BEYOND ECONOMIC MAN
Feminist Theory and Economics
Edited by Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson
1993
There are androcentric biases in the deep theoretical structure of neoclassical economics. Three of the most basic assumptions underlying economic theory are that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible, that tastes are exogenous to economic models and unchanging, and that actors are selfish (have independent utilities) in markets. I argue that each of these assumptions flows from a separative model of human nature that has become a focus of criticism by feminists across a number of disciplines. I call the model “separative” because it presumes that humans are autonomous, impervious to social influences, and lack sufficient emotional connection to each other to make empathy possible. This is how they are presumed to behave in “the economy” or the “market.”

A fourth, often more implicit, assumption in many neoclassical models is that individuals do not behave according to the separative model vis-à-vis their families. In the family, individuals (particularly men) are presumed to be altruistic. Thus, empathic emotional connections between individuals are emphasized in the family whereas they are denied in analyzing markets. I will argue that these assumptions exaggerate both the atomistic, separative nature of behavior in markets and the connective empathy and altruism within families.

These assumptions may be called “androcentric,” or male-centered, in part because had the existing system of gender relations not been seen as the only possible or desirable arrangement, these particular assumptions would not have been chosen. In particular, such sharp contrasts between the assumptions thought appropriate to analyze households and those thought appropriate to analyze markets would not have seemed appropriate. These assumptions are also androcentric in the sense of being biased in favor of men’s interests. Men’s interests are furthered because analyses proceeding from these assumptions direct our attention away from the ways in which typical arrangements...
between men and women perpetuate women’s disadvantage both in their families and in labor markets.

It is quite possible to criticize the major assumptions of neoclassical theory without making reference to feminist scholarship. Many economists and other social scientists have done so.1 This paper draws upon many of their insights, but it emphasizes something that many criticisms of economic theory ignore: that the way gender has been socially organized has much to do with which parts of human experience have been left out of neoclassical models.2 Contributions typically made by women are often rendered invisible by the theory; men’s advantages and power are often rendered invisible as well. Ignoring women’s contributions and men’s power are important parts of what may be called “androcentric” bias. The reader should bear in mind, however, that all sexism in economic writing cannot be reduced to these criticisms of gender bias in the deep theoretical assumptions of economics. Some analyses suffer from gender bias in the auxiliary assumptions of their particular applications rather than in the most basic assumptions discussed here.

Feminist Critiques of Theoretical Biases

Before applying a feminist critique to economic theory, it is first necessary to clarify what I mean by feminist theory. One result of the entry of women, often feminists, into the academy in the last twenty years has been the allegation that theories in every discipline have been affected by gender bias. Over time, feminist thought has become increasingly diverse and today contains much healthy controversy.3 What is common to virtually all feminist views, however, is the belief that women are subordinated to men to a degree that is morally wrong and unnecessary. Beyond this, views differ as to the sources of women’s disadvantage and the proper remedy.

Two major, though not mutually exclusive, emphases within feminist thinking can be discerned: One body of thought emphasizes the exclusion of women from traditionally male activities and institutions. For example, laws, cultural beliefs, and other discriminatory practices have excluded most women from politics, religious leadership, military positions, and traditionally male crafts and professions within paid employment. These exclusions

are significant for women since activities traditionally regarded as male are those associated with the largest rewards of honor, power, and money. The mechanisms of exclusion are sometimes so effective that most women do not choose to enter “male” domains, although a minority have always attempted to do so. Here feminists see the corrective to be allowing women to participate in these spheres on an equal basis with men.

A second body of feminist thought emphasizes the devaluation of and low material rewards accorded to activities and traits that traditionally have been deemed appropriate for women. The sexism here is in failing to see how much traditionally female activities or dispositions contribute to the economy, society, or polity. Examples include failing to see how much child rearing, household work, and volunteer work contribute to “the wealth of nations.” Another example is failing to see the extent to which work in predominantly female occupations contributes to firms’ profits, the issue raised by the movement for “comparable worth” in wage setting (England 1992). Feminists who emphasize this sort of sexism see the remedy to include changing values that deprecate traditionally female activities as well as allocating higher rewards to such activities.4

Sometimes these two feminist positions are read as being in conflict: the first is seen as advocating that women enter traditionally male activities while the second is seen to advocate women’s continued attention to traditionally female activities. In fact, however, the second position is not inconsistent with a commitment to opening all valued activities to both men and women on an equal basis. It is possible to believe that we should acknowledge the value of traditionally female activities and reserve them accordingly without believing that women should continue to do a disproportionate share of these activities. Indeed, a culture that really valorized traditionally female activities would undoubtedly encourage men as well as women to learn these skills and values. In this sense the two feminist positions can be seen as compatible, since together they would encourage that activities traditionally associated with both men and women be open to both men and women, while simultaneously en-


2. For other criticisms of economic theory that do link the omissions to gender bias, see Folbre and Hartmann (1988) and Nelson (forthcoming) as well as the other papers in this volume.

3. For one excellent review of feminist positions, see Jaggar (1985).

4. Nelson (1992) points out that traditionally female and traditionally male qualities each have both a positive and a negative aspect, but our culture has tended to see only the positive side of supposedly masculine qualities and the negative side of supposedly feminine qualities. Consider, for example, the oppositional terms “hard” and “soft” often metaphorically associated with men and women respectively. At least in intellectual or business life, “hard” is seen as positive and “soft” as negative. But Nelson points out that it is more telling to see “hard” as having a positive aspect, strength, and a negative aspect, rigidity, while “soft” has a negative aspect, weakness, as well as a positive aspect, flexibility. The tendency to see the hard-soft distinction as a matter of strong versus weak and to ignore the fact that it is also a matter of flexible versus rigid is an instance of androcentric bias. Nelson’s discussion shows that the second feminist emphasis I am discussing here is most defensible when it argues for valorization of the positive aspects of traditionally female activities and traits, and when its criticism of androcentric values focuses on the negative aspects of traditionally male activities and traits.
courage a more equal valuing and rewarding of both kinds of activities. However, the second feminist emphasis does entail disagreement with those feminists who glorify a self for either men or women modeled upon the unconnected, nonempathic self that classical liberalism evoked for men. The second feminist position sees this as a mistaken value for either men or women.

I draw upon the second feminist emphasis here to distinguish between a "separative" self and a self that is emotionally connected to others. Emotional connections, and the skills and work entailed in honoring connections, are an important part of the activities traditionally assigned to women. The focus in this essay is on the theoretical consequences of deprecating and thus ignoring emotional connections. The feminist objection here is as much to the glorification of the separative self as to its link to gender.

The feminist critique of the separative self model has been applied in a number of disciplines other than economics. SeylaBenhabib (1987) traces the ideal of separative autonomy through liberalism in political philosophy. This tradition (whether the version of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, or Rawls) discusses moving from a "state of nature" to the metaphorical "contract" to set up the state. Both before and after the contract, men are presumed to be separative and autonomous; what changes with the contract is the degree of civility or justice achieved by these separative individuals. As these ideas evolved from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, authors presumed that women would continue to do child-rearing and household work as well as provide emotional comfort and sexual satisfaction for men. They never seriously considered that men would do such work. Nor did they recognize that men are not entirely autonomous—that no man would have survived to adulthood but for the altruistic work of a woman, and that every man continues to benefit from such work as an adult. This women's work was taken for granted, seldom discussed, and excluded from political theory, because these authors viewed women and their work as "part of nature" within a metaphysic that denigrated nature. Moreover, women's activities did not count as "moral" since only exercising "autonomy" in the public sphere counted as "moral." Thus the separative self was valued while nurturant connection either was ignored or deprecated.

The emphasis on separation also can be seen in developmental psychology (Keller 1986; Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). Carol Gilligan points out that Freud, Jung, Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg, despite their differences, all viewed individuation as synonymous with maturation but viewed connection to others as developmentally regressive. Their views are deeply sexist in that they assumed women would do the emotional work of child-rearing and would provide emotional comfort for men, yet they did not acknowledge learning the capacity for intimacy and nurturance as part of maturation. They presented their theories as generic theories of the human developmental pro-

cess rather than theories of male development under certain social arrangements.

The separative self is glorified in the philosophy of science as well. Evelyn Fox Keller (1983, 1985) argues that objectivity has been defined in terms of the separation of the subject (the scientist) from the object of study. She believes it is more than coincidental that the men developing science conceived their methodology in terms of what was emphasized as "masculine"—separative autonomy. Emotional connections with one's subject matter were seen as contaminating knowledge. Keller insists, however, that these connections sometimes yield useful insights. Some of our deepest insights come from the ability to empathize with those whose behavior we study. Under the current norms of science, such connections are permitted within the "context of discovery" but not within the "context of justification." Yet scientific articles are written in the language of the context of justification, rendering the context of discovery invisible, rather like housework and child-rearing. As a result, any traces of how empathic connection to the subject provided insights are written out of the record of science, and we do not see how having a connected self in this phase of the research process might contribute to the recognized goals of science. Scientific texts thus deprecate the connective part of the enterprise.

Applying the Feminist Critique of Separative Self Models to Neoclassical Economics

How does the feminist critique of the separative self model apply to neoclassical economic theory? The assumptions to be criticized are: (1) that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible; (2) that tastes are exogenous and unchanging; and (3) that actors are selfish. These three assumptions are applied to behavior in market transactions—the primary focus of economics. Then, in a dramatic switch, a fourth assumption is invoked when analyzing the family: that altruism is the rule between family members. I will argue that each of the first three assumptions embodies a view of the self that is separative and hence vulnerable to the feminist critique discussed above. The fourth assumption is not discussed in most textbooks, but it is explicit in the one area of economics that has emphasized the household, the "new home economics" (Becker 1981; Pollak 1985). The contrast between the behavior assumed for the family and for markets will reveal how steeped in notions of gender role these assumptions are.

Interpersonal Utility Comparisons

Neoclassical economists assume that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible. Since the 1930s, utility has been conceived as the satisfaction of an individual's subjective desires; the concept lacks any dimension
of objective, measurable welfare that might form the basis for interpersonal comparison (Cooter and Rappaport 1984). As a result, neoclassical theory tells us that we cannot know which of two persons gained more from a given exchange because the relevant "currency" in which gain or advantage is measured is utility, and utility is conceived as being radically subjective. This is so basic an assumption that it is generally mentioned in undergraduate microeconomic textbooks (e.g., Hirshleifer 1984, 476).

Using Pareto-optimality as the criterion of efficiency derives at least in part from the assumption that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible. A distributional change is defined as Pareto-superior if at least one party gains utility and no one loses any. For example, voluntary exchange between self-interested individuals produces a Pareto-superior distribution. Each party must have felt that s/he would be made better off by the exchange than by foregoing it or s/he would not have made it. When no more Pareto-superior changes can be made through exchange, the distribution is said to be Pareto-optimal. Thus redistribution requiring some affluent persons to lose utility for the sake of a gain by the poor cannot be Pareto-superior by definition.

How does the feminist critique of separation/connection relate to interpersonal utility comparisons? The assumption that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible flows from assuming a separative self. To see how this is true, imagine that we started by assuming the sort of emotional connection that facilitates empathy. Such empathy would facilitate making interpersonal utility comparisons, since being able to imagine how someone else feels in a given situation implies the possibility of translating between one's own and another person's metric for utility. Assuming that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible amounts to assuming a separative self, and to denying the possibility of an empathic, emotionally connected self. But if we assume instead that individuals can make interpersonal utility comparisons, then surely we would conclude that as scholars we, too, are capable of making such comparisons. These comparisons would provide information about the relative advantage and disadvantage of individuals under study. We then would view such comparisons as practical measurement problems (analogous to calculating "shadow prices") rather than as impossible in principle.

As long as we accept the principle that utility comparisons between individuals are impossible, we find that the same principle applies to comparisons between groups. To answer questions about groups requires not only measuring utility but also averaging utilities across persons. While some applied economists study inequalities in wealth or income between groups, and discuss their findings in language that seems to imply something about unequal utility between the groups, such interpretations are in fundamental conflict with the theoretical core of neoclassical economics. Hence generalizations such as that women in a particular society are disadvantaged relative to men or that the poor are disadvantaged relative to the rich are moved to the margin of serious research and seldom discussed.

These beliefs also explain why positive neoclassical theories harmonize so well with conservative normative positions on distributional issues. The paradigm denies one the possibility of stating that those at the bottom of hierarchies average less utility than others, which otherwise might provide a basis for questioning the justice of initial unequal distributions of endowments and their consequences. The paradigm also implies that virtually all collectivist redistribution is non-Pareto-optimal. In sum, it permits no assessments of unequal utility that otherwise might serve as grounds for advocating egalitarian redistribution; rather it criticizes such a redistribution on the grounds of efficiency. To take only one example, this assumption leads one to question the merit of assistance to the large proportion of female-headed families who live in poverty. More generally, it denies us a theoretical basis for saying existing arrangements benefit men more than women.

Tastes: Exogenous and Unchanging

What the utility maximizer of economic theory will do is often indeterminate unless one knows the individual's tastes. Tastes (also called preferences) determine the amount of utility provided by different combinations of goods, services, leisure, working conditions, children, and so forth. They are an input to economic models. Economists do not attempt to explain the origin of these tastes. In a now famous article, George Stigler and Gary Becker (1977) argued that there is little variation in tastes between individuals, so most behavior can be explained by prices or endowments. Other economists disagree and see a role for disciplines such as sociology and psychology in explaining variations in tastes (Hirshleifer 1984). But whether or not they believe that tastes vary across individuals, economists typically see tastes as exogenous to their models. Further, tastes are not expected to change as individuals interact with others in markets or as they experience the consequences of market interaction.

Economists have recently also moved on the "turf" of other social sciences with models purporting to explain seemingly "nonmarket" areas such as crime (Becker 1968; Witte 1980) and family behavior (Becker 1981; Pollak 1988). I believe this is a misinterpretation. In Becker's model, called "rational addiction," the actor is presumed to calculate the present value of the future utility that will result from using the drug as well as the future disutility that will ensue from addiction. Then the actor makes a decision based on his/her present tastes about whether or not to begin use of the addictive drug. I see this work as an attempt to show that a model assuming rationality and exogenous tastes can be used to analyze even those phenomena noneconomists see as most obviously irrational and most obviously involving changes in tastes.
Selfishness in Markets

Neoclassical theory assumes self-interested actors. Since it says nothing explicit about what gives people utility, it is not inconsistent with neoclassical assumptions for some individuals to derive satisfaction from being altruistic (Friedman and Diem 1990). That is, self-interest need not imply selfishness in the sense of failing to care for others. Nonetheless, in practice, most economists do assume selfishness in markets, as Robert Frank (1988) has pointed out. Sometimes auxiliary assumptions preclude altruism, for instance, the assumption that utilities are independent (Folbre 1993). Since economists generally define A’s altruism toward B as the case where whatever gives B utility contributes to A’s utility, altruism is redefined by the assumption that actors’ utilities are independent.7

The assumption that individuals are selfish is related to the separative model of self. Emotional connection often creates empathy, altruism, and a subjective sense of social solidarity. For example, the experience of attending to the needs of a child or of mentoring a student often makes us care more about others’ well-being. (Note that this is also an example of changing tastes.) Separative selves would have little basis on which to develop the necessary empathy to practice altruism.8

Most labor economists assume selfishness of employers toward employees and vice versa. If employers were altruistic toward some or all of their em-

6. There is, however, a sense in which assuming endogenous tastes militates against recognizing gender inequalities. In the extreme, if we believe that people come to desire whatever they are limited to, then no disutility results from discrimination or other types of oppression. I believe that this extreme view distorts reality as much as the view that tastes never change as a result of the constraints one encounters.

7. The assumption that each actor’s utility is independent of the utility of other actors is distinct from the assumption that one cannot make interpersonal utility comparisons. The assumption of independent utilities is about whether A’s utility affects B’s; the assumption that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible concerns whether either the actor or the scientist can measure the amount by which total utilities increased from a particular distributional change. It is the assumption of independent utilities that implies selfishness. One could have a model in which people are capable of making interpersonal utility comparisons but are selfish (i.e., have independent utilities). Even so, the assumptions are related. It is difficult to imagine a model in which people are altruistic (i.e., utilities are not independent) that does not feature actors making interpersonal utility comparisons. To see this, consider how my choice to spend twenty dollars on a gift for my spouse, toward whom I am altruistic, affects my utility. If I buy the gift I forego the utility I would have gained from spending the money on myself, but I gain the utility that comes from seeing my spouse’s utility increase upon receiving the gift. A fully specified utility function of the sort economists assume must be able to determine which gain is greater, requiring some common metric. In sum, to assume interdependent utilities may require admitting interpersonal utility comparisons, but admitting the possibility of interpersonal utility comparisons does not necessarily imply interdependent utilities.

8. Of course, empathy can also be used selfishly. As people who have gone through a painful divorce can attest, it is often those who know their utility functions the best who can hurt them the most should they cease to feel altruism (Friedman and Diem 1990).
employees, they might pay them above-market wages, foregoing some profit. Of course, the strategic payment of above-market wages in the new “shirking” models of efficiency wages (Katz 1986; Bulow and Summers 1986) does not violate the assumption of selfishness. In these models, employers are profit maximizing, and thus they pay above-market wages only when such wages increase the productivity of workers, and thus revenue, enough to more than compensate for the costs of the higher wage.\(^9\)

Assuming selfishness in markets is not merely a “male” model of self that may fit women less well; it also fails to account for men’s altruism in market behavior, altruism that may work to the disadvantage of women. When people engage in collective action, a kind of selective altruism may be at work, at least in the initial stages (Elster 1979; Sen 1987). For example, when male employees collude in order try to keep women out of “their” jobs, they are exhibiting within-sex altruism.\(^10\)

Sometimes selective within-sex altruism also exists between male employers and employees, so that employers are willing to pay male workers more than the contribution of the marginal worker to revenue product. This may be termed pro-male altruistic discrimination as opposed to the more common form of anti-female discrimination in which women are paid less than the (two-sex) market-clearing wage. Matthew Goldberg (1982) has shown that this pro-male altruistic discrimination will not necessarily erode in competitive markets as anti-female discrimination presumably will.\(^11\) The essence of his argument is that a nondiscriminator cannot buy out an altruistic discriminator for a price consistent with the present value of the business to the non-discriminator. This is because the nonpecuniary utility the pro-male discriminator is getting from indulging his taste for altruism toward male workers makes the business worth more to the discriminator than to the nondiscriminator. By contrast, a nondiscriminator’s offer to buy out an anti-female discriminator (who is hiring men for more than he could hire women) will be compelling because the nondiscriminator can make more money than the anti-female discriminator with no sacrifice of nonpecuniary utility. If we assume the absence of altruism in markets, then we cannot recognize the possibility that this selective altruism is a source of sex discrimination that can endure in competitive markets. Thus, recognizing selective altruism would revise neoclassical economists’ usual assumption that discrimination cannot endure in competitive markets.

### Altruism at Home

When it comes to the family, economists generally assume a single family unit function in which the “head” is an altruist. This is clearest in the “new home economics,” the application of the neoclassical model to the household, an effort for which Gary Becker (1981) has become famous. From a feminist perspective, the acknowledgment of the importance to the economy of work that goes on in the household must be applauded. However, Becker’s assumptions about altruism are in need of a feminist critique. (These same criticisms apply to the more recent 1988 version of Becker’s Treatise on the Family as well as the 1981 edition.)

Becker’s well-known “rotten kid” theorem posits an altruistic family head who takes the utility functions of family members as arguments of “his” own utility function. Becker argues that even a selfish “rotten” spouse or child will be induced to “behave” because of the reinforcement mechanism set up by the altruist. This “rotten kid” theorem doesn’t hold without the assumption that the family member who is an altruist also controls the resources to be distributed (Ben-Porath 1982; Pollak 1985). Becker refers to the altruistic head as male and to the beneficiaries as women and children, although he claims that he used masculine and feminine pronouns only to distinguish the altruist from the beneficiary (Becker 1981, 173). Since Becker certainly knows that it is generally men who have greater access to money, we must be suspicious of his claim that his choice of the male pronoun to denote the altruist was arbitrary. Yet Becker never discusses the effects of such differential power in the family (England and Farkas 1986, ch. 3), although he does discuss the efficiencies of a division of labor in which men are the primary earners (Becker 1981, ch. 2). Thus his discussion shows us the advantages but none of the disadvantages for women of the conventional sex division of labor. Becker ignores male power and its potentially harmful effects on women while exaggerating male altruism. It is particularly ironic that altruism, in which women seem to specialize more than men (England and Farkas 1986, ch. 3 and 4; England 1989), gets credited to men!

---

9. By contrast, Akerlof’s (1982, 1984) “gift exchange” model of efficiency wages does presume a sort of altruism on the part of employers. In this sense, it is a radical departure from the usual neoclassical assumption of selfishness in markets.

10. Such behavior is documented by Reskin and Roos (1990).

11. For a nontechnical elaboration of Goldberg’s argument as well as an explanation of why economists believe most discrimination will eventually disappear in competitive markets, see England (1992, ch. 2). I have taken quite a few liberties in translating Goldberg’s technical argument into words. For example, his discussion is about race rather than sex discrimination, and he uses the term “nepotism” rather than “altruism.” However, he has stated in a personal communication that he considers my elaboration consistent with the intent of his paper. One qualification is in order: I have characterized “pro-male” discrimination as altruistic toward men because it entails a willingness to pay more than marginal revenue product. It could also be seen as altruistic toward men in the willingness to pay them more than necessary to employ equally productive workers. However, on this latter criterion, anti-female discrimination (paying women less than marginal revenue product) could also be seen as altruistic toward men since it, too, leads to paying men more than the wage for which equally productive women could be employed. Thus, I have not considered discrimination to be altruistic unless it involves a willingness to pay more than marginal revenue product.
My disagreement is not with the notion that altruism exists in the family, or even with the notion that, on average, people are more altruistic toward family members than toward others. It is rather with the extreme bifurcation of the assumptions about the two spheres. If economic man or woman is so altruistic in the family, might not some altruism be present in market behavior as well? Doesn’t this altruism imply an ability to empathize with others that might permit making at least rough interpersonal utility comparisons? Doesn’t the susceptibility of an altruist to being influenced by another’s joy or pain suggest that s/he also might modify certain tastes through the process of interaction with others? If the answers to these questions are yes, as may well be the case, then the altruistic self assumed for the household is inconsistent with the separative self assumed for market behavior. It is simply not plausible that the altruist who displays an emotionally connective self in the family is the same person who marches out into the market selfish, unable to empathize with others, with utterly rigid tastes.

A second objection to the assumption of extreme altruism in the family is that it conceals the harmful effects of men’s selfishness when combined with their greater power within the family. In one of the theoretical traditions within sociology most consistent with neoclassical economic assumptions, exchange theory, practitioners chose to model the family by characterizing each actor as selfish, or at least as less than completely altruistic. Empirical research in this tradition has examined how relative earnings of husbands and wives affect marital decision-making. The game-theoretic logic of exchange theory suggests that since earnings are resources the earner could withdraw from his/her spouse if the relationship were terminated, we would expect earnings to affect marital power.13

When individuals were surveyed, asked to identify areas of disagreement with their spouses, and asked whose wishes prevailed, the general findings showed that men’s wishes prevail more often than women’s wishes, but that this disparity is less pronounced when women are employed and least pronounced when women’s earnings are high relative to their husbands’ earnings. (For a review of such studies and a theoretical interpretation, see England and Kilbourne 1990c.) This research makes it clear that men do not use the power they derive from earnings entirely altruistically, as Becker’s (1981) model assumes. It also demonstrates that the sex division of labor in the typical household disadvantages women in bargaining within marriage by leaving them with less (or no) earnings to take with them if they left the relationship.14

12. Folbre and Hartmann (1988) also make this point.
13. Not all exchange theorists assume that each party is maximizing selfish gain. Some exchange theorists presume that actors also follow norms of equity. Yet those taking the latter view often presume that any existing distribution will tend to acquire an aura of legitimacy and equity over time, regardless of the actual equity of its origins.
14. For a discussion of why a woman’s domestic services, which also could be withdrawn if the marriage broke up, seem not to “count” as heavily in exchange as earnings, see England and Kilbourne (1990c).
15. I have argued elsewhere (England 1989; England and Kilbourne 1990a, 1990b) that the rationality assumption, in combination with the assumption of exogenous tastes, does entail an androcentric bias in that it considers emotion and reason to be radically separate phenomena, an idea tied to notions of gender differentiation in the history of Western thought.

The new home economics ignores issues of power when considering consequences of the traditional division of labor and the attendant loss of equity, and instead emphasizes only the efficiency gains from specialization according to comparative advantage (England and Farkas 1986, ch. 4). It also obscures the fact that market discrimination against women results in women’s inferior bargaining power within the family.

Conclusion

I have criticized economists’ assumptions that, in market behavior, interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible, tastes are exogenous and unchanging, and individuals are selfish (i.e., utilities are independent), but that altruism is the rule in the family. The first three of these assumptions of neoclassical theory contain the “separative-self” bias that feminist theorists have traced in many disciplines. Taken together, this view glorifies men’s autonomy outside the family while giving them credit for altruism within the family. Two specific aspects of gender bias were emphasized: unexamined assumptions about gender roles lead to a sharp disjuncture of views about the household and the market, and these assumptions result in an inability to see how conventional arrangements perpetuate women’s systematic subordination to men.

But I have not challenged the most “sacred” neoclassical assumption of all, rationality. Clearly, this term has a variety of meanings. Some feminist philosophers argue that the concept of rationality in Western thought has been constructed to be inconsistent with anything associated with traits and activities presumed to be “feminine”—nature, the body, passion, change, emotion—and that this has distorted the concept of rationality (Schott 1988; Bordo 1986; Lloyd 1984). Yet rationality has a rather limited meaning in neoclassical theory. The rational actor has preferences that are both transitive (if I prefer A to B and B to C, I will prefer A to C) and complete (any two outcomes can be compared), and s/he acts on the basis of correct calculations about what means will best maximize utility given these preferences (Varian 1984; Sen 1987). Perhaps this neoclassical concept of rationality is relatively free from gender bias, including the assumption that rationality entails a separative self; perhaps it is not.15 Resolving this question is beyond the scope of this paper. However, even if we retain the rationality assumption, the neoclassical model
needs to be changed substantially in the directions I have indicated above. Relaxing the three assumptions discussed as problematic assertions of a separative self will severely blunt the predictive power of the rationality assumption, even if it is retained. For example, when it comes to wages and discrimination, it is harder to predict what a rational, selectively altruistic employer will do than to predict what a rational, profit-maximizing employer will do. Similarly, it is harder to predict how a rational husband who earns more than his wife will behave in a model of marriage that admits the possibility of both altruism and selfishness than in a model that assumes only one or the other.

Correcting the biases discussed in this paper will generate models in which separation and connection are variable; this variation needs to be explained within both households and markets. Although these new models may entail a loss of deductive certainty, they will illuminate rather than ignore gender inequality in the social and economic world.

References


