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**Working Paper**

## Women and economics: New historical perspectives

CHOPE Working Paper, No. 2022-03

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Center for the History of Political Economy at Duke University

*Suggested Citation:* Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, Cléo; Forget, Evelyn L.; Singleton, John D. (2022) : Women and economics: New historical perspectives, CHOPE Working Paper, No. 2022-03, Duke University, Center for the History of Political Economy (CHOPE), Durham, NC, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4035940>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/250879>

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# WOMEN AND ECONOMICS: NEW HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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CHOPE WORKING PAPER No. 2022-03  
FEBRUARY 2022



CENTER FOR THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL ECONOMY  
AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

## Women and Economics: New Historical Perspectives

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This essay is the introduction to the *History of Political Economy* Annual Supplement on “Women and Economics: New Historical Perspectives.” We first reflect on the historiography of economics and the relative absence of women and gender in the mainstream of the field. Three approaches to the history of women and economics are delineated: making visible women economists, outlining the impact of including women in a broader narrative about economics, and analyzing gender metaphors in economic thought. We then preview and describe the nine contributions included in the volume. In the last of section, we consider “what’s next” for this research agenda, arguing that there are two important challenges to historians of economics. The first challenge concerns the consequences of delegating women and gender to a separate history. The second challenge concerns the “silences” of unwritten, un-developed, and un-preserved work in the history of economics and how the community engaged with the past of economics should reflect on these.

### *Why women and economics?*

Malthus. Ricardo. Mill. Marx. Menger, Jevons, and Walras. As Roy Weintraub (1999) observed a number of years ago, these names represent the figurative chapter titles to a “textbook” history of 19th century economics focused on the development of economic doctrine. Indeed, as Joseph Schumpeter opened his influential account of the history of economic thought, “By history of economic analysis I mean the history of the intellectual efforts that *men* have made in order to understand economic phenomena or, which comes to the same thing, the history of the analytic or scientific aspects of economic thought” (emphasis added; Schumpeter 1954).

Certainly, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century economics can be (and has been) written in a similar fashion: Marshall. Keynes. Hayek. Samuelson. Friedman. Arrow. Becker. Lucas, etc. Forward progress in economics forged through the intellectual accomplishments of leading luminaries – almost exclusively men. Among its dozens of biographical profiles of economists, the most recent handbook in the history of economic thought, for example, contains only a single entry on a woman (Joan Robinson) (Faccarello and Kurz 2016). Likewise, Chassonnery-Zaïgouche, Herfeld, and Pinzón Fuchs’s recent survey (2019) of major journals in the history of economic thought,

identifies just three female subjects (out of 145 authors mentioned in a sample of 205 published articles), of whom only one, Robinson, qualified as a professional economist.

But as many have argued, there are other ways to write histories of sciences, including the history of economics (e.g. Coats 1993; Schabas 1992; Forget 2005). Weintraub (1999), for instance, points to perspectives that are informed by science studies, the Latourian framework of actors and networks, and through the lens of how economists are trained, socialized, and practice. To this list of alternative approaches can be added accounts that are informed by the fields of feminist philosophy, women's history, and gender studies. While Weintraub's plea for "thick" history – i.e. "narratives with richness and complexity" – has been taken up by recent generations of historians of economics, accounts of economics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that "make women a focus of inquiry, an agent of the narrative" (Scott 1988; p. 7), and develop subjects and themes that emerge from that perspective, remain too few and far between.

The papers collected in this volume stem from a desire to produce and advance new knowledge about the history of women in the economics profession. This approach, which we view as helping to locate recent interest in the status and role of women within economics in historical contexts, has the potential to enrich understandings of economics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in several important ways. One is by "making visible" or – to use historian of biology Evelyn Fox Keller's term – "recuperating" the contributions of women economists to the construction and stabilization of economic knowledge. While this purpose includes bringing to light the overlooked or neglected roles of female figures, it also stands to advance scholarship by orienting historical narratives towards describing the experiences of women themselves – and relating how those experiences differed from men in economics – as well as investigating the consequences for knowledge production. This focus thus goes beyond inquiries into how the social "process by which individuals become economists conditions and shapes the practice of those who identify as economists" (Weintraub 1999, p. 149) to center the socialization and practices of *women* economists. As such, this perspective can also foreground the gender-related barriers and constraints faced by women in the economics profession in various areas and at various points in time, a key theme that emerges from the articles in this volume. Margaret Rossiter's major contributions to the history of women scientists provide the main model for this approach (e.g. Rossiter 1982, 1998, 2002).

In addition, centering women economists as subjects of historical inquiry can be used to complement or challenge received interpretations of changes in economics and economic knowledge. The papers in this volume focus on the postwar (1945–) period. An influential narrative of economics in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, told in Morgan and Rutherford (1998), emphasizes the rise of modeling, the passing from pluralism to modern "neoclassical" economics, and the mathematization of economics as crucial to understanding the development of economics after

World War II. Moving forward, Backhouse and Cherrier (2017) identify and explore a later transformation in the status assigned to theoretical and “applied” work in economics since the 1970s. They emphasize a shift in “attitudes toward empirical work and how to do empirical work” (Backhouse and Cherrier 2017, p. 5) that accompanied changes in technology and emerging demands from clients and patrons of economic research, including policy makers. Historical objects contested in both transformations include notions, laden in the recent past in terminology like “credible” and “policy-relevant,” of what it meant for economics to be “scientific” and “objective.” Seen through the experiences of women economists (and their work), these transformations implicate previously overlooked social contexts and can take on added meaning as stories of marginalization, sometimes recognition, and perhaps appropriation. Papers included in this volume connect with and raise new questions for these meta-narratives, for example by tracing the origins and boundaries of feminist economics as a distinct field and by examining the production and transmission of economic knowledge about women, such as the gender pay gap.

A third and final way in which women-centered accounts can “thicken” recent histories of economics is through identifying, describing, and applying the construct of gender. As Joan Wallach Scott has summarized: “If the group or category of ‘women’ is to be investigated, then gender – the multiple and contradictory meanings attributed to sexual difference – is an important analytic tool” (Scott 1988, p. 25). The application of gender in this way stands to have two benefits for histories of economics. One is that it broadens the categories of analysis for describing and analyzing the experiences and practices of economists – women, but also men. Changes, such as the rising status assigned to particular kinds of empirical work or the growth of (and increasing value assigned to) collaborative work, thus take on gendered characters. Notions of objectivity and science at different points in time likewise can acquire and embody traditionally masculine (as opposed to feminine) beliefs and characteristics. This has informed recent work in the sociology of science, such as Etzkowitz et al. (2000) and Rosser (2004), who argues that gender-related barriers to success in scientific careers stem partly from a “tradition of male-centered approaches in labs, practices, and cultures” (Rosser 2004, p. xx). At the same time, using gender as a historiographical tool can help to uncover “the metaphors with which scientists think” (Creager et al. 2001, p. 7) and describe how scientific practices in economics became gendered – e.g. distinctions between “hard” and “soft” fields or the division of labor on research teams or the “identification police” – the figurative aggressive audience member who upholds rigor in empirical work by protesting the endogeneity of an explanatory variable on the first slide. Inspired by feminist philosophy, feminist scholars have been pioneers of this approach, producing important scholarship on gendered aspects of economics in historical perspective (Pujol 1992; Seiz 1993; Nelson 1992; Folbre 2010).

In developing and pushing forward a women-centered approach to history, this volume builds upon important prior work relating to women in the history of economics. This foundational work includes biographies (Dimand, Dimand & Forget 2000) and bibliographies (Madden, Pujol & Seiz 2004) of women economists. Broad narratives on women in the profession include Madden (2002) who discusses female contributions to economic thought – and the barriers faced by women economists – in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Forget (2011) presents an account of the phases of the status of women in the profession in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: from a distinct minority in the early years to a relative retreat from academic economics into other spheres, before the “return” of women into academia in the 1950s (but in a lower proportion than before the 1940s). Informed by feminist perspectives, Marcuzzo and Rosselli (2008) survey and analyze work on the history of women, gender, and economics. Recent related scholarship contributes to bridging histories of the profession and histories of the knowledge produced (Madden and Dimand 2019). Conrad (2019) and Becchio (2020) are two recent accounts of the relationship between ideas on gender and the economics profession, while Chassonnery-Zaïgouche *et al.* (2019) and Cohen (2019) both analyze historical links between strategies for advancing the status of women in economics and economic theorizing and evidence.

In our view as editors, there are important values at stake in the research agenda advanced by this volume. One value concerns what has been termed “epistemic justice.” In their work, historians of science can re-produce and re-affirm social hierarchies concerning whose knowledge counts, for example, contributing (perhaps unwittingly) to the social processes that overlook, degrade, or otherwise deny credit to some groups or to some individuals. Writing women back into histories of economics is thus one step towards challenging and deconstructing such hierarchies. Also at stake, however, are the priorities moving forward of the community of those engaged in writing about economics’ past. As Gordon, Buehle, and Dye observed several years ago reflecting on the “problem” of women’s history:

We are learning that the writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities. (Gordon *et al.* 1976, p 89).

In the last of section of this introductory essay, we reflect on the articles in this special issue to consider “what’s next” for this research agenda, arguing that it issues two important challenges to historians of economics. In the section below, we preview and describe the contributions included in the volume to highlight and draw out several connected themes that emerge.

### ***What’s in the Book?***

The articles gathered in this volume attempt to move the analysis of women, gender, and economics along in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives. There is an inherent ambiguity involved. “Women and economics” itself is an ambiguous way to designate women as economists (profession), women economists’ ideas and practices (production of knowledge), and the subject of women in the economy (knowledge on women) as the objects of historical inquiry. One topic of interest is the evolution of women’s roles as economists over the past century: how do particular women fit into a profession that has not always welcomed them, and how have the decisions particular women made about their careers changed the profession itself? However, the knowledge produced by women economists is also of interest. Sometimes that knowledge involves a close look at the economic experiences of women, often but not always in the paid and unpaid labor markets. All of the papers collected here examine these topics to a greater or lesser extent.

“A Quantitative Snapshot of Research by Women, 1940-2019,” by Erin Hengel and Sarah Louisa Phythian-Adams, presents an overview of women’s representation within economics, particularly as authors in *élite* journals. This chapter raises as many questions as it answers. We might imagine we understand why women authors have become more prevalent over time, and have a sense that changing norms of co-authorship, institutional efforts to hire more women, to create more supportive work environments, and to ensure that women who are hired are well-placed in productive research networks all complement one another to support women economists. However, the profession of economics is not alone in adopting these changes and has been demonstrably less successful than other fields of study (Lundberg and Stearns 2019; Liu, Song & Yang 2020). And why were women authors so successful early in the twentieth century, only to become less so later? The trajectory is not monotonic.

In “Hidden Figures: A New History of the Permanent Income Hypothesis,” Jennifer Burns investigates the roles played by a remarkable group of women at the University of Chicago during the middle years of the twentieth century. Dorothy Brady, Margaret Reid, and Rose Friedman were essential figures in the development of Milton Friedman’s *A Theory of the Consumption Function* (1957). Indeed, Brady, Reid and Rose Friedman received praise and acknowledgement from Milton Friedman, from Franco Modigliani and others, but did one or more of them deserve greater acknowledgement, for example, in the form of co-authorships? This chapter documents an instance of what Margaret Rossiter has labelled the “Matilda Effect” – the systematic discounting of the roles played by women scholars (Rossiter 1993). As Burns notes, “all of this credit and recognition remained informal, confined to reputation and relationship, and did not translate into publications, research grants, or professional recognition” (below, xxx).

Marianne Johnson examines the documentation of credit from another perspective in “The Two Ostrom Problem.” This chapter documents the choices and decisions made by Elinor Ostrom, the first woman Nobel laureate in economics, as she attempted to build her career alongside that of her husband and research partner and to gain fair recognition for her own contributions to shared research programs. Johnson’s narrative highlights the constraints facing Elinor Ostrom and the strategies she adopted, yielding new insights into the processes of marginalization and attribution in economics and the problem of scientific credit.

The issues of career trajectories and generational differences are explored outside the dominance of the United States by Andres Guiot-Isaac and Camila Orozco Espinel in “Climbing the Obelisk.” The authors follow and document the career strategies of five successful women economists in Colombia who began their careers between the 1950s and 1970s. They show how the opportunities and challenges that women faced were distinct from those confronted by men and examine how their subjects leveraged the support of male colleagues, mentors, and family members to succeed in a setting not designed to facilitate their participation. This chapter also demonstrates how women economists relied on their ability to delegate to other, less well-situated, women the care work they were still expected to provide to their families.

In “Writing History as a Way of Life’: the Life and Work of Margaret Garritsen de Vries,” Christina Laskaridis creates the opportunity to examine the life of a woman economist, turned historian, who built a career outside academia. As the official historian of the International Monetary Fund, de Vries faced the challenge of working in a context where women were absent because “money is considered just too important and too powerful to be entrusted to a woman.” The discrimination that she and others faced, she believed, was less about explicit and intentional exclusion, than the “automatic” tendency to recommend only other men to fill vacant positions. Laskaridis writes, “to the frequent complaint of it being hard to find women to fill posts, [de Vries] would remind them of the quote by Juanita Kreps, who became Secretary of Commerce under President Jimmy Carter, that ‘it depends on who’s doing the looking.’” Throughout her life, de Vries struggled against sometimes unintentional behavior from colleagues who were and remained blissfully unaware of the devastating consequences their actions had on her own career.

Camila Orozco Espinel and Rebeca Gomez Betancourt, in “A History of the Institutionalization of Feminist Economics Through its Tensions and Founders,” document the challenges associated with the creation and institutionalization of the discipline of “feminist economics.” Noting that Barbara Bergmann used the term in 1983, a decade before the journal *Feminist Economics* was founded, the authors use key informant interviews with leading figures in the movement and archival material to demonstrate how feminist economics grew to question the subject matter, methods and theories throughout the discipline of economics. How, and to what extent, has



feminist economics been able to maintain its integrity and identity distinct from other approaches to economics as it evolved?

Two of the articles in this volume explicitly address the difficulty that integrating women's experiences in the paid labor market posed for the economics discipline. Mainstream economics, with its focus on perfect competition, had little space for considerations of group power and conflict. Barbara Bergmann's occupational crowding hypothesis was at the core of this dispute. Sarah Small explores this contribution in "Tracing Barbara Bergmann's Occupational Crowding Hypothesis: A Recent History." She documents the relegation of Bergmann's hypothesis, which was explicitly framed to stand among mainstream theories, from its temporary and somewhat uneasy position in mainstream labor economics to feminist and stratification economics.

Dan Hirschman builds on the same theme from a slightly different perspective in "'Controlling for What?' Movements, Measures, and Meanings in the U.S. Gender Wage Gap Debate." He shows how the observed gender-wage gap was used to demonstrate occupational segregation and the societal undervaluation of women's work through the 1980s, but by the end of the decade was increasingly attributed to women's choices and tradeoffs between family and work in mainstream labor economics, thereby retreating from more radical "feminist" analyses and placing this "stylized fact" firmly within the mainstream economic paradigm.

Jennifer Cohen's contribution, entitled "Queen of the Social Sciences," offers the opportunity to reflect on what, exactly, has been meant by the term "professional" in a variety of contexts. In most ways, the challenges that women economists face building careers, dealing with colleagues and negotiating credit are not especially different from the challenges faced by women working in any other field. However, there is one issue that economists alone confront. Only economists are theorizing about their own lives, decisions, experiences and accomplishments as working women.

Several major themes emerge from the collected volume. Several of the articles, for example, examine the roles that women have played as professional economists. Erin Hengel and Sarah Louisa Pythian-Adams's article investigates the changing roles that women economists have played as authors in key journals from a quantitative perspective, while the articles authored by Jennifer Burns, Marianne Johnson, Andres Guiot-Isaac and Camila Orozco Espinel, and Christina Laskaridis explore the tensions and compromises that particular women navigated as they built careers as professional economists and negotiated credit for their own work in particular times and places. Andres Guiot-Isaac and Camila Orozco Espinel, for example, examine the varied experiences of women in Columbia, while Christina Laskaridis looks at the role of one professional economist outside of academia. Jennifer Burns investigates the particular challenges of working

alongside high-profile male economists, while Marianne Johnson documents the career choices that allowed Elinor Ostrom to excel.

A second theme that emerges from these articles involves institution building. Camila Orozco Espinel and Rebeca Gomez Betancourt's article documents the emergence of feminist economics as a separate subfield, while the papers by Sarah Small and Dan Hirschman, from different perspectives, explore the ways in which the experiences of women in the paid labor market challenged the pre-conceptions of mainstream economics and supported the development of feminist economics. Small and Hirschman identify the ways in which the experiences of women as workers influenced the women economists theorizing about these issues, and set the stage for the third theme in this volume.

The interplay of the personal and professional is an additional key theme that emerges. The interplay between women's experiences in the economy and women economists documenting, exploring, questioning, and theorizing about economics has not been systematically examined by historians of economics, but has been the subject of feminist histories. Throughout many of the volume chapters, the subjects were building their careers and simultaneously negotiating the meaning of professionalism and work: what does it mean to be a professional economist? The article by Jennifer Cohen in particular shows how concepts of professionalism exclude diversity among practitioners and have protected the economics discipline from challenge, creating a hostile environment for women economists attempting to build careers, negotiate collaboration, and receive credit for their work.

### *What's next?*

The papers in this volume, and the research agenda of centering women in histories of economics to which they are connected, raise important questions moving forward for the community of those engaged with economics' past. Here, we reflect on two challenges and their consequences for future work in the history of economics.

This volume contains historical contributions related to women and economics in the postwar period. At the same time, the volume represents a separate space within the field of history of economics, broadly conceived, that is devoted to a domain of knowledge that has too frequently been ignored. Such separation is both common (the recent handbook on women's economic thought (Madden and Dimand 2019) providing another example) and, in the context of recuperative history, often reflects a strategic choice to foster the development of a scholarly community. In this way, the intellectual separation finds parallels with the history of the feminist movement, wherein a recurrent tension is between creating alternative venues and fighting for

inclusion in male-dominated spaces. The history of home economics provides a case in point: what was initially recognized and promoted as a social advance for women (e.g. college degrees and new academic jobs that explicitly recognize “feminine expertise”) later becoming perceived as a ghetto – the feminist avant-garde of one time becoming the epitome of anti-feminism for the next generation.

Whatever the causes for separation of pursuits of knowledge, a potential consequence with which historians of economics must grapple is that the institutionalization of separation can produce (or re-produce) social hierarchies. In the case of historical research related to gender and women in economics, separated spaces can reinforce a view that work on women economists as subjects or on the history of economic thinking about women and gender should not be priorities for the professional mainstream at-large. A fitting illustration of this is the “segregated pluralism” of the annual Allied Social Science Associations meetings, wherein heterodox economics and American Economic Association-organized sessions both take place, but in separate rooms (or even separate hotels).<sup>2</sup> Scott describes this “separate and unequal” state in history departments in the 1980s:

In the case of women's history, the response of most non-feminist historians has been acknowledgment and then separation or dismissal (“women had a history separate from men’s, therefore let feminists do women’s history, which need not concern us”; or “women's history is about sex and the family and should be done separately from political and economic history”). In the case of women's participation, the response has been minimal interest at best (“my understanding of the French Revolution is not changed by knowing that women participated in it”). (Scott, 1986, 1055).

As editors, we worry that this volume, whatever its merits in advancing knowledge, enables this sort of separation (and dismissal) to persist in the history of economics. But the challenge issued to the community engaged with the past of economics is greater yet: Which histories should be told separately? Should, for example, the production of historical knowledge that centers racial and other minorities, including indigenous peoples, and economics likewise be separated – appearing mainly in dedicated handbooks, conference sessions, or special issues? When and how should the knowledge generated be integrated it into the mainstream? In the case of women and economics, we have argued that mainstreaming gender as a tool of analysis, rather than its deployment in isolation, can facilitate integrating the history of economic thought by women with economics’ history.

The second challenge that emerges from the papers in this volume concerns the “silences” of unwritten, un-developed, and un-preserved work in the history of economics and how the

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<sup>2</sup> We thank Tiago Mata for the term, which he used to describe the status of heterodoxies at ASSA meetings.

community engaged with economics' past reflects on these. As historians, our "data" are naturally those historical artifacts that can be accessed in the present – e.g. published articles in economics journals, book manuscripts, conference proceedings, autobiographical accounts, written correspondence stored in personal archives. But, as A.O. Scott asks in a recent *The New York Times* review of Tillie Olsen's 1965 essay *Silences*, is there "a place in literature — in our canons and course listings, in our criticism and theory — for unwritten work?"<sup>3</sup> The silences of work not completed – and completed work not preserved – stalk historical endeavors, especially those that focus or center on marginalized groups or bodies of knowledge.

In the case of women in economics, unequal access to academic careers and, for those who did enter academia, unequal access tools and networks important for professional success were historical barriers to advancement. The case of Sadie Alexander is representative of these missed opportunities for economics: the first Black American to earn a Ph.D. in economics, she nevertheless pursue a career outside of it due to limited opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, what about those who "dropped out" altogether – the ones who are not even hidden, but are denied as scholars?<sup>5</sup> An example is Marion Crawford Samuelson, whose intellectual life is shrouded among the traces of her in her husband's archives (Backhouse and Cherrier 2019). Likewise, personal and collective archives of women economists are scarce, with even those of prominent figures still unprocessed (viz. Caroline Shaw Bell's archives at Wellesley and Phyllis Wallace's papers at MIT). This highlights gendered attitudes towards legacy and the role historians may play in the social process of appraising and affirming worth: While some economists organize their archives early on with a clear view of their value to future generations, many women economists have been reluctant to even keep their papers.

Another form of silence concerns the impact of "non-scholarly" pursuits on scholars' academic output and professional trajectories. A case in point is Phyllis Wallace, who, like many African-American scholars, waged urgent battles for racial and gender equality throughout her career. Issues of gender and racial inequalities requiring analyses or remedies (in society and in academia) have consumed the energy of scholars who have felt little choice due to circumstances of their life but to devote their energy to it – who else would have taken up the task? This energy, therefore, could not be devoted to becoming "brilliant scientists" – justifying their marginalization from historical accounts of scientific progress in economics. Wallace, for her part, produced original work on discrimination, but her main contributions were extra-academic: from influencing the principal litigation doctrine regarding discrimination (Chassonnery-Zaïgouche 2020) to urging the

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<sup>3</sup> Source <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/books/review/Tillie-Olsen-tell-me-a-riddle.html?smid=tw-share>

<sup>4</sup> See the important work of Nina Banks (2021) in retrieving and publishing her economics writings.

<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to the title of Aldon Morris's biography of W.E.B. DuBois, *The Denied Scholar*, which describes the denial of DuBois' general role in the history of scientific sociology and its "relegation" to activism.

Boston Art museum to open a Nubian Art gallery (Malveaux 1994). Her general theory of systemic discrimination was not written in the form of articles, but rather scattered in different venues that did not fit the norm of scholarly excellence of the time. The challenge for the community of historians of economics is both to recover the stories of the Phyllis Wallaces of the past as well as to tell the stories of the Phyllis Wallaces yet to come.

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