

An ESRC Research Group



Moral Political Economy and Poverty: Four Theoretical Schools Compared

GPRG-WPS-031

Wendy Olsen

Global Poverty Research Group

Website: <http://www.gprg.org/>

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the ESRC Global Poverty Research Group.

Moral Political Economy and Poverty: Four Theoretical Schools Compared

By Wendy Olsen

Global Poverty Research Group, Universities of Manchester and Oxford, UK*

© Wendy Olsen November 2005

Abstract

This paper explores a pluralist approach to moral economy. Firstly, four schools of thought on the rental of land in India are described. The normative and ontic assumptions of each school are described. Then I look closely at a debate between two feminist authors, Agarwal and Jackson. The advantage of the social researcher doing a meta-review of normative positions in this instance is that we can compare and contrast meta-criteria for improvements and progress. Five moral reasoning strategies for meta-normative economic research are described and discussed. These suggest a need for more research on complex moral reasoning strategies.

Keywords

tenancy, pluralism, schools of thought, moral economy, feminist economics, norms, moral reasoning.

JEL Keywords

B5 - Current Heterodox Approaches

O17 - Institutional Arrangements

O12 - Microeconomic Analyses of Economic Development

O53 - Asia including Middle East

* The support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the ESRC Global Poverty Research Group (grant no. M571255001).

Moral Political Economy and Poverty: Four Theoretical Schools Compared

1. Introduction

In this paper I conduct a review of research about land rental institutions whilst aiming at exploring new ways of conducting moral political economy research. Specific new departures in the paper include an open-systems approach to moral reasoning; a comparison of four schools of thought that are in the background when researching rural south India's socio-economy; and resolving problems related to who should instigate change. The approach used here derives insight from Sayer's (2005) appeal to conduct moral economy studies using empirical data. My approach is also rooted in classic works of moral economy by James C. Scott, John Harriss, Julie Nelson, and others, but this paper is focused quite narrowly on certain lively debates about land-rental in India.

Selected research on the rental of land is described in section 2. I have focused on four main schools of thought: neoclassical economics; marxist political economy; feminist treatments; and new institutionalist economics. The treatment of poverty is different in each school's texts because they theorise society differently. The relationship between poverty and sharecropping is dealt with explicitly in one theoretical school (Marxist political economy) which has borne much fruit in India-based empirical research on sharecropping. This paper compares that treatment with the normative orientations of the other three schools.

Then I look closely at a debate between two feminists, both of whom have made structuralist assumptions similar to those usually found in marxist political economy.

One author (Bina Agarwal) proposes including women in new forms of access to land on a rental basis. Women should also claim their joint or sole ownership in land that they farm, said Agarwal. The other author (Cecile Jackson) argues that Agarwal's proposal is unreasonably general and does not recognise the difficulties with fomenting change in women's lives. In response Agarwal argues that Jackson is being neo-conservative in defending women's authentic present voices. Agarwal argues that knowing women's needs does not depend merely on hearing their explicit claims made in their various voices.

Placing Agarwal's proposal in a moral economy framework helps to clarify this debate. The framework looks at how different researchers utilise their empirical knowledge to frame and shape their normative questions. Some use economic progress as instrumental to human development, while others (e.g. neoliberals) would tend to use human/social development and social capital as a means to economic development. However, both these strategies are useful, and neither economic nor social change is a zero-sum game.

The great advantage of the social researcher doing a meta-review of normative positions in this instance is that we can compare and contrast meta-criteria for improvements and progress. Each main school – neoliberal, structuralist, feminist and institutionalist – offers suggested criteria. Explicit treatment of the normative criteria in the case of sharecropping helps us to engage with Agarwal's specific policy proposals. She then appears as a (theoretical) pluralist who has integrated a series of carefully constructed normative positions with her empirical data.

A moral reasoning strategy needs to be well informed about structures, change, and differentiated agents within its remit; it also needs to consider well-being and harm at different levels of society (e.g. people as well as households); and its ontology needs a rigorous approach to whether conceptualisations that are being used are the best way to represent their referent. Furthermore the author of a moral reasoning strategy is likely to place themselves inside the macro scene (and be reflexive). Recognising that moral reasoning strategies are complex helps me to draw upon the four schools of thought presented in section 2 whilst being critical of the ontological errors of some schools. Both epistemological and normative strengths can be discerned in the resulting pluralist approach.

2. Four Schools of Thought Within Indian Political Economy

Dow argues that a school of thought may overlap in practice and in discourse with others, whilst having some incommensurate conceptual elements. Schools of thought are distinguished not only by their ontological assumptions but also by their traditional or usual normative strategies. I have reviewed four economic schools from a realist viewpoint (Olsen, 2005) but in that work I omitted the complexities of feminist economics. The pluralism advocated there is similar to Dow's proposed pluralism of theory. In the present paper, feminist economics plays an important role.

The four schools will be described with reference mainly to what they have said about rural tenancy in India. This particular literature covers sharecropping as well as cash rentals. Cash rentals have been growing in India but sharecropping is still common. In

1999, about 8% of the land was sharecropped (Sharma, 2000; Shankar, 1999) and 15% of rural adults were using rented-in land (National Sample Survey data).

Neoclassical economists (NCE) have written about sharecropping for decades. Tenancy transactions are seen by this school as optimal choices which avoid the use of standard labour-market contracts, e.g. Bardhan and Rudra (1984); Skoufias (1995); Stiglitz (1974). The idea of an optimising decisionmaker on each farm – the landlord and the tenant – is central to the way neoclassical economists write about tenancy. Stiglitz showed that the landlord's attitude to risk might affect their willingness to rent land, and the share or rent they expected to get. Stiglitz's 1974 article followed a tradition in economics in which all farming rental contracts are explained in terms of landlords' attempts to better utilise their land resources whilst also leading toward the new institutionalist economics which arose in the 1980s.

Skoufias (1995) works in a primarily neoclassical mode, estimating what labour inputs tenants are likely to put into their land. Tenancy is seen in Skoufias' multi-market model as a way to optimally use one's bullock power, irrigation water, and family labour. Ellis (1993) reviews the neoclassical models of labour allocation and of tenancy.

Developments since 1985 in neoclassical models treat the family more carefully than did the original 1960s and 1970s work. These developments, known as the 'new home economics', are firmly neoclassical with reference to the market, but they un-bundle the household into a set of individuals, who each optimally decide how to allocate their labour. Leisure time therefore has a differentiated opportunity cost. Tenancy had better pay the tenant – as individual (?) – well enough to be a rational decision.

Both the neoclassical analysis and the new home economics thus have an orientation to the market as the guide to the costs of time and goods; they assume maximising decision makers; they assume all parties to a contract make optimal decisions; and they see the landlord as a person who owns land and for whom it is a rational choice to rent some out. Neoclassical economists tend to make formal algebraic models and then, if there is space, test them using empirical household data.

Table 1 highlights neoclassical economists' ontic and normative assumptions alongside three other schools: new institutionalists; marxists; and feminists.

<<<Here place Table 1>>>>

In neoclassical economics, Pareto optimality became a central principle during the twentieth century (Pareto, 1909 in Italian, first published in English in 1971). As a moral principle Pareto optimality conceives that a change would be a social improvement if it made things better for someone but did not make anyone else worse off.

New institutionalist economists (NIE) look at it slightly differently. They model the decisions behind the contract. Most argue that tenancy contracts represent an optimal solution to a game-theoretic problem of simultaneous rational choice of landlords and workers (e.g. Srinivasan, 1989; Genicot, 2002; Majid, 1994). The context is one of risk aversion, uncertainty, and incomplete markets. Much of the ontology of the new theory is the same as in neoclassical economists. However, markets are not assumed to work perfectly, and information enters as an important entity.

Both neoclassical and new institutionalist theories have a focus on monetised values, exchange value, and prices in common.

In the marxist school known as marxist political economy (MPE), tenants are seen as part of the working class. They are assumed to be poor workers. They are 'used' by landlords who try to efficiently extract surplus labour and to realize its value in the crop market (Olsen, 1996). Many marxists thought that landlords were blocking modernization of agriculture. One explanation of blocked technical progress would be landlords' preference for retaining attached labour using usurious credit (Bhaduri, 1973, 1983a, 1986).

An interesting example linking new institutionalism with structuralism is Majid (1994). Majid reviews the declining role of sharecropping in Sindh, Pakistan using NCE and NIE theory. However, he finds that landholding structures underlie the decisions of landlord and tenant. These structures, he says, are critical influences upon whether and how sharecropping takes place. He uses detailed empirical data and makes connections with the marxist interest in the relations of production (the third school, below). However, because Majid's main interest is in tenancy contracts, not in the dynamics of landholding, the underlying class relationships remain merely background (1994, ch. 10). In this way 'structure' is a background factor.

Even today, empirical results are still being published which show that India's capitalism has a capacity for uneven development, including different levels of technology and labour productivity even within pockets of a single locale (Singh, 1995). In Punjab, says

Singh, the landlords use migrant tenants to drive tractors on the landlord's cultivated land but then expect them to hoe their rented plots manually. Inequality is vast in the rural Punjab. Pockets of uneven development are best seen in class terms (Brass and van der Linden, 1998; Bhaduri, 1983b; DaCorta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Ramachandran, 1990).

Marxists like these make huge normative assumptions. For instance, they assume that specific structures of class are exploitative and involve oppression of the working class. The structures need to be changed. To change them involves generating discourses of resistance. Otherwise capitalists and landlords will convince workers that they have shared interests. An overview of this approach to moral political economy is given by Sayer (2000a, pp. 158-171). Sayer describes traditional Marxism as a form of critical social science. Critical social has had a fairly negative ethic: it is bad for workers to be exploited (Fay, 1987). This moral principle does not open up the much wider, *constructive* question of what would be good for workers. Sayer suggests that critical social science is an arid soil for moral economy because there is so much more that needs to be addressed besides the false consciousness of workers.

Table 1 summarises the assumptions typically made by marxists in the Indian sharecropping literature. Athreya *et al.* (1990) is a typical example. Athreya's book combined the western tradition of measuring land productivity on each farm with the marxist tradition of examining class dynamics. Thus it overlapped between neoclassical concepts and marxist normative assumptions. By testing the marxist assumptions for empirical validity, Athreya *et al.* conducted empirically rich and interesting structuralist research. They found, to their surprise, little economic exploitation by landlords.

Feminist writings (the fourth school) draw upon marxist structuralism but also focus intensely upon women, gender relations (which are a social structure), patriarchy and the micro-macro linkages of the world economy. Foremost here is Mies (1982, 1998) whose initial Indian monograph showed female lace workers being exploited through both class and trading relations whilst also doing domestic work that created, for them, a double burden. Mies, like Kabeer writing much later (1994), broke down the class approach into a focus on differentiated women whose class/gender position doubly weakened them. Ethnicity, caste and rural/urban structures also get attention in both Mies and Kabeer's work. Thus an underlying structuralism is typical of feminist 'gender and development' (GAD) writing (Beneria, 2003).

Mies argued in a later book (*Patriarchy And The Structures Of Global Accumulation* (1998, original 1989), that the women who do housewifery are being used by the world economy. Mies said that the double burden on women could only continue to perpetuate their subordination if women and men continued to co-participate in it. The normative viewpoint here is to innovate on women's cultural and normative expectations. Mies wanted Indian women to resist their double exploitation. Get men to share housework; insist on women standing up for equal rights and better conditions in paid workplaces, said Mies.

Let us focus on the ontic assumptions here. Feminists assume that stereotypes and norms exist, and are gendered. However they see them as malleable, too. Their view of 'preferences' is very different from that of economists (of the NCE and NIE schools): preferences are forever changing and changeable.

Mies and Kabeer argue that women and men combine as agents in ongoing relations to create the structures that bind them. They can re-create and change the structures. Terrific optimism is combined with graphic description of the kind of exploitation that is actually continuing.

For instance in India, a series of qualitative studies show how Hindu women are still conforming in many ways to Hindu stereotypes. Many believe that their private lives are more important than doing public activity; that their marriage is their main hope in life; and that their children are their main achievement. One author which summed up local voices on the social expectations facing Hindu women put it this way:

‘The gender relationship entailed by the division of work according to sex . . . reveal(s) the structural relationship that prevails between the two genders: Masculine Role: [being] owner, boss, leadership . . . manager, he who holds power; . . . Feminine Role: [being] domestic, subjection, servant, servility, vileness, slavery [etc.]’ (Poitevin and Rairkar, 1993: 159-160, translated from the language of Pune, Maharashtra, India).

Muslims have also been suffering from a patriarchal gender regime within and outside India. *Purdah*, the practice of requiring women to cover their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their form, also refers to male control over women’s movement outside the home. Under *purdah*, women are seen as protecting the family’s honour. *Purdah* is in part a matter of women being self-disciplined in their ‘good’ behaviour. The Muslim and Hindu traditions of *purdah* were summarised in depth by Agarwal (1994) across

four South Asian countries, i.e. India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. *Purdah* is differentiated regionally in its meaning and coverage. *Purdah* is not restricted to any one or two ethnic groups. Agarwal argued that *purdah* is being challenged by some women, so that it is continually changing.

Kalpagam (1994), another marxist feminist, has built a conceptual model to enable policy makers to examine change in the gender regime and class relations. Kalpagam's model is a transformational model of social activity (see also Archer, et al., 1998). P. Swaminathan (2002) illustrates a structuralist approach to gender inequality combined with great sensitivity to social change as it affects women's roles.

When feminist writers write about tenancy, they are looking at it sociologically and are focusing on the gender regime involved. Feminists take a strong interest in women's farming work and its remuneration. Tenants' work was described in detail, for instance, by Dacorta and Venkateswarlu (1999). The lack of measurement of the labour time doesn't obviate the fact that the work has been done. Dacorta observed that the women of tenancing households in southern Andhra Pradesh also do unpaid domestic work and cow-related work with dung at the landlord's house. I also interviewed women in the same district who did these tasks from a position of utter powerlessness vis-à-vis their landlords in 1995 (e.g. the landlord owned the worker's hut-plot). Marxists and neoclassical economists alike tend to use a household unit of analysis and thus ignore gender difference in the experience of tenancy. Decision-making and money-earning was attributed to men. Furthermore the idealised household was perceived to be male-headed. Feminists strongly object to such assumptions.

There are a number of places where the first three of these schools (in Table 1) overlap. For instance, Bhaduri, a leading theorist of the structuralist political economy school, can be found exploring the contractual arrangements in terms similar to those now used in new institutionalist economics.

‘Loan arrangements can . . . change in many ways, which have been so simplistically captured in our model in terms of a single parameter representing the own rate of interest. . . [and in a footnote] a new loan arrangement – the so-called managed loan – which has become widely prevalent in place of traditional consumption loans in Haryana. . . ’ (1983b: 66).

Thus Bhaduri blended the formalised procedures of economic orthodoxy with the substantive assumptions and empirical interests of classical Marxism in India. Assets and resources are distributed differently to the classes, and each class acts in its own interest, he says. The landlord class protects its interest, even sometimes at the cost of lower productivity. They may think that lower productivity can be offset by higher usury income combined with the rental income. Therefore, under his assumptions, resistance to new technology might be the result.

Here Bhaduri thinks he has caught the neoclassical economists in a bind: how can rational behaviour in the landlords’ interests be economically irrational? Because their ‘interests’ are sectional, whereas economists’ notion of rationality takes on only the aggregated outputs of agriculture. A rise in the capitalist landlords’ share is what Bhaduri thinks the landlords work toward, whereas a rise in the total product is what

orthodox economists usually assume is desirable. Pareto optimality is the main criterion of net value used by orthodox economists.

Orthodox economists rule out exploitation discursively by focusing on aggregate supply and demand for crops and for land. Several new institutionalists have focused on the point that the tenant has *chosen* to make the contract (e.g. Srinivasan, 1989; Srinivasan and Bell, 1989). In other words, even if the tenant loses out in the short run, they have chosen the contract – so by deduction, there must be some benefits in the contract, as they prefer having it to not having a rental contract.

This tautological logic is flawed. But Bhaduri, too, can be accused of a tautology. His prediction in 1983(b) turned out not to match the growth performance of northern Indian agriculture. Landlords and capitalist farmers did pick up new technologies, in spite of their land rental arrangements (Stiglitz, 1986; Bhaduri, 1986). There were two misunderstandings here. Firstly, Bhaduri's model was intended to examine the power landlords have. Its weakness was not being well-grounded in a specific place/time. As a universalistic formal model, it is not clear where it would apply. To whom we would expect to look for real instances of these usury relationships? When Athreya looked for them in Tamil Nadu, his team didn't find much usury. When I looked for them in Andhra Pradesh, I did find usury but it was carefully hidden and kept quiet. I also found that villages just 2 km apart had very different usury situations because of heavy but localised bankers' competition (Olsen, 1996). There are empirical differences in the real power of landlords to control the prices they pay for supplies of crops and to charge high interest. However, Stiglitz (1986) rephrased the argument in a way that bypassed the question of power.

Secondly, Bhaduri's model is meant to focus on class interests. The misunderstanding that occurred was that Bhaduri's contextual factors – feudalism, traditional respect paid to the landlord, and social obligations – were ignored by orthodox economists. By reducing the world to the economic competition of classes, economists simplified the optimisation problem. The general trend, led by Stiglitz (1986), was to show that Bhaduri was factually wrong. This ignored his moral agenda of challenging landlords' power.

In West Bengal the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was able to implement strong land reforms and increased rights for tenants (Banerjee, *et al.*, 2002; Basu, 1992). In this sense perhaps Bhaduri's model was influential within India until structuralism's ascendancy there ended in about 1991.

Among the structuralists quite a few carried out detailed fieldwork and offer qualitative analysis, or at least vignettes, as part of the research outputs. Here they tend to overlap with and blend into the feminist authors' work.

For instance, Mencher (1978) working in a strongly structuralist tradition, describes in detail the motives and perceived constraints of a series of individuals who did farming in southern India (1978: 208-210). Here necessity is described from the worker's subjective perspective, and choices are made in a context of unfreedom.

'Ganeshan has 1.5 acres of *varam* [rented] land to look after. He and his wife work for one to two months in a year for others on a daily basis. They

cannot do more because of his *varam* land. . . . It is clear that his first priority is looking after his *varam* land. Yet it is necessary for him to hire others to work his land as well. . . . Munuswami is a Harijan from Pacciyur. He owns . . . He ploughs . . . His wife also works for others when she is not pregnant.’ (Mencher, 1978: 208-209)

Another structuralist, Epstein, writes mainly as a class-oriented structuralist but also takes into account a number of neoclassical economic facets of agriculture such as productivity and marketing (1962; 1973; 1998). Epstein draws strongly normative conclusions in one monograph (1973, last chapter). In her view, growth in India’s agricultural output would make it possible for tax to be collected from the big farmers. This tax money could support redistributive expenditure. Thus her empirical work led her to a detailed normative conclusion. However she stayed within the economic (monetised) realm in drawing her normative conclusion.

Ramachandran (1990) provides detailed family case histories in his appendix and he works from his vast primary data toward a conclusive grasp of the reasons why bonded labour is so persistent in rural south India: ‘Why do workers agree to given an employer a right of first call over their labour power and submit to the kind of servitude that such a relationship entails? There is no *legal* coercion for them to do so . . . The most important reason is, of course, that workers are compelled by poverty and unemployment to seek different ways of ensuring that they get wage employment whenever it is available and of ensuring subsistence at times when there is no employment to be had.’ (pp. 253-254). Labour service and performing traditional tenancy tasks for free come under

Ramachandran's general heading in which workers 'choose' to continue a relationship in spite of the presence of exploitation (p. 181 *et passim*).

In this section I first reviewed the four main schools in the literature (NCE, NIE, marxist structuralists, and feminists) and then I gave a few examples illustrating overlap between the schools. Ontic incommensurability co-exists with cross-school overlaps of both ontic and normative assumptions. Let me now review a specific vociferous debate about women doing tenancy in more detail.

3. A Debate About Women Doing Tenancy Work

Agarwal has for many years advocated women getting rights to land (Agarwal, 1994). She advocated women of Muslim and Hindu cultures taking up their traditional legal right to a share in their father's lands. She said that this right was often ignored. She opposed the patriarchal norms which had created huge gender inequality. Agarwal is widely recognised as a structuralist feminist economist (Jacobson and Wadley 1992: 3).

By advocating female land-holding Agarwal placed herself outside the usual marxist school. Her faith in the land rights system as a way of generating equality opposes the marxists' usual assumption that land in India was a huge source of growing inequality (Ramachandran, 1990). However Agarwal has in common with marxists a focus on material resources, of which land is a major one in rural India. She always conducts a class analysis.

In 2003 Agarwal further pressed the case for women to hold land. Her platform had three planks. Change people's assumptions about what work is appropriate for women (since poor women already do huge amounts of farming work anyway); change the list of preferred recipients of common land when it becomes available, to put women first; and ensure that women are enabled to rent and work that land collectively rather than taking individual risks (Agarwal, 2003a). This platform for land rental by women had been modelled by the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh. Their collective action of starting to do farming on rented land was highlighted by Agarwal as part of her larger argument. She argued that it would be more efficient and empowering to have women doing farming like this than to allocate the land to men. Micro-finance and bank loans specifically targeted to women, including women doing tenancy, have generally been on the rise in India (NABARD, 2004: 39-44).

Jackson (2003) wrote a reasoned response questioning Agarwal's advocacy. One reason Jackson took issue with Agarwal is that she understands that Agarwal means women to gain land at the cost of men losing it. Jackson seems to have assumed individualistic control over land (which Agarwal does suggest) as well as a zero-sum game of family land holdings (also hinted at by Agarwal in one section on family land).

Agarwal's platform draws some strength from the micro-enterprise and micro-finance literatures in India. For instance, Kabeer (1994) has lauded the self-employment union, 'Self Employed Women's Association' (SEWA) for enabling women to lobby collectively to improve their terms and conditions as both workers and micro-entrepreneurs. SEWA, she argued, was a flexible means of organising because it brought women together where they actually were, even if they had diverse economic activities.

Microfinance groups had long taken the view that pooling risk between very poor and less poor women might be good for women's capacity to borrow and save. India had since about 1990 been reproducing Grameen Bank style experiments. Both non-bank NGOs and banks were lending money to women. Banks got involved both in offering women personal loans for business, and in managing women's group loans via government schemes. To get farming loans, women would need to have a deed to some land as collateral. They rarely have their names on these deeds.

In this scene, it is not radical to suggest that some land rights be allocated to women. It is just un-marxist. Furthermore it is not against the law. The Indian government has had land ceiling laws which enable each state government to claim land over the ceiling, and then redistribute it, for the last five decades.

Agarwal's policy proposal would have costs and would require both state and grass-roots support. The risk of resistance of local men was always present. Men in Gujarat had been documented as resisting women's economic upward mobility by shaming them into returning to purdah (Bhowmik and Jhabvala, 1996: 124). Women in that locale were not allowed by their caste leadership to get any formal education, either. However feminists such as Agarwal and Kabeer are not going to be discouraged by elders' or men's resistance. Instead that resistance fuels the fire that demands that elder traditionalists support the changes.

Agarwal's proposals also fit into the international wave of 'gender budgeting'. This term refers to women getting involved in pressurising governments at local, state and

national levels to spend their revenue in ways that are beneficial to girls and women. Agarwal's proposals would generate direct economic benefits but would also fuel normative discussion about the proper roles of men and women, and could thus increase the rate of change of gender norms toward equality.

Jackson (2003) challenged whether the changed policies would be good for women in general. Her arguments were threefold. One, women are too diverse for a single policy prescription about them to be viable. Two, women's kin relations are so closely interwoven with male and female gendered identities that a sudden intervention into female identities was dangerous. Three, not enough land could be allocated to women to make any difference. In all three areas, Jackson urged more research rather than a leap to policy prescriptions. Jackson's second response (2004) also argued that she had been misinterpreted and that Agarwal's proposals were risky due to probable localised (ie differentiated) male and female backlashes.

Jackson and Agarwal are not the only actors in this debate, but they have published their views. Agarwal vibrantly defended her main theses (2003b). She accused Jackson of neoconservatism because Jackson's interest in women's subjectivities and in masculine identities seemed to accept these as given and fixed. Agarwal claimed that, instead, these views need to be challenged.

There are two issues here. Firstly, is it 'good' to advocate women getting collective rights to rent land in India? This is Agarwal's main focus. Secondly, is it 'good' in general for women to increase their involvement in commercial agriculture? Both issues require a further empirical investigation which would lie behind the answers: is it feasible

for Agarwal's proposals to be enacted? It is only necessary for it to be feasible in one or two places for Agarwal's specific proposition to get a tentative 'yes'. By raising the level of abstraction and generality, Agarwal has created an argument that is much harder to defend.

4. Discussion of Economic and Social Change Strategies

We could almost imagine Agarwal and the marxists focusing mainly on one dimension, the economic/ monetised dimension, and the cultural anthropologists and most feminists focusing on the socio-cultural dimension of the problem of social progress. These dimensions are sometimes seen as polarised or orthogonal to each other.

It is interesting how a monolithic discipline could focus entirely on movements in one direction (e.g. economics focusing on improved incomes), but interdisciplinary research has the added challenge of seeing commerce and society as interlinked.

Orthodox economists usually aim at increases in income as a way to enable social progress, but they then tend to be agnostic about and even ignorant about the persistent social and historical realities that reproduce inequality.

To qualify as moral economy, empirical studies of economic progress need to include the social dimension. They need to reconsider the space within which the two dimensions exist not as a zero-sum game but an open system. Marxists focusing on redistribution of land might assume a fixed quantity of land, but productivity depends also on water, technology and labour. The study of norms in political economy can

iterate between studying real strategies on the ground, which might involve studying class competition over given resources, and then taking a meta-review of the situation to try to see where new resources are becoming available and how they, in turn, should be redistributed. The distribution of economic assets is not a zero-sum game.

There is perhaps a parallel in the social dimension. Here we can imagine that social capital and cultural capital are distributed unevenly, but in part, due to the importance of self-respect and social status, the relative placement of a person depends in part on how they are seen by those who are of high status. In other words revaluing the social and cultural resources of poor people could, in itself, compress the society toward social or cultural equality. Pluralism, tolerance and increased understanding of minority groups might decrease cultural inequality without a direct economic cost *per se*.

The orthodox economic schools seem to separate the economic from the social dimension. Jackson seemed to be uncomfortable partly because Agarwal's proposition was mainly about women's economic roles. Agarwal would wish to compress the inequality of access to land and then let social change flow from this. Jackson's article argues that women cannot easily change their roles or gender norms: their own discourses and cognitive strategies are habituated ways of dealing with events in the family. Agarwal's view is that policy changes could encourage a new set of events in families and in women's work. In practice, changes of policy and changes in discourses are taking place all the time so these two views may be complementary.

Moral economy empirical research is sensitive to people's norms. The researcher would focus on what people care about, how they feel insulted or degraded, what

makes them socially valued, and what causes (or could cause) valued economic change. A researcher would iterate from micro studies to a meta-review of class change, the gender regime, and gender relations over a 40 year period. Both Agarwal and Jackson explicitly argue that more research is needed about women and the use of land in India. Thus these feminists agree with marxists that a moral economy agenda is needed.

So why did Jackson write such a lengthy challenge to Agarwal? Perhaps Jackson represents the 'gender and development' school (GAD), and her comments reflect the attempt to leave behind the 'women in development' school (WID; see also Jackson, 1996). The WID school often over-generalises about women, ignores men, prefers women-centred policies even if they are not feasible, and generally avoids a serious class analysis of differences among women. The GAD school, which is located in Table 1 column 4, tries to integrate marxist methods with feminist sensitivities. Here, Jackson doesn't mention this sub-school clash among development studies feminists, but see Kandiyoti (1998) or Moser (1993) for details. Yet this sub-disciplinary history is in the background of the debate.

In western economic sociology, a rather different debate has occurred that resonates with Jackson's critique of Agarwal's proposal. Ralph Fevre stresses the importance of the social dimension to the economic dimension (Fevre, Rees and Gorard, 1999; Fevre, 2003). Fevre treats the socio-cultural dimension in an interesting way by arguing that many economic sociologists have gotten into the habit of sharing value-orientations and basic assumptions with neoliberal economists (meaning the two orthodox schools). Fevre argues against this habit. He says specifically that around 1990,

'economic sociologists were increasingly likely to turn to the economists for inspiration. As a result they imported some key economic concepts into sociology ... human capital from the economics of Becker . . . social capital became the quintessential instrumental morality . . . [page 140] . cultural capital [page 141]. (Fevre, 2003: pages 140-141).

People's own values and morality, Fevre says, are then being treated merely as instrumental to how they achieve economic outcomes. The ultimate purpose that is assumed for all human effort is, crudely, to get rich. 'The space left for a consideration of the intrinsic value of the morality was reduced by the expansion of its instrumental function.' (Fevre, 2003: 141).

Ben Fine (2001) also argued persuasively that individualism was a western bias and a methodological error that had got associated with the widening use of the term 'social capital'. Agarwal's proposal sounds individualistic, and in India, individualism is less central to identity whereas lineages (e.g. castes) play a great role in identity formation and in discourse. Jackson may have been trying to enunciate a position against incipient individualism.

Fevre's complaint also resonates with Nussbaum's (2004) focus on human emotions and the complexity of their real effects. Emotions are neither universal nor merely socially constructed. However, as Sayer argues, the reality of emotional responses depends in turn upon the real occurrence of specific injuries. For instance the worker

often really is disabled from making autonomous choices about using the land that is rented from a powerful landlord.

Suffering and flourishing take the form of objective effects and characteristics, that is ones which can exist independently of their observation by others, such as injuries, hunger, depression and resentment, or health, fulfilment and contentment. There are not only physical/material causes of suffering such as violence and deprivation but social/psychological causes, such as refusals of autonomy, recognition and social contact (Sayer, 2005: 16).

This realist argument shows why Agarwal might take the risk of advocating a policy change: the felt hurt of many women she has met translates into an urgent need to act. A scientist, working outward from these personal and perhaps private emotions, may want to illuminate their research with normative orientations. But Nussbaum's theory and Sayer's explicit advice (2005) suggests that any normative conclusions drawn by a scientist can and should be, as far as possible, re-examined. They need to be grounded empirically through detailed research and in-depth understanding of the situation. Impulses are not enough. Knowledge of structural patterns is also not sufficient. The scientist also needs to grasp lay normativity, or in other words to empathise and have a conscious intent to understand. They need also to be able to bring into view a range of positioned subjectivities and social conflicts. This is same point Jackson made.

Jackson's various examples and data from Africa don't really support this point but the various African societies to which she refers help her to stress, by analogy, the differentiation within India and the need for more localised research. On this point, Agarwal rightly points out that her own research has made clear differentiations of women, and that Jackson was wrong to suggest that Agarwal posed a monolithic 'woman' or a homogeneous model of women. Grasping lay normativities, specific contradictions can be highlighted during a specific time or place of social change.

The reason that Agarwal argued that Jackson's paper reflected neo-conservatism is that Agarwal seems to think a focus on women's subjectivities will imply accepting these as customs which must be respected. Agarwal tends to argue that she wants to influence women, whilst Jackson argues that Agarwal needs to listen to women. These polarised claims hide the reality that women's habitual discourses are in a state of discursive tension with new ideas. Tradition and modernity come into tension. As new possibilities are opened up for women, their discourse will begin to reflect their considered reaction – or habitual rejection – of whatever is new. Thus a realist like me would agree with both authors on many points.

Listening to women means listening to a tapestry of struggle, worry, customs, norms, strategies, exceptions, explanations and differences described in detail. Influencing women occurs during research, too. It occurs whether the researchers are explicit about it or not. Our bodies, clothes, questions and research assistants all reveal our purposes and choices. They become part of the tapestry. A reflexive social scientist of Jackson's type will still be expected, at certain points, to give his or her opinions. These opinions, in my view, should not be rigid or unchanging. They are part of our tapestry.

The researcher cannot avoid leading questions. Jackson explicitly criticizes Agarwal for using leading questions. Whilst it may not be good practice to do so, Jackson is wrong to imply that a researcher can do interviews without implying a whole series of value orientations to respondents. Researchers are not value neutral in all that they do.

Thus research interviews are exchanges between worlds – often between academic and lay worlds, as Sayer would describe them. Perhaps Agarwal is right that women in India need to also listen to ‘us’. What is certain is this: discourses exist in a dialectic with structures; they are not fixed; nor are lay norms; and Jackson is right to insist that kinship discourses and women’s subjectivities are very important areas of research on women and land rights.

So to bring the story of the two competing authors to a close, it seems that their disagreements are over the stress marks not the basic language. They are actually working from the same dictionary of social science. Furthermore the policy prescriptiveness of Agarwal is not unknown in Jackson’s discourse. To prescribe that we listen to women more, that we differentiate their different voices, and that we should understand their problems in their terms, is Jackson’s main normative position (Jackson, 2003).

My addition to the debate between Jackson and Agarwal is to suggest that they need to see the overall situation clearly, and theorise it dialectically, and not get lost amongst the detail. The overall situation is that they both advocate changed gender relations – changed structures – and that the agency of women in the scene, along with that of

feminist scholars, is needed to generate a series of emergent new scenes which may generate resistance among some men and traditionalists, but which will be worth having because of the great oppression of women's potential which can be unblocked.

Since both Jackson's and Agarwal's overall body of printed work shows both to hold a dialectical view of structure and agency, their argument over women's subjectivity and land cultivation seems like a missed opportunity for moving forward with the agenda for change. Their strategies are different. One: focusing on lay normativity and discourses. The other: focusing on strategies for compressing the land holding structure between the genders and letting lay normativity catch up afterward.

5. Complex Moral Reasoning

The term that Sayer uses for the complex iteration of academic and lay normativities, taking into account both the economic and the social/cultural axes, is 'ethical naturalism' (2005: 21). Ethical naturalism refers to the real existence of injury and well-being in human lives and in society. Sayer argues against seeing well-being purely in social constructivist terms. He also argues against seeing change purely in rational terms, which in this paper is followed up by arguing against a purely economic, land-based, or money-based analysis. I have not considered the whole range of strategies of moral reasoning here. Instead I have used the existing literature to draw out the competing strategies actually found in one specific policy debate about land-renting. What emerges is indeed a complex normative scene. This section summarises the normative reasoning of the writers in the tenancy debate.

Many of the writers have allowed for iteration of the economic and social aspects, and have also advocated fieldwork about differentiated households/people as well as meta-analysis of policy and of grassroots proposals for change. Within this scene, given that we are looking at tenancy and at these four schools of thought, the following five main strategies for looking at norms were found:

- A neoliberal approach (focusing on marketised activities of individuals), which however did allow for openness of the economic system; growth with equity was assumed to be possible; incomes were not seen as a zero-sum game; and land productivity was not perceived as a zero-sum game.
- A human capabilities approach, focused on a wide range of social and personal outcomes, perhaps focusing on felt empowerment, and assuming open systems that can change - even in the area of customs. This approach, associated with GAD, re-evaluates and re-appreciates the people presently oppressed and tries to ensure that their voices are heard.
- A compression of income approach, which may focus on land redistribution or income redistribution. This approach can aim to change control over water and other natural resources as scarcities grow; it aims for structural equality; it may foster taxation. (Here we have some structuralists, the marxists, and Epstein.)
- A social equality approach which aims for pluralism and mutual respect among sub-cultures, with recognition of difference (exemplified by Jackson's anthropological detail). This approach requires a temporary muting of the academic voice and is most attuned to lay normativities and difference.

- A Pareto-criterion based approach: Any improvement strategy offered by lay actors is potentially valuable as long as no one is harmed by it, and no farm or state or region or household loses out as a result.

If a researcher only takes the last of these strategies and hesitates to attack entrenched structural inequality, then their hesitancy will create a weak moral agenda. Agarwal's apparent anger about Jackson's traditionalism or 'conservatism' arises because she attacks this form of weakness. See Jackson (2004) who rebuts the accusation of conservatism; see also Jackson (2002). By contrast if attention is given to a range of these approaches, then a serious discussion of norms and purposes, and of means and ends, can be reached. In this serious discussion lay accounts of 'the good' can be brought together with expert meta-analysis.

The normative strategies listed above are at a very high level of abstraction. No resolution of the tensions between them can be found at such a high level. One might question Pareto Optimality in general, but still wish to reduce harm from any change in a particular area of life. One need not take a utilitarian approach to measurement before wishing to minimise harm in both personal and social terms.

But the answer to whether a change is deemed good would depend on the specific types of harm, to whom, and what offer of changed circumstances might then be made available to them. Since in general changed policies imply changed opportunities, the no-harm condition cannot in general be assumed to apply. Our knowledge of harm is rooted in past conditions; it will be hard to predict the harm or well-being in the new conditions. We can know only of a tendency toward harm.

Secondly to list these strategies is not to resolve any specific problem, such as the moral dilemma created by Agarwal's proposal of an intervention. Further research must be carried out about that.

6. Conclusion

The paper has clarified some of the issues in a moral economy research agenda. I showed that although the different schools of thought are ontologically not easy to combine, there are still insights about social norms that are worth noticing in all four schools. Some ontological work is needed to develop an interdisciplinary economics with structure-agency dialectics, sensitive to the non-money economy and its dynamics, as well as to the market economy. Dow (2004) suggests that a structured pluralism would attend to major social structures whilst using a multi-disciplinary explanatory framework.

I argued that micro fieldwork and policy-related enquiry should and can complement the more philosophical and abstract meta-enquiry that is usually known as moral philosophy. Economists from the orthodox schools would do well to respond to Sayer's suggestion that lay normativity needs more attention than philosophers have given it.

Two criticisms of the framework offered here should be dealt with before ending the paper.

Firstly, it can be argued that the framework is too complex and wide-ranging to be viable. The danger, however, of narrower mono-disciplinary studies is that they cannot judge well the effect on the whole of any change in a part.

Secondly, it could be argued that the Indian women's tenancy issue has not been resolved. The role of a social scientist is not to resolve such an issue. They can take a position but their normative position must be conditional, conjunctural, and temporary, in the sense that it is held subject to new knowledge. The main task, though, is to identify how the proposals arising from Agarwal, alongside Jackson's critique, open up new research questions, and to decide which of these is most pressing.

References

- Agarwal, B. 1994. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Agarwal, B. 2003a. Gender and Land Rights Revisited: Exploring New Prospects via the State, Family and Market. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3, 184-224.
- Agarwal, B. 2003b. Women's Land Rights and the Trap of Neo-Conservatism: A Response to Jackson *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3:4, 571-585.
- Archer, M., Bhaskar, R., Collier, A., Lawson, T., and A. Norrie, Eds. 1998. *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. London, Routledge.
- Athreya, B. V., G. Djurfeldt, and S. Lindberg. (1990). *Barriers Broken: Production Relations and Agrarian Change in Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi, Sage.
- Banerjee, A. V., Paul J. Gertler, and Maitreesh Ghatak (2002). 'Empowerment and Efficiency: Tenancy Reform in West Bengal.' *Journal of Political Economy* 110(2): 239-280.
- Bardhan, P. K., and Ashok Rudra. 1984. Terms and Conditions of Sharecropping Contracts: An Analysis of Village Survey Data in India. *Land, Labour and Rural Poverty: Essays in Development Economics*. P. K. Bardhan. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Basu, A. 1992. *Two Faces of Protest: Contrasting Modes of Women's Activism in India*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Beneria, L. 2003. *Gender, development, and globalization: economics as if all people mattered*. New York; London, Routledge.
- Bhaduri, A. 1973. A Study in Agricultural Backwardness Under Semi-Feudalism. *Economic Journal*: 83(329),120-137.
- Bhaduri, A. 1983a. *The Economic Structure of Backward Agriculture*. London, Academic Press.
- Bhaduri, A. 1983b. 'Cropsharing as a Labour Process.' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 10(2-3): 88-93.
- Bhaduri, A. 1986. 'Forced Commerce and Agrarian Growth.' *World Development* 14(2): 267-272.
- Bhowmik, S. and R. Jhabvala. 1996. Rural Women Manage their Own Producer Cooperatives: Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) / Banaskantha Women's Association in Western India. In *Speaking Out: Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia*. Eds. M. Carr, M. Chen and R. Jhabvala. London, IT Publications, Aga Khan Foundation and UNIFEM: 105-125.
- Brass, T., and Marcel Van der Linden. 1998. *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues*. Berlin, Peter Lang AB.
- DaCorta, L., and Davuluri Venkateswarlu. 1999. 'Unfree Relations and the Feminisation of Agricultural Labour in Andhra Pradesh, 1970-95.' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 26(2-3): 73-139.
- Dow, S. 2004 Structured Pluralism, *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 7:3.
- Ellis, F. (1993). *Peasant economics: farm households and agrarian development*. Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press.
- Epstein, T. S. 1962. *Economic Development and Social Change in South India*. Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press.
- Epstein, T. S. 1973. *South India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Mysore Villages Revisited*. London, Macmillan.
- Epstein, T. S., A. P. Suryanarayana, et al. 1998. *Village Voices: Forty Years of Rural Transformation in South India*. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London, Sage.
- Fay, B. 1987 *Critical Social Science: Liberation and its Limits*, London: Polity Press.
- Fevre, R. 2003. *The New Sociology of Economic Behaviour*. London, Sage.
- Fevre, R., G. Rees, and S. Gorard. 1999. 'Some sociological alternatives to human capital theory and their implications for research on post-compulsory education and training.' *Journal of Education and Work* 12(2): 117-140.
- Fine, B. 2001. *Social Capital Versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium*. London, Routledge.

- Genicot, G. 2002. Bonded labor and serfdom: a paradox of voluntary choice. *Journal of Development Economics* 67(1): 101-127.
- Jackson, C. 1996. 'Rescuing gender from the poverty trap', *World Development*, 24:3, 489-504.
- Jackson, C. 2002. 'Disciplining gender?' *World Development* 30(3): 497-509.
- Jackson, C. 2003. 'Gender Analysis of Land: Beyond Land Rights for Women?', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3:4, 453-480.
- Jackson, C. 2004. 'Projections and Labels: A Reply to Bina Agarwal', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4:3, 387-388.
- Jacobson, D. and S. S. Wadley, Eds. 1992 (2nd ed.; 1st ed. 1977). *Women In India: Two Perspectives*. Delhi, Manohar Press.
- Kabeer, N. 1994. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. London, Sage.
- Kalpagam, U. 1994. *Labour and Gender: Survival in Urban India*. London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- Kandiyoti, D. 1998, 'Gender, Power and Contestation: "Rethinking Bargaining with Patriarchy"', in Pearson, R. and Jackson, C. (eds) (1998). *Feminist visions of development: gender, analysis and policy*. London, Routledge.
- Layder, D. 1998. The Reality of Social Domains: Implications for Theory. *Knowing the Social World*. T. May, and Malcolm Williams. Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press: 86-102.
- Majid, N., 1994, *Contractual Arrangements in Pakistani Agriculture: A study of Share Tenancy in Sindh*, D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford: Oxford University.
- Mencher, J. P. 1978. *Agriculture and social structure in Tamil Nadu: past origins, present transformations, and future prospects*. Durham, N.C., Carolina Academic Press.
- Mies, M. 1982. *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market*. London, Zed Books.
- Mies, M. 1998, orig. 1989. *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: women in the international division of labour*. London, Zed.
- Moser Caroline, O. N. 1993. *Gender planning and development: theory, practice and training*. National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD). 2004. *Annual Report 2003-4*, Hyderabad, India.
- Nussbaum, M. 2004 *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Olsen, W. K. 1996. *Rural Indian Social Relations*. Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Olsen, W.K. 2005. 'Pluralism, Poverty and Sharecropping: Cultivating Open-Mindedness in Development Studies', *GPRG Working Paper 8*, Universities of Manchester and Oxford, UK. Available online at <http://www.gprg.org/pubs/workingpapers/pdfs/gprg-wps-008.pdf> (Revised version forthcoming in the *Journal of Development Studies*, circa late 2006).
- Pareto, Vilfredo. 1909 [1971]. *Manuale di economia politica*. New York: A. M. Kelley. Translation of *Manuale di economia politica* (1909); Ann Schwier translator into English, Ann Schwier and Alfred Page, Editors (New York: August M. Kelly, 1971).
- Poitevin, G. and H. Rairkar. Eds. 1993 (orig. French 1985). *Indian Peasant Women Speak Up*. London, Orient Longman, trans. Michel Leray.
- Ramachandran, V. K. 1990. *Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture: An Indian Case Study*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sayer, Andrew 2000a. *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Sayer, Andrew 2000b. 'Moral Economy and Political Economy'. *Studies in Political Economy*, Spring, 79-103.
- Sayer, A. 2005 mimeo, 'Restoring the Moral Dimension: Acknowledging Lay Normativity', British Sociological Association conference, York.
- Shankar, K. 1999. 'Tenancy Reforms: Rhetoric and Reality'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 20-26, online at www.epw.org.in, downloaded Oct. 2003.
- Sharma, H. R. 2000. 'Tenancy Relations in Rural India: A Temporal and Cross-Sectional Analysis.' *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 55(3).

- Singh, M. 1995. *Uneven Development in Agriculture and Labour Migration: A Case of Bihar and Punjab*. Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Skoufias, E. 1995. 'Household Resources, Transaction Costs, and Adjustment through Land Tenancy.' *Land Economics* 71(1): 42-56.
- Srinivasan, T. N. 1989. On Choice Among Creditors and Bonded Labour Contracts. *The Economic Theory of Agrarian Institutions*. P. K. Bardhan. Oxford, Clarendon Press: 203-220.
- Srinivasan, T. N., and Clive Bell 1989. 'Interlinked Transactions in Rural Markets: An Empirical Study of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab.' *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 51: 73-84.
- Stiglitz, J. 1986. 'The New Development Economics.' *World Development* 14(2): 257-265.
- Stiglitz, J.E. 1974. 'Incentives and Risk Sharing in Sharecropping'. *Review of Economic Studies* 41.
- Swaminathan, M. 1991. 'Segmentation, Collateral Valuation and the Rate of Interest in Agrarian Credit Markets.' *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 15: 151-178.
- Swaminathan, P. 2002. The Violence of Gender-Biased Development: Going Beyond Social and Demographic Indicators. *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequalities in India*. In K. Kapadia. London, Delhi and NY, Kali Books and Zed Press: 69-141.

Table 1: Four schools of thought on rural land rentals in India

	Neoclassical Economics	New Institutional	Marxist Political Economy	Feminist
Objects of theory (the ontic content)	Individuals, firms, landlords; markets; demand; supply	Workers and landlords as principal and agent; contracts; markets; decisions; information	Social classes, interacting with castes and state government	Various types of agent who reflexively contemplate the actions they take and their effects; men, women, the state, traditions, customs, norms
Ontic assumptions	Individualistic optimising predominates ; market demand and supply are known and they create context of free choices	Modelling iconic agents gives worthwhile predictions; utility is mathematizable; situated optimising occurs;	Structures interact with each other; agents in social relations do not simply make free choices; people act according to their class interest	Society has interwoven layers (a depth ontology; Layder, 1998); stereotypes and norms exist; agents are important actors in construing social relations,
Normative assertions	More income is better; Pareto Optimal changes are good; efficient production is good	Non-market production will tend to be less efficient than marketised production	Structures of oppression need to be changed; changing them requires innovative discourses of resistance	Women suffer from both class and gender oppression; in India, caste structures create (bad) pressure on Hindu women by privatising their lives and priorities

Note: For full references to the literature see Olsen (2005).