

IV Ecofeminist political economy: Integrating feminist economics and ecological economics

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Introduction

Feminist and ecological economics argue that mainstream economic thinking has historically ignored issues of gender (feminist economics) and the environment (ecological economics). A review of the contents of the *Feminist Economics and Ecological Economics* journals shows that articles in the former rarely address the environment and the same is true for gender in the latter. I have no doubt that most, if not all, feminist economists would be committed to the preservation of the environment and that most ecological economists would not espouse overtly sexist perspectives. Given their respective critiques, it is surprising how little attention feminist economists and ecological economists pay to each other.

Ecological and feminist economics share a critique of the way in which the commodified market system forms a boundary between those things that are inside (and therefore generally valued) and those that are not (and therefore generally not valued). Feminist and ecological economists would present more cogent challenges to deficiencies in both economic theories and systems were they to work more collaboratively in developing new theories.

Ecological economics 4⁴ Ecological economics differs from environmental economics, which addresses ecological problems within a framework of conventional economics. Environmental economics puts forward a variety of solutions, from environmental accounting, assessments, and audits to proposals for green taxes or pollution permits. View all notes

Throughout its twenty-year development, ecological economics has engaged little with feminist economics. The special issue of *Ecological Economics* on “Women, Ecology, and Economics,” edited by Ellie Perkins in 1997, did not produce a flood or even a trickle of responses. A recent ecological economics text issued by a radical publisher shows little connection with either feminist or ecofeminist economics (Peter Söderbaum [2000](#) Söderbaum, Peter. 2000. *Ecological Economics*, London: Earthscan. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Söderbaum ([2000](#) Söderbaum, Peter. 2000. *Ecological Economics*, London: Earthscan. [\[Google Scholar\]](#): 127) sees economics as both a science and an ideology and deplores the way in which “Westernized” universities have been “narrowed down to neo-classical economics.” He instead advocates work that considers democracy and alternative paradigms. In an epilogue that explores possible alternatives, he briefly refers to “feministic economics” and the work of Perkins. Although Söderbaum ([2000](#) Söderbaum, Peter. 2000. *Ecological Economics*, London: Earthscan. [\[Google Scholar\]](#): 130) notes the need to “go beyond Economic Man and make things that matter for women (like ‘unpaid work’) visible in economic analyses,” he does not further explore the implications of a gender analysis.

One of the earliest arguments regarding a link between ecology and economics was made in the early twentieth century by the Scottish scientist Frederick Soddy ([1922](#) Soddy, Frederick. 1922. *Cartesian Economics*, London: Henderson. [\[Google Scholar\]](#) [1926](#) Soddy, Frederick. 1926. *Wealth, Virtual Wealth and Debt*, London: Allen & Unwin. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Linda Merricks [1996](#) Merricks, Linda. 1996. “Frederick Soddy: Scientist, Economist and Environmentalist – An Examination of his Politics.”. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 7(4): 59–78. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). He argued that all life and human activities depended upon energy and called for efforts to develop a sustainable economy in energy terms. In the early 1970s, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen ([1971](#) Georgescu-Roegen, Nicholas. 1971. *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) and Herman Daly ([1973](#) Daly, Herman, ed. 1973. *Toward a Steady State Economy*, San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) again raised the issue of energy in economic systems and challenged the growth model at the heart of economic theorizing. Their work and that of others (see, e.g., Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and W. W. Behrens [1972](#) Meadows, Donella, Jorgen, Randers and Behrens, W.

W. 1972. *The Limits to Growth*, New York: Universe Books. [\[Google Scholar\]](#) sparked heated debates among both ecologists and economists.

Although Daly criticizes conventional economic thought, he looks not toward radical political economy to achieve social change but toward religious transformation. Women's issues, in particular, are not central. In *For the Common Good*, written with philosopher and theologian John B. Cobb, women are referred to only briefly, once in relation to unpaid labor and again in support of sex education to reduce population growth (Daly and Cobb [1990](#) Daly, Herman and Cobb, John. 1990. *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, London: Green Print. [\[Google Scholar\]](#): 414 – 5, 249) – though they neglect to acknowledge how the inequalities in gender relations make it difficult for women to gain control over their fertility in many countries and cultural contexts.

Ecological economics' critique of economic systems would be greatly enhanced if it were to recognize the links between the marginalization and exploitation of the natural world and women's labor. Ecological economics risks importing gendered assumptions into its theories and proposals if it ignores gender. A feminist economics approach is particularly important in proposals for green economies that stress the local and the communal. Without gender awareness, local and communal could continue to be parochial and patriarchal, with women doing the most menial and lowest-status work.

Feminist economics

In general, feminist economics has sought to open up economic debate, challenge neoclassical economic thought, and explore economic issues as they relate to women, including inequality of treatment, women's work, and women's marginalization and exclusion (see, e.g., Waring [1988](#) Waring, Marilyn. 1988. *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, New York: Harper & Row. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Ferber and Nelson [1993](#) Ferber, Marianne A. and Julie, Nelson A., eds. 1993. *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. [\[Crossref\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Edith Kuiper and Jolande Sap [1995](#) Kuiper, Edith and Jolande, Sap. 1995. *Out of the Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics*, London/New York: Routledge. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Susan Feiner [1999](#) Feiner, Susan. 1999. "Portrait of Homo Economicus as a Young Man,". In *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, Edited by: Martha, Woodmansee and Mark, Osteen. 193–209. London: Routledge. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Nancy Folbre [2001](#) Folbre, Nancy. 2001. *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values*, New York: New Press. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)).

Although, as noted, *Feminist Economics* has published little writing directly focused on ecological issues, some papers address the associated topics of population policies (Ines Smith [1996](#) Smith, Ines. 1996. "Gender Analysis of Family Planning: Beyond the Feminist versus Population Control Debate." *Feminist Economics*, 2(2): 63–86. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Austreberta Nazar Beutelspacher, Emma Zapata Martelo and Verónica Vázquez García [2003](#) Beutelspacher, Austreberta Nazar, Zapata, Emma Martelo and Vázquez, Verónica García. 2003. "Does Contraception Benefit Women? Structure, Agency, and Well-Being in Rural Mexico." *Feminist Economics*, 9(2/3): 213–238. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) and land rights (Michael Kevane and Leslie C. Gray [1999](#) Kevane, Michael and Gray, Leslie C. 1999. "A Woman's Field is made at Night: Gendered Land Rights and Norms in Burkina Faso." *Feminist Economics*, 5(3): 1–26. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Elissa Braunstein and Nancy Folbre [2001](#) Folbre, Nancy. 2001. *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values*, New York: New Press. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Lourdes Benería, Maria Floro, Caren Grown, and Martha MacDonald ([2000](#) Benería, Lourdes, Maria, Floro, Caren, Grown and MacDonald, Martha. 2000. "Special Issue on Globalization." *Feminist Economics*, 6(3): vii–xviii. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)) do not refer to women and environmental issues in the introduction to the *Feminist Economics* Special Issue on Globalization, despite the well-established literature on women, the environment, and development (Rosa Braidotti et al. [1994](#) Braidotti, Rosa, Charkiewicz, Ewa, Hausler, Sabine and Wieringa, Saskia. 1994. *Women, the Environment, and Sustainable*

Development, London: Zed Press. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Wendy Harcourt 1994 Harcourt, Wendy, ed. 1994. *Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development*, London: Zed Press. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). While arguing that “globalization ... tends to devalue non-market goods and services, including reproductive work,” Benería et al. (2000 Benería, Lourdes, Maria, Floro, Caren, Grown and MacDonald, Martha. 2000. “Special Issue on Globalization.”. *Feminist Economics*, 6(3): vii–xviii. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#): xiii) do not question the ecological impact of economic growth, referring only to “how gender inequality may constrain or facilitate economic growth and the impact of market reforms on vulnerable sections of the population” (Benería et al. 2000: xvi).

There is substantial feminist economics literature on quality-of-life issues (see, e.g., the Explorations on Quality of Life Indicators, guest-edited by Iulie M. Aslaksen, Anne Flaatten, and Charlotte Koren 1999 Aslaksen, Iulie, Ane, Flaatten and Charlotte, Koren. 1999. “Explorations on Quality of Life Indicators.”. *Feminist Economics*, 5(2): 79–137. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Carmen Sirianni and Cynthia Negrey 2000 Cone, Cynthia Abbott and Myhre, Andrea. 2000. “Community-supported Agriculture: A Sustainable Alternative to Industrial Agriculture?”. *Human Organization*, 59(2): 187–197. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); A. Geske Dijkstra and Lucia C. Hanmer 2000 Dijkstra, Geske A. and Lucia, Hanmer C. 2000. “Measuring Socio-economic Gender Inequality: Toward an Alternative to the UNDP Gender-related Development Index.”. *Feminist Economics*, 6(2): 41–75. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Siobhan Austin, Therese Jefferson, and Vicki Thein 2003 Austin, Siobhan, Jefferson, Therese and Thein, Vicki. 2003. “Gendered Social Indicators and Grounded Theory.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 1–18. [\[Google Scholar\]](#); the Special Issue on Amartya Sen's work and ideas, guest-edited by Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries, and Ingrid Robeyns 2003 Agarwal, Bina, Jane, Humphries and Ingrid, Robeyns. 2003. “A Special Issue on Amartya Sen's Work and Ideas: A Gender Perspective.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(2/3) [\[Google Scholar\]](#); Naila Kabeer 2004 Kabeer, Naila. 2004. “Globalization, Labor Standards, and Women's Rights: Dilemmas of Collective (In)action in an Interdependent World.”. *Feminist Economics*, 10(1): 3–35. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). Quality-of-life literature reflects a wide range of issues including inequality, discrimination, and poverty, all of which have been dealt with extensively in *Feminist Economics*.

Other feminist economists explicitly address ecological issues. Sabine O'Hara is particularly relevant to ecological economics. She writes: “What may emerge as the core components of well-being may be exactly those functions rendered invisible by current value systems – the sustaining services provided in households, communities and nature that sustain the very social and environmental context within which we all live” (O'Hara 1999 O'Hara, Sabine. 1999. “Economics, Ecology, and Quality of Life: Who Evaluates?”. *Feminist Economics*, 5(2): 83–89. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#): 87).

In addition, *Feminist Economics* published a review of the *Ecological Economics* special issue on “Women, Ecology and Economics,” in 2000. Linda Lucas summarizes the content of the issue in four main themes: how women's work and nature's work are invisible to economic practice because they lie outside the intellectual tradition and vision of the economics discipline; how, this invisible work provides a free subsidy to the production sector; how, because of this inside/outside problem, neoclassical economics presents only a partial analysis of the economic world; and how time as a gendered concept is connected to the creation of economic space and the subsidized economy. She concludes that “many of the ideas in this volume are the foundation of tomorrow's feminist economics theory” (Lucas 2000 Lucas, Linda. 2000. “Review of *Women, Ecology and Economics*, edited by Ellie Perkins: Special Issue of *Ecological Economics* 1997.”. *Feminist Economics*, 6(2): 115–119. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#): 119).

Ecofeminist political economy: A material perspective

Ecofeminist political economy sees a connection between the exploitation of women's labor and the abuse of planetary resources. Women and the environment are both marginalized in their positions within the formal economy. As economists have long recognized in theory, but often not in practice, the economic system often views the environment as a “free,” exploitable resource while it ignores or undervalues much of women's lives and work. Thus, the material starting point of ecofeminist analysis is the materiality of much of what the world defines as “women's work” (although it is not necessarily all done by women or by all women), a theme that is also found in much of the work of feminist economists.

In my previous work (Mellor [1997a](#) Mellor, Mary. 1997a. “Women, Nature and the Social Construction of ‘Economic Man.’”. *Ecological Economics*, 20(2): 129–140. [[Crossref](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)] [1997b](#) Mellor, Mary. 1997b. *Feminism and Ecology*, Cambridge: Polity Press/New York: New York University Press. [[Google Scholar](#)]), I argue for theories that explore the needs and limits of human existence (embodiment) within the daily cycle, the life cycle, and the ecosystem (embeddedness). Body work must be done where the body is located (no virtual reality here) and within the framework of its temporality, the daily cycle (rest and replenishment), the life cycle (childhood, maturity, old age), and the time-scale of disease or ill health. Body work cannot fit into the schedules of paid work as it must conform to the needs of “biological time,” the time it takes to grow old, grow up, or get well.

Ecofeminist political economy and the realist debate

Because of their concern with the materiality of human existence, its bodily reality and embeddedness within the natural world, the debate in *Feminist Economics* about ontology initiated by Tony Lawson's paper “Feminism, Realism, and Universalism” (1999) is relevant to ecofeminists. Lawson bases his case for critical ontological realism largely on an analysis of economic systems as social structures, which sees “all of us as complexly structured, socially and culturally situated, purposeful and needy individuals” who “knowledgeably and capably negotiate complex, shifting, only partially grasped, and contested structures of power, rules, relations, and other, possible relatively enduring but nevertheless transient and action-dependent, social resources at our disposal” (1999: 50).

Lawson ontologically separates the social from the natural, arguing that natural realities have an independent tangible existence, whereas social realities do not. He sees humans as having a biological unity based on “common or shared real needs...common human nature, a recognition grounded in our biological unity as a species” (1999: 47). He goes on to argue that “this common nature is always historically and socially mediated, human needs will be manifest in potentially many ways” (1999: 47).

Lawson's paper drew responses from Sandra Harding ([1999](#) Harding, Sandra. 1999. “The Case for Strategic Realism: A Response to Lawson.”. *Feminist Economics*, 5(3): 127–133. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)]) and in 2003 from a group of respondents (Fabienne Peter [2003](#) Peter, Fabienne. 2003. “Critical Realism, Feminist Epistemology, and the Emancipatory Potential of Science: A Comment on Lawson and Harding.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 93–101. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)]; Drucilla Barker [2003](#) Barker, Drucilla. 2003. “Emancipatory for Whom? A Comment on Critical Realism.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 103–108. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)]; Julie A. Nelson [2003b](#) Nelson, Julie. 2003b. “Once More, with Feeling: Feminist Economics and the Ontological Question.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 109–118. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)]; Tony Lawson [2003](#) Lawson, Tony. 2003. “Ontology and Feminist Theorizing.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 119–150. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)]; and Sandra Harding [2003](#) Harding, Sandra. 2003. “Representing Reality: The Critical Realism Project.”. *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 151–159. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)], [[Web of Science](#)®], [[Google Scholar](#)]). However, only Nelson's response specifically embraces issues raised by ecofeminism. Nelson ([2003](#) Nelson, Julie. 2003a. “Confronting the Science/Value Split: Notes on Feminist Economics, Institutionalism, Pragmatism and Process Thought.”. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 27: 49–64. [[Google](#)

[Scholar](#): 112) supports the need to develop a feminist ontology although she cautions against the danger of excessive philosophising in face of the real-world disadvantages suffered by women. She stresses the importance of ontological beliefs about how the world works, particularly the importance of emotion and caring: "My hope is that digging around in the ontological roots can contribute to more fruitful caring about dependents, the disempowered, and the environment" (Nelson [2003](#) Nelson, Julie. 2003a. "Confronting the Science/Value Split: Notes on Feminist Economics, Institutionalism, Pragmatism and Process Thought." *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 27: 49–64. [Google Scholar](#): 110). She criticizes the split between "a material world that is assumed to be spiritless and a (possible) realm of meaning that is assumed to be bodiless" (Nelson [2003](#) Nelson, Julie. 2003a. "Confronting the Science/Value Split: Notes on Feminist Economics, Institutionalism, Pragmatism and Process Thought." *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 27: 49–64. [Google Scholar](#): 110–1) and points to the importance of the "living, novel, relational aspects of nature" (Nelson [2003](#) Nelson, Julie. 2003a. "Confronting the Science/Value Split: Notes on Feminist Economics, Institutionalism, Pragmatism and Process Thought." *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 27: 49–64. [Google Scholar](#): 111). This discussion builds upon Nelson's earlier work, in which she rejected both radical objectivism and radical subjectivism, arguing that "gendered embodiment be taken very seriously" (Nelson [1996](#) Nelson, Julie A. 1996. *Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics*, London: Routledge. [Google Scholar](#): 139) and that "economics should concern itself more with concrete issues of provisioning related to the actual social and natural environment" (Nelson [1996](#) Nelson, Julie A. 1996. *Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics*, London: Routledge. [Google Scholar](#): 131).

Fabienne Peter ([2003](#) Peter, Fabienne. 2003. "Critical Realism, Feminist Epistemology, and the Emancipatory Potential of Science: A Comment on Lawson and Harding." *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 93–101. [Taylor & Francis Online](#), [Web of Science](#)®, [Google Scholar](#): 98), in contrast, adopts the post-positivist position that no "facts" exist independently from theory and criticizes critical realism for making "the validity of claims to knowledge depend on something that lies outside of the process of knowledge production itself" (Peter [2003](#) Peter, Fabienne. 2003. "Critical Realism, Feminist Epistemology, and the Emancipatory Potential of Science: A Comment on Lawson and Harding." *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 93–101. [Taylor & Francis Online](#), [Web of Science](#)®, [Google Scholar](#): 94). She argues against Lawson's notion of a genetically constituted common human nature. For Peter ([2003](#) Peter, Fabienne. 2003. "Critical Realism, Feminist Epistemology, and the Emancipatory Potential of Science: A Comment on Lawson and Harding." *Feminist Economics*, 9(1): 93–101. [Taylor & Francis Online](#), [Web of Science](#)®, [Google Scholar](#): 94), human needs are contested rather than shared, which calls for a "critical rethinking of science and its role in society." She proposes a democratic notion of scientific inquiry within which to rethink science and agrees with Harding ([1999](#) Harding, Sandra. 1999. "The Case for Strategic Realism: A Response to Lawson." *Feminist Economics*, 5(3): 127–133. [Taylor & Francis Online](#), [Web of Science](#)®, [Google Scholar](#)) that the natural sciences should be seen as particular kinds of social science.

I have argued for an "immanent realism," an ecofeminist realism that takes a different approach from Peter's (Mellor [1997b](#) Mellor, Mary. 1997b. *Feminism and Ecology*, Cambridge: Polity Press/New York: New York University Press. [Google Scholar](#): 111). I take the position that while human knowledge is powerful and human activities have tempered natural forces, natural systems have their own dynamics that can trigger the unexpected. All human activities have to take account of natural conditions, limits, and uncertainties because humans are immanent rather than transcendent in relation to the natural world. Whatever the extent of human capacities or abilities, the body and the physical environment frame human activities. Immanent realism shares much of the approach of critical realism; however, it takes the critical realist perspective beyond the social to embrace the dilemma of humanity's immanence within a limiting, but indeterminate, natural framework. Ecofeminist political economy points to the gendered structures at the intersection of ecology and economy, where every day women and men deal with the consequences of human embodiedness and embeddedness. The danger with a critical realism overemphasizing social

aspects or subjectivism that deny the reality and agency of the natural world is that the material reality of women's subordination and exploitation in the dynamics of human existence will be ignored.

Conclusion: (critical) immanent realism

Humanity is part of a dynamic, interactive ecological process that it cannot manipulate at will or without consequences. Ecofeminist political economy provides an understanding of the role that gender, class, and racism play in the articulation of ecologically unsustainable and socially unjust patterns of domination within human societies (Mary Mellor [2005](#) Mellor, Mary. 2005. "Socialism and the Ecological Challenge,". In *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, Edited by: Andrew, Dobson and Robyn, Eckersley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)). From this perspective, promises of "equal opportunities" are vacuous if they rely on the further exploitation of the natural world or subordinate groups within the distorted frameworks of unsustainable economic systems. Ecofeminist analysis argues that the marginalization of women's work is not merely an injustice, but enables dominant groups to live as if they were not embodied and embedded within a limited nature.