

BEYOND ECONOMIC MAN:  
Economic Crisis, Feminist Economics, and the Solidarity Economy

Paper delivered by  
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At the International Association for Feminist Economics Conference, June 2009

At a panel celebrating the 15th anniversary of *Feminist Economics*, at the Boston IAFFE meetings, Lourdes Beneria posed this question, “What does it mean to build an economy that moves beyond economic man?”<sup>1</sup> This is a key question for feminist economists, especially in the current economic crisis, and one which I will try to answer in this paper on feminist economics and the solidarity economy.

In the U.S., and in most of the “developed countries,” feminist movement, and feminist economists, have been focusing on empowering women within the existing global capitalist system. This has involved conceptualizing and documenting the existence of sex discrimination, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities for women. It has involved analyzing unpaid care work and informal work, including its key role in the economy, and advocating for paid parental leaves and other forms of support for it, as well as for its inclusion in macro policy making. It has involved analyzing the conflicts between paid jobs, especially traditionally masculine ones, and unpaid care work in the home; the erosion of unpaid care work as women enter the paid labor force; and the

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, this was the title of Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson’s ovular collection on feminist economics in 1993.

advocating of work/family policies to compensate for the systematic disadvantaging of those who do unpaid care work.<sup>2</sup>

A second major focus of feminist theory, especially in the U.S., has been to help strengthen feminism as a movement of a diverse group of women. This has meant striving to understand and incorporate the differences in women's experience of gender oppression due to racial-ethnic, class, sexuality, disability, and other hierarchical processes, and to help craft policies which benefit all women, not just middle and upper class white heterosexual able-bodied women (hooks; Rhonda Williams; Spelman, Mohanty).

We have made some very important strides over the past almost 40 years, since the rise of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism and feminist economics. Now, the concept of sex discrimination has replaced the notion of a God-given sexual division of labor, and the forced imposition of such rigid gender economic roles is considered to be unacceptable by most. With the support of feminist movement, individual women have fought their way into most traditionally male-dominated jobs, including the very high status ones. Women's entrepreneurial abilities have been recognized with microcredit programs all over the world, particularly in poor countries. While sex discrimination has not been eliminated, and feminist activism in these areas must continue, with the support of feminist economists, these struggles against discrimination and for women's empowerment have made very significant strides,

At the same time, the experience of the past 40 years has shown the limitations of our ability to liberate and empower women if we are forced to accept

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brandt and I (Matthaei and Brant 2007) conceptualize these efforts as three distinct feminist economic processes, equal opportunity, valuing the devalued, and integrative.

the current rules of the economic game. To play and win at that game, women have been forced to act like the “Economic Man” which U.S. feminist economists identified and critiqued in the 1970s in the first path-breaking collection on feminist economics, *Beyond Economic Man* (Ferber and Nelson, 1993): narrowly self-interested, competitive, individualistic; focused on money and motivated by greed.

As I have showed in previous work (Matthaei 1982; Amott and Matthaei 1994), this “economic man” developed historically, in 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. and Europe. He was white, and served by a full-time homemaker. Liberated from rigid aristocratic class hierarchies, he was able to compete in the economy, as a worker or entrepreneur, a “bread-winner,” and had the opportunity to become a self-made man. With this as his goal – supporting his family, and doing better than others – other values such as helping others and contributing to society, gradually fell to the wayside. US economic institutions, and the corporation as it developed legally, reflect these masculinist values. Meanwhile caring was left to be the purview of homemakers, exercised towards their family members, or through the volunteer work and social homemaking which eventually transformed into a more or less paternalistic state. Race and class hierarchies enforced these roles – poor whites and most people of color weren’t allowed to play these polarized roles, and hence weren’t able to be successful men and women.

Many early second wave feminists envisioned women’s liberation as involving a wholesale transformation of “racist capitalist patriarchy” (Eisenstein 1979; Sergeant 1981). However, on the ground, feminist organizing came to focus on struggles for women’s equal economic opportunity. This meant striving for the

opportunity to compete – without being discriminated against -- in the masculinist capitalist bread-winning competition. In the past 40 years, as a result of feminist and anti-racist struggle, women of all racial-ethnic and class backgrounds in the US have been allowed into the economic “game,” and some have “beat” men and gained high positions, against heavy odds, definitively disproving natural explanations for the sexual division of labor.

Meanwhile, those of us who have more or less “won,” and those who have tried and lost, or decided not to play, have learned that there are many shortcomings to the game itself, even if freed from sex and race discrimination:

- To play that game, we have to accept that most women, and most people, will continue to be losers; many without their basic needs filled.
- To play that game, we have to minimize or farm out (usually to other women) our unpaid caring labor (Folbre 1995 and 2001).
- To play that game, we have to focus on increasing the profits of the company we serve or own, serving owners or stockholders but ignoring or even gravely damaging other stakeholders, including workers, consumers, suppliers, the local community, government, and the earth upon which we all depend for life.
- To play that game, we have to turn a blind eye to the multiple crises that this economic game has been producing, from climate to energy to food to water, employment, and soul, which threaten the very existence of all women, our children, and the men in our lives.

As I once heard Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), comment, “What’s the use of struggling to get the top berths of the boat if the boat is sinking?” It is clearer than ever before that there is something deeply wrong with the dominant economic system – with its very DNA. That it needs radical transformation.

It is also probably clear to most of us here that feminist movement all over the world – including feminist economists, with our critical understanding of the ways in which gender, race, and class hierarchical polarization undergird and distort our economy -- need to play a key role in midwifing this transformation. But how?

In the 1970s, Northern Marxist-feminists looked to a revolutionary transformation that would overthrow the interlocking systems of capitalism and patriarchy; that would bring a feminist kind of socialism (Eisenstein 1979, Sargent 1981). A revolution that would be first and foremost led by the working class, but which would incorporate the goal of women’s empowerment. This revolution didn’t come. Feminism splintered into many different kinds of feminism, as the differences among women were acknowledged and expressed. The working class was reformist, if not reactionary; the way out of capitalism was blocked; and all feminist transformative energy seemed to focus on “reform,” empowerment within the existing system.

However, a quiet transformation of economic values, practices, and institutions has been underway, almost invisible to the eye. New, solidaristic ways of being economic and doing economic life have been developing and spreading, creating new economic practices and institutions. These new ways of economic

being and doing have been fed by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century movements -- anti-racist, indigenous, feminist, lesbian/gay, environmental, worker, peasant, and anti-corporate globalization movements -- all movements in which women have played key roles. At the turn of the millennium, these movements began to come together in a movement of movements: against the global economic system (WTO, World Bank, IMF), first in Seattle in 1999 and, since then, all across the world; and, since 2001, in the Social Forum movement, under the motto, “Another world is possible.” World Social Forums since then, which have usually brought together from 50,000 to 100,000 activists and NGO’s from around the world – along with thousands of regional and local Social Forums, have begun to explore the kinds of economic transformation necessary to create a world that responds to the concerns of feminists, people of color, indigenous people, working class people, the unemployed, gays and lesbians, the disabled, etc. In other words, the Social Forum movement, including the very first U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta in June 2007 and the upcoming 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in June 2010, are playing a key roles in the process of unifying the various grass-roots movements, and identifying and building feminist and liberatory economic ways forward (Fisher and Ponniah; Allard, Davidson, and Matthaei 2008; Cavanagh and Mander 2004).

The growth of more solidaristic economic values, practices and institutions has also been fed by the severe economic crisis that have been experienced around the world, and currently, worldwide. The economic devastation wrought on Southern countries by structural adjustment programs in the 80s and 90s brought a growth in movements rejecting “free”-market based neoliberalism, especially in

Latin America, where leaders are beginning to discuss a 21<sup>st</sup> century kind of socialism. Under the leadership of popularly elected Hugo Chavez, Venezuela is actively supporting cooperatives and community economic development as a market-based alternative to capitalist development. Even in the US, the so-called “belly of the beast,” the current financial crisis – combined with the climate, energy, unemployment, housing, and food security crises -- are leading more and more towards a wholesale questioning of capitalist ethics and practices that brought so much wealth to those at the top, and devastated whole communities (Allard and Matthaei, “Introduction”; Lewis and Swinney; Allard and Matthaei, “From Crisis to Job Creation.”)

This is the world economic context within which more just, democratic and sustainable economic values, practices, and institutions -- and revitalized forms of pre- or non-capitalist ones – have begun to sprout, spread, and cross-pollinate across the world. It is the world economic context within which these diverse economic values, practices and institutions have begun to be recognized as forming the basis of a new economic system, the “solidarity economy,” which is growing up alongside and beginning to transform capitalist values, practices, and institutions. And it is the world economic context within which such values, practices and institutions, and people involved in them, are creating mutually supportive “solidarity economy networks,” and forming a global, diverse “solidarity economy” movement which is dedicated to visibilizing and growing the solidarity economy, the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS), first in Latin America, Europe, and Canada, then spreading, with the aid

of the Social Forum movement, to Africa, Asia, and the U.S. (Allard, Davidson, and Matthaei, eds., 2008; [www.lux09.lu](http://www.lux09.lu))

*Feminism and the Solidarity Economy*

The ultimate aims of the solidarity economy are 1) fulfillment of human needs, 2) the breakdown of oppressive economic hierarchies of all types, 3) the development of human potential, and 4) the preservation of our communities and our environment. All of these aims are congruent with the essential feminist goals.

-- The provisioning of needs has often been posited by feminist economists, such as Julie Nelson (1993), as the proper goal of economic life.

-- The breakdown of oppressive economic hierarchies of all types – not just gender hierarchy – has become a basic tenet of feminist theory after the interventions of Black, lesbian, working class, and disabled women (hooks, Matthaei 1996, Spelman, etc.).

-- The goal of developing human potential is closely akin to feminism's valuing of the feminine, mothering and caring activities of nurturing human development (Waring, Folbre 2001).

-- And the struggle to preserve the environment has long been advocated as an integral part of feminism by ecofeminists (Carol Merchant, Judith Plant, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva).

So in their basic, core goals, feminism and the solidarity economy are almost one and the same. As I have suggested earlier, this is not an accident, since

feminist movement across the globe has played an important role in crafting the social environment within which solidarity economy values, practices, and institutions have been born. Furthermore, the large majority of those active in the solidarity economy worldwide are women (Cote, Angullo) who have been marginalized by the dominant capitalist economic system, and who bring their feminine sensibilities and perspectives to this new project.

Underneath these goals, at the core of the solidarity economy, is a new set of economic values which motivate and organize economic activity. While these new values have many roots, one core root is undoubtedly feminism. In fact, I think it is fair to say that the values of the solidarity economy express the best of feminism. The solidarity economy rejects the currently, individualistic, money- and profit-centered values of the neoliberal economy which feminists have identified as masculine, and critiqued as patriarchal, oppressive, and dysfunctional. The solidarity economy framework recognizes that economics needs to be based on mutual, caring relationships with other people and with our environment – that is, to incorporate the feminine. It visibilizes and values nonmarket economic activities such as (women’s traditional) unpaid reproductive work and community-building work, as does feminism.

At the heart of the solidarity economy is a new type of economic person, who replaces “economic man,” and his dependent, “economic woman.” As early second-wave U.S. feminists repeatedly affirmed, the personal is political – personal relationships and choices can involve power-over others, and be oppressive – or they can be liberatory. The economic people who are building the solidarity

economy strive to express and live out solidaritous values in the myriad of decisions which permeate our economic lives, from their decisions about what to buy or where to work, to their choice of technology or treatment of the workers they supervise, to public policy about how to respond to climate change. Solidaritous values replace the narrowly focused, materialistic value system of capitalism, in which money is the goal of life as well as the measure of one's value. Activists at Quebec's Chantier de l'Economie Sociale (Neamtam 2008) talk about replacing the focus of economic decision-making on money and "value-added" with a "values-added" (*valeurs ajoutees*) approach. The values to be added? Cooperation, equity in all dimensions, economic democracy, local community control, and sustainability – all values which are explicitly or implicitly sought by feminists.

Capitalism is an economic system that is constructed, reconstructed, and continually revolutionized not by some cartel of evil corporations, but by values and choices of the economic men and economic women, as Julie Nelson has so convincingly shown (Nelson 2006, Ch. 5). Economic man is a bread-winner: a competitive being who seeks to support his family by struggling in the marketplace to dominate or "better" others and the earth, including "nonwhite" racial-ethnic groups; a being whose success is measured in terms of money received and accumulated. The ideal economic woman is a homemaker who subordinates herself in service to her husband and children through her unpaid reproductive work in the home, or through paid work, if necessary. With capitalist values and institutions as a given, her liberation essentially required her to behave as an economic man. As

shown in Table 1, core aspects of capitalist consumption, work, and enterprise are constructed by, and in turn construct, economic man and economic woman.

At the core of the solidarity economy is the emergence of a new kind of economic person – a solidaristic person -- who cares for herself and others, who is socially responsible and cooperative, who honors earth and values community. For feminist economists, one of the key things to notice about this new, solidaristic economic person is that she/he transcends the polarization of masculinity and femininity upon which economic man, economic woman, and capitalist economics are based. As Julie Nelson has convincingly argued, this polarization (and, I would argue, the hierarchy associated with it) creates distorted or negative forms of masculinity and femininity (1996, Ch. 1). Economic man's "negative" form of masculinity confuses self-assertion and strength with insensitivity, domination, and rigidity. Economic woman's subordinated and self-abnegating way of caring involves the acceptance of male domination if not active self-victimization, and creates children who grow up to be masculine dominators, feminine self-subordinating servers, or both.

In contrast, the solidaristic economic person combines feminine caring with masculine self-development. Unlike economic man, she/he is aware of her/his dependence upon others and upon the whole for her/his long-term well-being, and injects social responsibility – a concern for all stakeholders – into her behavior as a consumer, worker, entrepreneur, saver, investor. Rather than focusing on maximizing income and elevating his/her position in the economic hierarchy, she/he

strives for mutuality and equality – win-win relationships with others – in all aspects of her economic life.

Table 1 contrasts the economic values, practices and institutions of capitalist economic man and economic woman, and the solidaristic economic person.

Capitalist consumption, whose goal is to maximize one's consumption, and which takes the form of competitive, conspicuous, and socially and environmentally irresponsible consumerism, is being transformed by solidaristic consumers, who are motivated by the goal of provisioning the needs of themselves and their families, and gaining well-being for themselves and their community and planet. Such consumers practice simple living, both to live lightly on earth, and to free up time from working for income for other, unpaid activities and work; some – freegans -- even strive to live directly off the waste stream. They try to be socially responsible in their consumption, buying “green” or “fair trade” or “sweat-free” goods. They buy local, and create communities of sharing and freecycling (Matthaei, “Live Your Power”).

In the area of work, the polarization of economic man and woman into paid and unpaid work respectively is transcended, as are the goals of competitive bread-winning and self-subordinating homemaking. Both kinds of work can be valued, pursued, and integrated by the solidaristic economic person to support her/his livelihood and that of her/his loved ones, as a means of self-expression and development, and as a way to serve others, society and the planet. Solidaristic work ranges from liberatory reproductive and community work to paid work for

socially responsible businesses, nonprofits, or as agitators and whistle-blowers within “low-road” firms.

Finally, the entrepreneurial spirit which is so key to the dynamism of capitalism is transformed in the solidarity economy. The capitalist entrepreneur or manager is the quintessential economic man, who pursues manly “success” by maximizing wealth and profits, and does so by creating unnecessary needs and forced obsolescence; minimizing (and externalizing) costs; exploiting workers, the earth, suppliers, and consumers; bribing the state to serve its needs; as well as through theft, graft, and corruption. In contrast, solidarity entrepreneurship involves participating in a creative, win-win production process which seeks to benefit all stakeholders (workers, consumers, owners, community, environment, government, suppliers, competitors), and which is supported by socially responsible consumers, workers, and investors, and forward-seeking public policy. The solidarity person as entrepreneur or manager creates a “high road” firm – which can take the form of a socially responsible corporation, nonprofit, cooperative, or community business.

When I describe this emerging “new economic person,” I do not mean to refer to one common way of being and acting. Yes, those who participate and construct the practices and institutions which make up the growing solidarity economy are coming to share a complex and evolving set of values, which are based in a shared commitment to economic justice, economic democracy, freedom and self-determination, and environmental sustainability. However, just as feminism has recognized that there is no one shared essence of womanhood or set

of women's interests that transcends race, class, country, sexuality, the solidarity economy movement recognizes that there are a multitude of different ways to be this new kind of economic person.

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

I hope I have shown you the extraordinary (and nonaccidental) congruence between feminism and the solidarity economy.

As a feminist economist who is actively involved in developing the solidarity economy framework in the U.S., as well as in creating a U.S. solidarity economy network, I invite my sister feminist economists to begin to study, analyze, critique, visibilize, and contribute to the development of this emergent economic system. The solidarity economy needs feminism, and feminism needs the solidarity economy.

Feminism's goal is to liberate all women – and this can not be done within the value system of profit-motivated capitalist production, even in its equal opportunity form, as I have tried to show above. As I have also tried to show above, the solidarity economy embodies feminist values, as expressed in feminist critiques of racist classist patriarchal capitalism and in feminist economic visions. Also, as an economically marginalized, global, majority group, women are currently active in creating many solidarity economy institutions – and feminist economists should be studying this.

As the solidarity economy continues to grow in the context of the current cross-cutting crises (financial, energy, food, climate, poverty), it is crucial that

feminist economists and theorists be present to counteract masculinist tendencies in the solidarity economy movement and critique male domination of institutions

Feminist economic analysis of the solidarity economy can help encourage feminist movements across the world to actively and decisively join global solidarity economy movement, as a way to live their feminisms in their economic lives (personal is political). It can also help integrate into feminist policy platforms solidarity-economy policies that would benefit women (and people).

The new economic person or more correctly, persons, whom feminists have been searching for are being constructed alongside and through the emerging solidarity economy. In this transformative moment, we are building the road as we travel. And the road itself builds us, or allows us to transform ourselves, liberate ourselves, heal ourselves of the wounds of hierarchical polarization by gender, race, class, nation (Matthaei and Brandt 2007).

The solidarity economy presents an economic way forward that can truly liberate women and all people. It represents a diverse economy which transcends economic man, and embodies feminist values. I encourage you to participate in it in your everyday economic life, and to join the movement which is visibilizing it and working to grow it. We especially need feminist academics to write about it, do critical and constructive, collaborative research to help it and to make sure it embodies feminist values. Feminism and feminist economics have been and will be key to the creation of a new, more just, democratic and sustainable economy in which economic man and economic woman are obsolete.

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Table 1: Beyond Economic Man

	CAPITALIST ECONOMY		SOLIDARITY ECONOMY
	<p><b>ECONOMIC MAN:</b> Negative masculine:</p> <p>Bread-winner: competitive and seeks to dominate or “better” others and the earth, including “nonwhite” racial-ethnic groups; measures success in terms of money received and accumulated;</p> <p>focus on market-based economic activities</p>	<p><b>ECONOMIC WOMAN:</b> Negative Feminine:</p> <p>Homemaker: subordinates herself in service to her husband and children; lives through them;</p> <p>focus on unpaid economic activities</p>	<p><b>SOLIDARISTIC ECONOMIC PERSON</b> Positive Masculine: self-actualizing, cares for and defends self, develops self, does one’s best; participation in extra-familial, community-based economic activities, <b>COMBINED WITH</b> Positive feminine: sensitive to and caring for needs of others and for the earth, serves them without sacrificing her own well-being or living through them</p>
CONSUMPTION	<p>Competitive Consumerism: Buy as much as possible; try to keep up with the Jones; don’t share with others; conspicuous consumption; ignore externalities (negative effects of one’s consumption on others)</p> <p>Economic man’s job is primarily to earn as much money as possible to fund competitive consumerism.</p> <p>Economic woman’s job is to spend the money in a competitive consumerist manner.</p>		<p>Goal of provisioning needs, gaining well-being for self and community <b>EXAMPLES:</b> Simple living; freeganism; socially responsible consumption and fair trade; community supported agriculture; buy local; sharing; community ownership</p>
WORK	<p><b>NEGATIVE-MASCULINE-DEFINED PAID WORK</b> in the “market” with goal of establishing one’s “worth” relative to other men, and goal of money for competitive consumption; content of work is determined by boss and goals of the firm (i.e. narrow profit motive), and/or by organizing with other workers in unions to force bosses to pay more, exclude competing workers (women, people of color, and immigrants)</p>	<p><b>NEGATIVE-FEMININE-DEFINED UNPAID WORK</b> in the home – childrearing (to raise one’s children to be successful economic men and/or economic women); done under power of husband/provider; within increasingly nuclearized household, cut off from larger community; if done with class privilege, assisted by younger/poorer women, often of color</p>	<p><b>PAID AND UNPAID WORK</b> as means of livelihood and self-expression/development <b>AND</b> way to serve/help others, society, and the planet; value and seek to balance paid and unpaid work Involves liberatory reproductive and community work, work with SR businesses, social entrepreneurship, nonprofit work, and whistle-blowing and working to transform low road firms</p>

ENTERPRISE	<p>(Negative masculine) goal of maximizing profits, minimizing (and externalizing) costs so as to serve owners/stockholders interests of increasing wealth; Exploits workers, the earth, suppliers, and consumers; seeks to destroy or buy up competitors; bribes the state</p> <p>“Low road” capitalist entrepreneurs and firms</p>		<p>Participates in win-win production process which seeks to benefit all stakeholders (workers, consumers, owners, community, environment, government, suppliers, competitors), and is supported by socially responsible consumers, workers, and investors, and forward-seeking public policy. “High road” firms, including socially responsible corporations, nonprofits, cooperatives, community businesses</p>
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