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Economic Women

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Afterword— and Forward

ECONOMIC WOMEN IN THEIR TIME,
OUR TIME, AND THE FUTURE



REGENIA GAGNIER

The theme of this volume, as stated by the editors in their introduction, recalls Adam Smith's *Invisible Hand*, that "self-interested gain and mutual cooperation could be compatible; even as [women] pursued their own livelihoods, they also provided models for other women" (26). The volume begins with Economic Man as isolated individual Robinson Crusoe. In showing women's place in economic life and theory, it illuminates forms of collectivity and intersubjectivity—the family, paternalism, philanthropy, caring, writing—familiar to women while retaining a focus on economic individualism. The volume has certain unsentimental optics through which it views the nineteenth century: economic standing was more effective than feminine cultural capital in allowing women to intervene as agents of change in their communities (Gleadle); women's wealth could allow them to transcend gender, or at least to destabilize gender relations (Godfrey); Florence Nightingale could be both maternal caretaker (lady with the lamp) and public administrator wielding statistics in transforming the health system, Harriet Martineau could contribute to a war economy, and both were visible in the public domain (Poovey). The essays show that women's economy is both micro—individual relationships, choices, and behaviors—and macro—functioning within global

trade in people, goods, and finance. In methodological terms, it shows that there are no contradictions between markets and the humanities, between economics and decision-making in the novel (Bigelow), and between finance and fiction (Henry). Literature represents everyday economic life between the genders, and this life is refracted through discourses of technology, machinery, and economic operations. Employing more recent distinctions between high and popular literatures, popular literature especially concerns itself with the technology and machineries of modernity, whether the systematic intelligence of business, law, and government, or of finance and science.

If most of these essays show the tunefulness of current scholarship with market society, some of them show urgent social issues in their nineteenth-century beginnings: modern anorexia as a social condition, the ascetic or self-sacrificing body versus the consuming body (Gleadle, Blumberg); the role of gossip as information (MacDonald), and the volatility of information in economic panics; the unsustainability of mass consumer culture (Kreisel). The institution of the family here appears fascinatingly contemporary: women extricating themselves from abusive marriages (Rutterford); men as calculating and as consumerist as women in deciding whether to marry, liking their bachelor life of "lavender kid gloves, patent-leather shoes, and silk stockings" while longing for a simpler, less consumerist, less competitive culture abroad; women appearing contrary to the mythic woman-as-consumer, rather as economical and ingenious household managers (Rappaport). Abroad, women professionals found a market in colonial medicine (Hassan), whereas today, Britain recruits doctors and nurses from abroad to sustain its aging population.

The families here are concerned with accounting as well as philanthropy, "values"—as ideological memes—as well as ethics. In Thorne-Murphy's account of the Anti-Corn Law League, free-market women in the charity bazaar "could transform debatable policy proposals into religious and moral imperatives that allowed no legitimate counter-argument." In showing nineteenth-century British women as practical, economical, ideological, and mostly as individuals rather than as classes or movements, we see Economic Woman equal to Economic Man. To this extent, this is a collection for our time. Here, class is often treated less as an economic relation, identity, or culture, as in earlier treatments, than as a visible manifestation of taste, like a brand.

The women here are mostly bourgeois, professional, and individual: Katherine Plymley, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, Emily Westmeath, Ellen Wood, Charlotte Riddell, Lucie Duff

Gordon, and Isabel Burton. A lesser-known one that many readers will nonetheless remember is young Jane Plymley, starving herself to death to protest the dearth of 1800–1801. The volume opens avenues for further investigation of poor and working women and their corresponding forms of collectivity, and of more immigrant women and theirs. Yet there is doubtless much evidence to support the continuities between then and now, and, as the editors suggest, much inspiration here in women's ingenuity, entrepreneurialism, and sheer industriousness, which latter never ceases to awe even those of us who have studied the period for decades.

We are well ensconced in a neoliberal world with nineteenth-century roots. At the 2012 U.S. Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, all references were to an interpellated "middle class": the Democratic Party was the party of the middle class, or of those who aspired to be middle-class. The essays in this volume suggest a prehistory of this universality of middle-class-ness in their emphases on individual activity as inspiration for other individuals, individuals trading their goods and services on the market, the individual as the unit of analysis, and the economy as the salient niche of identity-formation. Yet while a focus on narratives of individuals can often obscure institutional political, legal, and financial structures of power and indeed can often exclude the less advantaged, these essays rather show the women embedded in diverse communities that may contribute to those structures of power. The Victorians—for although the volume ranges across the full nineteenth century, most of this collection is about the Victorians—were still strange and diverse, in their daily activities, in their religion that drew them toward collectivities as well as hailed them as individuals, and in the variety of their economic situations. The manor house here has the role of the plantation in postcolonial studies, the microcosm of a world of coherent but unequal relations, often dependent on external markets, socially an enclosed emanation of a fantasy (in Edouard Glissant's term).¹ The bazaar functions as a small economy, like a farmer's market or souk, but produces ideology supporting the largest abstraction of them all, The (Free) Market. The courts, the marriage market, the City of London, and the empire are present here but fully imbricated in the economic lives of women. When neoclassical tools of analysis such as consumption patterns, methodological individualism, and formalism take precedence in this volume over social classes and relations such as those between land/rent/landowners, labor/wages/

¹ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 67.

workers, and capital/profit/entrepreneurs, we see the place of women in specifically bourgeois economic relations. We see Economic Woman equal to Economic Man as we know him.

Yet many Victorians, especially those toward the end of the century when productive capacity had raised many above scarcity, had concerns beyond the market. They were concerned with reconciling freedom and equality. True freedom would begin with providing for needs equally, so that individuals could then develop according to their individual tastes and capacities. In another book on economic women in the nineteenth century, also representative of its time, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983), the socialist feminist Barbara Taylor quoted an Owenite Socialist plan for their communities of 2,000 persons, in which all property was in common; marriage, contraception, and divorce were available on demand; and child care was socialized. In the plan, all work would be streamed by age rather than gender, that is, by the productive and accumulative energies, experience, and knowledge of the communards. Housework would be performed by children of eleven years or younger. Between twelve and twenty-one, communards would produce the wealth; from twenty-two to twenty-five, young adults would preserve and distribute it; from twenty-five to thirty-five, they would teach the young; from thirty-five on, mature adults would shoulder the responsibility of government; and at forty-five, they would be freed for artistic or intellectual pursuits, travel, or leisure as they liked, at each stage women performing exactly the same tasks as men.²

This Owenite vision has charmed me for much of my lifetime. This is probably because it sees human contributions to social life as a life cycle or ecology, rather than as competitive individualism and ceaseless productivity. It joins other great economic visions of the period that rejected economic reductionism in human possibility. In the nineteenth century, the century known for economic liberalization, they were nonetheless seldom confined to free markets. Marx and Engels observed that the original, unequal division of labor was in sexual reproduction and child-rearing (*The German Ideology*, 1846; *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 1884). Perceiving that liberal equality in market society consisted in being equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad, they speculated that once the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights had been transcended, the good, or just, society would give to each according to need and take from each according to ability (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875). Oscar Wilde, whose views were doubtless shaped by his sexuality, refined this by pointing out that we could not identify real individuals until all society

² Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 52.

started from an equal base, achieved in the first instance through socialist redistribution. Only when we all started from a level playing field could individuals develop according to their diverse needs, tastes, and abilities ("Soul of Man under Socialism," 1891). Trained from infancy in the political economic traditions of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill was a firm believer in competition as the way to elicit optimal capacity, as in athletic games. In *On Liberty* (1859) Mill defended competition in the marketplace of ideas as the only way truth could prevail, and in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) he argued strenuously for women's full participation in the marketplace as a prerequisite for women's full subjecthood and social optimality. Yet he thought that capitalist monopolies and government support of inherited wealth and the status quo often prevented competition. And so, toward the end of his life, he defended market socialism, in which firms of workers would compete to sell the best product, distributing the rewards of their labor and abstinence, thus fulfilling the promise that capitalism had failed to fulfill, compensation equal to one's contribution.

Each of these visions was characteristic of the compromises between the leading ideologies of their time: liberal individualism and social duty. They had a wider frame than economics—the study of choice among scarcity—in which to define human possibility, not by its relationship to scarcity (Economic Man, economics) but to creativity, taste and preference, and personality. The contributors to this volume are less interested than I am in socialism, but they are attuned to the forms of social duty characteristic of economic liberalization: professional responsibility of doctors and writers, moral economies of religion and sustainability, charity organizations and philanthropy.

We might conclude with women's relation to economic progress itself, which in nineteenth-century Britain referred to growth in scientific knowledge, technology, and wealth. The conditions of economic progress duly impressed the world, not only throughout Europe, but even from the Meiji Restoration in midcentury Japan and the May Fourth and New Culture Movements in early twentieth-century China. Yet these and other movements were also interested in humanistic progress, or progress in moral, social, or political affairs. In his now-classic neoliberal manifesto "The End of History?" (1989), Francis Fukuyama thought that economic progress would inevitably lead to political progress. He also thought that there was an inevitable trajectory from the satisfaction of basic needs to tastes to high mass consumption.³ The question remains whether economic progress has

³ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest*, Summer 1989, 3–35 and *The*

led to moral and political progress. Or whether we are any nearer to reconciling freedom and equality. If ethics, as essays in this volume frequently point out, means our responsibility toward others, are we any closer to a moral economy? Or is Fukuyama's neoliberal inevitable progress as utopian as the Owenites'?

Today, the World Bank estimates that 1.5 billion people are living in absolute poverty. Absolute poverty is defined as the absence of enough resources (such as money) to secure basic life necessities. Absolute poverty means severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. Many of these living in absolute poverty are women.⁴ The Market is global; wealth and even provision are highly localized and unequal.

A report commissioned by the International Trade Union Confederation in 2008 shows that, based on their survey of sixty-three countries, there is a significant gender pay gap of sixteen percent. With the gender pay gap globally ranging from thirteen to forty percent, with an average of sixteen percent worldwide, women are today often educated as highly as men, or to a higher level, but "higher education of women does not necessarily lead to a smaller pay gap; in some cases the gap actually increases with the level of education obtained." The report also argues that this global gender pay gap is not due to lack of training or expertise on the part of women, since "the pay gap in the European Union member states increases with age, years of service and education."⁵ Even with a woman Director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, and leader of the European Union, Angela Merkel, Economic Women still have some way to go to equal Economic Man, even if that is the highest that we can currently imagine humankind.

End of History and the Last Man (New York: Avon, 1992).

⁴ "World Bank Sees Progress Against Extreme Poverty, But Flags Vulnerabilities," World Bank, 29 February 2012, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/2012/02/29/world-bank-sees-progress-against-extreme-poverty-but-flags-vulnerabilities>. "1.5 Billion People Living in Absolute Poverty Makes Its Eradication Humankind's Most Significant Challenge, Second Committee Told," General Assembly of the United Nations GA/EF/3313 Department of Public Information News and Media Division, New York Sixty-Sixth General Assembly Second Committee 13th & 14th Meetings (AM & PM), <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/gaef3313.doc.htm>.

⁵ Catherine Chubb, Simone Melis, Louisa Potter, and Raymond Storry, *The Global Gender Pay Gap*, International Trade Union Confederation, February 2008, "Gender Pay Gap Stuck at 16% Worldwide: New ITUC Report," ITUC Report (February 2008), <http://www.ituc-csi.org/gender-pay-gap-stuck-at-16.html?lang=en>.