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Neoclassical economic theory rests on explicit assumptions about individual consumer behavior and on implicit assumptions about the nature of families as economic units. This article examines the androcentric (male-centered) biases in both the explicit and implicit assumptions of the neoclassical model and suggests ways in which a feminist theory of economic behavior would differ from the standard approach.

Three of the basic assumptions of neoclassical economics are that 1) interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible, 2) tastes are exogenous and unchanging, and 3) individuals are selfish (their utility functions are independent) in market interactions. These assumptions flow from a separative model of human nature which presumes that people are autonomous, impervious to social influences, and lacking in emotional connection and empathy. A fourth, usually implicit assumption is that, within their families, individuals are not selfish, but behave altruistically. These assumptions may be called androcentric because they take the existing system of gender relations for granted, and are biased in favor of men's interests within that system.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF THEORETICAL BIASES

Virtually all feminist views share the belief that women are subordinated to men to a degree that is morally wrong and unnecessary. But beyond this basic point there are significant differences within feminist theory. One body of thought emphasizes the exclusion of women from traditionally male activities and institutions, calling for equal participation in those areas. A second body of feminist thought emphasizes the devaluation of traditionally female activities and traits, calling for greater recognition and reward for women (and men) in those areas. The two approaches are by no means incompatible, but they disagree on some issues.

The second feminist emphasis leads to a distinction between a "separative" self and a self that is emotionally connected to others. Honoring and maintaining emotional connections is an important factor in the activities traditionally assigned to women; such activities have been deprecated or ignored in the academic theory of many disciplines, including economics.

APPLYING THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE TO NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMICS

The feminist critique of the separative self model applies to all four of the assumptions of neoclassical economics identified above. The contrast between the assumptions about the market and the family reveals the pervasive gender bias of the standard approach to economics.

The first assumption, the impossibility of interpersonal utility comparisons, rests on the notion that utility is purely subjective, hence unmeasurable. In the absence of interpersonal comparisons, all that can be said is that, if a voluntary exchange occurs, both individuals must be better off as a result (if not, the trade would not occur). But the impossibility of interpersonal comparison is a result of assuming a separative self. If economic theory were to assume the sort of emotional connection that facilitates empathy, then interpersonal comparison of emotional states would be viewed as possible; while practical measurement problems may arise, these do not constitute a theoretical impossibility. The neoclassical rejection of interpersonal comparison is congruent with conservative positions on distributional issues. If it is impossible to say that those at the bottom feel worse than those at the top, then there is no theoretical basis for supporting egalitarian redistribution of resources. This discourages analysis of gender-based and other inequalities.

A second assumption of the neoclassical model is that individuals' tastes or preferences cannot and need not be explained by economists. Rather, tastes are inputs into economic models. Some economists have argued that there is no need to assume much variation in tastes between individuals; others believe that individuals' tastes differ. But, for either group, preferences are assumed to be unchanged by market interactions. The "new home economics," which purports to explain family behavior in market terms, must therefore assume that tastes are exogenous to family interactions as well. But if consumer preferences do not arise at least in part from market or family influences, where do they come from?

The strict assumption of exogenous tastes implies that consumer behavior is not influenced by interactions with coworkers (because the labor market must not affect tastes) or with neighbors (because the housing market must not affect tastes). If economics is to explain family life, then the choice of a spouse in the "marriage market" must also leave consumer preferences unchanged. Such imperviousness to social influence is obviously implausible, ignoring research in fields such as psychology and sociology that have studied the processes of socialization and value formation.

A third neoclassical assumption is that people act in a self-interested way in the market. Self-interest need not imply selfishness; altruists may be seen as maximizing their own utility, which is in part a function of others' happiness. However, the standard formulation of the neoclassical model also assumes independent utility functions - which amounts to selfishness in practice. Altruism would imply that one individual's utility depends on what makes another happy, violating the assumption of independence. The assumption of selfishness flows from the separative self model. It hardly describes the behavior of anyone who genuinely cares for another.

It is common to assume selfishness between employers and employees in labor markets. But collective action involves selective altruism toward other group members. For example, collusion to maintain gender discrimination in employment involves within-sex altruism on the part of men.

A fourth, often implicit assumption of the neoclassical model is that a family acts as a single unit in the marketplace, with perfectly altruistic internal allocation of resources. This is made explicit in the "new home economics" pioneered by Gary Becker. In Becker's model the head of the household is an altruist who controls the distribution of all family resources. Becker never discusses the effects of differential power within the household, but does analyze the efficiency of a household division of labor in which men are the primary income earners. Thus he explores the advantages but not the disadvantages for women of the traditional division of labor.

While family life is undoubtedly more altruistic than relations with others, the extreme bifurcation of assumptions about the two spheres is not believable. If people are purely altruistic within the family, it should spill over into market behavior. Likewise, if people are purely selfish in the market, this habit is bound to affect their behavior at home. Sociological research has found that, in cases of marital disagreement, men's wishes prevail more often in families where men earn a higher proportion of total household income. Thus selfishness and market inequalities enter the supposedly altruistic inner life of the family. The new home economics ignores the issues of power that arise from the traditional division of labor.

CONCLUSION

The separative self model, as used in economics, glorifies men's autonomy outside the family while giving them credit for altruism within the family. Unexamined assumptions about gender roles lead to a disjuncture of views about the household and the market, resulting in an inability to see how conventional arrangements perpetuate women's systematic subordination to men.

> Correcting the biases discussed in this paper will generate models in which separation and connection are variable; this variation needs to be explained within both households and markets. Although these new models may entail a loss of deductive certainty, they will illuminate rather than ignore gender inequality in the social and economic world. (50)