

Reseña

Giandomenica Becchio. *A History of Feminist and Gender Economics*. Abingdon, New York, Routledge, 2019, 230 pp. ISBN: 9781138103757.

Many researchers are now interested in assessing the role of women in the field of economics and their progress in scaling the professional ladder. However, the history of women making their way into academia and shaping this discipline is less studied. *Feminist and Gender Economics* is an inspiring contribution to this field of interest. The author, Giandomenica Becchio, illustrates how economics has evolved since the nineteenth century and progressively included the “woman question” (i.e., early feminism) and gender issues, leading to the emergence of two distinct fields: gender and feminist economics. By bringing together the theoretical aspects of these disciplines, the cultural backgrounds and a range of insightful “biographical sketches” (p. 3) of women economists and activists who sought more gender-inclusive paradigms and models, Becchio reconstructs the historical roots and the evolution of these two fields.

The author divides the book into four chapters, arranged chronologically. The first chapter provides a careful account of the development of the woman question and its relationship to political economy from the nineteenth century to the interwar years. The next two chapters explore, respectively, the historical origins and evolution of gender and feminist economics. In the last chapter, the author shows how the introduction of gender studies in the 1960s and the use of the term “gender” permitted both schools of economic thought to converge in studying how the gender gap affects society. She concludes the chapter by reviewing recent studies and presenting current evidence on the labor, wage and entrepreneurship gender gaps. The book also includes an appendix with a timeline of the important dates in the rise and evolution of both feminist economics and neoclassical gender economics.

In the first chapter, the author analyzes the relationship between the woman question and political economy from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. The author presents many examples of women who, from different research fields and social groups—classical liberals and Fabian socialists and guilds in Victorian England, orthodox Marxists in Germany, Jews, and Quaker religious groups in the US—shared similar goals, such as the emancipation of women, their access to education and their fight for comparable pay. These women are mentioned in the text for different reasons, such as being the first in their country to obtain a PhD, to found a journal, or to publish the first feminist article in an academic economic journal (i.e., Ada Heather-Bigg’s article “The wife’s contribution to family income” in *The Economic Journal*). In a similar way, the second chapter also deals with the emergence of the woman question in economics and political economy. However, this

chapter focuses on the evolution of gender economics. It begins by describing the origins of home economics in the late 19th century and early 20th century in the US, and its transition to household economics and new home economics in the 1960s and 1970s. Although home economics improved women’s access to higher education and allowed a higher proportion of them to take part in academic matters, it also reinforced the stereotypical role of women in the household, emphasizing such aspects as the cult of domesticity and how to become a good housewife. Necessary steps were later made in this field regarding the quantification of household activity and unpaid labour. The University of Chicago was one of the pioneers in moving forward and developing household economics as a subfield of microeconomics. Households became production units that relied heavily on rational choice assumptions and neoclassical ideas. In the 1960s and 1970s, household economics converged into new home economics. In the latter, most of the theoretical frameworks were based on some neoclassical assumptions and evolved around human capital and the division of labour within households (determined by comparative advantage). Overall, home economics, household economics and new home economics (although at a lower extent) created opportunities for women in universities. Still, they also raised several criticisms by feminist economics which the author describes in more detail in the following chapter.

In the third chapter, Becchio examines feminist economics. She introduces women’s studies, a field which aimed at understanding the nature of woman’s subjection in society and strongly influenced feminist economics. This chapter gives a detailed account of the main topics published in the journal *Feminist Economics* (founded in 1995). These ranged from new methodological approaches to very diverse issues such as caring labor, minorities, marriage and labor force participation, sexuality and epidemiology, family policy, and women in developing countries. The unifying theme of the chapter is how feminist economics and other related fields (such as women’s studies and alternative schools of thought) contributed to the understanding of a more complex economic system that goes beyond what is taught in standard economics textbooks centering on neoclassical economic theory. Feminist economists aimed to take into consideration non-market institutions and include such unquantified elements of the economy as caring and ethics. In contrast to home economics, which treated gender issues in economics as market failures, feminist economics considered that gender disparities were determined by non-market institutions such as social norms, patriarchy, and property rights. In the final section, the author links feminist economics to alternative heterodox schools of economic thought, for example, Marxian political economy, post-Keynesian economics, Austrian economics, or Sen’s approach of capabilities.

In the fourth chapter, the author argues that the introduction of gender studies in the 1960s permitted both feminist economics and the economics of gender to converge since they dealt with the same topic: the persistence of gender inequality. According to the author, the emergence of gender studies allowed neoclassical economists to include other aspects of the economic system (such as social norms, values, culture, and habits) which their models had been previously neglected. In this chapter, it is interesting to see how the term “gender” was progressively adopted across the social science fields of psychology, feminism and activism, poststructuralism, and philosophy. The term “gender” was perceived as a cultural category that finally undermined the traditional biological determinism between the male and female sexes. In the final section, Becchio builds on current literature and recent data (mostly on OECD countries) to shed light on present-day trends concerning the labor, wage and entrepreneurship gaps. She also examines some of the variables that determine these gender gaps, such as the persistence of gender-stereotyped expectations, glass ceilings, and self-ghettoization (e.g., the preference for part-time jobs or less competitive fields). This section raises serious questions about the position of women in economics, especially in academia. For example, some of the studies cited argue that women receive less credit in co-authored papers, while their manuscripts spend more time under review in top journals and require higher standards in the reviewing process (p. 201).

Overall, the book describes to the reader the theoretical and methodological differences between feminist economics and gender economics. It is impressive to see how the author reconstructs the evolution of these schools of thought by bringing together the lives and contributions of many women (and men also) who shaped their research fields. In doing so, she offers a crucial perspective on the way in which different cultures and historical backgrounds have influenced the various disciplines dealing with gender-related issues in the social sciences. Most of the women she cites played a significant role

in determining their fields of interest, by founding new departments, facilitating the access of women economists to academia, writing the first textbooks or publishing in top journals.

The book is very well written, although it takes a while to become familiar with all the terms used to identify different schools of thought (e.g., gender economics, neoclassical gender economics, home economics, household economics, new home economics, feminist economics, gender studies, women’s studies, etc.) This applies particularly to the last chapter when both gender and feminist economics (and other related fields) adopt the term “gender”. Given the complexity of the issues involved and the space limits of a book, it is inevitable that some topics are treated superficially, leaving the reader eager to learn more, but this is understandable.

This book, in my opinion, is a significant contribution to the field of both economics and history, offering an essential perspective on both the interconnectedness between disciplines and the transition from one to another. From the standpoint of an economic historian, it is fascinating to learn that economic history has been the main field for female scholars since the nineteenth century, and to realize how long it took universities to accept the first female scholars, or to see women’s role, for instance, in founding institutions such as the Economic History Society. By providing so many instances and describing the theoretical and methodological aspects of the schools of thought to which women belonged, the author paints more broadly the major historical and cultural changes through which economics evolved. This book helps us understand better the approaches we now study in economics; this is why it should be part of any course related to the history of economic thought, economic history, political economy and, obviously, gender and feminist economics.

Laura Maravall
University of Tübingen

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