

## Book review

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### COUNTING ON MARILYN WARING: NEW ADVANCES IN FEMINIST ECONOMICS

Edited by Margunn Bjornholt and Ailsa McKay

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When Marilyn Waring's *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* was published in 1988 (renamed *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth* in later editions), it was instantly picked up as path-breaking scholarship. In testimonials, feminist legends of the time called it 'the definitive feminist economic analysis' (Robin Morgan), 'a breakthrough book' (Andrea Dworkin), 'a stunning radical feminist text on patriarchal economics' (Mary Daly), and one that would 'challenge the fundamental premises of our political, economic and moral systems' (Bella Abzug). To suggest that their words were prescient seems not to be an overreaction. As this collection *Counting on Marilyn Waring* shows, a generation later, her work not only continues to be relevant in its own right but has also contributed to the radical expansion of conceptual and applied scholarship pertinent to women and economic life in the 21st century. The core themes that she advanced about the undercounting and invisibility of women's care work, its significance to economic activity, and the dominance of economic models that emphasise (wrongly) market exchange as the basis for economic worth have proven to be valid in a diverse range of contemporary domains, amongst them, financial crises and austerity, sexual violence and child abuse, HIV/AIDS, infant mortality and mother's milk, art activism and policy advocacy.

The volume comprises seventeen essays authored by academics and researchers, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and even artists. Its geopolitical coverage is likewise broad – country case studies are drawn from Norway, Mexico, the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, India, and Israel. The end result is a book that surprises; it is the culmination of innovative thinking and research that deepens feminist economic theory as academic critique but is demonstrably broad enough to be relevant in various fields of practice. Stylistically, this is an accessible book. Although it deals with conceptually complex material, its succinct chapters are presented in language aimed at academic and non-academic audiences.

The essays broadly address themes drawing heavily on Waring's original work. Some develop and build on her conceptual ideas. Bjornholt and McKay (Chapter 1) review the core tenets of an inclusive feminist economics and apply them to the current financial crisis pointing to a crisis in the discipline of economics which parallels the crisis in wider society. Aslaken, Bragstad and Ås (Chapter 2) explore conceptual continuities and intersections between feminist and sustainable economics. In her essay, O'Hara (Chapter 3) elucidates the concept of 'care work' for understanding rest, restoration and recreation, making a case for accounting each of these into an analysis of economic activity. Another cluster of chapters conceptually develop

care work for integration of into national statistics – Chapters 4 and 5 examine Norwegian and Finnish national statistical systems respectively while Julie Smith's analysis (Chapter 14) calls for accounting mother's milk in economic statistical valuation.

Chapters also employ Waring's theorisations as a methodological critique against the language and methods of economics. Casper and Simmons' paper 'Accounting for Death' (Chapter 6) deftly contests dominant economic framings that quantify infant mortality at an aggregate level rather than acknowledge the grief and trauma associated with the loss of a child. In their view, this aggregate framing is deliberately intended to advance neoliberal economic solutions to what should be issues of women's empowerment. Julich's chapter (Chapter 7) likewise discusses the necessity of costing child sexual abuse but challenges the idea that trauma can be converted to numbers. Similar challenges to the discourse of market economics are raised in Chapter 9 ('Narrative Trumps Numbers') and Chapter 8 ('A Pacific Way of Counting') where authors demonstrate that quantifying the environment and culture disembodies societies and destroys 'the integrity of community norms, social capital and surrounding ecosystems on which all depends' (p. 145). The closing sections of the book contain essays that focus on themes of activism and motherhood through art (Chapter 10) and policy advocacy and social movements (Chapter 15), the experiences of care workers (Chapter 11 focuses on caregivers to HIV/AIDS patients and 12 on rural caregivers) and teaching and learning (Chapters 16 and 17). Together, these essays reinforce that the invisibility and the perceived irrelevance of care have implications across all strata of society – and, indeed, in all societies. They also highlight the continued challenges faced in centering care on economic and political agendas even today.

Although this is a book that purports to be about economics, it is in reality a deeply political and gendered analysis of society. Underwritten into the research findings are narratives that are strongly critical of main/malestream thinking especially within the discipline of economics. The essays advocate subversion and resistance to this main/malestream, and a focus instead on justice that is founded on visibility and recognition of the experiences of women's caring work, not the macro-economic data that is the current norm for designing policy. Julie Smith, for instance, demonstrates the insufficiency of standard models of policymaking, built on statistics and evidence, for highlighting women's contributions to the economy; her own critical analysis of women's lactation as productive work, she contends, has 'helped achieve some economic justice for women' (p. 223). The authors in their various ways also recommend alternative strategies to create visibility and, with it, fairer outcomes for women and other marginalised groups. There is no single solution for change here; authors advocate reviewing disciplinary discourses, transforming institutions, reemphasising the local and the experiential, and embedding feminine practices of co-operation and care to create momentum for change.

While undoubtedly a timely and important collection of ideas, the volume is not without shortcomings. The quality of the chapters is uneven; some are cogently argued while others could profit from rigour. The chapters on teaching and supervision sit uneasily in a collection about feminist economics. Further, the authors rely on ontological dualisms – 'women/feminine' v. 'male/masculine', where the former has a moral superiority – that have been extensively critiqued by scholars espousing intersectional, post-modern or post-structuralist approaches. The neat dualistic categorisations insufficiently capture the complexity of care and work, which is not only gendered but also classed and raced. Indeed, the revisioning of care as a commodity where it is purchased by affluent women from women of lower socio-economic status needs to be factored into this political and economic analysis; an analysis that is all the more relevant when the relationship between purchaser-provider of care is raced, as is often the case in western countries. Similarly, market-led growth is also complex and despite its flawed foundations, evidence points to nuanced implications for women (and other disadvan-

tagged groups). Research by McDowell (2003, 2005, 2006), for example, shows that in the UK the particular nature of neoliberalism and de-industrialisation has meant the dislocation of young, white, working males from traditional factory-type work sometimes to the advantage of women and people of colour. To make sense of these complex trends, the notions and implications of the 'market' and 'neoliberalism' need to be examined in temporal and spatial contexts.

These critiques, however, do not deter from the merits of Waring's fundamental arguments about reshaping economics through a gendered, care lens. In reviewing this book, I couldn't but help wonder if Waring's work would continue to be relevant to yet another generation of feminist economists in the future. Given the richness of her work, every indication suggests that it's something we can count on.

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