

Note from the editor

An intersection that counts: Gender studies and economic sociology

Content

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by *Jeanne Lazarus*

5 "Introduction" to *L'imposture du travail: Désandrocenter le travail pour l'émanciper* (10/18, 2024) by *Maud Simonet*

8 Toward a gender-sensitive economic sociology of surrogacy by *Marie Trespeuch*

13 What bodies, sex, and love do to finance and the economy by *Isabelle Guérin*

23 An interview with *Lisa Adkins*

29 Book reviews

Editor

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Jeanne Lazarus

A few years ago, I agreed to take responsibility for the course "Sociology of Gender" in the Sociology master's program at Sciences Po. During the first session, the ten students who had chosen the course – all young women, passionate about the topic and highly committed – protested when they saw the syllabus. "What?" they said. "This isn't a 'real' gender studies course – it's an economic sociology course in disguise."

Although they were keen on intersectionality, the encounter between gender studies and economic sociology was not obvious to them. They knew, of course, that my field of research is economic sociology, which made them suspicious. Still, I was very surprised by their reaction. Out of the twelve sessions planned, five or six were indeed devoted to topics with an economic dimension: occupational inequalities; wealth

inequalities – at the time, I relied on Mariko Chang's (2021) book; feminist perspectives on the welfare state – I had just returned from a stay at Northwestern University, where I had discovered the work of Ann Orloff (1993) and other North American researchers; or, of course, the work of Viviana Zelizer and scholars such as Burgoyne, who have shown the gendered nature of money – female money and male money (Burgoyne 1990; Vogler and Pahl 1994; Vogler, Lyonette, and Wiggins 2008). Not only did these works seem canonical and indispensable to me for a sociological analysis of gender relations, but I also told the students that I was very surprised they considered questions of money not to be "real" gender studies topics. In their view, "real" gender studies were those related to the body and sexuality.

This course turned out to be one of the most intellectually stimulating classes I have ever taught. After this initial exchange, each session became a kind of trial in which I had to prove to the students that an economic sociologist like myself could teach gender studies. We progressed together, and I believe I managed to convince them – at least a little – that questioning gender could (and should) be applied to the organization of the economy, one of the central institutions of our societies; and conversely, that economic issues cannot be studied without taking gender relations into account.

Of course, I was not the first to ask such questions. The students' reaction likely stemmed in part from a representation of economic sociology as a field interested in markets and finance, perceived as masculine in outlook. In the very first issue of this publication, then called the *European Economic Sociology Newsletter*, Viviana Zelizer published an article entitled "A Gendered Division of Labor" (Zelizer 1999). In that article and in several subsequent works, she emphasized the gendered organization of economic sociology. First, it is a space in which there are fewer women than men, female voices are absent from syllabi and publications, she then noted. Second, the topics addressed reproduce classic gender divisions. Women do study economic processes, though not quite in the same way: "A boundary has appeared that separates definitions of topics, with economic processes at both sides but only one side defined as economic sociology." There are thus two distinct agendas: one that studies the mainstream economy, largely populated by men and recognized as mainstream economic sociology; the other, which studies power and inequalities, where women are far more numerous and which remains marginal – particularly because it explores spaces not immediately perceived as economic, such as the family, intimate relations, interpersonal relationships. It is striking that in her article, Zelizer does not oppose topics but rather agendas, and that she does not speak of family and intimacy to qualify what she is interested in, but of power relations. Indeed, one of the recurring criticisms leveled at economic sociology (even though things have changed over at least the past decade) has been its lack of politicization and social critique. Yet this politicization and social critique were present in work on family and gender.

In the mainstream approach to economic sociology, when gender dynamics are present in economic processes, they are most often ignored by those who study them. Except when researchers are in-

formed by a gender-sensitive perspective, such as Lisa Adkins, who in the interview she kindly gave us recalls her early work on the world of work, showing that it cannot be understood without taking gender issues into account. Nina Bandelj, in a recent article, provides a genealogy of the "new economic sociology"

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and shows that the lack of attention to gender, as well as the limited presence of women authors in this field, can be explained in three ways (Bandelj 2019). First, by what she calls "academic familialism," meaning that this research field developed around intellectual figures and their students, particularly Harrison White and Mark Granovetter, who did not really address the gender dimension of the economy. Second, that the network sociology this group of researchers promoted benefited from prestige linked to its methodological proximity to the natural sciences and economics. Finally, that sociology mirrors gender hierarchies found between quantitative analysis, more often produced by men, and cultural analyses, more often produced by women. All of this explains, in her view, why gender analysis remains a marginal subfield of economic sociology.

Drawing on these extremely stimulating readings and this teaching experience, I wondered whether my knowledge of the sociology of money might be useful for studying gender issues. In 2021, I therefore wrote an article with a programmatic intent on how women's relationship to money could be conceptualized using economic sociology while engaging more deeply with gender studies (Lazarus 2021). My starting point was to analyze how different waves of feminism have spoken about money.

I encountered this issue quite early in my work on money. As early as the first edition of *Sociologie de l'argent* in 2007, which I coauthored with Damien de Blic, I had brought together research on the sharing of money within families and couples, and on the differentiated marking of women's and men's money (de Blic and Lazarus [2007] 2021). I devoted a chapter of this handbook to the issue of money in the family,

drawing on Viviana Zelizer's work on money marking, extended by the few existing studies on the differentiated use of money by men and women. I was also interested in intergenerational transmission between parents and children – here, gender was not yet at the forefront of my thinking, as the work of Bessière and Gollac had not yet been published (Bessière and Gollac 2020).

However, I felt a certain frustration with this body of work, as it seemed to me to offer analyses more in terms of gendered social inequalities than in terms of gender studies. Gradually, I came to understand that the missing element was the body. This was also what the students were referring to when they spoke of “real” gender studies and argued that economic sociology research incorporating gender did not qualify. In my 2021 article, I therefore sought ways to approach economic questions through a lens that goes beyond gender inequality and takes into account the body and differentiated subjectivities between men and women. I did so based on my expertise in the sociology of money.

I show that women's relationship to money is historically structured by moral and social suspicion. Money is classically conceived as a corrupting force (what Zelizer calls “separate spheres” and “hostile worlds”). This suspicion takes a particularly acute form when it comes to women. They are alternately accused of impurity when they freely dispose of money – on the grounds of a symbolically sacred female body, supposedly incompatible with market logic – or of incompetence. This situation often leads women to lack money and to find themselves in positions of dependence vis-à-vis men: fathers, brothers, husbands.

These figures exist historically and are replayed in each generation. Even after the disappearance of legal prohibitions, women's illegitimacy as owners of their own money persists in the background and must be considered to understand wage and wealth inequalities, as well as debates surrounding social policies (think of the figure of the welfare queen).

This suspicion prevents women from being perceived – and from perceiving themselves fully – as owning subjects, and closely links the question of money to that of self-ownership. Women's appropriation of money is inseparable from the appropriation of their bodies, their labor, and their sexuality. As long as the female body is conceived as passive and socially appropriable – by men as well as by society as a whole – the money women earn or own remains suspect. Prostitution then appears as an extreme and paradoxical figure: condemned as a symbol of degradation by money, yet often forced by women's exclusion from autonomous access to the labor market. The sacralization of the female body thus contributes

to maintaining that body as an instrument for accessing money, rather than as the property of an autonomous subject.

Women's economic emancipation cannot be reduced to the mere diminution of monetary inequalities. The central issue is that of subjectivation: To be recognized as the owner of one's money is to be recognized as the owner of oneself. Reading Carol Gilligan's seminal text *In a Different Voice* through this lens adds an explanatory element (Gilligan 1982). Gilligan shows women's relational approach to decision-making, in contrast to men, who consider that they must make decisions based on their own judgment, and that maturity lies precisely in the capacity to detach oneself from relationships. Applied to money, this analysis suggests that women may have a relational relationship to money and to the decisions they make about it. Not only are women perceived as objects of corruption rather than as economic actors – delaying their access to money and the market and their ability to constitute themselves as fully legitimate subjects in the economic, social, and sexual order – but moreover, even when money belongs to them, they think of it relationally, as something that should be used for collective and familial goals.

These questions resonate with the articles gathered in this issue. I asked the four authors (despite several attempts, I unfortunately did not succeed in finding a male author to contribute, which shows that the gendered division studied by Zelizer and Bandelj persists) to reflect on how their research as economic sociologists (or socio-economists, as Isabelle Guérin defines herself) dialogues with gender studies.

The first article in this issue is a translation of the introduction to Maud Simonet's book *L'imposture du travail* written in French (Simonet 2024). The author, whose previous work has closely examined unpaid labor (Simonet 2018), situates herself within the feminist lineage and proposes “de-androcenter” work as a political and democratic necessity. The second article, by Marie Trespeuch, analyzes controversies surrounding surrogacy, a practice banned in France but adopted each year by several hundred couples, heterosexual or same-sex. The comparison with debates around prostitution immerses us in issues concerning the commodification of women's bodies, but also their emancipation and the agency that can be attributed to their choices. The third article is written by Isabelle Guérin, based on her book *The Indebted Woman* (Guérin et al. 2023), with the aim of analyzing debt in its bodily, affective, and sexual dimensions. The subtlety of Guérin's work lies in showing that while women's bodies are constrained and appropriated by their families, husbands, and creditors, they also find within them a site of power, desire, and pleasure.

Finally, the last article is an interview with Lisa Adkins, in which the sociologist reflects on her trajectory, stating: “My interest has always been in thinking about that intersection in order to reflect on both feminist theory and economic sociology.” She emphasizes not so much the difficulty of having gender issues recognized by economic sociology, but rather the difficulty of making economic issues – studied as they are by economic sociology and the sociology of work – subjects for gender studies and feminist movements.

Across these four articles, we find the classic objects of economic sociology: markets, labor, credit relations, and the circulation of money. By taking gender into account, the authors examine these objects relationally, as Viviana Zelizer has taught us. This gendered approach leads us toward questions of social norms and sometimes violent controversies, because gender roles are among the most powerful social institutions, and the collective definition of how women’s bodies should be used ensures that these issues are never perceived as individual decisions but rather as matters of societal responsibility. This explains why controversies around surrogacy can be so intense; why Indian women must take extreme precautions to avoid being stigmatized as deviant within the patriarchal order; why the gendered construction of work as masculine is so difficult to transform; or why destabilizing asset-based domestic economies leads to destabilization of gender norms.

Taken together, the research presented here shows how profoundly the ownership of women’s bod-

ies is both a social and an economic issue. Women’s reproductive capacities, sexuality, and labor are economically valued – but most often in hidden, secret ways, with the shadow of prostitution lingering. This produces paradoxical economic effects. The fact that surrogacy is a contested market leads to a proliferation of intermediaries and exorbitant costs for parents; conversely, the non-recognition of women’s labor described as care or love leads to its underpayment. Most often, the way societies resolve the moral dilemma posed by women using their bodies to earn money (including through the most ordinary wage labor) is by economically undervaluing their work.

This difficult economic valuation both stems from and reinforces power relations. These power relations are also evident in the macroeconomic transformations described by Lisa Adkins: The shift from a wage-based economy to an asset-based economy transforms household life, money flows, and perceptions of gender roles. As Isabelle Guérin puts it, analyses that take gender and the body into account show “how contemporary capitalism persists amid stagnant incomes, eroding social protections, and pervasive uncertainty.” One of the key conclusions of this issue – and no doubt the reason I wanted to bring these studies together – is to show that approaches centered on gender and intimacy are not distant from the broader questions addressed by economic sociology, or even political economy. On the contrary, they make it possible to grasp dynamics that would remain invisible without close attention to women’s money.

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