
Ludwig von Mises as Feminist Economist

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VICENTE MORENO-CASAS

Feminist economics is a research field that seeks to include and recognize women’s productive and theoretical contributions within economic science. It is usually considered to have arisen in the 1990s with Marilyn Waring’s (1988) work, in which she claimed that nonmarket work, accomplished mainly by women, should be included in economic indicators. Although Waring’s work “revitalized feminist arguments for valuing non-market work” (Folbre 2009, 308), feminism and economics had converged several years earlier (see, for example, Boserup 1970; Bergmann 1974; Hartmann 1979). It was in the 1990s that feminist economics officially emerged (Becchio 2020), and, after that, many feminist scholars joined this study and found that women’s roles as economic agents were generally absent in economic science, in both theory and empirical studies. This was so, they argued, because mainstream economic epistemology and theory had been built on male constructs and gender biases. Some feminist economists talked about *malestream* instead of mainstream economics in reference to neoclassical economics because of its androcentric character (Bergmann 1990; Nelson 1992, 1993; Pujol 1992; Seiz 1993). For instance, feminist economists used the idea of *homo economicus* as evidence that the subject of the study of neoclassical economics is a man and not a neutral subject. Some argued that only reputedly male characteristics such as rationality, individualism, and competition were being studied in economics, whereas putatively female characteristics, such as cooperation, altruism, and subjectivism, were treated as being beyond the scope of economics (Nelson 1996).

Vicente Moreno-Casas is an economics student at Loyola University in Andalusia, Spain.

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Since then, some feminist scholars have tried to improve neoclassical economics by including women's contributions and features, which has resulted in what is known as "gender economics." However, many other feminist economists have considered that the very foundations of neoclassical economics have limited the broadening of the scope of economics and the introduction of new, more *humanistic* concepts and methodologies. Hence, they prefer to find better explanatory capacity in other approaches and currents within economics. As a result, feminist economics has been connected with many approaches: various socialist branches, American institutionalism, post-Keynesianism, social ontology, the capability approach, behavioral economics, the economic comparative system, and Austrian economics (Becchio 2020). This paper aims to contribute to the existing relationship between the Austrian School of economics and feminist economics by studying the life and oeuvre of one of the most relevant Austrian economists in history, Ludwig von Mises.

Some economists who have worked on this Austrian feminist approach are Karen Vaughn (1994), Deborah Walker (1994; also Walker et al. 2004), Steven Horwitz (1995), William Waller (1999), and Giandomenica Becchio (2015, 2018, 2019, 2020). Others, such as Miguel-Ángel Galindo and Domingo Ribeiro (2012), Robert Garnett (2015), and Michael Hammond (2016), have treated it superficially, using Austrian ideas in feminist arguments or vice versa. However, as Waller states, "it seems that an Austrian-feminist approach to economics is possible, but that potential is significantly underdeveloped at present" (1999, 25). Thus, in order to enhance the Austrian-feminist relation, I study the figure of Ludwig von Mises, whose life is a vivid demonstration of the classical liberal defense of women's freedom and whose writings serve as a consistent and sound foundation for the development of feminist economics theory. If we can conclude that Ludwig von Mises's writings are useful for feminist economists, it will be easier to develop a vigorous Austrian branch within feminist economics.

For this purpose, I first introduce Mises's life as an example of support for women's freedom and his writings on marriage and private property as a classical liberal position in defense of women's rights. Then, I discuss the epistemological similarities between feminist economics and praxeology and how the latter can enrich the former. Finally, I criticize some methodological ideas of feminist economics and enhance them from the praxeological viewpoint.

Women, Feminism, and Ludwig von Mises

Ludwig von Mises is considered one of the most prominent authors of the Austrian School. He wrote justly famous books such as *The Theory of Money and Credit* (2009, originally published in German in 1912), *Socialism* (1951, originally published in German in 1922), and, his major work, *Human Action* ([1949] 1998). However, his academic life was not as successful as his works. According to Jörg Guido Hülsmann (2007), Mises's professional and academic beginning was very challenging; he did not

gain an academic position easily. While he was working in a prestigious law firm and after that in the Vienna chamber of commerce, he began teaching economics in October 1907 to the senior class of the Trade Academy for Girls.¹ Mises's first students were girls, just a few years after women were admitted into the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna in 1897 and some years before women entered the Department of Law in 1919. In 1919, Mises started his private seminar with a talk offered by a woman, Elisabeth Ephrussi. In fact, two generations of Austrian women economists were participants at Mises's seminars, both in Vienna and later at New York University. Helene Lieser, Marianne Herzfeld, Ilse Mintz, Gertrude Lovasy, Elly Spiro, and Martha Stephanie Braun were some of the female students in Mises's private seminar in Vienna, and all of them belong to the second generation of Austrian School female economists (Becchio 2019). In addition, Mary Sennholz and Bettina Bien Greaves, from the third generation of Austrian School women economists, were regulars at Mises's seminars at New York University. These facts support the idea that "Mises was one of the few men in a leadership position who actively promoted young female intellectuals" (Hülsmann 2007, 417), according to his classical liberal notion of women's freedom and rights, which I discuss at greater length later in this paper.

We could consider Mises as a man concerned with women's issues. Such is the case that his wife, Margit von Mises, asserted: "Lu was a great defender of women, and never doubted their mental capacities or potentials. His seminar in Vienna was well known for the many highly gifted women who attended and later became leading figures in economics and education" (M. Mises 1976, 141). He captured this concern in one of his most famous books, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, which I analyze later.

Mises's political philosophy is embedded in the classical liberal tradition (see Mises 1985). This being so, it should come as no surprise that Mises wrote on the issue of women and feminism, given that the woman question emerged in the nineteenth century as a consequence of the period's concern with liberal principles of equality before the law and individual freedom, exemplified in two of the first modern feminist publications: the pamphlet *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (Declaration of the rights of woman and the female citizen, 1791) by Olympe de Gouges and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ([1792] 1994) by Mary Wollstonecraft. Another famous classical liberal author cited in reference to liberalism and feminism is John Stuart Mill, who published *The Subjection of Women* (1869). It is noteworthy that in Austria in the early twentieth century, the woman question was already being discussed in socialist circles, but mainly in liberal groups (Becchio 2020). In that sense, Mises continued a long tradition of liberal thinkers who had worried about women's freedom and civil rights. Concretely, the fourth chapter of *Socialism* is

1. At that time, young men were given a broad classical education to prepare them for the university and public responsibilities, whereas women had a separate education oriented toward concrete professional concerns (Hülsmann 2007).

bound to defend the institution of marriage contracts against the socialist attack. It seems that he realized that feminism was being tempted by socialists, whose claims, he felt, were very harmful to freedom. Therefore, he wanted to make an essential distinction about feminism. He stated: “So far as Feminism seeks to adjust the legal position of woman to that of man, so far as it seeks to offer her legal and economic freedom to develop and act in accordance with her inclinations, desires, and economic circumstances—so far it is nothing more than a branch of the great liberal movement, which advocates peaceful and free evolution. When, going beyond this, it attacks the institutions of social life under the impression that it will thus be able to remove the natural barriers, it is a spiritual child of Socialism” (1951, 101).

In accord with his refutation of socialism, he warned about the risk that feminism could become a socialist or interventionist movement, pointing out that the majority of the proposals to change relations between the sexes had been claimed hand in hand with the intention of socialization of the means of production—the ultimate goal of socialism—and doing so almost thirty years before the second wave of feminism (known for being anticapitalist) was born (Beauvoir 1956; Friedan [1963] 1974).

From a classical liberal standpoint, he was concerned about the “legal and economic freedom” of women so that they could “develop and act in accordance with [their] inclinations, desires and economic circumstances.” However, as a classical liberal Mises not only wrote in defense of women’s equality before the law but also pronounced on more profound questions such as marriage, free love, prostitution, women’s personality, and violence against women. He affirmed: “Woman’s struggle to preserve her personality in marriage is part of that struggle for personal integrity which characterizes the rationalist society of the economic order based on private ownership of the means of production. It is not exclusively to the interest of woman that she should succeed in this struggle; to contrast the interests of men and women, as extreme feminists try to do, is very foolish. All mankind would suffer if woman should fail to develop her ego and be unable to unite with man as equal, freeborn companions and comrades” (1951, 105). He was aware of the fact that women’s role is essential for the social and economic progress of everyone, both men and women. This is entirely consistent with his liberal view of human cooperation (Mises [1949] 1998). For him, cooperation based on the division of labor and peaceful exchange is the source of progress and civilization. And because of that, not only women but also men should cooperate peacefully and strive together in women’s cause so that all humanity could benefit from such an extension of the division of labor: “But the matter affects men not less than women, for only in co-operation can the sexes reach the highest degree of individual culture. . . . To preserve the freedom of inner life for the woman, this is the real problem of women; it is part of the cultural problem of humanity” (1951, 103).

It cannot be denied that, for Mises, women’s circumstances and the cause of feminism were of great importance. Nevertheless, this awareness did not lead him to argue in the same line as socialist feminists of the moment. Regarding the question of marriage, Mises had a different viewpoint. Whereas socialist feminism believed that

marriage had enslaved women (Nash 1907; Kollontai 1977),² Mises affirmed that the social institution of marriage was not really the problem for women. In truth, the real obstacle to their liberation was “the more absorbing form in which the sexual function affects the female body. Pregnancy and the nursing of children claim the best years of women’s life, the years in which a man may spend his energies in great achievements” (1951, 100). He identified, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that the real sources of the unequal development of men’s and women’s lives are motherhood, nursing, and childcare,³ not marriage: “But whatever the truth about this, the fact remains that when [a woman] becomes a mother, with or without marriage, she is prevented from leading her life as freely and independently as [a] man. Extraordinarily gifted women may achieve fine things in spite of motherhood; but because the functions of sex have the first claim upon woman, genius and the greatest achievements have been denied her” (1951, 100–101).

He considered the marriage contract as the historical consequence of women’s development. In making a sociological analysis of gender relations, Mises traced the origin and evolution of marriage and, precisely, its contractual form. According to Mises, before the establishment of the marriage contract—which he considered to be an eminent capitalist development—there was a time he called “the age of violence,” in which the “unlimited rule of the male characterizes family relations where the principle of violence dominates” (1951, 89). In that time, women were subjugated to the power of men; they had no rights and were the servants of men. Mises expressed their situation in different ways: “The man seizes possession of the woman and holds this sexual object in the same sense in which he has other goods of the outer world. Here woman becomes completely a thing. She is stolen and bought; she is given away, sold away, ordered away; in short, she is like a slave in the house.” Moreover, “[t]he principle of violence recognizes only the male. He alone possesses power, hence he alone has rights. Woman is merely a sexual object” (1951, 89, 90).

It is remarkable to see how in 1922 Mises was already talking about women’s oppression and subjugation in gender relations, as Betty Friedan ([1963] 1974) would do forty years later. Moreover, he focused not only on women’s legal equality and on their economic development and freedom but also on their situation in the household and family, especially in connection to the matter of violence and male aggressiveness. That is to say, he dealt with women’s problems in the private sphere (family) as well as with their problems in the public sphere (markets, society). With this approach, he did

2. Mises referred to Friedrich Engels’s work *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (2010, originally published in German in 1884) as an example of the Marxist argument against marriage and to August Bebel’s book on free love, *Woman under Socialism* (1904, originally published in German in 1879), where he criticized marriage.

3. Nowadays, this idea is thought to best explain the social phenomenon of the gender pay gap. Differences in wages between sexes are supposed to be due to motherhood, among other causes, and many official statistics and works have demonstrated that such differences exist for this reason. See, for example, the work of Michelle Budig and Paula England (2001) and Paula England (2005).

what feminists and feminist economists (Jennings 1993; Funke and Grove 2019) would later advocate, studying not only the public realm (markets) but also the private realm (relations within the household), not assuming that there are equal relations between the husband and the wife but differences in the bargaining power between them (Folbre 1986) or even, as Mises said, relations based on male violence.

In his sociological analysis, Mises (1951) stressed that polygamy was a common phenomenon in “the age of violence”⁴ because wives were considered the property of their husbands. Nonetheless, as women later became engaged and married as owners and heiresses—Mises continued—monogamy was slowly enforced by wives, “who bring[] [to their] husband[s] wealth” (1951, 95). Eventually, “the relation of husband and wife is acknowledged as a contract” (95). That marriage began to be recognized as a contract is a paramount point in women’s historical struggle for equality. This means that women went from being the servants and property of their husbands to being one of the partners in a contract. The form of contract implies that the husband acknowledges the wife’s property and wealth; otherwise, he would have her properties at his disposal without permission. In other words, women gained the rights and the position of equal partners within marriage with the introduction of the contract in the social institution of marriage, albeit provided that the contract would be useful for women under the rule of law. In that regard, Mises asserted: “As the idea of contract enters the Law of Marriage, it breaks the rule of the male, and makes the wife a partner with equal rights. From a one-sided relationship resting on force, marriage thus becomes a mutual agreement; the servant becomes the married wife entitled to demand from the man all that he is entitled to ask from her. Step by step she wins the position in the home which she holds to-day” (1951, 95–96).

In what Mises called “the age of violence,” a woman could not demand or defend her wealth before her husband. With the evolution of marriage into a contract, women acquired rights over their own properties and wealth, which improved their social position in the private and public spheres. Even so, it was not enough that the contract acknowledged a woman as an equal partner: she also had to hold property within marriage. A historical case can be found in the creation of the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 in the United Kingdom. This act “granted British women the right to own and control personal property and dramatically increased the bargaining power and the amount of properties of married women. This legal change in married women’s property rights facilitated a growing female role in investment” (Becchio 2020, 20, citing Combs 2006). This development supports the Misesian argument that the contract contributes to enhancing women’s position within marriage.

4. The “age of violence” is not a specific historical reference but a sociological yardstick that marks the difference between two stages of civilization: one that is founded on violence and another based on contracts and peaceful cooperation.

Mises ended his analysis elucidating the causes of this evolution in marriage. For him, the contractual form of marriage was a consequence of capitalist thought, in particular economic calculation and private property. Mises explained:

This evolution of marriage has taken place by way of the law relating to the property of married persons. Woman's position in marriage was improved as the principle of violence was thrust back, and as the idea of contract advanced in other fields of the Law of Property it necessarily transformed the property relations between the married couple. The wife was freed from the power of her husband for the first time when she gained legal rights over the wealth which she brought into marriage and which she acquired during marriage, and when that which her husband customarily gave her was transformed into allowances enforceable by law. Thus marriage, as we know it, has come into existence entirely as a result of the contractual idea penetrating into this sphere of life. (1951, 96)

This liberal reasoning is of great importance for feminist economics. Because of this thesis, it is not possible to affirm that marriage—a contract, as understood today—has enslaved women or that capitalism and private property have also enslaved them. Instead, following Mises (1951), it can be logically deduced—and historically demonstrated (as in Combs 2006)—that the contractual form of marriage has helped to preserve women's rights in the public and private realms and that this development resulted from the principle of private property and the mechanism of economic calculation.

This detailed analysis of women's issues follows a more general argument that Mises developed in *Socialism* (1951) and other works. Mises wrote many times about social progress and development. As remarked earlier, he gave a central role to human cooperation and the extension of the division of labor, with which we can affirm that social progress depends on those two phenomena (see, e.g., Mises [1949] 1998). Plus, his vision was significantly grounded in an evolutionist view, which led him to assert that social evolution is tantamount to the development of the division of labor (Salerno 1990). At the same time, his view was no less rational than the evolutionist view. Joseph Salerno (1990) emphasizes the importance that Mises attached to volition and reason as well as to the role of ideas: human society is based on human actions, which are directed by ideas (Mises [1949] 1998). These ideas will thus be those that define social institutions, on which we can reach social progress; and, for Mises, liberalism “is the ideological framework necessary to secure the peaceful development of the social division of labor” (Salerno 1990, 53). From this point, we can understand that Mises outlined a social evolution from a violent or “barbarian” order, where violence was thought to be the primary mechanism to determine ownership, to a liberal or peaceful order, where individuals acknowledge the contract and the law as the means to interact and cooperate. He applied this reasoning to explain the evolution of marriage, which

passes from a violent order—“the age of violence”—to a liberal and peaceful order based on contractual relations.

Furthermore, Mises’s argument that capitalist and liberal thought helped women’s social progress can be extended in a vast array of ways. For instance, if economic calculation has contributed to women’s position, it can be said that in socialism, where economic calculation is impossible (Hayek 1945; Mises 1951; Huerta de Soto 2010), women cannot enforce their properties against their husbands, and it would be much more difficult for them to acquire their rights and a better social position. Plus, economic calculation allows women to make decisions in the productive and reproductive spheres, which they cannot do in a socialist world, where there is no economic calculation.

Mises defended marriage against socialist feminist attacks not according to traditional and conservative ideas but according to his characteristic utilitarian way of thinking (Tucker and Rockwell 1991). In that line, Mises found that marriage contracts had been very beneficial for women, contrary to what many socialist authors thought (see, e.g., Bebel [1879] 1904; Nash 1907; Kollontai 1977; Engels 2010). And this benefit specifically stemmed from the mechanism of economic calculation and private-property rights, two main features of the liberal order and capitalist thought.

Mises discussed women and feminism not in a book devoted to addressing women’s problems but in one of his most renowned works on economics. Following a classical liberal tradition, he defended marriage contracts and private property to prove that women can progress in a liberal order but not in either a violent or a socialist order. This approach enabled him to describe how women were subjugated to their husbands and how violence was exercised over them before the creation of the liberal order. Thus, his view of contractual freedom and property rights as emancipatory means in women’s historical struggle was aimed at contributing to women’s public and private development, both in the household and in society. To the extent that these topics have been discussed by feminist economists for years, the Misesian classical liberal view would enrich any approach on the theme because it provides a concrete analysis of marriage grounded on a general and rationalist theory about social evolution.

Praxeology and Epistemology

Beyond Mises’s life and concrete writings regarding feminism and women’s issues, it could be fruitful to delve into the rest of his works to search for divergences and similarities between his thought and feminist economics in order to show that the former can theoretically enrich the latter.

Mises’s epistemological reasoning can be found in various books and essays (Mises 1962, [1949] 1998, 2003, [1957] 2007). In his magnum opus, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* ([1949] 1998), Mises presented the study of *praxeology*, which he

defined as “the general theory of human action” (3). Praxeology⁵ is a general science whose object of study is human action. As Mises set forth, what we know as economics is a particular science that stems from the general study of human action and that is also the most developed branch of praxeology. This distinction between a general discipline and a particular one was made before Mises defined praxeology as such. He had made that distinction in *Epistemological Problems of Economics* (2003, originally published in German in 1933) when he differentiated between sociology (general science) and economics (in particular science within sociology). However, as sociology developed, he abandoned this terminology and conceived a more suitable one, *praxeology*.

Mises reflected on several epistemological issues that can be connected with feminist economics because both Mises and feminist economics criticize neoclassical economics. We can begin with an elemental question: What is economics?

The mainstream definition of economics—that economics is “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” (Robbins 1932, 15)—has been intensely criticized by feminist economists. Julie Nelson states that Robbins’s definition is clearly gender biased: “The emphasis on the ‘scarcity of means’ suggests that nature is static, stingy, and hostile, a view of nature perhaps still based on a conception of man as dominating feminine nature, which, while dominated and passive, is still able to frighten” (1993, 26).

Considering this, Nelson proposes that economics cannot be defined as the science that studies people’s choices “between alternative ends, given the means at hand” (1993, 32). Better than that, economics can be defined as the study of the *provisioning* of human life. The concept of *provisioning* encompasses any action aimed at ensuring the survival of human life; thus, nonmaterial services, unpaid work, and childcare would be included.

One Austrian economist has already discussed the idea of provisioning. In her response to Nelson (1993), Karen Vaughn (1994) points out that the concept of provisioning is not well defined and lacks theoretical foundations. She argues that it is unsound to think that society can be treated as a household and that economics has to study how society is provisioned. The entire society is not like a family or household; there are many differences, capabilities, and knowledge in society for which we have had to develop more extensive orders of cooperation and division of labor. The Misesian definition of economics also differs from Robbins’s, as Israel Kirzner has demonstrated: “The concept of purpose as fundamental to human action seems to be wholly excluded [in Robbins’s definition]. . . . By squeezing the element of purpose out of action, Robbins’s structure of ends and means is ‘timeless’ in the sense that it ignores the fact

5. Praxeology is a branch within the Austrian School. Many authors have written on it, and many methodological divergences can be found among them. Lawrence White’s ([1977] 2003) work is a compilation of methodologies within Austrian economics.

that ends are never presented to the actor coincidentally with the means” ([1960] 1976, 125).

Given that purposeful behavior is essential within the praxeological setting (Mises [1949] 1998), Robbins’s definition cannot fit into the Misesian conceptualization of economics.

Mises established that economics stems from praxeology, so he could also claim that economics is a science not about human choices but about human actions. Economics must be concerned with the consequences of acting, not with how individuals choose. In this general conception, the idea of provisioning can be included because to provision something to someone is to act. Furthermore, Mises ([1949] 1998) stated that people act to remove their uneasiness, and in that way they choose means that can satisfy their ends. The term *provisioning* fits into this meaning: to provision something results from having chosen means according to certain ends. However, it seems that provisioning, as defined by Nelson (1993), has the economic end already defined: survival of human life. In the praxeological sense, this definition is narrow from a materialistic viewpoint. Instead, the more general praxeological definition suggests that economics does not have to select ends beforehand because each individual has his or her own ends and goals. Because of that, the concept offered by provisioning is more particular than that provided by praxeology; human survival is included in the more general conception of satisfaction of human ends. We can thus conclude that provisioning is not incompatible with praxeology but simply a particular concept of the satisfaction of human needs. A better and general definition of economics is found in praxeology, which includes any human action aimed at satisfying human ends, whatever they may be.

Other economists have proposed this definition of economics afforded by provisioning.⁶ Kirzner devotes one section of *The Economic Point of View* ([1960] 1976) to “the science of subsistence” (32), in which he criticizes this view supported by economists such as Thorstein Veblen from a praxeological standpoint. In that regard, Kirzner adds: “The imposition of ‘subsistence’ as the goal of economic activity sets up a value involving among all others the least troublesome subjective differences between individuals. The only area of choice left to human intelligence is in the means objectively best suited to attain this one end. Once man’s power to select his own ends is prescinded from economics, the subject is at once reduced to an only slightly more involved version of biology” (37).

Feminist economics theory criticizes the scope of neoclassical economics. Because economics is often defined as the study of exchange, most of women’s traditional activities—such as childcare and reproduction—have been treated as noneconomic

6. A highlighted connection between feminist economics and institutionalism is this same conceptualization of economics: “[F]or institutionalists, and for feminists, economics are societies’ organizations for provisioning, rather than the locus of an assumed universal rationality as is often asserted in neoclassical textbooks” (Mayhew 1999, 480).

activities or inappropriate subjects for research in economics (Nelson 1995).⁷ Thus, the scope of economics is limited to the study of markets and exchange activities, which leaves women's economic contributions outside that scope. If economics were focused on provisioning, however, traditionally women's activities would be considered economic ones (Nelson 1995). Again, Mises and feminist economists converge in their arguments against neoclassical economics. Mises argued that *catallactics*⁸ must study what is generally known as the economic as well as what is commonly known as the uneconomic or noneconomic. He said about the scope of catallactics: "It is not permissible to except from the orbit of 'economic' action those actions which remove uneasiness directly without the interposition of any tangible and visible things. The advice of a doctor, the instruction of a teacher, the recital of an artist, and other personal services are no less an object of economic studies than the architect's plans for the construction of a building, the scientist's formula for the production of a chemical compound, and the author's contribution to the publishing of a book." Moreover, "[t]he subject matter of catallactics is all market phenomena with all their roots, ramifications, and consequences. It is a fact that people in dealing on the market are motivated not only by the desire to get food, shelter, and sexual enjoyment, but also by manifold 'ideal' urges" ([1949] 1998, 234).

Mises advocated widening the scope of economics beyond tangible and material things so that we can consider many intangible activities as economic. Here, he provided some examples, such as childcare, where raising a child is an intangible thing that has many repercussions in the economy, markets, and tangible things. As feminist economics asserts, it is no less important to analyze nonmarketed activities than to analyze marketed ones. Nevertheless, the fact that economics is more centered on markets than on other activities outside the market is very logical. Without markets, private property, economic calculation, and capital goods, women could not provision their families. Hence, the market has been the most relevant phenomenon to the provisioning of human lives, to the satisfying of individual needs and desires.

Another contribution from feminist economics is the idea of dualisms (Harding 1986, 1993). It is asserted that economic theory, methodology, and epistemology are full of dichotomies. Feminist economists have identified several examples: public/private, (market) economy/family, efficiency/inefficiency, objective/subjective, individual/social, selfish/altruistic, rational/emotional, science/humanities, competition/cooperation, economics/sociology, independent/dependent (Jennings 1993). It is argued that these dichotomies are gender biased, so we can observe that "the male" is currently understood as rational, objective, individual, selfish, competitive, efficient, scientific, independent, so he operates in markets and the public sphere,

7. Julie Nelson (1995) nuances this point by affirming that Becker's theory, New Home economics, and the application of game theory to the family are exceptional examples of how mainstream economics is dealing with the study of the family.

8. Mises referred to economics as *catallactics*, a term that, he said, was first used by Richard Whately.

whereas “the female” is considered emotional, subjective, social, altruistic, cooperative, inefficient, humanistic, dependent, so she operates only in the family, the private sphere. These dualisms leave the feminine out of economics; economic science is concerned only with characteristics and subjects defined as “male” (Nelson 1992). The prototypical model of neoclassical economics—*homo economicus*, or economic man—is selfish, rational, autonomous, competitive and is guided only by profit maximization (Nelson 1996). That is, all characteristics considered to be “feminine” are set aside in the study of economics: altruism, cooperation, irrationality, dependence, and so on. The argument is that economics does not have to focus on female features, but it should encompass both positive male and female characteristics to create a more humanistic science (Nelson 1995).

In that sense, the praxeological view of economics is not prone to these gendered dualisms. Mises discussed this point several times. He stated: “Thus there are no irreconcilable conflicts between selfishness and altruism, between economics and ethics, between the concerns of the individual and those of society” ([1957] 2007, 54). Moreover, “[i]t makes no difference whether action springs from altruistic or from egoistic motives, from a noble or from a base disposition; whether it is directed toward the attainment of materialistic or idealistic ends; whether it arises from exhaustive and painstaking deliberation or follows fleeting impulses and passions” (2003, 36).

It is nonsensical for economics to study whether an individual is altruistic or selfish, whether he or she is guided by profit maximization or not; the real object of study is human action. Thus, these dualisms are absent in praxeological economics. Mises demonstrated this when he underlined that there is no antagonism between some of those dichotomies. For instance, Deborah Walker and her colleagues (2004) confirm that there is no opposition between competition and cooperation. In that sense, competition and cooperation are intrinsic phenomena of the free-market economy; every worker or entrepreneur is both competitive and cooperative at the same time, behaviors that are not incompatible: “[C]ompeting in cooperation and cooperating in competition all people are instrumental in bringing about the result” (Mises [1949] 1998, 335). In fact, Walker and her colleagues quote Mises on this question, where he stresses that “competition is an element of social collaboration, the ruling principle within the social body. Viewed sociologically, fighting and competition are extreme contrasts” (1951, 321, qtd. in Walker et al. 2004, 249).

Another word that feminist economists usually analyze in search of dichotomies, dualisms, or gender biases but that Mises treated in a neutral way in his writings is *rationality*. Some argue that neoclassical rationality is gender biased, too (Weinreich-Haste 1986). Rationality is analogous to efficiency, optimization, and objective things, all considered “masculine” attributes. Thus, the “emotional,” which is not objective, efficient, or optimal, is something irrational, what is thought to be “feminine” (Nelson 1996). Once more, though, the praxeological concept of rationality overcomes this gender bias. As Mises asserted, “[E]rror, inefficiency, and failure must not be confused with irrationality” ([1957] 2007, 268). That is because “the terms ‘reasoning’ and

‘rationality’ always refer only to the suitability of means chosen for attaining ultimate ends” (267). Error and inefficiency can be rational because human action is always rational. Hence, the words *rational* and *irrational* “are inappropriate and meaningless,” and the term *rational choice* is “pleonastic [i.e., redundant] and must be rejected as such” (Mises [1949] 1998, 18). Within the praxeological framework, rationality is about purposeful behavior. That is, it is about choosing means according to own ends, no matter how efficient or optimal these means and ends could be. To be rational is to choose subjective means to attain subjective ends. Therefore, for praxeology, an action that is guided by emotional motives is a rational action as well.

The general and broad view provided by praxeology could contribute to feminist economics’ goal to widen the scope of economics. As has been argued, the concept of provisioning is compatible with praxeological economics but is a narrow concept, so economics is better understood from the praxeological standpoint. Plus, the Austrian scope of economics is beyond what is currently considered economic and noneconomic or rational and irrational, as in feminist arguments. And, finally, it is noteworthy that this praxeological economics is not imbued with gender-biased dichotomies; from the Austrian view, many gender-biased concepts are compatible and mutually dependent. Having an economic science that is free of gender biases and that offers a more general and epistemologically sound theory by adopting praxeology as a method, feminist economics could gain strength and tools to understand all economic phenomena better.

Praxeology and Methodology

Similarities and differences can also be found in economic methodology. Feminist economics’ analysis of individualism remarks that besides being a gender-biased concept—male is autonomous, female is dependent—individualism cannot include some social phenomena that are essential in studying women’s situation. For example, Jennings declares, “[T]he individualistic perspective severely limits any consideration of social norms or power relationships” (1999, 513).

Unlike the atomistic individualism that thrives in neoclassical economics, methodological individualism becomes nonatomistic in praxeology. Mises did not reject the influence of collective phenomena over human action; he simply stated that the methodological starting point must be the individual: “For a social collective has no existence and reality outside of individual members’ actions. The life of a collective is lived in the actions of the individuals constituting its body. There is no social collective conceivable which is not operative in the actions of some individuals. The reality of a social integer consists in its directing and releasing definite actions on the part of individuals. Thus the way to a cognition of collective wholes is through an analysis of the individuals’ actions” ([1949] 1998, 42).

Conversely, to reject methodological individualism leads to founding our theory in collectivism. Mises pointed out: “The rejection of methodological individualism implies the assumption that the behavior of men is directed by some mysterious forces

that defy any analysis and description. For if one realizes that what sets action in motion is ideas, one cannot help admitting that these ideas originate in the minds of some individuals and are transmitted to other individuals” (1962, 82).

Hence, economics must be concerned with individual action as well as with the simultaneous collective action and social phenomena. What is more, this nonatomistic individualism also allows the study of relations within families. The neoclassical conceptualization of family (Becker 1981) is set within a holistic foundation, in which family is interpreted as a whole, where there are no conflicts or inequalities (England 1993). In contrast, methodological individualism can identify differences in bargaining power or power relations between the husband and the wife, but methodological holism cannot.

Feminist economics emphasizes that mainstream methodology is gender biased because it is thought to pursue objectivity, which is regarded as masculine. Objectivity requires mathematics. There is no quality in economic theory or economic propositions if a mathematical method is absent. As shown, objectivity, science, and math are intended as masculine concepts; the opposite is considered feminine. To that extent, we can observe that in neoclassical economic methodology, what is rigorous is masculine, and what is not rigorous is feminine (Nelson 1995). On that point, feminist economists ask for a more verbal methodology that may be considered as having the same rigor: “[S]ound economic reasoning, including about very applied issues and including argument in largely verbal form, should be no reason for apology in economic seminars” (Nelson 1993, 31). In fact, they claim that the use of mathematics, which expresses “masculine hardness,” leads to rigidity (Nelson 1995). Mises would agree. About mathematical formalism, he stated: “The use of mathematical formulations in economics has done more harm than good. The metaphorical character of the relatively more easily visualized concepts and ideas imported into economics from mechanics, which may be warranted as a didactic and occasionally as a heuristic expedient as well, has been the occasion of much misunderstanding” (2003, 127). He did not think that mathematics provides economics with rigor but that mathematics leads to misunderstandings about the real world because its use can derive from a controversy about the foundations of economics. For him, economics must study human actions as they take place in the economy, not only imaginary constructions such as equilibrium. The exclusive concern with these imaginary constructions, mathematically formulated through equations, remove the only constant in the real world: change. Mathematical models thus represent the economy as static, when the real economy is entirely dynamic. These mathematical techniques do not describe the market process, which is better comprehended using verbal formalism and deduction (Mises [1949] 1998).

Another issue of feminist economics is that the history of economics is narrated by its *dominant practitioners* (Strassmann and Polanyi 1995).⁹ Following the theory

9. The concept *situated*, as introduced by Donna Haraway (1988), means that every individual tells the reality he or she lives from the social position or location in which he or she is. There is no such a thing as a universal view of facts and history, but history is built together with many and different *situated* viewpoints.

developed by Deirdre McCloskey (1983, 1985, 1990) about economics as *rhetoric*,¹⁰ they propose another way of interpreting economics: as *storytelling*. What is more, Sandra Harding (1995) argues that because economics is a social science and not a natural science, it cannot be value neutral. Hence, economists have to be aware of the fact that current economic epistemology and methodology are gender biased, so in order to validate or reject a theory it is important to consider how that knowledge is positioned or situated.

Mises ([1949] 1998, [1957] 2007) made an epistemological distinction between theory and history in order to illustrate that in the science of human action theory is independent of experience. For him, theory is concerned with the study of regularity in the concatenation of phenomena, either of the physical world, which is studied from the natural sciences, or of human actions, which are studied from the sciences of human action. With that conceptualization of theory, Mises pointed out: “[T]he reference to bias, whether intentional or subconscious, is out of place if the accuser is not in a position to demonstrate clearly in what the deficiency of the doctrine concerned consists. All that counts is whether a doctrine is sound or unsound. . . . If the failures and errors of a doctrine are unmasked by discursive reasoning, historians and biographers may try to explain them by tracing back to their author’s bias. But if no tenable objections can be raised against a theory, it is immaterial what kind of motives inspired its author” ([1957] 2007, 27–28).

Taking this reasoning into account, we can affirm that feminist economics’ criticism of neoclassical economics is sound when we realize that the real problem with mainstream economics is not how its theorists are positioned but how their theory is not appropriate to explain some regularities in human actions. Gender biases create narrow concepts and methodologies that limit a general explanation of many economic phenomena. In addition, as feminist economists have demonstrated, gender biases affect the validity of the economic theory.

Theory, as defined by Mises, is value free so long as its object of study is not value judgments or subjective decisions but rather the recurrence of some phenomena concerning human actions. For its part, history, defined as “the collection and systematic arrangement of all data of experience concerning human action” (Mises [1949] 1998, 30), must be neutral, too. Although it is evident that many historians have used history with partisan interests, Mises stressed that this is not the main issue. He pointed out that history makes use of theory to interpret facts. Without theory, “reports concerning economic facts would be nothing more than a collection of unconnected data open to any arbitrary interpretation” (Mises [1949] 1998, 51). Nevertheless,

10. McCloskey cites Ludwig von Mises in each of her works to argue the impossibility of predicting the future by means of economics. In fact, she discusses the Austrian School several times in them. McCloskey’s argument about *rhetoric* is refuted by several Austrian economists, such as Hans-Hermann Hoppe (1989) and David Gordon (1991), who follow the Misesian branch within the Austrian School and argue that McCloskey’s theory ends in relativism and hermeneutics and thus moves away from any scientific truth or certainty.

theory cannot explain all phenomena; there is always something that remains unexplained. For this remainder, historians resort to another mental tool, *understanding*.

According to Mises's ([1957] 2007) approach, we can understand that if neo-classical economics' theory is gender biased and consequently wrong, and if historians resort to mainstream economic theory, they will interpret economic facts in a gender-biased and erroneous way. We no longer consider that the real problem is a partisan and intentional understanding of history but rather the significant influence that a gender-biased and incorrect theory has in history and its reports. Then, the real problem of economic history is not only in history and historians but in economic theory. By changing the biased and unsound condition of the economic theory it uses, history will leave its biases and mistakes behind. And for that change, as proved earlier in this paper, we can turn to praxeology, which presents a broad and general conception free of gender biases.

In terms of methodology, feminist economics and praxeology continue to complement each other. Both reject the idea that the use of mathematics provides economics with rigor. Praxeology supports a nonatomistic methodological individualism, which can interpret economic phenomena more accurately than can a holistic or atomistic methodological standpoint. Finally, the praxeological distinction between history and economics allows one to enhance history through the general science of praxeology in order to avoid gender biases and misinterpretation in economic history.

Conclusion

Besides what Mises did in his academic life and with his female students, his published work was also aligned with women's struggle. In one of his most famous books, *Socialism*, Mises devoted one chapter to women's problems in marriage. His analysis combines a defense of private property and the marriage contract and at the same time notes that the real problem for women is violence and how they were (are) treated by men as sexual objects and property. More broadly, as demonstrated earlier, the Misesian epistemology and methodology, formalized in praxeology—the science of *human* action, not of *homo economicus*—is closely compatible with feminist economics' claims and epistemology. It can even be said that some feminist economics theory fits into praxeology. With this inclusion, not only can the foundation of feminist economics remain intact, but feminist economics can also gain in rigor by rejecting methodological holism and widening the scope of economic science.

In the light of what has been argued in this paper, it may be expected that some feminist economists will converge toward Mises's economic theory and methodology. This conclusion serves to strengthen the connection that other Austrian School economists have made with feminist economics as well as to contribute to future research on the relation of these two currents, which can be interpreted as one: Austrian feminist economics.

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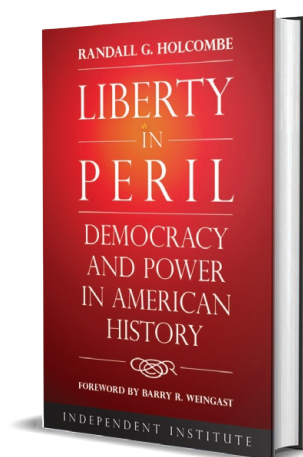
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