

BOOK REVIEW

Folbre, Nancy. 2009. *Greed, Lust & Gender: A History of Economic Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780199238422. Cloth: 34.95 US. Pages: 379.

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This book has a slightly racy title (at least for an economics book) and my initial reaction was that the 'lust' focus was a bit forced. Greed and gender are associated easily with economic ideas, but lust? Nor was I assuaged by the assertion in the introduction that 'lust is to feminist theory what greed is to economic theory – a marker of contested moral boundaries' (xx), an assertion that seemed too convenient and probably not true. Isn't it usually religious ideologues that set moral boundaries with lust?

But after reading Folbre's book, I'm convinced by her reasons for linking greed and lust to her major theme. The theme is that assumptions about gender, throughout the long build up to the current incarnations of market capitalism, shaped assumptions about *self-interest*. This is where ideas about greed and lust get reinforced through economics. Gender is neither an aside nor an afterthought to the development of economic ideas, but is deeply embedded in their configurations all along the way. It does not mean these human motives have been considered equally significant over time, however; greed clearly outstrips lust in the pantheon of crucial desires beginning with the rapid growth of markets.

Like most feminists who began writing during the second wave of feminism, Folbre is interested in both the economic and sexual freedom gap between males and females and how this is imbued in economic and political thought. What is special about this interpretation is not that men have assumed for themselves more freedom to pursue their economic and sexual self-interests, an analysis that is consistent with most feminists' understanding of western political thought. Rather, it is Folbre's focus on the inter-relationship between greed and lust as it relates to the idea of self-interest that is innovative, mainly because of the monumental position self-interest has assumed as a factor in capitalist economic life.

In twenty short chapters, Folbre takes us through a long period of history. I was fascinated by the preoccupation of thinkers like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas with female lust and their support for the role of prostitution in saving society from it. The marketization of lust clearly was

a not-too-latent notion of a solution to a vexing problem. But the main focus of the book is on ideas associated with the rise of capitalism beginning from the 18th century in Britain, France and the US (colonies like Canada do not figure). Here the relationship between ideas like wealth and value are interwoven with a cognisance of the connection between population growth and economic activity. As key actors in any population discussion, women and their relative economic and sexual freedom assumed significance for economists.

Self-interest, as the focus for market based decision making, sets greed and lust as its logical culmination. Folbre neatly contrasts a relatively benign approach to self-interest, such as Adam Smith's, to self-interest in the extreme, such as that of the Marquis de Sade. Smith relies heavily on the moral innate goodness of humans, something that by itself would curb the ultimate logic of self-interest through greed. De Sade, in contrast, removes all moral limits on self-interest and shows how intolerable individualism in the extreme can be. In his self-interest, the 'strong has every right to dominate the weak' (95) and the sick should be left to die, women raped, friends betrayed and family responsibilities ignored. The parallels with might makes right in today's political economy easily can be drawn, as can the consequences of unregulated individualism's potential for disaster.

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Throughout the book, the voices of feminists and socialists are not silent. Through most of this period under review both had distinct views that were prominently expressed during the debates about morality, the market and women's place in society. Some of this is downright fun: Charles Fourier, the French utopian socialist, for example, envisions a utopia that explicitly espouses the 'sexual minimum,' a kind of social safety net somewhat like the minimum wage (183). No one, no matter how old, ugly or disgusting should be denied sexual satisfaction, something that would be met by altruists who aspire (apparently) to sexual sainthood. Attention in greater detail is given to more familiar feminist analyses – by Mill, Marx, Engels and Bebel, but also to female writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Harriet Taylor, Alice Clark and Margaret Sanger.

Over time women's association with lust gets inverted and women become the paragons of virtue, with all the need for social regulation that this burden entails. Ultimately self-interest becomes couched in the language of individual choice that is so magically sorted out through the market mechanism. But all along the way, economists' distinctions between market and non-market activity served as a convenient divide to

champion the double standard in relation to what was rightly seen as men's self-interest and women's duty to care for others.

This is a book that gets stronger as it progresses, so stay with it. Folbre has a sweeping knowledge of economic thought and focuses her feminist critical eye, not on the easy targets (the misogynous bent of too many male thinkers), but on the reasoning behind the bifurcated gendered approach of our dominant economic analyses. It helps explain why our ideas of a healthy economy can so easily champion the bad and the dirty, while ignoring all it takes to meet real human needs. I wish I were teaching a course on economic thinking. This would be a splendid text to read alongside Locke, Smith, Malthus, Rousseau, Ricardo, Bentham, Mill, Marx, Marshall, Keynes and Friedman. It would also work in a course with any analysis of the economic mess we're in and what might lead to a more rational economic system.