



SURAJ MAL AND SHYAMA DEVI AGARWAL BOOK PRIZE 2023

PRIZE CITATION

Joanna Rostek

*Women's Economic Thought in the Romantic Age:
Towards a Transdisciplinary Herstory of Economic Thought*
Routledge

"The judges were unanimous that this outstanding and innovative book merits the Suraj Mal and Shyama Devi Agarwal prize, which has been established for a work of original scholarship in the field of feminist economics.

Dr. Rostek has written a thought-provoking book in which she argues that some of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century English women writers made relevant contributions to economic thought and should be considered economists. She shows how using the socially acceptable genres for women at the time—novels, instructional manuals, pamphlets and travelogues—educated women were analyzing many of the topics of concern to feminist economics: the economics of marriage, property rights, employment and wage discrimination, and the undervaluation of care labor. And yet, their keen sense of the economic issues affecting the lives of women during that period were never considered as valuable contributions to economic knowledge. Women were systematically excluded from practices constituting what was recognized as scholarship. She demonstrates that the insertion of women's voices into the history of economic thought renders economic discourses and practices more comprehensive, pluralistic, and therefore, more realistic.

Rostek begins by posing the questions of what economics and economic knowledge is and how gender influences this. To answer the first question, she argues that we must adopt a transdisciplinary framework, one that integrates not only different genres, but also modes of analysis—literary criticism along with political economy. Drawing on the work of feminist economists on the androcentric bias of mainstream economics, she answers the second question by demonstrating throughout the book how gender influences economic experience and thinking about what is important.

The material analyzed consists primarily of the contributions of seven English authors. On the economics of marriage, Rostek highlights the work of eighteenth-century writers Sarah Chapone, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Mary Robinson. She also draws on testimonies from women's letters and journals to document the injustices of coverture that inspired these writers' analyses and arguments for recognition of women's property rights. Rostek thus demonstrates the pioneering role of these authors in drawing attention to the issues that eventually led to the Married Women's Property Acts—the reforms of the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the United Kingdom. They also called for the recognition of the value of domestic labour, which is still a salient issue.

Rostek shows how in the early nineteenth century, writers Priscilla Wakefield and Mary Ann Radcliffe were demanding greater opportunities for women's wage employment while providing astute critiques of the conditions under which it was taking place. She also re-evaluates Jane Austen's work, principally to show how Austen used economic data (on personal incomes, household expenditures, living standards) in her fiction, to engage in the economic discourse of her period. Moreover, a central theme in her novels was the dilemma between economic self-interest and moral or collective obligations and responsibilities, a pivotal contribution towards a moral economics.

In sum, Dr. Rostek's analysis shows how the contributions of these feminist writers laid the foundation of an alternative economics, one focused on the critique of an economic system skewed towards men's interests, what she terms the patriarchal economy. The book is beautifully written and well researched. It is a most worthy contribution to the history of feminist economic thought."

The Judges

Carmen Diana Deere, Distinguished Professor of Food & Resource Economics and Latin American Studies, University of Florida (chair)

Maria S. Floro, Professor Emerita of Economics, American University

Jane Humphries, Professor Emerita of Economic History, Oxford University, and Centennial Professor, London School of Economics