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Abstract

This essay examines on the New Household Economics' view of the family (focusing in particular on household organization and intra-household decision-making) from the methodological point of view. It emphasises upon the fact that feminist neo-classical economics, which applies the feminist perspective to an existing economic theory or seeks to improve neo-classical theory by removing its male bias, gives rise to change in the methodological framework of New Household Economics. The family is not constituted economically by rational individuals but an institution which has relative autonomy for capital accumulation and family decision-making with regard to the labour market.

1. Introduction

How has economics dealt with the family? Since the mid-1960s, there has been increasing interest among economists in topics such as the use of time and goods within the family, marriage and divorce, and fertility has developed. G. Becker (1965, 1985) established New Household Economics on the basis of human capital theory and the theory of the allocation of time between alternative uses, highlighting the importance of households as the relevant unit of decision-making with significant implications for the analysis of labour supply. New Household Economics, however, was not new in terms of its approach and method. Rather, its novelty laid in the domain the application of standard microeconomics to choice made within the household. What may be understood as a broadening of economics, in terms of its subject matter, ironically involved its narrowing in terms of the identification of economics with a method. (Humphries 1995)

On the other hand, from the standpoint of comparative welfare regime theory, G. Esping-Andersen writes as follows regarding the welfare state and the family.

“The political economy paradigm, which so powerfully underpinned welfare state research in the 1980s, did little to resurrect interest in the family. Its analytical lens was fixed on the battle between state and market, and the family received mention only in so far as it was the nucleus of a class constituency or the beneficiary of distributive outcomes and de-commodification” (G. Esping-Andersen 1999, p.45)

Esping-Andersen thus proposes the new political economy focused on the micro-behaviour of the family in place the macro-comparative political economy.

Key words: family, market, methodology, relative autonomy of family, New Household Economics, feminist neo-classical economics, Family-friendly Economics

His proposal was a response to the criticism brought by feminists against *The Three Worlds of Welfare-Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen 1990), published in 1990, which is recognized as a milestone in comparative welfare regime theory. Feminists argued that the welfare social policy reproduced the gender discrimination and that Esping-Andersen had failed to address this aspect. Esping-Andersen acknowledged that this criticism should receive considerably more attention, mainly because it was a salutary reminder that the household is the core component of any welfare regime. (Esping-Andersen 1999) It is now recognized that understanding the relationship between market and family is of great importance in a context of “the crisis of welfare states” and of “the pro-family movement” that has spread in the advanced countries since the 1980s.

This paper examines the problem just outlined from the methodological point of view. I will argue for the relative autonomy of the family as supply side in the labour market, a point of view which is important as regards both theory and policy.

2. A critical examination of New Household Economics

2.1 The logic of Neo-classical Economics’ treatment of family

Becker has written on the sexual division of labour within the family and the allocation of time between alternatives as follows:

“Increasing returns from specialized human capital is a powerful force creating a division of labor in the allocation of time and investment in human capital between married men and married women. Moreover, since child care and housework are more effort intensive than leisure and other household activities, married women spend less effort on each hour of market work than married men working the same number of hours. Hence, married women have lower hourly earnings than married men with the same market human capital, and they economize on the effort expended on market work by seeking less demanding jobs.” (G. Becker 1985)

This is the well-known preamble to Becker’s, “Human Capital, Effort, and the Sexual Division of Labor” and it is recognised as a common-sense explanation for general gaps in the labour market, such as the sexual wage differential and the disparity between married women and unmarried women. According to Becker, a household economy is one in which the wife (or husband) invests life (housekeeping) time and market goods, and performs household economic production so that a firm can invest labor, raw materials, and capital in a market and so that market production can be performed. The concept of ‘household commodities’ expresses this logic exactly (Becker 1965).

In Becker’s (1981) model, although a woman and a man start out with the same intelligence and the same education, it is assumed that if the couple has a child the woman is biologically more productive in housework and she will increase her advantage in household production the more time she spends on this activity. She invests in household-related human capital. At the same time, the ‘household commodities’ in the family are expected to generate more welfare for family members than in separate single-person households. A family is a community of individuals and special profits will be enjoyed there in through the pooling of resources, the

division of work and intra-family exchange.

Ott (1995) assumes that there are three types of family transaction that generate a surplus:

- (1) as a production company, a family has members which can exploit comparative advantages by specializing in market and work at home in conjunction with intra-family trade.
- (2) as a consumer cooperative, the family allows the joint use of the indivisible goods and achieves decreasing costs through economies of scale.
- (3) as an insurance coalition, the family produces security through the exchange of mutual promises for aid.

Ott criticizes Becker's traditional view of household production and the narrow framework within which the above potential profits are realized, claiming instead that they require long-term contracts within the family. Because the willingness to agree to such contracts depends on individual welfare, the distribution of the total household production affects the behavior of family members.

Ott analyses the division of work within the family by using a bargaining model and seeks to improve Becker's model from a feminist perspective. Ott is a feminist neo-classical economist and my concern here is whether or not the feminist neo-classical economics' approach is successful in terms of improving or changing the neo-classical framework with method.

2.2 Feminist Neo-classical Economics

Feminism endeavours to change economic theory. Gustafson (1997) has presented the following three versions of the feminist approach. The first rejects neo-classical theory and argues that there is a need for alternative feminist economics. The second version maintains the feminist perspective is applied to an existing economic theory, different policy implications will be drawn. The third argues that feminist economics will improve neo-classical theory by removing its male bias and may thus reveal mechanisms by which the overall efficiency of the economy can be increased.

The first version disagrees with the neo-classical economics in terms of the methodological framework. This view stems to large extent from heterodox theories such as marxian economics and institutional economics. The second and third are known as feminist neo-classical economics, which is essentially based on the neo-classical economics' framework and in particular on methodological individualism and the efficiency. Gustaffson endorses the second view and seeks to go one step further by putting forward the third view: namely that the male bias in economics may conceal important economic mechanisms, and this may give rise to policy recommendations which are less economically efficient. Efficiency is at the heart of economic analysis. Sometimes a more equal distribution of income among the members of society can be shown to be equally efficient, but there is often a trade-off between efficiency and equality. Analysis of feminist goals can then be framed in terms of this trade-off between efficiency and equality.

As mentioned, feminist neo-classical economics unites within itself the following two characteristics. First, it seeks to improve neo-classical economics by using tools of such as game theory with gender awareness. Second, it is essentially based on a neo-classical economic method. Gustaffson writes that neo-classical economics

is the best theory with which to analyze changes in prices and incomes, although it cannot be used for long-term prediction. Using the tools of neo-classical economics with gender awareness may yield arguments for reforms that produce a society which is at the same time more economically efficient and closer to the feminist vision. It seems that feminist neo-classical economics is theoretically based on the neo-classical economics and is politically (as policy-making) applies the feminist perspective to an existing economic theory, However, this prompts the question as to whether in contrasts to Gustaffson's view, feminist neo-classical economics may not be inconsistent with neo-classical economics with methodology. (see Humphries 1998; Folbre 1994)

Comparison of the theoretical work of two feminist neo-classical economics with Becker's may be fruitful. Ott (1992) shows that even if the division of work and trade is optimal in the short run as Becker predicts, it is not optimal in a long-term perspective because it implies decreasing power and outside options for the partner specializing in household production, and that a suboptimal number of children will therefore be born. Ott analyses the decision to have a child is analysed as a prisoner's dilemma.

On the other hand, Rosen (1993) employs a matching model based on the

Table 1.1 Division of work within the family

BECKER	OTT
<p>Division of work and trade lead to specialization gains.</p> <p>Feminist goals can be achieved by trading off efficiency for equity.</p> <p>Policies to promote feminist goals might decrease economic efficiency due to decreased specialization gains.</p>	<p>Division of work lowers the homeworking partner's threat point, leads to tied marriages, fertility decisions as prisoner's dilemma.</p> <p>Feminist goals can be achieved by policies which simultaneously improve Pareto optimality i.e. economic efficiency.</p> <p>Policies to promote feminist goals, e.g. subsidized childcare, paid parental leave and tax rules benefiting the two-earner family, might increase economic efficiency.</p>

Source: S. Gustaffson (1997, p.44)

Table 1.2 Discrimination

BECKER	Rosén
<p>Employers have a taste for discrimination and discriminate against women by paying them a lower wage equal to their subjective cost of employing women.</p> <p>Feminist goals of equal wages can under some conditions be achieved automatically with time because non-discriminatory.</p> <p>Employers will make profits and drive discriminating employers out of business.</p> <p>Affirmative action, quotas etc., that do not affect the coefficient of discrimination may result in less productive persons being hired and may decrease efficiency of the economy.</p>	<p>Employers discriminate against women by not making jobs which results in women accepting less efficient job matches than men.</p> <p>Feminist goals will not materialize without action because discriminatory equilibria are the only stable equilibria.</p> <p>Affirmative action will lead to better matches and may increase the efficiency of the economy.</p>

Source: *ibid.*, p.50.

search theory literature, showing that, on the basis of the economic mechanism of matching between jobs and workers, the presence of discrimination will lead to sub-optimal matches with losses of economic efficiency as the result. She also shows that discrimination will not disappear because the discriminatory equilibrium is stable, and affirmative action may be needed to bring about a more efficient non-discriminatory equilibrium.¹

3. Gender research and criticism of modern economics

3.1 Two streams of Feminist Political Economy

The international association for feminist economics (IAFFE) was established in 1992 and since then has gathered members who divide largely into two groups in terms of the methodological point of view. The first group comprises feminist neo-classical economists, who apply the feminist perspective to an existing economic theory or try to improve neoclassical theory by removing its male bias (see Gustaffson 1997). The second group consists of feminist political economists, who rejects neo-classical economics and undertake its feminist reconstruction to find an alternative. (ibid.) The second group, moreover, divides into two subgroups. The first of them seeks to construct a feminist political economy but is influenced by neoclassical institutional models or traditional institutional theory. The second addresses the problem in more general methodological terms than does the feminist representation. In other words, it pursues the construction of “a new and gender-sensitive political economy” (Humphries 1998, p.224) by posing the problem of what methodology most convincingly accounts for “the relationship between structure and agency” (ibid.). The point is whether the methodology might be able to change the framework of neoclassical economics to construct an alternative.

3.2 The first group of Feminist Political Economists

I refer here to Folbre (1996) as a typical example of the former group of feminist political economists. She is, of course, engaged in constructing a feminist political economy by applying the feminist approach, but does so very much under the influence of analytical marxism and the institutionalist schools (neoclassical and traditional models). Folbre provides stylized comparisons of the two schools.

Table 2.3 illustrates the stylized features of the feminist approach, which is described as ‘a starting point’ (Folbre, 1994, p.50) of a feminist political economy. This model displays its similarities and differences with respect to the neo-classical institutionalist and neo-marxist models. It utilizes the neo-marxist vocabulary of structural factors, but includes ‘preferences’ among them and has the same list of processes and sites as the neo-marxist model, including coercion. Folbre states, that “this is particularly important insofar as coercion applies to the family as a site”. Like both institutionalist and neo-marxist approaches, this feminist perspective appreciates the roles of individual agency and processes of coordination, as well as coercion. Here coercion, which is stressed by Folbre, might in my opinion, fit with the vocabulary of the school of social accumulation (SSA) rather than with that of traditional marxist theory.

I find that the fundamental logic of Folbre’s ‘collective action’ theory has been

Table 2.1 A stylized comparison of Traditional Neoclassical model and Neoclassical Institutional model

Traditional Neoclassical model
Exogenously given factors: <i>rules, norms, preference</i> Agents: <i>individuals</i> Processes: <i>exchange</i> Sites: <i>markets</i>
Neoclassical Institutional model
Partially endogenous factors: <i>rules, norms, preference</i> Agents: <i>individuals, interest groups</i> Processes: <i>exchange, bargaining, coordination</i> Sites: <i>markets, social institutions</i>

Source: N. Folbre (1994, p.24)

Table 2.2 A stylized comparison of traditional Marxian and Neo-Marxian approaches

Traditional Marxian model
Structural factors: <i>assets, rules, norms</i> Agents: <i>classes</i> Processes: <i>coercion, production, bargaining</i> Sites: <i>capitalist firm</i>
Neo-Marxian model
Structural factors: <i>assets, rules, norms</i> Agents: <i>classes, class-like groups, individuals</i> Processes: <i>coercion, production, bargaining, exchange, coordination</i> Sites: <i>capitalist firms, states, markets, families</i>

Source: *ibid.*, p.35.

Table 2.3 A stylized feminist approach

Structural factors: <i>assets, rules, norms, preference</i> Agents: <i>individuals, chosen groups, given groups,</i> Processes: <i>coercion, production, exchange, coordination</i> Sites: <i>states, markets, families</i>
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Source: *ibid.*, p.49.

influenced by the notion of ‘collective organization’ analyzed by the transaction cost theory of O. E. Williamson (1975), the prominent neo-classical institutionalist and by Commons, one of the founders of institutional economics. (see Hara 2001, p.273) Williamson explored the microeconomic issues of market and hierarchies in his famous book *Markets and Hierarchies* (1975). Whilst he expressly acknowledged the importance of *human* factors in the “organization failures framework” (*ibid.*, p.2) and “bounded rationality and opportunism” in the organizations, he also pointed out that new institutional economists “both draw on microtheory and, for the most part, regard what they are doing as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, conventional economics”. (*ibid.*,p.1) It seems to me that Folbre’s intention is to construct the new rational theory of family organization as an alternative to the

new household economics. The relative openness of the framework of the transaction cost approach may be preferred by feminists seeking, for instance, to include institutional and cultural variables into their analysis. Yet, one may ask, is it possible to criticize the neoclassical economics by using the methodological vocabulary of the neoclassical institutionalist model? On the other hand, Folbre has stressed that: “This stylized model of a feminist political economy is nothing more than a starting point, a map designed to orient further exploration. Certainly, it raises as many questions as it answers (...) We are talking history and herstory here, narratives that the mathematical tools of game theory cannot formalize”.

This consideration raises the question of how Folbre is able to establish a methodological relationship between her ‘collective action theory’, which seems to me to lead to Pareto optimality, and historical- narrative description.

3.3 The second group of Feminist Political Economists

The J. Humphries referred to here is a historian of the working-class family particularly in nineteenth-century in Britain and she is also a well-known representative of gender research in Britain. She certainly shares with Folbre a commitment to reexamination of rational theory in conventional economics. But compared to Folbre, Humphries addresses the problem in more general methodological terms than the feminist representation and she advocates the convergence of feminist and other critique (T. Lawson 1997, 1999, 2003a. 2003b).² Humphries writes:

“Economists’ methodology has long been criticized for its naive failure to problematise the relationship between structure and agency. But it would be equally naive to see these failings as amenable to some marginal readjustment of economic theory. To respond to these feminist criticisms would involve major changes in the practice of economics. It is a useful lesson for those who would construct a new and gender- sensitive political economy” (Humphries 1998, p.224)³

Humphries’ approach thus has the following three features.

First it addresses the problem in more general terms than does the feminist representation, criticizing methodological individualism and the hypothesis of rational economic man of New Household Economics and seeking to construct a gender-sensitive political economy, that is a ‘Family-friendly Economics (J. Humphries 1998). The main problem, therefore, is the convergence of feminist and other critiques. Although Humphries acknowledges that the looser framework of the game theory may be preferred by feminists (feminist neoclassical economists such as Ott 1995), seeking to include institutional and culultural variables into their analysis, she maintains that a more important question for feminists is whether the way forward is to conduct analysis of power relations within the using models of this kind, or to use structural models. (Humphries 1995)

Second, Humphries maintains that the historical study of the working-class family, especially in nineteenth-century Britain furnishes very important background. She consequently examines the relationship between capital accumulation and the working-class family both historically and dynamically, showing that the family, the supply side in the labour market, has played a ‘relatively autonomous’ (Humphries and Rubely, 1984 p. 332) active roll in each historical phase. This approach, she maintains, yields a perspective on the persistence of the working-class

family different from that of family disappearance theory.

Third, Humphries (1977) has criticized a well-known domestic labour controversy connected with the value controversy of the 1970s, which had focused almost exclusively on an extension of value theory that abandoned Marx's first abstraction and thus accommodated the existence of domestic labour from the methodological point of view. Humphries writes of "the unique correspondence between the level of wages and the historically given working — class standard of living, which now depends not only on purchased commodities but also on household activity". (ibid., p.244)⁴

4. The relative autonomy of the family: methodological examination

Humphries and Rubery (1984) has examined the main approaches to the analysis of the family system from the methodological point of view, using the criterion of methodological consistency. They show that across the whole spectrum of theoretical approaches, from neoclassical to Marxist and feminist, broadly similar methodologies for analyzing the relationship between the spheres of production and reproduction have been employed. (ibid., p.331) According to Humphries and Rubery, the existing literature applies two opposing but equally inappropriate approaches to analysis of the family system: approaches which they call *absolute autonomy* and *reductionist/functionalist*. In the former approach, the family system is taken as 'given' and independent of the production system, which must adapt to and operate within its constraints. In the latter approach, the family system is an integral and adaptable part of the broader production system and is essentially a dependent variable within the economic system. Humphries and Rubery take *relative autonomus* approach as the appropriate one with which to analyse the relationship between the spheres of production and reproduction

I find it interesting that this approach's credence is paradoxically assumed on the basis of the failure of existing studies "to apply their *absolute autonomy or reductionist/functionalist* approaches consistently or plausibly" (ibid., p.332) Humphries and Rubery maintain that the '*ad hoc adjustment*' of existing works leads to swings between one methodology and another in order to make sense of empirical realities. The questioning here is which approach does justice to the role of the family system plays in shaping the structure and development of the economic system.

4.1 The relative autonomy approach to the family as the supply side of the labour market

In what does the relative autonomy approach consist? In contrast to the absolute autonomy and reductionist/functionalist approaches, Humphries and Rubery assert that the aim of the relative autonomy approach is to develop an appropriate historical treatment of the family system in which the productive system is one important conditioning factor. The four fundamental principles of the relative autonomy approach are stated by Humphries and Rubery as follows. (ibid., p.339)

The first principle is that the family system is articulated to the production sphere and is an integral part of the economists. The demand-side structure of the economy cannot be conceived independently of its supply-side structure. The latter

is not autonomously determined, as under patriarchy, nor does it respond smoothly, predictably or accommodatingly to demand-side impulses.

The second principle is that the supply-side structure is relatively independent of the sphere of production and that both the demand-side and the supply-side structures must adapt to each other.

The third principle is that the relationship between the spheres of production system and the family system can only be understood historically and is not predetermined.

The fourth principle is that the relationship must be analyzed within a non-functionalist perspective: that is, a perspective in which the family system can and does adapt to the benefit of both capital and labour, and to the benefit or cost of different elements within the working class.

These principles allow for the development of a historical and dynamic analysis of the interaction between the spheres of production and reproduction.

4.2 The relative autonomy approach in practice

Humphries and Rubery concentrated on the practical meanings of the four principles of the relative autonomy of the family system. Most important from the theoretical point of view, I believe, is that the family system is a core element in economic analysis and that its existence, therefore, serves to break the direct link between wage levels and standards of living. "Theories of value and distribution need to take into account the structures and organization of the family as well as that of the labour market". (Humphries and Rubery, 1984, p.341)

Humphries' research (1977) into the struggle over real wages in the nineteenth century suggests that the family system played an important role in protecting the individual against the harshness of the capitalist labour market, and provided a basis on which the working class could organize itself to raise its standard of living, both by protecting real wages on the labour market and by increasing domestic labour.⁵ The family, as an institution, has been shaped by the aspiration of people for personalized non-market methods of distribution and social interaction. To ignore the role that these aspirations and beliefs have played in guiding human conduct and in shaping the class struggle is to fail to understand the proletarian family and its persistency. (Humphries, 1977)⁶

This consideration highlights the meanings of the relative autonomy approach to the family system in practice.

First, the organization of consumption on a family basis means that participation in the labour market and the share of non-waged and waged work within the family can be varied, and potentially controlled, by the family unit. (Humphries and Rubery, 1984, p.341 see also Picchio del Mercato 1981) Thus the relatively autonomous system of social reproduction is able to shape the path of economic development.

Second, theories of value and distribution need to take into account the structures and organization of the family as well as those of the labour market. Neglect of the family sphere of the economic system is "surprising in view of the need within the major economic paradigms for a theory of distribution". (ibid., p.339) Here, the family here is not necessarily the modern family, but a network of social relationship which may be based on genealogical relationships but which also needs to be pro-

duced and sustained by social practices reinforcing reciprocal kinship relations.

5. Conclusion

The paper has considered some methodological issues of central importance to the study of the relationship between the market and the family, examining for the purpose the issues concerning New Household Economics, Feminist Neo-classical Economics and two streams of Feminist Political Economy. It has followed Humphries in emphasizing that the relationship between the family system and the market system must be analyzed using the relative autonomous approach both historically and dynamically. The family system is not autonomously determined, as under patriarchy, nor does it respond smoothly, predictably or accommodatingly to the production system. From the feminist standpoint tradition, patriarchal theory has combined men's oppression of women with a historically specific form of economic organization to explain gender division. (see Hartmann 1979) "The relative openness of structural analysis may prove attractive to feminists disillusioned with the restrictions of neoclassical economics". (Humphries 1995. p.xxii)

The same openness, however, has also been unable to establish the structural analysis a hierarchy of determination in the articulation of patriarchy and capitalism. It is important, I believe, that the meaning of the persistency of the family system should be analyzed by using the relative autonomous approach. The family, as an institution, has been shaped by the aspiration of people for personalized non-market methods of distribution and social interaction. Theory of value and distribution must take account of the structure and organization of the family as well as those of the labour market. The major economic paradigms, however, mainly Neo-classical Economics, neglect the family system in their construction of a theory of distribution.

The main problem here is achieving convergence between Feminist Political Economy and other critiques in order to construct a theory alternative to mainstream economics: that is a gender-sensitive political economy or a Family-friendly Economics (not Family- friendly policy).⁷

Notes

- 1 There are prominent studies from the feminist neo-classical point of view in Japan, for example, Nakata (1997) and Nagase (1997). Their notions, I believe, would be inconsistent with assumptions of neo-classical theory, that is, of the New Household Economics. As to a development of feminist political economy in Japan, see Kuba (2002).
- 2 Recently, there has been the earnest discussion about the methodology of gender in the *Feminist Economics*: the discussion is "Is Critical Realism a Useful Ontology for Feminist Economics?" (Lawson 1999, 2003a, 2003b).
- 3 Best and Humphries (2003), for example, seek to construct the convergence between a gender-sensitive economics and other theory by examining the notion of *The Theory of the Firm* by Edith Penrose. The title of this trial is "Edith Penrose: A Feminist Economist?" (see also, Humphries 1995).
- 4 As to the retrospective of domestic labour controversy, see Gardiner (1997).
- 5 The controversy of the family wage between Humphries and Hartmann is very famous.

- (Hartmann 1976, Humphries 1977, and see also Kimoto 1995) Humphries emphasized that the family wage was formed through the struggle over real wage in the nineteenth century (1977).
- 6 E. P. Thompson stated that in the early nineteenth-century the cost of bread was the most sensitive indicator of popular discontent, and that consumer consciousness was positively related to the evolution of class consciousness (Thompson 1963, see also Humphries 1977).
 - 7 Family-friendly economics is not same as the Family-friendly policy in terms of the methodology. Humphries writes “the economics that matters is neoclassical economics and to argue a case for policy intervention, feminists must be able to identify a market failure” (Humphries 1998, p.235). Trzcinski (1995) describes how it was done by the proponents of the Family and Medical Leave Act in the USA following its veto by President Bush in September 1992. She notes that opponents of the legislation relied in large part on the standard neoclassical analyses to form the cornerstone of ideological and theoretical opposition to mandated job-guaranteed family and medical leave.

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