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Sociology, Economics, and Gender: Can Knowledge of the Past Contribute to a Better Future?

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**Sociology, Economics, and Gender:
Can Knowledge of the Past Contribute to a Better
Future?**

Julie A. Nelson

August 2008

This paper was presented at the American Sociological Association conference, Boston, August 2008 and (under the title “Boundary-Making in the Social Sciences: Gender and the Evolution of the ASSA”) at the Allied Social Science Association meetings, San Francisco, January 2009.

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Abstract

This essay explores the profoundly *gendered* nature of the split between the disciplines of economics and sociology which took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasizing implications for the relatively new field of economic sociology. Drawing on historical documents and feminist studies of science, it investigates the gendered processes underlying the divergence of the disciplines in definition, method, and degree of engagement with social problems. Economic sociology has the potential to heal this disciplinary split, but only if the field is broadened, deepened, and made wiser and more self-reflective through the use of feminist analysis.

Sociology, Economics, and Gender: Can Knowledge of the Past Contribute to a Better Future?

Julie A. Nelson

Introduction

Nicole Hollander's *Sylvia* comic strip periodically asks "How well do you know your genders?" Readers are presented with two quotes, and asked to assign a gender to each. In this spirit, consider the following two excerpts from scholarly pronouncements:

The Society shall operate as a completely disinterested, scientific organization...Its main object shall be to promote studies that aim at the unification of the theoretical-quantitative and the empirical-quantitative approach to [word deleted] problems and that are penetrated by constructive and rigorous thinking similar to that which has come to dominate in the natural sciences.

The [members of our Society] do not imagine that they are appointed to destroy the vocation of other investigators of [word deleted]. They feel themselves called to represent factors in the problems of human association which have thus far received less than their share of attention. In organizing a society, they are not beginning, but continuing, the work of winning for those neglected factors the appreciation they deserve. The society makes no appeal for credit. It simply proposes to encourage [word deleted] inquiry and to await competent judgment of results.

Note, in the first quote, the bold claims to scientificity, the repetitive emphasis on quantitative analysis, and the appeal to association with the "hard" sciences. Note the strong verbs and adjectives used, and especially the quasi-sexual (from a sexist and macho-masculine viewpoint) language. It says, *We're going to penetrate and dominate, too!*

The second quote, in contrast, practically apologizes for existing. It says, in effect, *we are really not encroaching on anyone...we don't want to steal anyone's thunder...we just feel that something is calling us to point it out...we don't want too much, only what's fair...we're not doing anything radical...we won't expect to get any recognition for our work...we'd just like to be supportive...our job is to wait.* It has subservience and passivity written all over it—strongly reflecting the sexist imagination of feminine sexual and social roles.

The first quote is an excerpt from the "Scope of the Society" adopted by the Econometric Society on the occasion of its founding in 1930 in Cleveland, Ohio. This statement is printed inside the cover of every issue of the Society's journal

(*Econometrica*), and the deleted word is “economic.” It was drafted by a group of fifteen men (Roos 1933), and its gender is decidedly masculine. While the founders of the Econometric Society represented the mathematical vanguard of their time, the entire profession of economics has since shifted in that direction. The typical contemporary paper in the flagship journal of the American Economic Association, the *American Economic Review*, is now more mathematically sophisticated than anything published by the Econometric Society during the 1930s.

The second is from the editorial announcement of the formation of the American Sociological Association (then called the American Sociological *Society*), reporting on its first conference in Providence, Rhode Island. It appeared in 1907 in *The American Journal of Sociology* (American Sociological Society 1907a), the members called themselves “sociologists,” and the deleted words are “society” and “sociological.” The ASA at this time was also a male-dominated organization. Of the seven papers published from the first conference, one was by a woman. Of the 115 names in the original list of members, only 15 clearly refer to females (American Sociological Society 1907b).¹ The excerpt quoted above seems to have been noncontroversial, at least insofar as it was reproduced by later leaders in the field without comment (Small 1916, 784-785). While the society was predominately male in *sex* at its founding, the *gender* of the passage announcing its establishment is decidedly feminine.

Though a variety of means, the fields of economics and sociology in the United States marked off separate methodological and subject-matter territories in the years surrounding the turning of the twentieth century. Now, in the years surrounding the turning of the twenty-first century, the field of economic sociology is challenging some of those longstanding divisions. The gauntlet thrown down is the simple—but quite radical—assertion, as expressed by Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg, that “the economic process [is] an organic part of society” (Smelser and Swedberg 2005b, 6).

The thesis of this essay is that ignoring the heavily *gendered* nature of the historical and still-existing split between the discipline of economics and the discipline sociology is naïve, and harmful for the future development of economic sociology. Understanding how sexist, dualistic, and hierarchical notions of gender have shaped the two disciplines could open the door to richer, stronger, more resilient and less biased forms of scholarly practice.

First, a few caveats. This essay does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of the disciplines. It does not address many issues that importantly shaped the formation of the disciplines during this period, including but not limited to the distribution of political and economic power; historical developments in U.S. industrial capitalism; the legacy of slavery and abolition; immigration issues; and regional interests.² Neither is the intent of this essay to denigrate important scholarship on gender issues and the difficulties faced by feminist scholars *within* each discipline.³ Nor should this essay be understood as seeking to reify dualistic, hierarchical gender categories—that is, as making any claim that cultural understandings of “masculine” and “feminine,” and perceptions of their relative worth, are related to some underlying essence. Rather, the intent is to show how

the stamp of common cultural habits of dualistic, hierarchical gendered thinking is vividly clear in the history of the split between the two disciplines.

On Sex versus Gender

The most obvious connection between gender and the shaping of the fields of sociology and economics has been the division of subject matters. The discipline of economics⁴ has historically neglected subjects that particularly affect women, such as unpaid household labor, intra-family economic relations, labor market discrimination, and the social and emotional dimensions of occupations involving human relations and care. Women's experiences in paid employment and in families only began to be discussed within economics in the 1970s, and even then extremely reductionist approaches predominated. Sociology, on the other hand, has had the study of families within its boundaries from the start. The Section on the Family, for example, was one of only seven sections formed within the ASA by 1925 (American Sociological Association 2008). Sociology has also been more open than economics to discussion of power relations and the gendering of occupations. While feminist sociologists have (rightly) complained that these subject matters are marginalized and of lower prestige within sociology than more masculine-associated topics, these subjects have at least been granted a place at the table. In contrast, when I was a student in the 1980s, economics students expressing a wish to study issues relating to women, families, or gender were frequently advised that these were *sociological*—not economic—topics. They likely still are so advised today, in many departments.

Paula England and Nancy Folbre, in their essay for the second edition of the *Handbook of Economic Sociology* (England and Folbre 2005), point out that economic sociology is in danger of reinscribing the sexist bias of neoclassical economics regarding the subject of inquiry. If economic sociology is thought to be only a matter of bringing sociological methods to bear on “the economy,” and “the economy” is defined as markets and business institutions, then the pattern is perpetuated. England and Folbre point out that the 1994 version of the *Handbook* relegated discussion of gender to a last section on the “intersections” of the economy with presumably “non-economic” areas of life (2005, 628). The 2005 version (Smelser and Swedberg 2005a), however, shows no progress on this score.

Another obvious link to sex and gender is the demographics of the practitioners of the two fields. A more substantial proportion of sociologists, sociology faculty, and sociology students have been female than is the case in economics. For example, in 1966, when 15% of doctoral degrees in sociology were awarded to women, women received only 4% of the doctoral degrees granted in economics. In 2006, the figures were 64% in sociology and 31% in economics (U.S. Department of Education 2008).

The concern of the present essay is not the sex of subjects of study or the sex of practitioners, however, but rather with *gender*, or the associations cultures build up on top of the observation of the preponderance of sexual dimorphism. In particular, the concern

is with the *cognitive* functions of gender—that is, how gender structures the way we think. Psychological study has shown, for example, that many people remember lists of words better when the items in the list all belong to the same culturally-defined gender grouping (e.g. “butterfly” and “blushing”) than when the word lists are mixed or neutral (Bem 1981). In contemporary U.S. culture, dogs are gendered masculine and cats feminine. Even abstract shapes are gendered—curvy, enveloping ones usually perceived as feminine, and sharp, angular ones as masculine. The purpose of pointing out these associations is not to endorse or reinforce them—many feminist and queer theorists have (appropriately) sought to complicate such binary views. Rather, the purpose for the present discussion is to highlight cognitive gendering as, whether one likes it or not, an extant psychological phenomenon. Only by bringing such a phenomenon from an unconscious and unexamined level out into the open, can its ramifications be discussed.

Feminist scholars of science including Evelyn Fox Keller (Keller 1985) and Sandra Harding (Harding 1986) have pointed out how such gendered patterns of thought have influenced the development of scientific endeavor, from the Enlightenment forward. Metaphors used to describe the ascension of scientific thinking over pre-scientific thought and nature have often taken the form of contrasts between masculine and feminine. As expressed by Harding,

mind vs. nature and the body, reason vs. emotion and social commitment, subject vs. object and objectivity vs. subjectivity, the abstract and the general vs. the concrete and particular—in each case we are told that the former must dominate the latter lest human life be overwhelmed by irrational and alien forces, forces symbolized in science as the feminine” (1986, 25).

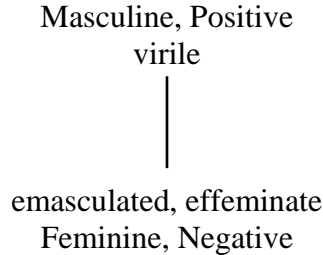
Keller, Harding and others demonstrated how separation, logical consistency, individual accomplishment, and mathematics have long been culturally and cognitively associated with rigor, hardness—and masculinity. At the same time, connection, “intuitive” understanding, sociality, and qualitative analysis have often been associated with weakness, softness—and femininity. Such associations were sometimes explicit in the language used by the early scientists to define their endeavor. Henry Oldenburg, an early Secretary of the British Royal Society, for example, stated that the intent of the Society was to “raise a masculine Philosophy ... whereby the Mind of Man may be ennobled with the knowledge of Solid Truths.” (Keller, 1985, 52).

Cognitive gender also—and crucially—tends to be hierarchical in the dominant culture. The term “virile,” for example, refers to a masculine trait with a positive connotation, while the term “effeminate” carries negative valence, and “emasculated” indicates a lack of manly vigor. Masculinity is traditionally associated with strength, and femininity with weakness, as shown in Figure 1.

Reading the early accounts of professional societies in the United States reveals a recurring concern with defining disciplines that could be thought to be *scientific*. The separate fields of economics and sociology were formed out of an earlier, more

amorphous “social science,” which in the 1860s included history, “political economy,” politics, social work, and sundry other endeavors. The following two sections explore the manner in which gendered understandings of science served to shape the formation of the disciplines of economics and sociology, respectively.

Figure 1



Cartesianism and the Formation of Economics

One could go back to Descartes, and his split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* to begin talking about how economics came to model itself around assumptions of (hyper-) rationality and detachment, and an insistence on the economy being considered as profoundly a-social.⁵ Or one could find the origin of the idea of the economy as an inhuman, purely mechanical system (driven by the “energy” of self-interest) in the work of Adam Smith.⁶ A crucially important development closer in time to of the formation of the disciplines in the United States, however, is an 1836 essay by John Stuart Mill. In it, Mill carefully distinguished economics from other disciplines, laying out both the central assumptions and the methodology which neoclassical economists would come to adopt.

In “On the Definition of Political Economy,” Mill attempted to carefully distinguish economics from the physical sciences and technology, from ethics, and from a more general study of social behavior. Political Economy is distinguished from physical science, he wrote, because it is about “phenomena of *mind*” (1836, 29, emphasis in original) rather than about physical laws. Among the mental sciences, it is further distinguished by the particular “part of man’s [*sic*] nature” (36) with which it deals. Conscience, duty, and other feelings relevant to a person’s dealings with other individuals were consigned by Mill to the realm of ethics (34). Principles of human nature that have to do with life in society were consigned by Mill to the realm of “speculative politics,” which he also called “social economy” (35). With issues concerning physical bodies, ethics, and social interactions split off and assigned to other disciplines, Political Economy would deal with what was left. It should, Mill wrote, deal with “man [*sic*]...solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end” (38). Here is the nub of the rational-choice-theory definition of economics: the original description of “economic man.”

Why did Mill do all this slicing and dicing? Mill believed that he had to separate out a very thin slice of human nature for analysis by each of the various fields because this was required by the nature of *science*. Significantly, his model for science in this essay was Cartesian geometry. Political Economy, Mill thought, could only proceed as a “pure” and “abstract” science, resulting in general truths and timeless laws, if it posited a minimal set of starting principles. Political Economy and geometry, he claimed, both “must necessarily reason...from assumptions, not from facts” (1836, 46). Political Economy presupposes “an arbitrary definition of man” for the same reason that “[g]eometry presupposes an arbitrary definition of a line, ‘that which has length but not breadth’” (46).

Mill, to his credit, in principle left his premises open (64). He argued that no political economist would ever be “so absurd as to suppose that mankind” is really described by only the parts of human nature selected for study in Political Economy (38). In any application, he said, Political Economy would need to be complemented by the insights of other sciences that had focused on other parts of human nature and other circumstances (58), and also by practical knowledge of specific experiences (68).

What remained and flourished in later economic thought, however, was not Mill’s modesty concerning the *ad hoc* premises and limited applicability of the geometry-like discipline he proposed, but rather his idea that Political Economy must become an axiomatic-deductive enterprise in order to be “scientific.” This approach received a big boost in later in the 19th century when neoclassical economists (including Francis Edgeworth, Stanley Jevons, Leon Walras, and Vilfredo Pareto) found that they could mathematically formalize Mill’s idea of economic behavior as simply the pursuit of “wealth,” using models borrowed from Newtonian physics. The notion that economic research is centrally defined by abstract mathematical modeling of consumers’ desire to maximize utility, and firms’ desire to maximize profit, was born, and continues to be central to the mainstream definition of the field to this day.

This definition of economics as a narrow exercise in deductive logic and mechanics did not go entirely uncontested, however. Richard T. Ely, founder of the American Economic Association (AEA) in 1885, was one of a group of scholars—many of whom later went on to become sociologists—who were influenced by the German Historical School. Reflecting on the founding of the society, Ely wrote:

We believed that economics had, in itself, the potency of life. In the vast field of research which lay before us...we felt we had opportunities for service of many kinds . . . We saw a good deal of poverty on the one hand and a concentration of wealth on the other hand; and we did not feel that all was well with our country...We thought that by getting down into this life and studying it carefully, we would be able to do something toward directing the great forces shaping our life, and directing them in such a way as to bring improvement. (Ely 1938, 155-56)

The first platform of the AEA was largely the work of Ely, and he included in it prominent references to social problems, human progress, and the role of the state (Coats 1960; Ely 1936, 144; Furner 1975).

Within a few years, however, the AEA platform was watered down, and all of the references to problems, progress, and the state were deleted (Tobin 1985). This change was largely, in later history, portrayed as a debate over methods, rather than one of basic goals and values—that is, about whether the economy should fundamentally be seen as being alive and social, as opposed to mechanical. By the 1930s the mathematical and mechanical approach—confused with a notion of scientific “objectivity”—had clearly risen in ascendance, as evidenced by the above-quoted Econometric Society statement. Rather than see ourselves as—with Ely—engaged in the solution to social problems, economists tend to see our role as being neutral and detached technical advisors to decision-makers, whose only motivation is the search for pure and precise truth. It is, presumably, left up to the decision-makers to choose the goals. Whether one calls it “scientism,” “objectivism,” “positivism,” or any of the other names that philosophers and historians of science use to refer to the (rather peculiar) belief that all knowledge must mimic Newtonian physics, the victory of this view among mainstream economists has been nearly complete.

Also crucial in the development of economics was economist Lionel Robbins’ 1935 precedent-setting definition of economics as the science of *choice-making*. Robbins defined economics as “the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between scarce means which have alternative uses” (1935, 15). Scarcity, here, refers to a perceived imbalance between presumably unlimited human wants and a level of resources that is insufficient to satisfy them all. In the static neoclassical model, the focus of attention is the internal, individual, mental process of choosing so as to maximize utility or profits, given the (presumed) universality of scarcity.

But when “scarcity” became a central defining motif, what was shunted aside in the process? Note that the antonym for “scarcity” is “abundance.” And note that, especially in food-rich, goods-rich, industrialized societies, “abundance” would be at least as appropriate a term for describing economic life. Then consider the cultural symbols that represent abundance. The cornucopia or horn of plenty is mythologically the horn of the female goat that nursed young Roman god Zeus, accidentally broken off. Zeus gave it back with the promise that it would always be filled. The cornucopia is one of the symbols of the Roman goddess Fortuna, the female symbol of luck who was given offerings by mothers. Abundance is associated with fertility and fecundity, in turn associated with women and with the earth. No wonder then, that in a world in which masculinity is associated with higher value (Figure 1), a status-seeking discipline would want to align itself with “scarcity” instead.

Economics, then, captured the high status ground. It took on the “masculine” subjects of markets and business. It took on the study of these with a “masculine” armory of rigorous (-seeming) precise, mathematical, deductive, abstract tools. It took as its agents individuals imagined to be thoroughly—masculinely—rational and individual,

detached from all social connection, and living in a tough, dog-eat-dog world of competition for scarce resources. The notion of scientific objectivity promoted is one that relies on detachment—detachment from social influences, detachment from the object of study, detachment from other researchers, and detachment from practical and ethical concerns.

And economics got away with it. For roughly a hundred years, other social scientists and people in general have simply nodded their heads when faced with propositions like “firms maximize profits” or “people, in their economic lives, act out of self-interest.” After all, to assert otherwise—to assert that economic life is *part of social life*—would be to question “hard science” and appear emasculated or effeminate. Or so it has been understood.

“Leftovers” and the Formation of Sociology

As economics moved away from sociology, the latter was considered by some to be made up of the “leftovers: marriage, the family, poverty, crime, education, religion, and sex” (Furner, 298). The areas that economics was eager to shed—areas of women’s traditional activity and of pressing social problems—landed on the doorstep of sociology. Sociology’s methods and models also remained more diverse, and its connection to social change more salient.

The writings of Frank Sanborn offer an early—and explicitly gendered—discussion of the contrast between Mill’s Political Economy and *social* analysis. Sanborn was the founder of the Department of Social Economy of the American Social Science Association. This association was founded in 1865 and was the precursor of the associations for many disciplines, though it later itself became defunct. Working off Mill’s definitions, Sanborn wrote in 1887 that Social Economy is “the feminine gender of Political Economy, and so, very receptive of particulars, but little capable of general and aggregate matters” (quoted in Haskell 1977, 137). Apparently Sanborn did not see the association of his life work with femininity or particularity as a weakness, but rather believed that Social Economy had a heightened capacity to engage in social reform and address human suffering (Haskell, 136-7).

But an unsettling sense that sociology is not quite a *science* is also a strong recurring theme in writings about the origin of the discipline. The opening sentences of Lester Ward’s account of “The Establishment of Sociology,” for example, rather defensively reads, “I do not propose on this occasion to enter into any defense of the claims of sociology to be called a science. I wish simply to show that its history, and the steps in its establishment, do not essentially differ from those of other sciences” (Ward 1907), 581). John Lewis Gillin in “The Development of Sociology in the United States” wrote that “much still remains to make [sociology] a science (1927, 17).

Clearly one of the issues is that of methods. In the period between the two World Wars, science and objectivity became increasingly identified, within the social sciences,

with the gathering of statistics (Ross 1991; Smith 1994). While defending techniques such as case studies, Gillin in 1927 still took quantitative analysis as the gold standard for science: “There are certain problems in sociology, however...to which the statistical method has not *yet* been successfully applied” (1927, 18, emphasis added). The *yet* is telling, as Gillin seems to leave open the possibility that further “scientific” development could close this gap.

A more dramatically scientific stance was taken by William Fielding Ogburn, who, in his 1929 Presidential Address claimed that the future of sociology lay in adopting “strictly scientific methods,” so that “everyone will be a statistician”(Ogburn 1930, 2, 5). Ogburn believed that science allows thinking to be “freed from the bias of emotion” (4). Ogburn explained that the roots of his views lay in this own experience:

My father, planter and merchant, died in 1890 when I was four. Then began my long struggle to resist a dear mother’s beautiful but excessive love. To the successful outcome, I attribute my strong devotion to objective reality, [and] an antipathy to the distorting influence of emotion. (Ogburn, quoted in Laslett 1990, 423)

Here we see a case in which the hierarchical, dualistic linking of gender with methodological prestige is made perfectly explicit: women (mothers), love, and emotion are firmly placed on the inferior side, as things to be resisted, while men (fathers), science, and—as Ogburn put it (1930, 2)—“wholly colorless” knowledge are made the goal.

Besides methods, another hotly debated issue was the relation of sociology as a knowledge-seeking (and science-aspiring) discipline to the goal of the amelioration of social problems. While Ely’s attempt to keep economics involved with social betterment was quickly defeated within his own discipline, many accounts of the early development of sociology take a more encompassing view, seeing the two orientations as complementary (e.g. Gillin, 21, 25; Small, 770-71). Gender was apparent here as well, of course: Women such as Jane Adams were major leaders of the socially-engaged, settlement house variety of early sociological research and social reform, while men predominated in the more detached university positions (Silverberg 1998).

Major battles about the proper relationship of scholarly work to engagement with social problems were fought within sociology at the turn of the 20th century (Furner 1975), during the inter-war years (Smith 1994),⁷ and again in the early 1950s (Bernard 1973). But the battle within sociology has never been definitively won by the scientific separatists. “Engaged” research and social criticism are still, today, legitimized within the broad umbrella of sociology (even if they may not be at the most prestigious core) in a way that contrasts sharply with the situation in economics.

But, since “science” has been associated with masculinity and cool detachment, this all comes at a cost. Sociologists do not have nearly as large a line for funds at the National Science Foundation. The President consults no Council of Sociological

Advisors. Sociologists' salaries are on average lower than those of economists (Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2008). Sociologists might aspire to publish in economics journals, but the reverse is not true. Sociologists are by and large regarded by economists as doing "soft" and inferior work, not deserving of equal status with their own. For example, economist and ex-Harvard President Larry Summers' belief, reported in the press, that economists are "smarter than" sociologists (Bombardieri 2006) tends to be, in my experience, shared by most economists (as well as many in the public who feel cowed by displays of mathematical expertise).⁸ Some of the differences in tangible resources and power may well be due to those with economic and political dominance preferring to support research that buttresses, rather than challenges, their positions of advantage. But that does not explain the general relative disrespecting of sociological research, since much sociology is *not* engaged in such critique. In terms of Figure 1, sociologists are clearly, when taken as a group, positioned on the down and feminine side, no matter what their particular sex, interests, abilities, or degree of critical leaning may be.

Either/Or: The "Hostile Worlds" View

Sociologists have, at least until recently, for the most part stayed submissively on their side of the disciplinary dividing line established near the turn of the 20th century. A whole way of understanding the relation of economic and social life has, in fact, grown up around and been reinforced by this disciplinary division. The view that Viviana Zelizer (Zelizer 2005) calls "hostile worlds" depends exactly on this contrast between human society and presumably inhuman economics. While sociologists (as well as many in psychology and the humanities) generally study human interdependencies and often elaborate on their emotional and ethical complexity within some areas of life, when the topic turns to economics they often suddenly reveal a schizophrenic view of human nature. People in their lives in markets and commerce, they say, are driven by self-interest. Capitalist firms function to maximization of profit, they assert. Economics is quantitative, and the measuring rule of money flattens out all social meaning, they repeat.

This division has been reified even by some feminist sociologists. For example, in her influential 1973 essay on revolutions in sociology, Jessie Bernard presented without critique the idea that women historically have tended to live in a social, relational "status world," intrinsically characterized by love, duty, particularism, and affectivity, while men have lived in an economic, cold "cash-nexus world," characterized by money exchange, self-orientation, universalism, and emotional neutrality.⁹ Such dichotomizing preemptively rules out recognizing both the self-interested and sometimes even violent dimensions of family relationships, and the the relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions of business and commerce.

"Hostile worlds" advocates generally regard themselves as the defenders of meaning and ethics against the capitalist onslaught—that is, as defenders of the goals of social betterment (or at least human survival) against the forces of mechanistic economic systems and laws. They see themselves as brave critics of the existing system, in contrast to other, presumably co-opted, social scientists who seek only to make capitalism run

more smoothly. But in actuality the insistence that economic life is mechanical and a-social simply *kowtows* to neoclassical economics to a rashly undue extent. It is neoclassical economics, not the actual study of organizational behavior, for example, that has generated the (unfounded) belief that firms single-mindedly maximize profit. It is *a priori* assertions by neoclassical economists, not actual study of psychology or human social behavior, that has created the belief that agents within capitalist firms are motivated only by money. Rather than representing radical critique, the “hostile worlds” view actually reflects the subservient posture reflected in the above-mentioned description of the founding of the ASA: *We promise not to infringe on your territory—you get to describe the economy. We’ll keep our social analysis to ourselves.*

Sociology has not yet made a case for the importance of its subject matters, the validity of its goals, or the reliability of its methods equal in strength to the case made by economists. Economists claimed all the “high ground” of science, conceived of as detached and mathematical. As long as the hierarchical and sexist associations of economics with masculinity, detachment, science, and high value, on the one hand, and sociology with femininity, sociality, softness and lesser value are allowed to stand, the situation is unlikely to change.

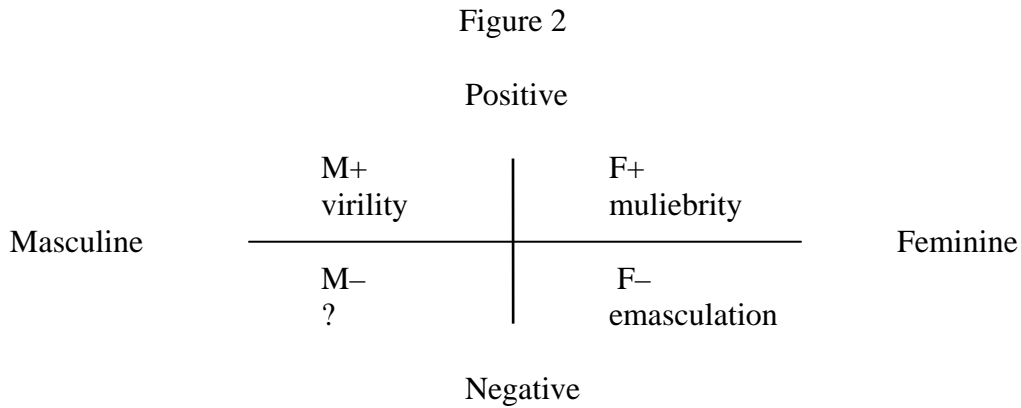
Both/And Thinking

Sexist and hierarchical habits of thinking are strong (and are strongly reinforced by social patterns), but they are not inevitable. One way of attempting to avoid these cognitive traps is to attack the gender dualism itself—refusing to talk about gender at all, or multiplying the categories past two so that there are many genders and the discussion becomes much more complex. While these are appropriate approaches for some situations, the use of the dualistic gender metaphor in demarcating “hard science” is so strong and deeply rooted that a different, two stage, approach may be more helpful.

The first stage is to very carefully unlink gender and sex, so that one does not jump from the acknowledgement that some characteristic is culturally coded as, say, feminine, to a unmerited conclusion that it is shared by, or predominant in, women. Some forms of cultural feminism, unfortunately, promote rather than challenge essentialist links—claiming, for example, that not only is emotion culturally associated with femininity (a factual statement), but that women are by nature more emotional than men (a claim that can be roundly disputed). Unlinking gender and sex, on the other hand, leads to the acknowledgement that men and women (and transsexual and transgendered persons and persons of ambiguous sexual identity) all have emotional capacities. And in parallel fashion, we all have rational capacities as well.

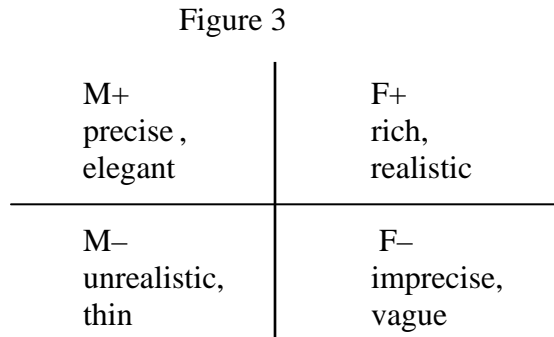
The second stage is to take a modest—but potentially enlightening—step past the binaries of Figure 1, to explore what has been hidden by habitually overlaying the masculine-feminine binary with the positive-negative one. As a tool for getting past this habit of conflation, a “gender-value compass” (Nelson 1992; Nelson 1996) may be useful. Consider how the hierarchy pictured in Figure 1, for example, changes if one

refuses this overlay, and instead splits off the gender axis from the value axis, as shown in Figure 2:



Virility is defined in the dictionary as “manly vigor.” Emasculation is the lack thereof. But are all things feminine just degraded forms of masculine characteristics? If one looks hard enough in a sufficiently thick dictionary (or is persistent in web searching), one can also find the new term in the figure. “Muliebrity” is defined as “womanliness,” “possessing full womanly powers,” or “the feminine correlative of virility.” While not a term in common use, it suggests that alongside and on a par with a masculine, positive strengths we might also consider there to be feminine, positive strengths. The cross-diagonal terms illustrate a condition of *lack*: for example, “emasculation” is an absence of “virility.” There is, unfortunately, currently no term in the English language for a lack of womanly vigor.

Now, applying this sort of exercise to social science methodology, consider the belief that masculine, precise, quantitative methods are always preferable to less precise qualitative analysis. Figure 3 suggests that there are costs to focusing only on precision, and benefits to be had by a richer approach.



Practitioners of economic sociology have rightly criticized neoclassical economics for its often absurdly unrealistic models of economic phenomena, and presented much more institutionally and sociologically rich descriptions and analysis.¹⁰ Economists, on the other hand, routinely dismiss much sociological analysis as “vague” or “messy” simply

because it does not conform to standards of mathematical precision. Usually this dismissal is absurd: The real world is simply not of a nature to be exclusively studied by the methods of mathematical symbolism and logic.

It should be noted, though, that sometimes the economists' critique of sociological vagueness can be to the point: Sociological studies sometimes suffer from a dire lack of a common vocabulary and overwhelming internal inconsistencies.¹¹ A distressing tendency among some scholars in the social sciences (and humanities) to assert *this term will mean whatever I want it to mean right now* blocks, rather than facilitates, the creation of knowledge. A little more attention to precision and consistency could go a long way, in such cases, towards improving the analysis.

Examined in the light of Figure 3, interminable debates about “hard” versus “soft” methods, or “quant” versus “qual,” lose their polarized and oppositional sting. Good research—as opposed to simply macho research—should be *both* as precise *and* as rich as possible. In many cases, this might mean combining data crunching with case studies, or survey research with ethnography. At the least, it means appreciating the gaps in any study that draws on only one methodology. Such a standard for quality would undeniably make the jobs of academic researchers, reviewers, and editors more challenging: Instead of merely making a study conform to the methodological template favored by a particular school or journal, one would be forced to evaluate, in a more overarching and critical way, the appropriateness of the methodologies used to the subject of study and the contribution of the research to knowledge.

Consider also the way that hierarchical, dualistic thinking creates the following false “either/or” choice: *either* one does work committed to social betterment *or* one does work that is scientifically objective. Feminist scholars of science have revealed the sexist biases implicit in the belief—so obviously gender-linked in Ogburn's account of the source of his scientism—that objectivity is a matter of detachment. Feminist alternatives, such as those called “strong objectivity” by Harding (1986) or “dynamic objectivity” by Keller (1985, 116) incorporate a more relational approach. For example, as expressed by feminist philosopher Helen Longino, “The objectivity of individuals...consists in their participation in the collective give-and-take of critical discussion and not in some special relation (of detachment, hardheadedness) they may bear to their observations” (1990, 79).

Drawing on the cultural associations of masculinity with detachment and femininity with connection, Figure 4 illustrates how one can envision a “both/and” balance of socially-engaged *and* reliable research, informed by a stronger conception of objectivity. The drive for abstraction arises from a macho fear that any emotional, value-laden attachment necessarily compromises the search for knowledge, instead of acknowledging that emotions are inherently involved in all human activities. It's end point is a highly refined irrelevance. The obsession of economists with abstraction well serves, of course, the interests of those who would prefer that problems of economic inequality, injustice, environmental degradation and the like *not* be seriously investigated. An over-connection with practical problems, on the other hand, leads to a “quick-fix”

mentality that may lead to rushed, biased recommendations. The balance of the top two cells reminds us that we want reliable results—but also results that in some sense *matter*.

Figure 4

M+ concerned with understanding	F+ concerned with real problems
M- concerned only with abstractions	F- concerned only with “quick-fixes”

Regarding subject matter, a definition of economics that does not rely on either a masculine-biased definition based on markets and business firms, or a masculine-biased definition based on rational choice theory, is one based on provisioning: *Economics is about how societies organize themselves to provide for the survival and flourishing of life* (Nelson 1993). Economic sociology might better progress by drawing on such a definition, rather than—as it does presently—on the neoclassical notion of “scarce goods and services” (Section on Economic Sociology 2007; Smelser and Swedberg 2005b, 3). A recognition of the co-constitution of economies with the natural world as well as the social world would also be extremely helpful, in light of pressing problems such as global climate change.

As a final example of the use of the compass, consider the two quotes that opened this essay. Many would find *both* statements somewhat repulsive. The Econometric Society statement is arrogant and overbearing, lacking in any sort of appropriate modesty or respect for alternative intellectual projects. It pretends to a sort of perspective-free knowledge that cannot actually be achieved. Meanwhile, the ASA description is wimpy and servile, so afraid of offending or claiming too much that it lacks any appropriate assertiveness. It is self-deprecating to the point of limp passivity. Rejecting this as an either/or choice, could we envision a scholarly discipline that is both appropriately assertive, and appropriately careful about its claims, as described below?¹²

Figure 5

M+ appropriately assertive	F+ appropriately careful
M- overbearing	F- servile

Economic Sociology: A Way Forward

In their essay on gender and economic sociology, England and Folbre argue for an “integrative” approach that brings in topics related to women and draws from both existing sociological and rational-choice-economics approaches (2005, 627). While appreciating their contribution, this essay proposes something far more radical. Economic sociology has the potential to be the fresh breeze that begins to break apart century-old habits of sexist, dualistic, and hierarchical thinking about the subjects, methods, and goals of the social science disciplines. It could, simultaneously, become the medicine that heals the split between sociology and economics. Why be satisfied with the vagueness of many existing sociological formulations and the empirical irrelevance of currently dominant economic theories? A feminist-informed understanding of the requirements of truly scientific investigation—investigation that is not bound by dogmas of any kind, but rather open to new evidence and viewpoints and to evaluation by ever-wider communities—could move beyond the stultifying biases of both disciplines and lead, at last, to a more rich and reliable understanding of human economic life, in all its complex sociality.

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NOTES

¹ Twenty-two names are gender-ambiguous, but most likely refer to males.

² A number of histories of the development of the social science discipline in the United States exist. Some of these are sensitive to gender issues—especially the essays in Silverberg (1998)—but most neglect gender or at most give it only a brief mention (Furner 1975; Haskell 1977; Ross 1991; Smith 1994).

³ See, for example, Bernard (1973), Stacey and Thorne (1985), and Acker (2006) for discussions of obstacles to feminist research in sociology, and Ferber and Nelson (1993; 2003) for discussion of the state of feminism within economics.

⁴ To ease exposition, the phrase the “discipline of economics” in this paper will refer to the dominant, neoclassically-centered, “mainstream” of the discipline. Attention to interesting, but historically marginalized, schools such as radical and Institutional economics, or contemporary specialty fields such as behavioral or neuro-economics, would take this essay too far afield. This essay also focuses only on the United States. While there are those who claim that while the discipline of economics might have had the biases described at one time in its history, it is now non-sexist and has gone beyond its neoclassical roots to become truly open to diverse models and methodologies, many publications by feminist and other heterodox economists document the opposite.

⁵ The work of Susan Bordo (1986) would apply here.

⁶ Although this image is present in only a few passages of Smith’s work, and is contradicted elsewhere, it is the part of Smith’s legacy which has had the most effect on the development of economics. See Nelson (2006b).

⁷ “Sociology as a science is not interested in making the world a better place in which to live,” claimed Ogburn (1930, 2).

⁸ I find accounts suggesting more cooperative and mutually respectful relations among economists and sociologists, such as in Aspers et al. (2008) rather suspect. This is probably due to a problem of small and biased samples: Sociologists will be drawn to read only those parts of the economic literature (often marginalized within the economics profession) they find interesting and have the mathematical skills to digest, while the only economists willing to engage with sociologists are the relatively few who think such communication might be worthwhile.

⁹ For more on the problems created by this dichotomy, analyzed in terms of Habermasian concepts of “life world” versus “system,” see Nelson (2006a; 2006b).

¹⁰ While proposing that economic sociologists consider using some rational choice theories, England and Folbre (2005) also—rather undermining their own argument—systematically point out how these theories fail empirically.

¹¹ See, for example, the discussion in England and Folbre (2005, footnote 2) of sociologists’ use of the terms “culture,” “norms,” and “institutions.”

¹² Jessie Bernard (1973) presented an analysis of research approaches that can be analyzed with this compass. Drawing on research in psychology, she classified sociological approaches as either “agentic” and focused on “separation, repression, conquest, and contract” (784-5) or “communal” which is “much humbler” (785) and focused on “fusion, expression, acceptance,...cooperation.” She identifies the agentic approach with machismo, and seems to argue that while it is appropriate for some subjects, women and communal approaches are more appropriate for “status world” subjects. By valorizing the humility of the “communal” approach and associating “agentic” mostly with negatively-valenced terms such as “repression,” she seems to be outlining an F+/M- diagonal. But by arguing (along “hostile worlds” lines) that there exists an emotion-free, impersonal “cash nexus world” to which agentic methods apply, she gives far too much over to mechanical images of economics. She also seems unaware of the dangers of servility—which is closely related to the characteristic of “solubility” discussed in Nelson (1992) and England (2003).

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