

Difference in economic geography

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Environment and Planning A

2016, Vol. 48(10) 2089–2092

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DOI: 10.1177/0308518X16661859

epn.sagepub.com



When the invitation to participate in this panel titled “Feminist Economic Geography: What Difference Does Difference Make?” came addressed to Maryann Feldman, I thought it was surely some mistake. After all, I am not a feminist geographer. I like to associate with geographers because they are interesting and eclectic, open to new ideas and methods and ask interesting questions. The panel invited women scholars to consider how feminist approaches have—and have not—made a difference in economic geography. In writing this brief response, I asked Erica Schoenberger to join me as we hold similar perspectives.

In our scholarship, research questions have always been more important than gender. Things have gotten better but not by enough. Both Erica and I have lived our lives as feminists, independently and always striving for professional excellence. It was perpetually surprising when gender was, and still is, an issue. There was an invitation to be personal and thought provoking and in what follows we offer Feldman’s story first and Schoenberger takes over.

Maryann Feldman’s perspective

When McDowell’s article came out in 1991, I was finishing my PhD at Carnegie Mellon, the most interdisciplinary research environment I have ever experienced. In the spirit of Herbert Simon, there was recognition of the limits of existing theories and an emphasis on appreciative theorizing. I was fortunate to study with Brian Berry. But with his departure from Carnegie Mellon, I restructured my committee and adapted to becoming more of an economist. I was interested in the fortunes of industries and places and the transformations that technological change brought to both, with clear winners and losers. During my graduate studies, the Pittsburgh region was in the midst of restructuring. Steel was in decline, part of a larger deindustrialization in the developed world. After having been steeped in coursework in economics, I had refreshing conversations with Gordon Clark, who although not serving on my committee left an indelible influence on my thinking.

My primary focus lies in understanding structural transitions in regional economies. I choose to focus on innovation—the creation of new value as the upside of the structural transition in the economy. I wanted to understand the process of innovation, and its

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corollary entrepreneurship, but these were topics that had been out of vogue given a preoccupation with larger firms in mature industries. Scholars reverted to Schumpeter who was highly revered and the rest of the Austrian economists, a rather unsatisfactory theoretical basis, especially for someone concerned with institutions and public policy. Nelson and Winter (1982) published *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*, building on March and Simon (1958) and demonstrating the need to build new models based on observations.

In the midst of this type of transition, there is great uncertainty and speculation about what might be next. McDowell (1991) offered a vision that is rather utopian in retrospect—a new age that would move beyond the male dominated, patriarchal organization of the economy, with a decline of mass production. Moreover, McDowell advocated for a critical theoretical perspective that was feminist in orientation.

Against this backdrop, Erica Schoenberger (1991) wrote “The Corporate Interview as Evidentiary Strategy in Economic Geography,” published in *The Professional Geographer* (see also Schoenberger, 1992). This article was part of a research stream by Ann Markusen and her students that has been highly influential in my work. The idea was to study regions by studying their constituent firms to understand phenomena by engaging with the world, interviewing people in firms and engaging in appreciative theorizing.

Certainly, while always difficult to prove causality, the passage of time allows some observations. One trend has been the rise of qualitative research, post-modern theory, and a decided lack of policy relevance in economic geography. Certainly, there is not a zero sum between qualitative and quantitative research and both are needed in good scholarship. Yet, in geography now there is seemingly less tolerance in theoretical perspectives. Feminism and the post-modern movement in the social sciences presented a challenge to the methodological hegemony of neo-positivist empiricism. Yet, the feminist perspective has proven intolerant of other points of view. McDowell (1992) questions the impartiality and objectivity of the researcher in the interview process and especially in interviews with men. Yet, fieldwork is important for understanding phenomena and building new theories. Interviews never stand alone but require background research and vetting of data collected. Unfortunately, conducting interviews with firms still means talking predominantly to men.

At a time when questions about place, income distribution, and economic development have moved to great prominence, the good work of economic geographers is not sufficiently celebrated. And from this void, economists, organizational theorists, and strategy scholars have forged ahead, using sophisticated research design and advanced econometric methods and benefitting from the availability of new data sources.

An interesting alternative is offered by the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP). After debate in the mid 1990s, the decision was made to focus on promoting women’s careers, providing mentoring and professional development workshops rather than focusing on gender issues. Blau et al. (2010) present a randomized controlled study of CSWEP participants, which suggests that this type of mentoring may be one way to help women advance in the economics profession and, by extension, in other male-dominated academic fields.

Recently at a conference dinner, a well-known economic geographer made the assertion that women are not good theorists. At first, I thought that I was not hearing him correctly as much wine had been consumed. I offered examples of the contribution of women to the field and he shot them down. Then I changed tactics. I asked him to name men who were strong theorists. After another bottle of wine, I was able to get him to agree that men were not very good theorists either.

Erica Schoenberger's perspective

Like Maryann, I came into this field because I was preoccupied with a set of problems. At the level of research project, these included: why firms don't behave according to economic theory—for example, why do they mostly *not* shun high-wage, high-regulation locations—and why technically progressive firms don't act in their own best interest even when they know what they should do—that is, why don't they act with clear-eyed rationality. The general approach was to try to understand how corporations think about the world in order to better explain how they act in it. Since they have such a huge effect on how an industrial landscape will develop, on the fortunes of particular places, and on the life chances of huge numbers of people, this seemed to me important. As Maryann has noted, this is a very male world and so, perforce, my research involved only men.

On the left in the 1980s, there were many people working on the condition of labor and many people working on the condition of women. I felt that oppressed groups didn't need me to tell them about their situation. What they didn't know about was how corporate strategy really worked and what really mattered in its development and that, I thought, was where I could make an actual contribution. I was able to show that the standard narrative about American workers being too expensive and too unionized and the regulatory environment being too strict simply didn't matter for a huge swathe of industries. So that opened up, I thought, new possibilities for organization and resistance. Not that that went anywhere, but it was sincere.

I came into academics after a number of years doing what we used to call 'movement work'—anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-war, and so on. I had along the way acquired a seriously good formation in political economy. This was my mental frame for the world. It's how things make sense to me now and it is where the questions I am drawn to come from. These are questions about how capitalism works and how we think it works. Women are deeply involved in all of these questions. Feminist theory and empirics have altered how I think about the world and that necessarily means that it has altered my own political economic sensibilities. Capitalism relies on and helps generate many injustices, including the oppression of women. These are under scrutiny from many directions. But the parts of this landscape that are most mysterious to me, that require explanation, lie elsewhere.

I have a colleague who is a famous writer on 19th-century figurative painting. His house, though, is filled with 20th-century abstract expressionist art. When I asked how it can be that he loves abstract art but writes about figurative art, he said that he simply gets abstract expressionism, but that figurative painting is a mystery to him so he finds himself compelled to write about it in order to understand it. Perhaps we all have our own mysteries that feed our sense of what needs to be explained.

The personal is assuredly political. But is the personal also theoretical? *Living* a feminist life is different from being a feminist theorist or a feminist geographer. My colleague of many years, David Harvey, used to be regularly criticized for not incorporating feminist theory in his own work. That's as may be. He is absolutely a feminist in his professional life. He has hired women, mentored them, promoted them, created opportunities for them, and supported a lot of strongly feminist work.

I think I can also claim to be a feminist in my own professional, political, and personal life. But feminist theory and feminist empirics are not where I live intellectually.

Having said all that, I deeply appreciate feminist scholarship. It is vital, illuminating, and has changed how we are able to think about the world. It is more important than ever in a world where women who are not white, middle class Americans and Europeans are suffering horrendously. I make my engineering undergraduates read feminist literature. It's a big

surprise to them, believe me, but in the end they are able to pronounce phrases like “the social construction of gender” without actually stammering. I don’t in the least underestimate or deprecate the value of feminist scholarship. It’s just not what I do.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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