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A Gendered Division of Labor

by

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A funny thing happened to economic sociology on the way to its present success¹. In North America male dominance remains remarkable. If you looked around at the organizational meetings for the proposed American Sociological Association's Economic Sociology section you would have noticed a predominantly male audience. In the section on Organizations, Occupations, and Work, the contrast is striking: a substantial proportion of participants are female. If, in preparation to teach a course, you inspected the ASA economic sociology syllabus set, you would discover the same gendered pattern: only 2 of the 22 syllabi came from women (Green and Myhre 1996). In comparison, of the 10 syllabi included in the newly issued set on Gender and Work, every single one came from a woman (Winfield 1999).

A similar situation prevails in Europe. All authors of articles in the first two issues of this European Electronic Newsletter on economic sociology are male. Another form of evidence comes from scholarly organizations and meetings: for instance, most members and paper givers of the European Sociological Association's economic sociology group are men.

Female voices are similarly absent from the most influential mainstream economic sociology texts. When Richard Swedberg (1990) interviewed 17 leading economists and sociologists about areas of their common concern in the late 1980s, every single respondent was male. That ratio has not changed substantially in the past decade. Some examples:

- ◆ Among the 34 economic sociologists identified by Swedberg's (1997) overview of the field as "key people" only four are women.
- ◆ Of the 45 authors in Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg's (1994) *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, only nine are women.
- ◆ The field's most prominent reader, *The Sociology of Economic Life* (1992), with 15 selections of what the two editors (Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg) define as "the most interesting work done in modern economic sociology and related disciplines", includes only two women.
- ◆ When French economic sociologist Michel Callon (1998) assembled a book of readings on the field, only one of the 12 contributors was a woman.

What's going on here? What explains this pattern of recruitment into the field? Three possible answers come to mind: *first*, that women simply do not study economic processes; *second*, that men have excluded women from this field; and *third* that a fault line has occurred in the gender division of labor. The first explanation is certainly not the case. In fact, women are

¹ Revised version of article prepared for the newsletter, Organizations, Occupations, and Work section, American Sociological Association, Fall 1999.

studying all kinds of economic processes. Nor is there any evidence of the second. Certainly my personal experience is of being welcomed into discussions of economic sociology.

The third explanation, however, seems quite plausible. A boundary has appeared that separates definitions of topics, with economic processes at both sides but only one side defined as economic sociology. To simplify, the fault line results from orientation toward two rather different intellectual agendas. It is as if we had two magnets, one the agenda of mainstream economics, the other the agenda of power and inequality. Of course there is an overlapping field, and we can point to exceptions, but we will find most scholars clustering around one magnet or the other. Calls to unite the two regions usually turn out to involve ceding dominance to one pole or the other.

Economic sociologists have, for the most part, accepted the standard economic agenda, concentrating on firms and markets. On the other side of the boundary researchers have qualified, criticized, modified, or rejected the agenda of mainstream economics. They have sought instead to incorporate studies of power and inequality.

We could explore this surprising division of labor with respect to a wide range of topics, such as consumption, informal economies, households, gift economies, or welfare transfers. However, it appears dramatically in studies of economic processes where differentiation by gender figures significantly. Although gender appears everywhere in economic processes, students of firms and markets in the style of economic sociology ordinarily ignore gender issues.

As Ruth Milkman and Eleanor Townsley (1994:614) observed in their essay on “Gender and the Economy” in the *Handbook of Economic Sociology*:

economic sociology as a field has yet to be truly sensitized to the gender dimension of economic life. The recent flurry of attention to the Polanyian concept of embeddedness, which has striking gender implications, has yet to persuade most sociologists of the economy to seriously integrate gender concerns into their analyses. Gender-centered research, although plentiful, remains essentially ghettoized and ignored by the mainstream.

The result is to treat gender as one more attribute of single decision-making economic actors instead of an organizing principle in economic life. In fact, feminist economists agree with that judgment. Since the late 1980s, a group of critical scholars has been waging a vigorous campaign against gender-biased traditional economic models and methodologies. More forcefully than their sociological counterparts, feminist economists, with their own organization and a special journal (*Feminist Economics*), have boldly criticized economics’ main tenets. As Julie Nelson (1998:36), a leading figure of this movement, states: economists’ “exclusive focus on the individuality, autonomy and agency of the economic actor ignores the social and physical nature and familial upbringing and responsibilities of actual human beings, as it does the possibility of relationships of control and coercion” (For a feminist sociological critique of the economic model, see England 1993).

Let’s be clear about what is going on: plenty of scholars are investigating gender in economic processes. The majority of those scholars are women. The point is that most of them are doing so outside the perimeter of economic sociology as participants currently define the field. As a

consequence, their work has less influence on mainstream economic sociology than it would if scholars would recognize them as engaged in the same enterprise.

Why should we care? Why should gender make a difference for economic sociology?

First, by expanding definitions of economic activity. Most economic sociology follows economics' concentration on production markets, while treating as peripheral a wide range of other economic processes where gender differentiation is obvious and /or where women predominate, most notably non-market economic activity.

Second, attention to gender challenges assumptions of single-utility functions in units, such as households, which are in fact gender-differentiated.

Third, a focus on gender raises more general questions concerning the place of categorical differentiation -- not only gender, but also race and ethnicity -- in economic processes. These form barriers to organizational activities which genderless, efficiency-driven models cannot account for.

Fourth, the presence of gender multiplies the social work going on in ostensibly purely economic transactions. Where economic analysis postulates only the importance of interests and resources, by recognizing gender, we can see instead how people are creating, maintaining and transforming social relations.

It would be a pity if two such talented groups of scholars proceeded to work on economic processes in isolation from each other.

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