

MEA 2013 Annual Meeting, 10J: A Celebratory Session on Paulette Olson's Contribution to Political Economy, Sunday, March 24, 2013, 10:00 a.m.-11:45 a.m.

Roundtable Participants: Barbara Hopkins (Wright State University); Lynn Dugan (Indiana University); Sirisha Naidu (Wright State University); and Zdravka Todorova (Wright State University)

Brief Remarks on Paulette Olson: A Feminist Institutionalism

Zdravka Todorova

I first saw Paulette at an Association for Institutional Thought (AFIT) conference in San Diego, in 2000. I was a MA student, and she was giving a talk entitled "Thinking about Wage Differentials in the Classroom". I saw her again when I was a Ph.D. student at UMKC, attending another AFIT conference in Albuquerque in April 2002. Her talk was entitled: The Schools of Commerce a Century Later: Veblen's Insights Revisited. At these encounters I did not remember her then as Paulette Olson, but I remember her personality, and parts of her talks stuck with me: one had to do with conspicuous consumption and business trips, and the other was about a classroom exercise about wage differentiation. Later on, I came across Paulette Olson's name again as I began to be interested in feminist economics while studying institutional economics at UMKC. At that time I read her article "Feminism and Science Reconsidered: Insights from the Margin" published in one of the edited volumes that exemplifies the attempts to bring in insights from feminist theory in Institutional economics: "The Economic Status of Women under Capitalism: Institutional Economics and Feminist Theory" edited by Janice Peterson and Doug Brown (1994). As a graduate student, I also came across some of her articles in the Journal of Economic Issues (JEI). Since I was also curious about women's contributions to economics - I actually purchased and read her co-edited book *Engendering Economics – Conversations with Women Economists in the United States*. So, I associated her name with feminist institutionalism. Then, in 2006 Paulette picked me up from the lobby of a Dayton hotel to drive me to the WSU campus for a job interview. Finally, I began to put together the name of the scholar to the face and personality of the presenter I saw at those AFIT conferences.

My brief remarks today will focus on two themes in Paulette's work – which are also two issues in heterodox economics - the emergence of a Feminist tradition in Institutional Economics; and the importance of compiling an oral history of heterodox economics.

First, in institutional economics - especially in the 1990s we can observe the emergence of Feminist Institutional economics occurring after the work of Ruth Allen, Edyth Miller's article on the connection between Veblen's work and women's liberation, published in the JEI in 1972 and the suggestion made by Daphnee Greenwood in 1984 in the JEI for a gender focus in institutional economics. Among those that worked for bringing in feminist theory into institutionalism in the 90s was Paulette Olson, together with, Janice Peterson, William Waller, Ann Jennings, Dell Champlin, Linda Nicholson, Charles and Linda Whalen, and Doug Brown. In addition, there were institutional economists that pointed the importance for gender in institutional economics, as well as the suitability of institutional method and theory for gender analysis: William Dugger, William Waller, Gladys Parker Foster, Nills Gillman, Ron Stanfield and Jaqueline Stanfield. Further, there were feminist institutional analyses offered by Julie Nelson, Deborah Figart, Ellen Mutari, Nancy Rose, Bernadette Lanciaux, Aparna Mitra, Elman Zein-Elabdin, Mary Mellor, Phil O'Hara, Steve Pressman, and Irene Van Stavern. It is clear that there is a trend of feminist work within institutionalism, including my own work on the connections between Veblen's feminist institutional theory and Post Keynesian theory.

Thorstein Veblen (who was one of the main figures whose work was used to set the foundations of Institutional Economics in the US) should be called feminist without a doubt, and for many reasons – methodological, theoretical, and political. This has been also pointed out in the JEI by Edyth Miller (1972) and Nills Gillman (1999). Veblen after all included in his most notorious book “The Theory of the Leisure Class” (TLC) a lengthy discussion on: “The New Woman Movement” as a part of his chapter on the “Survival of the Non-Invidious Interest.” Remember, he analyzed “the leisure class” (or what today some call the “rentier class”) as an outcome of “invidious distinction” and “barbarian predation” - an “imbecile institution” – that retards social provisioning. In that context Veblen discussed the “Barbarian Status” of women as trophies contributing to invidious interest; and thus he saw women's emancipation as the survival of the opposite of invidious distinction – workmanship (or non-invidious interest). In the capitalist culture, Veblen argues, “the good life” is the one that assigns to the woman a “sphere” ancillary to the activity of the man – any departure from the traditional duties is unwomanly (Veblen, TLC, 1898, 218). Consequently, it is astonishing to me why Veblen has been so underused in feminist theory, and even further - in feminist economics.

Paulette's work however makes use of Veblen's analysis, as well as of contributions in the wide field of feminist theory. Her articles in institutional economics range from discussing the effects of domestic ideology (a main theme in Veblen too) on contemporary public policy directed at mature women; to "corporate welfare"; corporate restructuring and employment relations; occupational segregation; the effects of global consumption and production patterns on biodiversity; and notions and practices of development and science.

We still deal with the topics brought up by her work in the JEI in the 90s. I will give you just one example. One of her co-authored articles discusses "corporate welfare" using the same language deployed so often to attack social programs. It has a contemporary ring...

"What we have created is a 'culture of dependency.' Corporations can no longer be expected to provide jobs, to invest, or to produce without government assistance. We have created an 'endless cycle of dependency' – a 'way of life' for a whole group of people. Thus, we suggest that any attempt to get corporations 'off the dole' will have to be no less dramatic than the way we ended Aid for Families with Dependent Children" (Olson/Champlin 1998).

Today we can speak of a distinctive presence of Feminism in the Institutional Economics literature – a tradition that is very appropriate for explorations of all sorts of hierarchies and conflicts in the economy. Paulette's work clearly has a presence in this specific approach to political economy.

Let us not forget that her collaborative oral history project is itself an application of feminist institutionalist research methodology – as it articulates varieties of experiences and contexts. This is the second theme in my remarks today.

I believe that without some understanding of the history of the development of economic ideas, economists lose their bearings why they do what they do. One way to get an understanding of the development of economics is oral history – actually recording the experiences of economists as they narrate them. Paulette's work in her 2002 book *Engendering Economics* gives us access to the experiences of women economists.

The book was a collaboration – co-edited with Zoreh Emami, published in 2002, but the 11 interviews were taken during Paulette's sabbatical in 1996-7; and Emami's sabbatical in 1997-

8... (The gift of time...) The interviewed female economists received their doctorates between 1950 and 1975 (from Barbara Bergman to Loudres Beneria).

The interviews in the book are structured so that we learn about the family upbringing of the economists – including asking explicitly about socio-economic class origins – one of the most interesting feature of the project in my opinion; a second theme is: why studying economics at the doctoral level, and the various experiences of these women as students and their experiences entering the social networks within economics. A third theme is family – and professional lives (in some of the women’s lives these were intertwined – Barbara Jones and Ann Mayhew). Another theme was about the professional lives and intellectual development.

Those are the main themes of the interviews, but there are varieties of other questions - and that is the beauty of oral history – things are popping out – and you follow up – and find out and record something important that perhaps nobody would know otherwise – not just events – but feelings and attitudes – those that cannot go in journal papers – but are most telling about the economics discipline as a living social entity.

Oral history gives voice and an explanatory power. Consider Myra Strober’s interview and her description about Stanford University.

“Two male associate deans told me that I was denied tenure because I “hadn’t hit a home run” and my work was not “seminal.” They seemed completely unaware of the male metaphors they were using. They also “explained” that the faculty was unable to evaluate my work because my field was too new.” (Olson/Emami, 2002, p. 151).

Indeed, this is the ever-present theme of measuring “quality” of research... with its various biases.

In the 1950s the percentage of economic doctorates awarded to women was below 5 %, and 1979 it was a little over 7 %, as pointed out by the authors (p. 5). Today, as the 2011 Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession report states, 34.7 % of economics PhDs go to women. Note however that in 2011 women represented 28.7 % of assistant economics professors, 21.9 % of associate economics professors, and just 12.8 % of full economics professors.

Women holders of doctorate in economics is one thing, women full professors at Ph.D. granting institutions conducting research in heterodox economics approaches (such as feminist institutionalist), AND having the freedom to teach heterodox economics, AND the opportunity to advise doctoral work in heterodox economics is yet another thing. Not many of the interviewed women were in a position to do so. And today's opportunities to be part of a Ph.D. program that produces heterodox economists actually have declined. In the USA we can count the heterodox doctoral programs on one hand. (Telling in that respect is Loudres Beneria's interview that gives an account of the disappearance of heterodox tradition at Rutgers University.) So, as the percentage of women with doctoral degrees in economics increases, the space for women to pursue heterodox economics and to work at Ph.D. granting institutions does not, and nor is their participation in the production of future economists. So, there is the general problem of maintaining heterodox doctoral programs, and also you have the sub question of the heterodox woman economist. Could she be more than a lone token...Could she be even that? Could there be more than one in a department? Are 3 too many?

I will share with you an excerpt from Mariane Ferber's interview in Paulette's book, which perhaps resonates also with Paulette's experience, and perhaps in some ways with us:

Mariane Ferber (p. 50) "In the economics department at Illinois, for example, when there were two or three women, I became Marianne Ferber rather than the "the woman." On the other hand, I served for some years on the executive committee of the Graduate College ... For the first couple of years I was the only woman faculty on the committee and I was very conscious of the fact that when I opened my mouth they did not hear me, Marianne Ferber. What they heard was "the woman." In these circumstances you know very well that if I never said anything, which in my case would be somewhat unlikely, they would claim that women never speak up. But if we do, they claim that women talk too much. As I said, you become very self-conscious. As the numbers increase, however, this attitude changes significantly." (Olson/Emami, 2002, p. 50).

To what extent was this Paulette's story too? After her retirement she leaves 3 of us behind today. I think that the numbers do make a difference – and our experiences are different than Paulette's – and not to a small degree due to her efforts. Are there ways in which Mariane's story is still the story of the newer generation women economists, and particularly heterodox economists?

“At the margins” we need even more so to recognize that we are part of intellectual communities, and to acknowledge that our own work depends to the achievements and struggles of others like Paulette.

It is telling that Paulette’s book dedication reads: “*To the memory of Michele Pujol who inspired and encouraged me to pursue this project and to all the women economists who were not included in this book, but should have been.*” Pujol wrote a history of thought account from a feminist perspective. It is not just the history of thought that is important but the standpoint – as the history of our discipline is an analysis too. I see *Engendering Economics* as a part of this project of providing a history of thought analysis. The book gave voice to various experiences of women in economics. We ought to follow up on that broader project of history of thought and sociology of Economics, and record the experiences of her generation of women, and specifically in heterodox economics ... I suspect these won’t be rosy either (just like the ones documented in her book)...

Finally, I would urge those interested in the exploration of hierarchical relations and conflicts to look into the feminist institutional tradition. We also have to bring in institutionalism into feminist economics. Paulette’s work is a good example to follow.

Selected Contributions by Paulette Olson to Feminist Institutional Economics

Book

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"Gender and Involuntary Migration: A Comparative Study of Cuban Exiles and Vietnamese Refugees in the United States", International Association for Feminist Economics, Barbados, West Indies. (June 2003).

The Schools of Commerce a Century Later: Veblen's Insights Revisited", The Western Social Science Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico. (April 2002).

"Thinking about Wage Differentials in the Classroom", The Western Social Science Association, San Diego, California. (April 2000).

"The Historical Development of Seniority as an Institutional Wage Rule", The Western Social Science Association, San Diego, California. (April 2000).

"Oral History Projects as Feminist Method", Amsterdam. (June 1998).

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Invited Manuscript Reviewer, International Feminist Journal of Politics, "The North American Free Trade Agreement and Women: The Canadian and Mexican Experiences". (2001).

Associations

Through the years Paulette was also a member of a combination of heterodox economics associations – building bridges, as opposed to being part of just one scholarly community. These associations are: Association for Institutional Thought; Association for Evolutionary Economics; International Association for Feminist Economics; Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession; Union for Radical Political Economics.