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How Could An Ecofeminism Perspective Change Our Current Understanding Of Economics?

How could an ecofeminism perspective change our current understanding of economics?	1
1. Introduction	3
1.1 Personal Interest	3
1.2 Current understanding of economics	4
1.3 What's ecofeminism?	5
2. Main Part - How could an ecofeminism perspective change our current understanding of economics?	8
2.1 The difference	8
2.2 How could this perspective change economics?	8
3. Conclusion	9
3.1 Call for Ecofeminism	9
3.2 Outlook	10
4. Bibliography	12

Abstract: Our contemporary world and society, but especially our economy, have been shaped by decades of male dominance and oppression of women, nature, and other marginalized groups. For several decades, however, voices have been raised that question this capitalist patriarchy and consider how to counter the classical growth mindset of conventional economic theory. One of the best known concepts for this is ecofeminism, the encounter between feminism and ecology. This can ensure that economic processes are seen through the lens of feminism and ecology, in order to change the very conservative understanding of economic theory, which has been determined by growth and exploitation, and ultimately also the real economy in the long term.

1. Introduction

1.1 Personal Interest

The world and society as we know it today, whose engine is the economy, have been dominated by the male gender for many decades, centuries, if not millennia, whether one wants to admit it or not. Men decided most things, especially in the economic sphere. (Gerhard, 2019) This can also be shown relatively easily by concepts such as patriarchy (Walby, 1989) or the unequal conditions described, for example, every year in the Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum, which calculated in 2021 that it will take about 267.6 years to close the gender gap in economic participation and equal opportunities. (World Economic Forum, 2021) For the women on this earth, of course, these are not too rosy prospects and it would be desirable, of course, to shorten this time as soon as possible ... but how? Is there even a large part of the population that is interested in the problems just described? And what could or should a fairer and more just world actually look like?

This question and a specific concept connected with this question shall be the subject of this work. All this, with a clear view on the economic influences, factors as well as implications of the unfair existing system.

In all of this, however, the main focus is on economic theory. In many cases, it forms the basis for our real economy. Changing the actual economic theory, which is also taught, is considered the first instance in a possible paradigm shift towards a more just world and economy. It first requires a monumental shift in economic theory. Because as the saying goes, first comes theory ... followed by practice. Especially when it comes to dealing with the academic elite of economics. This is a very special group of people who live in their own world. These groups also have to deal with such problems and include them in their thoughts. (Navidi, 2017)

With this consideration in mind, I would like to position myself in the course of this paper in order to make my point of view more clear and understandable.

I myself feel that I currently belong to the male gender and come from what I consider to be very good circumstances. I grew up in a more or less wealthy family in Germany, with every support one could imagine. Therefore I would describe myself as privileged. And like many other white men before me, I chose to study business and economics at the beginning of my career, to be more precise „Technische Volkswirtschaftslehre“. Even with the firm belief that I would do something good for humankind. I'm sure there are many others who thought like me but weren't lucky enough to take the modern economics courses afterwards and will never know better. In the course of my first studies, I have to confess in retrospect, I was surprised afterwards by how male-dominated not only the lecture hall was, but also the books and theories.

Thinking back, for me as a former student of classical economics, it was difficult to accept that a large part of economic history goes back to male decisions, that economic activity is almost exclusively male-dominated, and also that marginalized group such as women get little to no attention in today's economy, especially when it comes to areas that do not fall into the classic areas of economics. This includes, for example, the entire field of the care economy (Folbre, 2006). One of the biggest problems with this is that most economists in this academic field simply don't care about such a view, or venue questioning their own person, which would be implied when thinking of such a perspective.

In addition to women, of course, there are also other marginalized groups that do not have a fair share in the economy. For them, too, there is currently no chance to be able to participate fairly and equally in any economic process. (Bennett, 2019)

So my understanding of economics from the earliest days on has always been based up on classical economic theory. And this not only excludes many different social groups, but oftentimes also the mindfulness for our planet. Basically, it is about production and the associated exploitation of the planet to create wealth. But in the end, the question is actually for whom? And at what cost? Because one or the other voice would claim that the costs for our society and the planet are nowadays higher than the profits.

In the course of my second studies I gladly ran into the concept of ecofeminism, which seems to solve or deal with a lot of the issues I just described, especially in regard to feminist theory and ecology. I therefore decided to take a closer look at the concept of ecofeminism and ask myself if and what classical economic theory could learn from such a revolutionary approach as Ecofeminism?

1.2 Current understanding of economics

In order to understand what ecofeminism actually means and what exactly it wants to change and how it could change the conservative understanding of economics, it is helpful to first take a look at classical economic theory, which has dominated the economic discourse for decades. This is because classical economic theory as we know it today is based on completely different values than the concept of ecofeminism. Values that promise

a world of prosperity, but are not quite so fair and just after all. (Harvey, 2014)

The beginnings of the probably most concise influences for the economic theory known to us today and also actual economy go back some decades. Of course, there were already much earlier occupations with the economy that show their traces until today, such as the first works of Thomas Hobbes (Levy, 1954). However, the theories formulated by Adam Smith (Samuels, 1977), Alfred Marshall (Keynes, 1924), John Maynard Keynes (Keynes, 1971), or even Milton Friedman (Hetzl, 2007) were probably far more important for today's conditions. They form the basis for the classical understanding of market and economy and are part of every classical business course. After all, it's all about people who do and study business, who decide in the end how the economy should be run. Only when this thinking becomes present in lecture halls and courses in today's economics classes can real change occur. Therefore, a focus on the theory makes sense.

In addition, there is also a political competence that has played an increasingly important role in recent decades and for the understanding of how we came to the point in economic history where we are right now. There are some historical and political events that completely changed and had a lasting impact on the current economic understanding and theory. Due to the dissolution of our current economic system from the gold standard (Bordo & Gold, 1981) and the introduction of the Bratton-Woods system (Korten, 2014), the economy has become increasingly inflated and in many cases has nothing to do with the real economy anymore. In terms of the economy, it was then more about debt than about the real productivity of the economy. This also led to the fact that a large part of the economic theory of the last years was based on the values such as growth, expansion, as well as the exploitation of the people and the planet. (Ravenhill, 2017)

This economic theory was over the years supported and further developed by a mainly male-dominated group of economic moguls, economic theorists and politicians. It must be said here, however, that Magarate Fetcher, as a woman, contributed a great deal to the decline and deregulation of the current economic system. Because the last decades of economic theory and thus also the real economy were shaped by principles of the open markets and a ever higher flexibility were coined. This included more and more openings, privatizations, and commodifications. (Ravenhill, 2017)

Even for goods where no one would have thought it would be possible, such as water or even air. The question that arises now is how to counteract this meanwhile obviously wrong economic understanding and create a fairer and safer economy for all people? And this is exactly where the concept of ecofeminism comes in and tries to fight our current economic patriarchy.

1.3 What's ecofeminism?

The concept of ecofeminism, as the name suggests, is obviously composed of the two terms ecology and feminism. But how exactly do these two concepts fit together and why they are put together in the first place? In short, there seems to be many of the same reasons why

both women and nature play a rather subordinate role in our society today, and in most cases are dominated and exploited. This perspective on this opens up many other assumptions and insights. (Gaard, 1997)

To be more precise, ecology and feminism are both approaches that deal with groups that have been previously oppressed and often unnoticed by society. In both cases, there is also a form of male dominance and oppression. So there is an intersection between feminist goals, gender oppression and the exploitation of our planet. And ecofeminism deals with exactly this intersection and tries to find a way to combine the two approaches. (Puleo, 2017)

The first discussions of this topic came from Simone de Beauvoir, for example, or Francoise d'Eaubonne. He coined e.g. the term „l'eco-féminisme“. Accordingly, the first thoughts on this subject came from the French region. (Archambault, 1993), (Glazebrook 2002)

Over time, of course, the concept has evolved and advanced, and today there are countless definitions of ecofeminism.

On the one hand, one could see ecofeminism as a concept or lens to understand and analyze the world. Rosemary Radford Ruether e.g. defines it as something that „examines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. It aims at strategies and world views to liberate or heal these interconnected dominations by better understanding of their aetiology and enforcement“ (Ruether, 2012, page 1). This definition is clearly about looking at international social, political, but also economic processes from an avoidably better perspective. In the course of this work, we will also work with the understanding of ecofeminism as a perspective or lens.

But on the other hand, ecofeminism can also be seen as a kind of social movement. David Kronlid describes ecofeminism e.g. as „the community of women that are engaged in restorative and preservative work“ (Kronlid, 2003). But, he is therefore limiting himself only to women and also only to their work.

Many academic discussions of the subject are actually about being able to see the world through a new perspective and lens, in order to recognize what is going wrong and how it could possibly be done better.

Karren Warren describes quite well that nevertheless, each of these definitions or considerations of the term ecofeminism is based on certain assumptions. First, that there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. Second, understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. Furthermore, feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective and last but not least solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective. (Glazebrook, 2002)

However, the term ecofeminism encompasses also many other concepts and terms and can also be seen as an Umbrella term. These include also, for example, racism, deep ecology, sexism, religious ecology, social ecology, or even anti-nuclear movements. (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002) There are, of course, umpteen other considerations with the concept of ecofeminism. Underlying all of this, however, is capitalist patriarchy, which is the cornerstone of ecofeminism's critique. This includes above all the aspects of the privatization of the means of production and the male privilege associated with it.

"Patriarchy is a system of male dominance, rooted in the ethos of war which legitimates violence, sanctified by religious symbols, in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality, with the intent of passing property to male heirs, and in which men who are heroes of war are told to kill men, and are permitted to rape women, to seize land and treasures, to exploit resources, and to own or otherwise dominate conquered people" (Christ, 2016, p. 214)

Furthermore, there is the clearly linguistic connection between femininity and nature. We do not speak of "Mother Earth" or "fertile soil" for nothing. Femininity seems to be connected with nature in a very special way. (Hatten-Flisher & Martusewicz, 2018) In addition, women also play a fundamental role in agriculture, especially in developing countries. A large proportion of people employed in the agricultural sector in these countries are female (The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations I, 2011). A report of 2011 stated that „Women make up on average 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, ranging from 20% in Latin America to almost 50% in East and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa“ (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations II, 2011, Women's work). It can be assumed that the conditions have not changed or improved significantly since then.

A good example to understand the extent of the principle, and to demonstrate the connection between nature and femininity, is a look at the textile industry. For decades, the price of clothes dropped around the world, while the associated costs to the environment and our planet skyrocketed. Much of the clothing sold around the world is made in developing countries, with, of course, again much of it destined for the West. The majority of workers in the textile industry are women and the textile waste caused by this industry is unimaginable. Not to forget that these women usually also take on the domestic tasks. This clearly shows the connection between the exploitation of women and nature. Thus, however, many other examples can be found that show this connection well. (Abadejos et al., 2018)

Let's take e.g. a look at the connection between climate change and the principle of ecofeminism. The focus is on issues that traditionally women are more concerned with. These include, for example, the environment, health, habitat, and livelihood. All these important factors are marginalized in debates that treat climate change as a scientific problem without even once questioning the economies of domination (exploitation and colonialism). (Gaard, 2015)

These examples clearly show how in a male dominated economy and also industry, women and therefore nature are exploited to make a „profit“ or how this intersection between Ecology and Feminism looks like. The concept of ecofeminism describes exactly this dualistic character in the exploitation and connection of women and nature on the basis of a capitalist patriarchy.

2. Main Part - How could an ecofeminism perspective change our current understanding of economics?

2.1 The difference

The classical understanding of economy, which still dictates the economic discourse in many cases, goes along with the idea of growth and expansion. Growth that is promoted by free markets, individual decision making and above all the exploitation of others. A side of capitalism that is clearly visible today and often finds no place in the classic economic view. The capitalist system in which we currently find ourselves is therefore doomed to exploitation by the ultimate goal of accumulating capital and creating wealth. All under the pretense that this would bring about an increased standard of living for all fellow inhabitants of the earth. The thing is, that in capitalism only one can win. And so far this has been mainly male dominated and privileged groups who do not take a particularly reflective view of themselves and their actions and rarely admit to making mistakes. (Harvey, 2014)

The ecofeminist view, on the other hand, opens a perspective on our system through which we can understand how and to what extent the current system contributes to the exploitation of women and our environment. It offers a perspective to understand and comprehend this view. It describes how both women and the environment should be valued and rewarded according to their supporting role. Whereas with a capitalist system, they are completely forgotten. In short, a more reflective view of current events and how they come about/have come about in our system in order to change the current circumstances.

In contrast to the classical understanding of economy and its processes, ecofeminism offers a new way of looking at our economy and society, with fairness and, in particular, a connection between women and nature, whose role is much more fundamental than it first appears to many people.

2.2 How could this perspective change economics?

While the economic discourse so far, as already described, has been determined and led by a capitalist Patriarchy, it would be worth considering whether it is now time to question this classical thinking and include revolutionary perspectives and concepts such as ecofeminism.

As it turned out, the capitalist concepts, methods and markets that have been implemented so far are not particularly effective, especially when it comes to the well-being of the entire

world population, and not only a small privileged part. And it is exactly this acknowledgment, that is missing in classical economic theory. To stand by this would lead to the fact that finally also women and the environment would be important and above all valued factors for our economy and not as so far simple means to exploit .

The concept of ecofeminism shows thereby actually completely clearly, what runs wrong in our society, and much more importantly also why! Thereby also the classical economic theories as we know and live them today can be quite questioned. Is growth really the only way to create ever greater prosperity? Do women or nature really have to be exploited for this? An ecofeminist perspective would also finally bring these issues to the forefront of economic discussions.

To this question, ecofeminism answers quite clearly with a NO. No, it is not indispensable to do these things. The economy as we know it exists primarily out of a capitalist assumption that these things belong to capitalism. It exists as it is because a small part of humanity benefits massively from it. On closer inspection, it quickly becomes clear that this does not have anything to do with a fair or just system that would bring prosperity to all of humanity. But this is a clear fallacy, mediated by a system in which those who ensure inequality and exploitation are also in charge. From this point of view, the adoption of an ecofeminist perspective in economic theory could ensure that the classical arguments of capitalism are undermined and people will realize that it cannot and must not work this way.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Call for Ecofeminism

As we have quickly come to realize in the course of this work, that the current view of the capitalist system as we know it today and in which we currently live has great difficulty in including all groups and factors equally in various economic processes. The concept of ecofeminism opens a perspective to ensure exactly this equality, justice and fairness. By paying attention to previously marginalized groups as well as the planet, ecofeminism develops a sense with what it would be possible to create an economic system in which no one is left out. With the help of ecofeminism, it can be shown in an understandable way that there are intersections between feminism and ecology, but also between things such as exploitation, oppression, gender and many more, which partly have the same reasons.

Therefore, a lot more people, especially men (in best cases someone who studies or teaches economics) should deal with this concept and its underlying values. Because it is and remains sadly until now a topic about which a lot of people do not know about. But who would not be in favor of creating a fairer and more environmentally friendly economy? Even the purest and most conservative capitalist ultimately wants to create the greatest prosperity and the best possible life for everyone. It is just that he has apparently not been able to admit to himself that he was completely wrong with his classical methods. Here, then, the perspective of ecofeminism offers hope for economic understanding and, indirectly, for us.

3.2 Outlook

It would therefore be more than desirable if the principle of ecofeminism, or its underlying values, were to be incorporated into the economic consideration of our society, especially also in terms of education as mentioned before. This would inevitably lead to a better economic system for all, as people would care more about important aspects of economy and life, that are left out of discussion right now, with the main emphasis on the word all.

In recent years one could observe an ever-increasing attention to issues such as feminism, fair & sustainable economy, or even a strong trend towards environmental protection. All of this is contributing to concepts like ecofeminism slowly making its way into society's discussions. Like the environment and feminism, many of these concepts are interconnected and work together to create a more just and sustainable world in which everyone participates.

Ecofeminism could be a very good alternative for many to understand economic processes and the current economic system, but also to analyze it. This would open up so many possibilities to shape the world in a better way. But maybe there are already parts of the economy that function according to the principle of ecofeminism?

There are actually already a lot of ecofeminist movements that do their part in shaping the world in terms of international politics and economics. These include, for example, the Chipko Movement from India, in which primarily women from a small village opposed commercial logging and the resulting destruction of their livelihoods. But also, for example, The Green Belt Movement, which is about environmental protection and the development of social communities with a feminist background, which was founded in 1977 by the Kenyan Wangari Maathai. (Salman & Iqbal, 2007)

But whether the concept and its values will prevail in the long run is actually a done deal. It is probably more a question of when and how they will be fully integrated into society? Because the values on which the concept is based will find their way into our economy and, first and foremost, into our economic theory, be it in the short or long term. For it is only through the academic study of the subject that a change in our current economic structure can and will occur in the long term. Therefore every academic study of the subject is a step forward and contributes to making the world a fairer and more just place.

But I very much hope that there will be this change, and that it will not be too long in coming. This is mainly due to the fact that I really think that the values or the perspective that ecofeminism wants to convey, is a now necessary consideration of the economic system. Anything else amounts to a complete breakdown of the system, the exploitation of marginal groups and the destruction of our planet. Which even makes no sense from the point of view of economic theory, but also not from the point of view of a just and fair society, which we hope to become.

The best example of this is tourism. An intact ecosystem, with living animals and a beautiful nature, is usually worth much more than one profits by their destruction. Thus, a living elephant, added to the tourist income, is worth about 76 times more than a dead elephant. (Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, n.D.) Thus it makes in the long run also from economic view sense to save the planet.

Even if it is still difficult to understand for many people, but an intact nature and an intact society offers in any case more economic value than everything we know so far from our current economic system, which is based on the old and classical economic theory. Thus, whether to incorporate concepts such as those of ecofeminism into economic discourse and theory remains not a matter of perspective after all, but rather arguably a necessity.

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