the description of feminists that add-on the sphere of woman's work to the conventional image of the economy.

It is easy to label much of Massey's work as being representative of all feminist economics, as many of the authors in 'Geographies of Economies' have done. However her achievement is to have written a textbook that has not been stereotyped as being overtly 'feminist' but instead is inclusive of women's experiences in a male oriented sphere, and thus has become a central economic text. She has also successfully achieved a key aim of the feminist movement, and that is to show how women's economic experience is different to that of men, through the case studies of industrial regions of the UK.

Manufacture and industry seems to take up a majority of the academic literature on both economic geography in general, and the role of women within manufacturing. For example, the only point where Dicken mentions women in Global Shift is in the context of clothing and electrical assembly work where he notes that women are the predominant source of labour. However the language he uses is verging on being sexist; "they employ many of the more sensitive segments of the labour

force: females and immigrants” (Dicken 1998) as if women are a minority 'othered' group like migrants. They are also described as being semi-skilled or unskilled, and Dicken perpetuates backward notions of women's work stating that assembly work requires “good eyesight and dexterity, but little training”.

This practice is noted in a little more depth by the Women Geographers Study Group, who note that what these Trans-National Corporations are looking for is a kind of perpetual 'international teenager': someone who is naïve about unions and working conditions, has no family to worry about, but is young and hard working (WGSG 1997). This notion is similar to the image Dicken depicts of female labour, where they are helpless victims of their employees. Yet WGSG and other feminists have noted that these kind of jobs can be empowering for women in developing countries, providing them with financial independence from home and men, and an opportunity to pay for further education. Far from being helpless these workers have sometimes rallied together and successfully campaigned for better working conditions (WGSG 1997).

Dicken does note some of the serious issues with this work, and notes the tendency to “only hire unmarried women, to avoid paying maternity benefits and ensure that an employee's loyalty will be to the company not to her family or household” (Dicken 1998). This language has unfortunately resorting to common essentialised notions of women being housewives and not independent workers. There is also no mention of the role of women in managerial or senior positions. What 'Global Shift' does mention is the relatively new practice of outsourcing back office paperwork procedures to countries where the labour is cheaper. In this respect Dicken is the only author that makes note of international labour markets outside of manufacturing. This issue is particularly important for gender economics, because it is often women who perform these secretarial roles, for example administrative paperwork, check processing, and working in call centres.

Dicken (1998) gives the example of an New York insurance company that physically sends their application forms to Ireland and Barbados to be typed up, and e-mailed back as digitised and processed documents. The trend to decentralise office processes takes advantage of moving functions to areas where office space and labour is cheaper than in the financial central business districts. Massey (1995) mentions this process occurring within the UK, but does not mention the international dimension. Both books make very light of this issue, although in many ways it should

get equal emphasis to the issues surrounding manufacturing employment. Although industry is the traditional battleground for the new international division of labour, service industries employ many more people, and are growing while traditional factory work continues to decline.

The internationalisation of services is an important issue for feminist geography, as the kind of roles that are outsourced are generally performed by women, and these back processing industries create 'pink ghetto' effects in developed countries. These are suburbs where women are unable to leave because they do not have access to transport and have domestic roles, but where businesses have located offices to take advantage of cheap part-time female labour (England 1993). Call centres are being increasingly outsourced to India where there is a large, well educated and English speaking female workforce. New technologies and cheap international telecommunication allow service industries to be even more footloose than industrial ones, and this is an area the dominant literature is not up to date on. It will be women's jobs that are lost in developed countries, and new gendered power systems will be created in developing countries to run these new businesses.

So far this essay has had very little input from post-modernist critiques of theory, a form of thinking that is often used in feminist writing. However, the texts of Dicken, Knox et. al and Massey are very material in their descriptions of economic systems, and so it is difficult to assess the discourses and methodologies used in this way. However 'Geographies of Economies' provides a much more theoretical analysis of economic geography, and as an edited compilation, represents many differing viewpoints which cannot be summarised as reflecting on one area of the economy. Hence it is worthy of its own chapter with a different critical approach.

### **Dissecting Discourses**

'Geographies of Economics' has three chapters written by prominent writers in the field of feminist geography. Massey's chapter is entitled 'Economic/non-economic' although the title of the article is misleading, as it mostly concerns itself with the development of R&D institutions in the UK and their strong links to academic institutions. She likens their structure to monasteries and suggests that women are still excluded from R&D laboratories in similar ways that women have been prevented from entering senior positions in the church. Although she does use strategies of feminising history to make her case, there is already considerable writing on female exclusion in research and high-

tech roles, and considering the title of the chapter, her conclusions are a little disappointing. Many feminist writers have completely challenged the whole economic system; Gibson-Graham has drawn parallels from Marx, and Still has written persuasively about the notions of alternative gift economies (Still 1997). In 'Geographies of Economics' there is no questioning of the economic system as a whole, despite frequent criticism of the way in which it is described. Hence one gets the feeling that feminism is being 'tacked on' to existing economic discourses, rather than truly challenging the nature of the underlying processes.

A true post-modern critique of the economic system would start by rejecting the assumption which all the key texts have taken for granted; that the dominant capitalist economic system is the only system worth noting. Even the title of Massey's article: 'Economic/Non-economic' implies a dualism which is a gross simplification. As Gibson-Graham have deftly illustrated (Gibson-Graham 1996, Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003), there is no clear boundary between the two, instead a multiplicity of systems and processes. Yet their own article in the book is comparatively dualist: not only with regards to capitalist/non-capitalist categories, but with respect to class and gender dualisms, despite referring to Butler and her ideas on gender trouble.

Thus some interesting questions can be raised: why are there no articles in the collection that challenge the role of the economy in its entirety, and despite the presence of some excellent and challenging authors, why are the articles so bland? Why are Gibson-Graham writing about class, and not challenging the notions of the economy? Why are there no contributions from Still about the non-economic, and from Butler about gender dualisms? Why does McDowell write what is essentially a synopsis of her book 'Capital Culture', when for another compilation she has written an excellent review of feminist economic thought (McDowell 2000). Considering the potential here, the role of feminist critique is very disappointing. 'A Companion to Economic Geography' and 'The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography' are both much more challenging compendiums.

It is hard to shake the notion that the editors of this volume are simply not interested in commissioning articles about feminist critiques, or those that truly challenge economic geography. Some of this sentiment can be gleaned from the editorial introduction to the first section written by Crang. Here he seems to deem feminism to be part of the cultural-turn, and it is listed together with post-structuralist and ecological movements, seemingly 'othering' these writings that are not part of

the contemporary discourse. Yet no mention is made of other post-structural debates, such as the role of race, Western-centralism, or age (Crang 1997). Some have argued that feminist writing is focused too much on dualities of gender, and should become more multi-stratified in its approach to include more notions of class and race bias within feminist literature (Bordo 1990). Vaiou's article on the informal economy in 'Geographies of Economies' perhaps provides the best description of a multiplicity of form, noting that "the informal does not exist in a vacuum, but in specific contexts of formal regulatory systems; thus the same activity or practice may be perfectly regular and formal in a certain place and time, but informal, irregular or illegal in another" (Vaiou 1997). Yet it seems that most of the contributors to this volume are not ready to confront feminist writing, let alone post-feminist writing. Indeed the way Crang briefly writes about feminism seems to imply that all writers who can be labelled as feminist share the same viewpoint.

In the chapter by Allen entitled 'Economies of Power and Space', it seems that feminist writing is even being de-gendered. He makes great note of Massey's writing on power and authority, and yet moves this away from the context of gender to glean a different meaning from it. Allen argues that power is not defined by social relationships, but instead argues that within the economic sphere power is institutional and emotionless (Allen 1997). While this is clearly a notion that feminist critique would disagree strongly with, attempting to arrive at this conclusion through Massey's arguments on gender is an extraordinary strategy. He has to remove Massey's description of male dominated authority, the very crux of her argument, as patriarchy represents emotional and irrational behaviour, not institutionally based power. By sanitising and de-gendering power based structures, Allen tries to convince that power is faceless and rational.

So it seems that there is as big a challenge for feminist geographers as ever, especially in the traditional rational and calculated world of economics. There is however lots of excellent feminist literature on the subject, especially compared to the sphere of political geography. Confines of space prevent much discussion other issues, such as the home/work multiplicity and the value of domestic labour, an area that is one of the most researched issues in economic geography. It should just be noted that such an assessment of the role of the private sphere in these textbooks would be difficult to write, as it receives almost no attention. This essay has also been predominantly negative, perhaps because the nature of this kind of study which makes it more interesting to find differences rather than consensus and not because the texts are entirely without merit.

## References

- Allen. J. 1997. *Economies of Power and Space*. In Lee and Willis 2003.
- Anderson. J., Duncan. S., Hudson. R. 1983. *Redundant Spaces in Cities and Regions? Studies in Industrial Decline and Social Change*. Macmillan, London.
- Bordo. S. *Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism*. In Nicholson 1990.
- BBC News. 2004. *Rato Confirmed in IMF's Top Job*. [accessed online May 2004]  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3684613.stm>
- Bryson. J., Henry. N., Keeble. D., Martin. R. 1999. *The Economic Geography Reader: Producing and Consuming Global Capitalism*. Wiley, Chichester.
- Cameron. J., Gibson-Graham. J.K. 2003. Feminising the Economy: Metaphors, Strategy, Politics. *Gender, Place and Culture*. **10(2)**, pp 145-157.
- Clark. G., Feldman. M., Gertler, M. 2000. *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Crang. P. 1997. *Introduction: Cultural Turns and the (Re)Construction of Economic Geography*. In Lee and Willis 1997.
- Dicken. P. 1998. *Global Shift: Transforming the World Economy*. Paul Chapman Publishing, London.
- Domosh. M., Seager. J. 2001. *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*. Guilford Press, NY.
- Domosh. M., Morin. K. 2003. Travels with Feminist Historical Geography. *Gender, Place and Culture*. **10(3)**, pp 257-264.
- England. K. 1993. Suburban Pink Collar Ghettos: The Spatial Entrapment of Women? *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. **83(2)**, pp 225-242.
- Gibson-Graham. J.K. 1996. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew it)*. Blackwell. Oxford.
- Gregson. N., and Rose. G. 1997 *Contested and Negotiated Histories of Feminist Geography*. In WGSJ 1997.
- Hewitson. G. 2001. A Survey of Feminist Economics. *La reobe University School of Business Discussion Paper*. **A 1.01**, pp 1-52. [accessed online May 2004]  
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/business/research/dps/downloads/dps01/a01-01.pdf>
- Lee. R., Wills. J. 1997. *Geographies of Economies*. Arnold, London.

- Massey. D. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Massey. D. 1995. *Spatial Divisions of Labour*. Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- McDowell. L. 1997. *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- McDowell. L. 2000. *Feminists Rethink the Economic: The Economics of Gender/ The Gender of Economics*. in Clark et al. 2000.
- Nicholson. J. 1990. *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Routledge, NY.
- Oberhauser. Ann. 2000. *Feminism and Economic Geography: Gendering Work and Working Together*. in Sheppard and Barnes 2000.
- O'Neil. P. 1999. Bringing the Qualitative State into Economic Geography. in Lee and Wills 1999.
- Rose. D., Mackenzie. S. 1983. *Industrial Changes, the Domestic Economy and Home Life*. In Anderson et. al 1983
- Sheppard. E., Barnes. T. 2000. *A Companion to Economic Geography*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Still. J. 1997. *Feminine Economies*. Manchester University Press. Manchester.
- WGSG. 1997. *Feminist Geographies: Explorations in Diversity and Difference*. Longman, Harlow.
- Wikipedia. 2004. *Henry Ford*. [accessed online May 2004]  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Ford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Ford)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).