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The Issue of Female Agency in Classical Economic Thought: Jane Marcet, Harriet Martineau, and the Men

Introduction

This paper is essentially a sequel to Bodkin (1999). In that earlier paper, I essentially defined female agency as the intellectual capacity of women (adult human females) to make intelligent, purposive (rational) decisions, under the standard constraints that face most decision-makers. It was also observed that a secondary meaning of female agency could be the financial *capacity* to make and carry out such purposive (rational) decisions. It was also noted (e.g. Hufton, 1997) that the general social (masculine) thinking of earlier centuries typically considered women incapable of such rational thought. Moreover, as the late Michèle Pujol (1995a) has argued convincingly on more than one occasion, in general the Classical School and their Neo-Classical successors considered women “irrational” and “unfit as economic agents.” It should also be noted that this is a different question from the issue of whether a woman may have or ought to have separate and distinct economic interests from those of the family (by birth or by marriage) to which she belongs.

In that earlier paper (Bodkin, 1999), the views on this subject of two prominent male Classical economists, Adam Smith (1723-1790) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), were examined in some depth. Looking at his views on women’s education, one was able to conclude that Adam Smith almost certainly held the standard masculine view of female economic agency. But John Stuart Mill, a staunch feminist and early supporter of women’s suffrage (the right to vote and to hold office in parliamentary elections) held views that were quite contrary (we should

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say “advanced”) to the general (masculine) opinions of his day.¹ In particular, he held that men and women should be treated symmetrically or equally in the market place and in society in general. In this he was aided, abetted, and, in some interpretations, guided by his wife, Harriet (Hardy) Taylor Mill (1807-1858), who it was argued should be considered the co-author of the *Principles of Political Economy*. Harriet Taylor Mill wrote on her own an essay entitled “Enfranchisement of Women” (1851), which contains the germ of many of the ideas later developed by Mill in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869). As reviewed in the earlier article, some commentators (e.g., M. A. Dimand [1995] and Michèle Pujol [1995b]) have felt that Taylor Mill’s treatment of the subject of women’s possible role in the economy in general and of female agency in particular was superior to that of the great man, John Stuart Mill, himself.

Before launching into the subjects of this paper, a word on the method I used may be appropriate, particularly as it relates to Section 4 (on male Classical economists’ views of female agency). In general, an extensive reading of the works of these economists is not very useful in inferring such views, for the simple reason that often they did not say anything explicit on this subject; rather, their views were part of the *unstated* general assumptions of the era, which they assumed that their readers would take for granted. Thus consider Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1937 [1776]), where the subject of women is hardly raised.² On the other hand, the following long passage from Smith’s seminal work is very instructive:

There are no public institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education. They are taught what their parents or guardians judge it necessary or useful for them to learn, *and they are taught nothing else*. Every part of their education tends evidently to some useful purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, or to oeconomy; to render them likely to become mistresses of a family, and to behave properly when they have become such. In every part of her life a woman feels some conveniency or advantage from every part of her education. It seldom happens that a man, in any part of his life, derives any conveniency or advantage from some of the most laborious and troublesome parts of his education.³

It is not my intention to repeat the analysis of the previous paper, where this quotation is discussed in detail; suffice it to say that the *latent* content of this passage is quite different from the *manifest* content. Thus, Smith is apparently discussing the advantages of private vs. public education, but it is abundantly clear that he does not trust (adult) human females to make decisions in their self-interest, as they have to be guided or even controlled. Thus our method shall consist in looking at some peripheral comments, where writers reveal truer feelings. In a sense, our method is not dissimilar to that of Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992), in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*; the apparent story or statement cannot be taken at face value, but has to be re-examined or reinterpreted, in order to find a truer meaning.

In this paper, the question is raised of whether the few female Classical economists shared the views of their masculine colleagues on the subject of female agency, or whether their keen common sense told them otherwise. In reviewing the thought of two prominent female Classical economists, Jane Marcet (1770-1858) and Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), we shall see that the distaff side of the Classical school differed markedly from its masculine colleagues. Section 4 presents a few selected examples of masculine thought on this subject, confirming the general impressions summarized above. Some concluding remarks are presented in the final section.

The Economic Thought of Jane Marcet

Jane Marcet's attitude towards female agency can be inferred from two sources: by inference from *Conversations on Political Economy* (1827), the first of her three works on that subject, or from the biographical details that Bette Polkinghorn (1993) furnishes in her excellent biography.⁴ *Conversations on Political Economy* was apparently written by an anonymous woman and addressed to young persons of either sex. The conversations are between a young woman named Caroline and her mentor, who is also female, Mrs. B. Certainly by example, Mrs. B. (doubtlessly as a surrogate for Jane Marcet) stomps on the idea that ignorance of political economy is "ladylike." At one point, Mrs. B. suggests that, even as mothers, women should know something about this important subject, in order not to lead their offspring into error in this important discipline. Furthermore, Polkinghorn's biography conveys the important additional information that Jane Marcet resisted suggestions (e.g., from her friend, Maria Edgeworth [no relation to Francis Y. Edgeworth, to the best of my knowledge]) to convert Mrs. B. and Caroline into two males, e.g., a man and a boy who could be father and son. Of course, a number of contemporary men (e.g., her reviewer in the *American Monthly Magazine* and Sir Samuel Romilly, the jurist) were quite impressed that such a work had proceeded from the pen of a woman.

Moreover, it should be noted that Jane Marcet, being squarely in the English Classical school, was no revolutionary. The existing gender division of labour is taken into account (and hence implicitly accepted) in Conversation IV. Workers are mainly men, as are generally household decision-makers and capitalists.⁵ Furthermore, the notion of a family wage, to be earned by the male head of household, may be found in Conversation VIII ("On Wages and Population"). For the most part, the bulk of Marcet's work is an exposition of Classical doctrines — the wages fund, the Malthusian theory of population, the Ricardian theory of rent, the Smithian doctrine of productive and unproductive labour, a crude quantity theory of money, and the concepts of absolute and comparative advantage as applied to international trade.⁶ Moreover, she certainly held to the Classical view of society, with an essential harmony in the interests of the various social classes,⁷ and no tendency at all toward

underemployment as anything more than a transient, disequilibrium phenomenon. Also interesting is what is omitted: there is no discussion of what one might call the economics of women's issues (e.g., female participation in the labour force, segregation of women workers, relative pay levels of male and female workers, or questions of household production and decision-making).

Nevertheless, it is clear that Jane Marcet certainly believed that women were as capable of rational thinking and decision-making as men. Consider the following quotation from Conversation X, "On the Condition of the Poor":

... [I]t is the infant and the savage who live only for the present moment; those whom instruction has taught to think, reflect upon the past and look forward to the future.

So it would appear, taking the above evidence into account, that we are entitled to conclude that Jane Marcet considered that civilized adult women, like civilized adult men, were capable of rational thought and decision-making.

The Economic Thought of Harriet Martineau

On similar bases, one can infer Harriet Martineau's attitudes toward female agency and women's capacity for rational economic thinking. From the extracts that Gayle Graham Yates (1985) has put together from Harriet Martineau's writings (as well as from the biographical notes connecting these extracts), we may note that Martineau was a strong feminist.⁸ (She would probably have preferred the nineteenth century expression, a strong supporter of reform with regard to "the woman question.") In particular, she considered it ridiculous that she, a person of property and political views based on some reflection, was denied the vote, while the most ignorant worker was permitted to vote, if only he were of age and male. In this regard, we may note that she signed John Stuart Mill's petition (1866) for female suffrage, toward the end of her life. As well, she asked to be addressed as "Mrs." (even though, as noted in footnote 8, she never married) as a mark of respect for her adult status, rather than as "Miss," which term she considered more suitable for girls, analogous to the formal (and somewhat dated) term "Master" for young males.⁹

Also as noted in footnote 8, Harriet Martineau earned her living as a writer. Although much of her income came from her work popularizing classical economic thought, *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1834),¹⁰ she also wrote some original pieces on the functioning of various social institutions, particularly as they affected women in general.¹¹ These *Illustrations* were nine volumes of assorted short stories and novelettes in which the author attempted to teach principles of political economy in the guise of fables or morality tales. Martineau's economic doctrines followed

the English Classical School, and so one could not describe her as an innovator in this regard. Indeed, Thomson (1973), following Blaug, “credits” Martineau for preserving Ricardian economics beyond the time of its usefulness, particularly the clumsy “wages fund” doctrine of the English Classical School.

However, these writings, along with others, allow one to infer easily her attitudes towards the social issues of the day. Moreover, early in her career (in 1832), Martineau remarked that she had to act with her pen, as this was the only access to politics that a woman had. She believed that single women should earn their own incomes and be allowed to do so, with equal pay for equal work or even work of comparable worth. In contrast to Adam Smith (see the quotation above or Bodkin, 1999), she believed that female education should be really useful, rather than ornamental. (See the pertinent extracts in Yates, 1985.) Surely, Harriet Martineau believed in the capacity of women (most women or ordinary women) for rational economic and political thought.

Some Male Classical Economists’ Views on Female Agency

The views of two prominent members of the Classical school, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, have been summarized rapidly above, and of course, for a more thorough exposition the reader may consult Bodkin (1999). What about the other male Classical economists?

In general, most (male) Classical economists ignored women’s issues (other than population questions). Consequently, one might naively think (particularly if one did not pay too much attention to parenthetical remarks) that this benign neglect implied that women could safely be considered to be essentially the same as men, at least in their economic behaviour. However, we have seen that Michèle Pujol, as a result of her extensive study of the texts of various Classical and Neo-Classical economists, was a strong dissenter from this position. Pujol’s views on this subject appear to be corroborated by the three examples that will be discussed in this section. Basically, it will be argued that main stream Classical economics followed the implicit suggestions of Adam Smith rather closely, while the ideas of Mill and Taylor were considered heterodox, if not downright idiosyncratic.

Peter Groenewegen (1994b) gives two examples which illustrate this assertion rather well. He reviews Jean Baptiste Say’s (1767-1832) argument that women are “irrational consumers,” which Say illustrated with his tale of Pauline, a Roman lady, and her inordinate taste for very expensive jewels. (Interestingly, as one reviewer has pointed out, this implicit criticism contradicts a standard Classical doctrine that tastes are a given and beyond the pale of value judgements of the economic analyst.)

We may also note that this tale was repeated without comment by Jane Marcet in her *Conversations*, which we reviewed above. Groenewegen's second illustration of "irrational" feminine behaviour belongs to John Ramsey McCulloch (1789-1864). In discussing markets for feminine labour, Groenewegen notes that McCulloch argues that middle-class women who are forced by circumstances to work for pay avoid domestic service, which is relatively high-paying, like the plague, preferring other occupations that pay less. McCulloch argues that domestic service is thus "undercrowded" due to such irrational behaviour, as contrasted, say, with the textile and clothing industries. One might dispute that such behaviour is really irrational; after all, men have been known to accept lower pay for more pleasant surroundings or less dangerous work, and indeed the theory of equalizing differences goes back at least to Adam Smith and Cantillon. However, the point here is that McCulloch considers women, at least in this instance, to be something less than fully rational economic agents.

Finally, we note that Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), a disciple of John Stuart Mill, furnishes us the prize example of this attitude among men in general and male Classical economists in particular. It is worth quoting a passage from Sidgwick at some length:

As another of these fundamental assumptions, let us take a proposition of J.S. Mill's [footnote reference], viz. that "each person is the only safe guardian of his own rights and interests." This proposition, of course, is only intended by Mill to apply to sane adults — and, to avoid controversy, I will for the present suppose (what, I hardly need say, is not Mill's view) that it is only applicable to adult males: since *it is not clear that the common sense of mankind considers women generally to be the safest guardians of their own pecuniary interests*. Even among adult males it is not difficult to find instances of persons who are not insane, who are so recklessly passionate or self-indulgent, or so easily deluded, that a wise parent or friend would prefer to place any gift or bequest intended for their benefit in the hands of trustees.¹²

Now from this passage it is clear that Sidgwick wishes to "sit on the fence" and to avoid committing himself to the issue of whether women are capable of rational economic thought, and in this regard he is quite unlike his mentor, John Stuart Mill. Moreover, it also seems clear that the view that women, like (some) imprudent men, cannot be trusted to make decisions in their own economic self-interest, was quite general a century ago, among males in general and the masculine members of the Classical (and Neo-Classical) schools in particular. All this despite the fact that Sidgwick was known for his enlightened views (he supported the women's movement in general and gave qualified support for the vote for women in particular), and that he generally followed John Stuart Mill in many aspects of Mill's (and Taylor Mill's) formulation of the Classical tradition. Accordingly, his unwilling-

ness to take on general masculine opinion on this subject is somewhat surprising and disappointing. Thus, one can understand that, in her commentary on Sidgwick, Caine (1994) finds a strong element of paternalism in his support for the nascent women's political movement.¹³

Concluding Remarks

What, then, shall we conclude about the Classical economists and their views about women's capacity for intelligent, informed decisions in the economic arena? In particular, did the sex of the Classical economist in question influence his or her judgment on the issue of women's economic agency?

As asserted in the previous paper (Bodkin, 1999) and summarized above, Smith implicitly argued that women were incapable of knowing what was in their best interest, at least with regard to an informed choice of the subject matter of their education. In our terms, one could say that he argued that women were not capable of rational economic decision-making. (This assertion reminds Canadians of the debate at the beginning of this century concerning the issue of whether women were "persons," in a legal and juridical sense. (The constitutional ability to vote and to hold parliamentary office was at stake.) We have also seen that Henry Sidgwick, who was definitely in the Classical tradition, was brutally explicit about general male opinion concerning women's supposed limited capacity for rational decision-making, while at the same time he refused to take a stand on this controversial issue himself. By contrast, the Mills (a married couple) had no hesitations about trusting women to make decisions in their own full, long-run interest. (For example, they opposed paternalistic legislation that put restrictions on women's ability to choose hours of work that were allowed for men.) It is the contention of this paper (and also of some feminist economists, e.g. Michèle Pujol [1992, 1995a]) that, unfortunately, Main Stream economics has chosen to follow Smith and the other masculine members of the Classical and Neo-Classical schools, rather than Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill on this issue, at least up to this time.¹⁴

Before concluding, it may well be worth venturing into a digression on what might appear to be a tangential subject, the debate in Great Britain and the United States in the 1840s and 1850s on black slavery. As David M. Levy (1999a, 1999b) has so ably summarized this at times violent argument, on the side of continuing black slavery and hence (obviously) of racial inequality were the "Romantics," led by the gifted Thomas Carlyle. On the side of racial equality were many members of the English Classical School, including John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, W. Nassau Senior, and John Elliott Cairnes. For their troubles, Carlyle hung on the

discipline of economics the pejorative sobriquet of “the dismal science,” as Levy reminds us (1999a) and as Persky (1990) has already pointed out.¹⁵ While it is not my intention to review this entire debate, three points are worth making. First, racial inequality is not totally unrelated to sexual inequality; black slavery was an “efficient” fashion for a male white slaveowner to exploit a black female slave, as was at times recognized in the debate.¹⁶ Second, Harriet Martineau, whose powerful pen wielded many strong arguments for the abolitionists, was particularly the subject of pointed and vituperative personal attacks, on the part of the racists. There certainly appeared to be no chivalry from this quarter, perhaps because her aim was too true and she threatened their vital interests. Third, in view of the fact that the Classical economists were on the side of racial equality in this altercation, one might have thought it a logical extension to come down on the side of gender equality as well. I have argued above that, logical or not, this was not the case for most of the masculine members of the Classical school.

However, we have seen that Classical economics had two very capable women interpreters, Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau, who certainly demonstrated a capacity for rational economic thinking in their exposition of Classical doctrines. Moreover, we have seen that both Marcet and Martineau would have had no truck with a view that held that women were intrinsically incapable of logical thinking or of a clear, consistent articulation of their preferences. Why, then, did they not have more of an influence on the thinking of male Classical economists (aside from John Stuart Mill)? While I do not wish to venture deeply into the sociology of knowledge, it seems clear that both women were regarded as seven-day wonders, rather than as accurate representatives of their sex. In this regard, Groenewegen (1994c) has noted that Alfred Marshall once remarked that Harriet Martineau was really an economic journalist, who concentrated on only one simple point at a time, rather than a true economist. With such attitudes, it is not surprising that the two women expositors of Classical doctrines were only able to make such a small impression on this aspect of Main Stream thinking.¹⁷

Still, with the appearance of academic feminism in the discipline of economics, the time is ripe for a reappraisal, on this point (perhaps on several others as well, of course). This paper and its predecessor (Bodkin, 1999) are designed to take a small step in this direction.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Indeed, as a member of parliament in the early 1860s, John Stuart Mill even introduced a bill for women's suffrage (which he had made the centre of his campaign for a seat in parliament, after the death of his beloved wife, Harriet Taylor Mill). Needless to say, in the climate of the time, this proposal went nowhere.
2. Thus the index to the 1937 edition contains only one reference to women, the passage that we are about to quote. This absence of any deep treatment of the subject of women is confirmed by Glahe's (1993) *Concordance*, where the term "women" appears only 13 times and the word "woman" appears only twice. This in a volume of over 900 pages!
3. Smith (1937, p. 734; emphasis added and archaic spelling retained).
4. Jane Haldimand Marcet was born in London, England, in 1769 and died there in 1858. Married to a doctor with research interests in chemistry during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, she combined motherhood with home study in an impressive fashion, producing best-selling synopses of the disciplines of both economics and chemistry. The Marcets' circle of friends included both T.R. Malthus and David Ricardo, and both of these gentlemen enjoyed conversing at length on political economy with Mrs. Marcet. For further biographical information, see Polkinghorn (1993, 1995), Thomson (1973), Chapter I, or Blaug (1986), p. 565. The short summary of Marcet's professional writings on economics in this section concentrates mainly on the *Conversations*, as her later writings mainly amplify and develop her views of how the economy functions, but add little additional substantive material.
5. Indeed, a modern reader might well find evidence of both classism and racism (Conversation IV). However, it is not the intention here to judge Marcet by higher standards than we should apply to masculine members of the English Classical school.
6. As Polkinghorn (1993) indicates, Marcet put more emphasis on subjective factors (utility) in her theory of value than did Smith and Ricardo. In this doctrinal matter, she was closer to Jean Baptiste Say (and later Nassau Senior).
7. Indeed, as Bette Polkinghorn has suggested, a later work (*John Hopkins's Notions on Political Economy* [1833]) may have been written to argue vigorously against a polarized view of class interests, in the face of a threatened worker revolt. When the threat passed, so did apparently the interest in "educating" the working classes. However, it may be noted that, as Dorothy Lampen Thomson (1973) points out, the titles of some of the stories in *Johns Hopkins's Notions on Political Economy* suggest that Marcet attempted to interest women as well as men in political economy. Clearly, she would not have done so if she thought women incapable of such an intellectual exercise.
8. Harriet Martineau was born in Norwich, England, in 1802 and died in England in 1876. Although engaged to marry in her youth, her fiancé died tragically young, shortly before the wedding. Martineau never became engaged again and so was forced to earn her own living. As she was deaf, a usual route for bright, well-educated young women (teaching or serving as a governess or private tutor) was closed to her. Instead, she earned her living as a writer, a fact about which she was quite proud, and justly so in view of the opinion of many who have remarked how difficult it was for women to break into the professions at that time. Thomson (1973) notes that Martineau really worked only seven years in economics (from 1827 to 1834) and then moved on to other fields. In particular, she visited the antebellum United States and then wrote a book on it (*Society*

in *America* [1837]), thereafter remaining a severe critique of the American institution of African-American slavery (like fellow Classical economists John Stuart Mill and John Elliott Cairnes). We shall return to the question of black slavery below. Further biographical detail on Martineau may be found in Thomson (1973, Chapter II), Yates (1985), and Blaug (1986). For the record, it may be noted that Marcet and Martineau are two of only (roughly) 32 women economists, in a compendium in which the contributions of approximately 1275 living and dead economists are summarized.

9. Of course, in our century, we have solved this little problem (in English) with the title "Ms." for adult females, regardless of marital status. However, the nineteenth century did not have our terminology.
10. In this regard, it may be noted that Harriet Martineau acknowledged her debt to Jane Marcet for this manner of presentation.
11. Martineau also translated and abridged the philosophical works of the French philosopher, Auguste Comte, in 1853, and Comte was so impressed with the work that Martineau did in summarizing his philosophy that he had the abridgement re-translated into French, as an introductory treatment, for the benefit of his students. Clearly an impressive accomplishment!
12. Sidgwick, *Elements of Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1891), pp. 9-10; italicized passage (emphasis added) quoted by Barbara Caine (1994, pp. 31-32).
13. To be fair, it should also be noted that Caine finds similar elements of paternalism in John Stuart Mill's support, as a politician, for the women's movement. This did not stop the suffragettes of the early 1920s from considering him as one of their heroes, once the vote for women had been obtained.
14. In the view of one feminist economist (Folbre, 1994, Chapter 1), Neo-Classical economics expected women to be *non-rational*, at least in the sense of being unselfish. Thus women were expected to sacrifice themselves for the larger unit (the family). Of course, one might still describe this as "purposive" (and hence *not* irrational) behaviour, but it was somewhat different from reactions anticipated from male agents.
15. Most economists (including the author of this piece before beginning this research) believe that the label was simply a piece of scorn emanating from Carlisle's distaste for the Malthusian theory of population. As Levy and Persky have shown, Carlisle's distasteful distaste was far more extensive than this!
16. Levy (1999a) reminds us that, in *Society in America* (1837), Harriet Martineau pointed out that the fact that brothels were relatively less frequent in slave cities certainly suggested that female slaves were exploited sexually in sufficient numbers to affect the demand for casual sex.
17. Of course, other explanations are indeed possible. Feminist intellectual historian Dale Spender (1982) argues (convincingly, in my view) that women intellectuals have often been "hushed up" or had their contributions minimized by male critics, and Robert W. Dimand (1995) has pointed out some examples in the history of economics. Indeed, Spender gives Harriet Martineau (but not Jane Marcet) and Harriet Taylor Mill as an example of this sort of process, and it must be admitted that Marshall's remarks on Martineau (just cited in the text) are certainly a corroboration of this point of view. Bette Polkinghorn (1995) is more generous: she thinks that serious historians of thought (e.g., Schumpeter, 1954) misjudged both the quality and the volume of the readership of these women Classical economists, and in any case such popularizers had a limited claim to being system-builders. But Polkinghorn discounts other reasons, such as their gender, for the limited impact of Marcet and Martineau on Main Stream thinking.

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