

INTERVIEW

Ecological and feminist economics: an interview with Julie A. Nelson

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Julie A. Nelson is Professor Emeritus of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Boston and Senior Research Fellow at the Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University. Over the last 30 years and more she has established herself as a highly respected voice on many aspects of economics, most notably social and environmental policy, ethics, feminism and economics. Her work often has a methodological frame of reference, though she also has a longstanding record in applied economics (initially micro) and worked for the World Bank and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics early in her career. She is the author or co-editor of such well-known books as *Economics for Humans* (Nelson, 2018) and *Beyond Economic Man* (Ferber and Nelson, 1993).¹ Her published work spans the mainstream-heterodox divide (for example, *American Economic Review*, *Ecological Economics* and *Cambridge Journal of Economics*). Moreover, her collaborative work on various textbooks has shown a laudable commitment to pluralism and the transformation of the curriculum and pedagogy of economics (for example, Goodwin et al., 2019). She was the 2019 President of the Association for Social Economics and is the editor of the Economics and Business Ethics section of the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

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She is interviewed by Jamie Morgan for *RWER*

Jamie: It seems that in the wake of the IPCC post-Paris report (2018) and 9th UNEP *Emissions Gap Report* (2018) that there seems finally to be genuine growth in public awareness of the urgency of fundamental environmental issues. As a longstanding advocate of an ecological approach to economics and a Research Fellow at the Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University you seem well positioned to comment on this.² Let's start with the Green New Deal in the USA.³ As a non-American observer, it strikes me that the discursive positioning of the Deal encapsulates much of the problem of inertia and misinformation that has dogged this subject for decades. How do you see this?

Julie: While I'm not sure exactly why you are skeptical about Green New Deal rhetoric, I'm guessing that you may be objecting to the somewhat optimistic, business-inclusive, and even "pro-growth" aspects of this program. For example, the legislation introduced in the U.S. by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Senator Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts (my own senator), speaks of creating "millions of good, high-wage jobs" and

¹ See also Ferber and Nelson (2003).

² Global Development and Environment Institute <http://sites.tufts.edu/gdae>.

³ For an account of the Green New Deal in the USA see <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/climate/green-new-deal-questions-answers.html>.

For a parallel UK organization see <https://www.greennewdealgroup.org>.

“unprecedented levels of prosperity and economic security.” It also mentions businesses as partners in the efforts, and speaks of “spurring massive growth in clean manufacturing.”⁴ Yet I suspect I see this “discursive positioning” as less of a problem than you do.

I believe we agree on the seriousness of climate change, and don’t need to rehash the facts here. And I suspect we also agree that orthodox economics thinking has in some ways encouraged the development of thoughtlessly resource-squandering, and cruelly inequality-encouraging, economies. And we very likely agree that really radical changes are urgently needed.

The question, then, is *what sort of* really radical changes do we need. I would like to posit that some proposals being put forth as “radical” are really not as radical as they seem, while others decried as half-baked may be actually more useful.

Jamie: Yes, I take your point. Perhaps the question was inexact. I was referring to and so reporting media skepticism (having observed the response from afar from Fox and such) rather than expressing skepticism. Still, your point is crucial it seems. The core issue is liable to be, for many nonmainstream and ecological economists, the nature and implications of a “pro-growth” and “business-friendly” orientation.

Julie: Exactly. While my thoughts are totally in line with those who point out the disastrous course our fossil-fuel-based economies are currently on, I’ve noticed that many people who position themselves as “radically” opposed to orthodox economics actually agree with some (actually very questionable) major tenets of orthodoxy. They often agree, for example, with the ideas that capitalist or market-using economies have a “fundamental drive” towards growth, and that businesses are forced by competitive markets to seek every last dollar of profits, societal concerns and the environment be damned. They then conclude that, to stay within ecological bounds and serve people, current economic structures must be totally dismantled. Usually some kind of state and/or cooperative alternatives are envisioned – though, given the size of the changes called for, the attitude in the end is often exceedingly pessimistic. From that point of view, the Green New Deal proposals may seem to be naïve and merely reformist.

But, many years ago, I became curious about where beliefs in things like growth- and profit-“imperatives” came from, and dug into their history. As I discuss in my book *Economics for Humans* (Nelson, 2018), what I discovered was that these beliefs were *invented by economists*. They were adopted because they gave our profession a veneer of physics-like scientificity, not because they reflected any research into how economics and businesses actually work. The causality, in fact, tends to run in the reverse: As these ideas of economists have become more popular and entrenched, they have changed how policymakers and business leaders think and behave.

Jamie: So, somewhat ironically our universal ahistorical self-interested (as selfish) economic agent in a methodologically individualist framing for model construction and policy relevance is a social construct? Something *performed* into reality (though not fully adequate as a description of the human in that reality) by the activity of economists?

⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>.

Julie: Yes. Economic theory has become performative. When we observe people acting like “economic man,” this is not because it is our “nature” to be this way, so much as that we’ve been sold a bill of goods about how we are *supposed to* act in our economic lives. I’m not saying that people are *never* selfish, or that business leaders are *not* interested in profit. But if we don’t let ourselves be blinded by orthodox economic theory, we can see that human behavior generally reflects a mix of self-interest and other-interest, and that real business leaders have pursued a variety of goals. Lynn Stout’s excellent book *The Shareholder Value Myth* (2012) describes how economists’ narrow view came to take over business education and the business media.

Jamie: Your well-known interest in the underlying effects of language and metaphor seems relevant here. As I understand it, your concern is that critics sometimes think in binaries and so simply reverse the terms of theory and activity they criticize and this in a certain sense “plays the game” of the mainstream they criticize, and this applies to ecological matters as much as it does to any other social issue or economic concern.⁵ As such, you argue we should go “beyond dualisms”?

Julie: Yes. Back in the 1980s I was influenced by the work of Deirdre McCloskey on the rhetoric of economics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on the role of metaphor in how we understand and communicate about things, and Evelyn Fox Keller and Sandra Harding on the history and philosophy of science. And it became absolutely clear to me that the mainstream discipline of economics relies on a deeply gendered belief about what makes for good science. Economists like to think of economic life as confined to the market, driven by self-interest and competition, rational and controllable, and intrinsically governed by mathematics and physics-like “laws” not because the economy is intrinsically that way but because these ways of seeing it are all associated with masculinity and toughness. What about production in the home? Care for others and the environment? Human emotions, in the face of a future that is fundamentally unknowable? Ways of understanding that require hands-on investigation and broader sorts of reasoning? Acknowledging these things is, by comparison, seen as womanly and weak. And so those parts of reality and those parts of good science – which I define as open-minded and systematic investigation – were banished.

To give you a recent example, when in charge of the Paris climate summit in 2015, Christiana Figueres, the UN climate chief, said that “the self-interest of every country is what is behind all of these measures. It’s not because they want to save the planet” and “Humans don’t have a stronger guiding force than my own self-interest.”⁶ This is wrong, and I regard her pronouncements as evidence of the pernicious influence of economic thinking on policymaking. One can certainly find instances of countries acting out of compassionate or principled motivations and, revealingly, Figueres’s own motivations for working on climate, when she was interviewed about them, were quite emotional.

Yet the solution to having a weak, one-sided discipline of economics built around a macho ideal should not be to simply flip to the other side and advocate a “feminine” economy of cooperation and a discipline that uses entirely qualitative methods. Both those options “play with only half a deck.” We need to get away from this “either/or” thinking and realize that it’s really “both/and.” For example, I’ve tried in another essay that I entitled “Husbandry” (Nelson

⁵ Note from Jamie: see for example, Nelson (2015, p. 115).

⁶ For references and further discussion, see Nelson (2019).

2016) to revitalize the realization that caring and carefulness are not just for women, but for men (and any other gender), too.⁷

Jamie: So, binaries remain a problem in so far as they influence thinking and restrict the way we choose to proceed? You seem to be suggesting then, that the issue of dualisms encapsulates the way some protagonists are talking at cross-purposes and perhaps there is the potential for less antagonism and some progress? It seems entirely plausible that market systems do not reduce to a stereotype of vicious amoral capitalists seeking least cost in all circumstances. At the same time and as your allusion to “what we agree” indicates, scale and the general direction of travel *of a system* (variegated though its participants may be) have mattered and continue to do so (one does not get to negotiate with the planet). There have been effects at scale that we must address. This, I expect, is part of the difference between protagonists – since the direction of travel of observed capitalism *in toto* has had consequences and for some these are rooted in fundamental mechanisms – hence the critique (bleak though this can seem). Still, the meanings we apply in thinking *through* problems are not irrelevant, they influence our frameworks and we can think through these in more inclusive and constructive fashion?

Julie: What if we could reverse the tide? What if we could move towards a more human-centered (or, if that sounds too species-limited, life-centered) economy by beginning with the economic and political structures that are already close to hand?

If you read the Green New Deal proposals, while they work within existing structures, they are hardly prescriptions for complacency or inaction! The U.S. legislation calls for a massive 10-year mobilization that gets us to zero net greenhouse gas emissions. It defines its goal in terms of creating healthy, sustainable, equitable communities for generations to come.

These are important and radical changes! If you are disappointed that the Green New Deal doesn't call for dismantling capitalism and abolishing corporations, I think that it is worth considering whether it is capitalism in general, or more specifically a particular historical variant (i.e., neoliberal and short-termist) that is the problem. If you are disappointed that the Green New Deal doesn't call for “no growth,” I think it is worth considering whether the answer we are seeking is numerical (i.e., zero), or better framed as careful thinking about growth *of what* and *for whom*.

Jamie: There is certainly a whole set of issues and problems regarding political strategy and it seems clear economics plays and could play multiple roles. Ultimately, persuasion regarding plausibility in order to develop appropriate law for effective mechanisms of change is vital. To some degree this seems a basic dilemma for economics as theory and as you suggest, beyond this. A contrast which, for example, has influenced the reception of Kate Raworth's best-selling *Doughnut Economics* (2017) in the UK. It proposes a new set of metaphors and concerns for a new kind of economy, but is “agnostic” about growth and articulates a need to avoid language and commitments that alienate constituencies that may be required in order for pragmatic solutions to current problems to be found. This, of course, raises the counter expressed by Clive Spash and others – whether the result is a compromise that does not do enough to contest the impossible (the scale problem as a systemic issue: material-quantity economic expansion at a time of excess) and so tacitly encourages

⁷ Note from Jamie, Professor Nelson's essay was awarded the Independent Social Research Foundation essay prize in ‘What is the place of care in the economy?’ 2015. See <http://www.isrf.org/funding-opportunities/essay-competitions/#PrevComps>.

complacency – which is counter-productive, since we are now approaching (and may already have passed) seemingly some climatological and ecological tipping points. Does this resonate at all with the US experience?

Julie: There is no denying that the *outcome* we need – that is, to stop living beyond our resource means – is both a dramatic change from our current situation and most urgently required. So, it's really *the means* of bringing about that outcome that are in debate in the literature you refer to. While I've looked at Raworth's work, I'm not familiar with it in detail, or with the discussions in the UK that you refer to. But my sense is that the proposals in it that you describe, and the reactions to it by some critics, are similar to what I've said about the Green New Deal and some of its critics. That is, accusations of "compromise" and "complacency" often get thrown at proposals that fail to call for what someone feels to be more "radical" solutions, such as "dismantling capitalism" or "no-growth." Compared to some kind of ideologically pure image of, say, post-capitalist utopia, more pragmatic solutions are often derided as merely reformist and ineffectual.

I have just argued that the mainstream and many "radical" views are just two sides of the same coin – and both based on a highly contrived image of capitalism. So, if giving up those myths means I'm labeled as a pragmatist reformer, I'm happy with that. Just don't claim that because I want to start with the situation as it actually is, that I'm not aware of the urgency of change.

Jamie: And the politics of this in terms of persuasion? For example, Raworth's point regarding alienating constituencies?

Julie: Pragmatically speaking, we do have to think carefully about the best way to persuade the public to get on board. The Green New Deal proposals, for example, *are* pulling a bit of a bait-and-switch when they talk about "high wage jobs" and "prosperity." Politically speaking, this rhetoric is probably necessary – no one is going to propose legislation promising reduced employment and poverty. Realistically, though, what "prosperity" means while living sustainably in a resource-constrained world will necessarily be different from how many define it today. Barring some unforeseen technological miracle (which we should by no means wait around for), prosperity can no longer be about eating lots of steak, driving a big car and flying all over the world. But prosperity could still be about living reasonably comfortable and meaningful lives, and be increasingly about health, a clean environment, and economic security. It could also be about spending less time at work and more equally sharing family- and community- care. Starting such changes in our mind-sets needs to be part of any process that has the slightest whiff of a chance of diverting us from the catastrophic path we are on right now.

Jamie: And you have spent a whole career attempting to persuade people to think differently, not least economists. The first edition of your edited text with Marianne Ferber *Beyond Economic Man* dates to 1993 and feminist economics has now been around for nearly three decades. How do you feel about how it has developed over time?

Julie: Feminist economics has had a lot of growth and new developments since its inception. There have been some victories. I think it has had the most influence, among sub-fields of economics, in development economics. Recognition of the important contributions of women and girls in countries of the Global South, and the necessity of treating women as agents in development strategies has, I believe become the norm within many national and

international development agencies. That's not a complete victory, of course – much of the leadership remains male and some of the gender discussions are no more than window-dressing – but there has been progress. Feminist economics fairly quickly gained a place within the community of those favoring pluralist approaches. The International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) has grown from its modest inception into a truly international group with lively annual conferences and a journal.⁸ I was invited to write a couple pieces for the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* and a long book review for the *Journal of Economic Literature*, all on feminist topics. The American Economic Association (AEA) has recently – and laudably – finally taken some action against harassment and unjust treatment of women and other groups within the profession. Noting that nature and women's traditional work have been treated the same way by the mainstream – i.e., both as infinite resources that can be exploited without any direct attention to them and without cost – has created a bit of a link between ecological and feminist economics.

Yet progress has been slow or stalled in other areas. In spite of those invitations I received to write for AEA journals, I'd say that for the most part the mainstream has assiduously ignored the feminist critique. Feminist perspectives have simply not become the topic of serious discussion or debate – much less become topics an economics department will make sure to cover when considering hiring or curriculum! Students wanting to do undergraduate or graduate study in feminist economics hence face very limited options. And within the field of feminist economics, I've been disappointed by what seems to be a flagging of efforts toward critique. That is, when we started out a lot of energy was put towards identifying biases within the discipline – biases in how it is defined, in its models, and in its methods, as well as in how it portrays women and women's traditional activities. Barbara Bergmann, for example, was relentless on this.⁹ And many of us put a lot of thought into how the discipline could be improved, not just in its study of women, but also more generally by shedding the macho biases that obstruct the accomplishment of useful and reliable research. What I've seen increasingly, though, in the *Feminist Economics* journal and the conferences, are a preponderance of papers that use fairly conventional methods to study “women and ____ (fill in the blank).”

And it's not like the mainstream no longer needs critique! Studies of the gender wage gap, for example, are increasingly dismissive of discrimination as a cause, preferring to focus on women's “choices” regarding work/family issues (no matter how constrained those choices may be) and on presumed “gender differences in preferences.” I recently wrote a series of articles (and a book) which reviewed the literature on gender and risk-taking and which shows that the “gender differences” claim is based far more in stereotyped beliefs than in fact.¹⁰ In fact, the data show that men and women are far more similar than different on this score. I would like to see more feminist economists engaging in direct and pointed critique of the biased, sexist, unscientific work that still comes out every day. There's a lot that could be done conceptually, and through meta-analysis and replication. We feminist economists early on pointed out that science is a social endeavor that grows and gains reliability through just such cross-critique – and that individual researchers *p*-hacking their way to a “publishable” result does *not* give objectivity. Yet I'm afraid that insight might be fading.

⁸ Visit: International Association for Feminist Economics <http://www.iaffe.org>.

⁹ Note, see the special issue of *Feminist Economics* on Barbara Bergmann 4(3), 1998: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfec20/4/3?nav=toCList>.

¹⁰ See Nelson (2014, 2018b).

Jamie: I hope that is not the case and perhaps on a more optimistic note, the way to ensure such problems are not perpetuated is to influence the education of economists. You have done a great deal here too. Perhaps you might comment on your thinking on pedagogy and your contributions to textbooks. Early on in our interview you define “good science” as “open-minded and systematic investigation”. Arguably, based on traditional positivist and didactic approaches in economics, an open-mind is perhaps the most difficult attribute to inculcate in young economists.

Julie: I would agree. It’s much easier to teach students how to shift curves, solve equations, and run regressions, than to carefully observe economic life and think deeply and critically about it. Students also tend to feel comfortable – and even feel powerful – when told “here, we are handing you the exact tools and models you need to use to understand how the economy works.” We thought very carefully about the approach to take in the textbooks I worked on – the *Economics in Context* principles textbooks authored by Neva Goodwin, myself, and others (see Goodwin et al, 2019a, 2019b, 2014).¹¹ To make the textbooks adoptable by instructors, they needed to cover the standard topics and models. To make the textbooks attractive to students, students needed to feel that they would be learning useful and practical things. Many “alternative” economics textbooks, I think, rather go over beginning student’s heads by launching directly into tendentious debates between different schools of economics, leaving students perhaps frustrated and confused. Our approach was, instead, to teach the mainstream material as *ways some people have thought up* to try to explain the economy, which have some value and areas of applicability but which also have some (often serious) limitations. Teaching mainstream models as particular and partial views rather than as “how the world works” is a subtle but fundamental shift. And then we went on to fill in some of the rest of the story by looking at other perspectives on the economy. For example, in the chapter on consumption, we followed the neoclassical model with discussions of the origins of consumerism, the effects of advertising, and the environmental impact of consumerism.

Another fundamental but important shift was to list an additional economic activity *before* the usual three of “production, distribution, and consumption.” We called this “resource maintenance,” emphasizing that you can’t even begin production unless you possess (and protect) stocks of natural, physical, human, and social capital. This made it easy to integrate issues of environmental damage, the contribution of unpaid household labor, and the social strain that comes from extreme income inequality. Once, when I was teaching from *Microeconomics in Context*, I mentioned at the end of the semester that most econ textbooks don’t include “resource maintenance” as a major economic activity. The students were incredulous! It just made perfect sense to them. I didn’t directly work on the later revisions of the textbooks, or on the European edition, but I believe these themes have continued.

I’m glad, too, that the *RWER* has become an important place to get the word out about pluralist approaches in economics. I’ve enjoyed this conversation with you.

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¹¹ See the Economics in Context Initiative (<http://www.bu.edu/eci/education-materials/textbooks/>) for more information.

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