



## **Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?: A Story About Women and Economics**

*Katrine Kielos , Katrine Marçal*

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How do you get your dinner? That is the basic question of economics. It might seem easy, but it is actually very complicated.

When Adam Smith proclaimed that all our actions were motivated by self-interest and the world turned because of financial gain he laid the foundations for 'economic man'. Selfish and cynical, 'economic man' has dominated our thinking ever since, the ugly rational heart of modern day capitalism. But every night Adam Smith's mother served him his dinner, not out of self-interest, but out of love.

Even today, the unpaid work of mothering, caring, cleaning and cooking is not part of our economic models. All over the world, there are economists who believe that if women are paid less, then that's because their labour is worth less.

In this engaging, popular look at the mess we're in, Katrine Marçal charts the myth of 'economic man', from its origins at Adam Smith's dinner table to its adaptation by the Chicago School and finally its disastrous role in the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

## Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?: A Story About Women and Economics Details

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# From Reader Review Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?: A Story About Women and Economics for online ebook

## Keertana says

As an economist and a feminist, I really loved this novel. But, after the first couple of chapters where the significance of women's labor in the household is really underlined, the theoretical jargon concerning economic man simply bored me. I understood it, mostly because I'm studying economics, but the anecdotes and fast-paced chapters failed to really hit home any concrete ideas for me. I also took a few issues with the ending chapters where the author discusses how there's really only one sex. Men get to be human while women have to conform to gender stereotypes and identities, making them the sole sex--but while this book talks about how women's labor has been ignored for years, it manages to go right ahead and ignore stereotypes that MEN face on a day-to-day basis, too! Of course women have it worse--duh!!--but I wasn't as impressed with this analysis as I wanted to be.

Anyhow, recommended for anyone who wants to really understand feminist economics (at least the first couple of chapters are worth a read at your local bookstore for sure!).

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## Holly says

What an interesting and subversive book this was. The "women and economics" story is sort of the background and Marçal spends more time focusing on the myth of the individualistic, rational, "economic man." It's an overview of the history of economics that begins with Smith and the invisible hand, and discusses the legacies of classical and neoliberal economics in short incisive chapters. This was a translation from the Swedish, and after finding myself alarmed at the typos in the 3-page preface to American edition, I found Saskia Vogel's translation of the text itself remarkable for its idiomatic English, gentle sarcasm, and emphatic drollness (a tone I'll assume Marçal intended).

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## Kelly says

A readable, witty look at the intersection of economics and feminism. I loved this and breezed through it -- a lot to chew on relating to women's work, economic mobility, and human psychology. Also a reminder than white dudes who did a lot of the groundwork for "thinking" and "philosophy" in the past and became legends were only allowed to do so because mom/wife did all of the other work. In Smith's case, he lived with mom, she fed him, she did the chores, and he only had to work. (Thoreau, if you didn't know, "went to the woods because he wished to live deliberately" but went home to mommy who did his laundry).

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## Caren says

I enjoyed this book because the author took familiar economic ideas and turned them on their heads. Her

point seems to be that economists have primarily been men and have developed an idea of rational "economic man" for how the world should work, leaving out the real "invisible hand", that is, the hand of a (usually unpaid) woman who is taking care of all the nurturing sorts of roles in society so that economic man can go out and manage the "real" economy. She said Adam Smith only mentioned the "invisible hand" of the marketplace once in his "Wealth of Nations", but that idea was picked up by neoliberals and has been dominant in our economy for the past thirty or more years. Smith's idea was that economic man acted in self-interest, but that, through the magic of the market, every self-interested transaction contributed to a smoothly running, prosperous whole. She says that even when a new branch of study, such as behavioral economics, is developed, it still uses traditional economic man as a reference point. For example, Daniel Kahneman developed the idea that people don't, in fact, act rationally, but the state then used that information to try to nudge people toward state-sanctioned choices. As she says on page 153, "Of course, it's not behavioural economists' fault that their analysis is used to create shortcuts for politicians who want to avoid making difficult decisions. The theories are certainly a step in the right direction. But they don't change the fact that economics is still a science of choice--not a science about how society will survive, keep house and evolve. No overview of society and how people are created and formed in relation to each other is found within behavioural economics. Economics remains the study of the individual. It asserts that dependency is not a natural part of being human, and power relationships aren't economically relevant."

In the epilogue, the author finally tells us who Adam Smith's mother was: Margaret Douglas. On pages 192-193 she says, "Margaret Douglas is the missing piece of the puzzle. But it doesn't necessarily follow that when you find the missing piece the solution will become clear. 'There is no such thing as a free lunch' if one of the most-often quoted truths in economics. To this should be added: there is no such thing as free care. If society doesn't provide childcare that we all contribute to, then someone else will have to provide it. And that someone is most often a woman. Today, Margaret Douglas is the woman who reduces her hours at work to care for her grandchildren. She does this because she loves them and because there isn't any other solution. Her daughter and her son-in-law have their own jobs to go to. There's no chance their family could survive on one salary, when they can barely manage on two. It's usually women who reduce their working hours to care for their offspring and who, as a result, lose out on economic security, pension contributions and future earning. And it's our welfare, tax and pension systems that haven't been built to compensate them for this work or even take it into account. Women's responsibility for care is presented as a free choice out of your own free will, you have to accept the consequences. Everything from the Scandinavian welfare states to our neoliberal economies is built on women doing certain kinds of jobs in the workforce at a very low cost....And this is work that's often related to care, to duty, nursing the sick, children and the ageing. Can today's problems in healthcare and education even be discussed without this perspective? The modern-day Margaret Douglas often takes care both of the children and of her own or her partner's sick parents. Seventeen per cent of unemployed British women quit their last job to care for someone else. For men, that figure is one percent."

The book was translated from Swedish and used a lot of incomplete sentences to make emphatic statements. Somehow, this style made it seem choppy to me, so it didn't read smoothly. Still, the ideas were interesting, so the end experience was a positive one.

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**Jonas says**

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## **Munthir Mahir says**

It seemed to me the book was actually a collection of newspaper columns. It is frustrating enough that an author posits a question as the purpose of a book and fail to answer it or deliver a coherent theory or argument on the question. But positing a question and leading the reader to expect an answer only to write at the last pages that the purpose of the book is not to answer the question is deceiving.

Actually there is no question to be answered, as the author concedes in the book that her main objection to economic theory, the exclusion of work performed in home by women, has already been addressed in economic theory albeit not satisfactorily to her. Matter of fact economics is not a science, I personally believe, at least not currently, however, it is ever evolving to refine its fundamentals with the the development of such theories and fields like behavioral economics.

The authors other main objection is that economics reduces human relations to emotionless transactions where everything even a marriage relationship can be modeled and managed by economic laws. I would say, why shouldn't it? Any science, even economics, should capture relationship dynamics just like Newton's third law of motion. Newton's law doesn't care about why you swung the bat against the lamp post it describes the action and its results. So does economics it does not care why you had to pay high price on a product it only describes the demand and supply relation.

The author keeps going on and on about how the economic man, the theoretical man used to model economic activities, fails to account for the way a woman thinks and performs her activities under social and cultural influences. But that is misleading, the economic man is a construct of the author and actually the economic man is a collective, an aggregate of all economic decisions and activities as they exist in an economy regardless of how these decisions and activities come about freely or under influence or coercion of society or culture. The author's squabbles with the economic man lay in politics and society not in economics.

Again, economics is already accounting for women's activities though not fully yet.

The author does not offer a solution or argument or theory on how does she wants economics to account for the love and care a woman expends raising her family; the paradox is once you model this love and care into a transaction or relationship it immediately becomes a faceless dry action with a price tag on it. Exactly what the author berates in economics - taking the humanity out of human relationships and transactions.

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## **Alex says**

As a feminist who is studying economics (at the Master's level), I was excited to read Katrine Marçal's book "Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?". The book purports to analyze and criticize the foundation of economics and argue that economics has excluded women due to the foundational assumption of economic man. To Marçal, "economic man" is everything that a man is, while failing to acknowledge everything that a woman is, even though women are the invisible labour in our economy that keeps it running. She argues that economics has "added women and stirred", but has failed to actually adapt to including women in their analysis'.

While I cannot (and will not) argue that economics doesn't exclude women, I have huge problems with the way Marçal goes about proving her point. She criticizes economics for being too simplified and then does it herself! (Oh, the irony.) She glosses over important details and makes sweeping generalizations about the discipline, to the point of being false. One example of this is that she asserts over and over again that economics only studies the individual (not how individuals interact with one another) and doesn't relax any of the "economic man assumptions", yet completely fails to take into account the sub-disciplines of both Game Theory and Behaviourial Economics (the latter is mentioned very briefly in passing). Another is that

she paints a picture of economists only having an interest in hypothetical, non-important questions, even though there are many fields of economics concerned with improving the quality of human life (and I don't just mean GDP per capita), such as development economics, health economics, labour economics, etc. Also, she dismisses economics, and yet uses economic studies as proof!! (Again, the irony). I often found myself reading statements she would write and wondering how the heck she'd made the logical leap and where the proof was. This was especially problematic. And lastly, her writing style was jarring and unsuited to the non-fiction writing of the sort she was trying to do. Overall, I would not recommend this book to anyone, especially not someone who studies economics, because it's just going to frustrate you.

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### **Alejandra Arévalo says**

Katrine Marçal realiza un recuento histórico desde el ya conocido "hombre económico" de Adam Smith hasta las diversas teorías económicas actuales que lo sustentan y que buscan que el hombre económico sea quien nos relacione como individuos. Todo esto mientras le brinda una mirada feminista, dándole voz al trabajo que durante miles de años ha realizado la mujer y que se le ha invisibilizado, de tal manera que hasta el día de hoy no se ha incluido en la economía actual. Con una mirada crítica brinda los argumentos para demostrar que no es el hombre económico la mejor forma de analizar al supuesto individuo y se necesitan otras maneras que entiendan a la persona y su manera de organizarse como sociedad. Sencillo, claro y para principiantes como yo (feministas e interesados en la economía).

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### **Anna says**

I REALLY wanted to like this book. I ordered it immediately after reading a review of it because I was so intrigued and excited by its premise. But I ended up disappointed in it and had to force myself to finish it. The central thesis of the book is interesting and crucially important, in my opinion (which is the reason it gets two stars and not one). But the author's clipped writing style would have lent itself better to a manifesto-style book that was half this book's length; that, or the book should have been longer and more academically rigorous. As it is, it felt vague and repetitive, revisiting asserted economic tropes over and over without really delving into economic theory enough to prove that those stated tropes were an accurate representation or criticism of economic theory. It's a good premise, but I would suggest you read a review of the book instead, as that will give you all the main ideas without the drudgery of actually reading the book.

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### **Viv JM says**

This is an entertaining and thoroughly readable feminist take-down of economic theory, in particular the idea of "economic man". Marçal's writing is occasionally angry, often very funny and always accessible. On the cover of my edition, there is a quote by Caroline Criado-Perez: *"I genuinely believe that if everyone read Katrine Marçal's new book, patriarchy would crumble..."* I concur!

By the way, the answer to the question "who cooked Adam Smith's dinner?" is, you guessed it, his mother!

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## **Oliver Clarke says**

An interesting, well reasoned take on economic theory that provides a useful primer on the basics (which I forgot a very long time ago), and then cleverly dissects them to reveal the significant gaps. The central message being that economic theory ignores the value of work done by women and that this (possibly deliberate) oversight means that the theory the world spins on is dangerously flawed.

It's engagingly written throughout and never gets too heavy even if, like me, you're not used to reading economics tomes. The feminist slant ends up feeling like common sense rather than a polemic and I can see myself reflecting back on the message in coming weeks and months.

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## **Nick Imrie says**

Adam Smith said 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.' This book is based on an interesting and thought-provoking observation: Adam Smith lived with his mother for all of her life, and she cooked his dinner every day. The butcher, baker and brewer may all demand payment for their work, but the work done by Mrs Smith was done out of love, and she was never paid for it. The book explores the simple observation that huge amounts of work are done without payment, the work of cooking, cleaning, childcare, elderly care, social care. Without this work capitalism could hardly survive - it is only because someone else is taking care of their day to day provisions that workers are free to dedicate themselves to paid work.

However, having made this observation, the book repetitively meanders, approaching it from various angles but never really following it through to any strong conclusions, and never really addressing it with any rigorous attention to the numbers.

The pros, cons and consequences of wages for all the kinds of work that are currently unpaid are never really explored in this book. Certainly not to the extent of the radical feminists of the 70s who made this same observation and followed with a load of demands for wages for housework, wages for childcare or transhumanist revolution of reproductive work.

Likewise, the economic consequences of women giving up all their unpaid caring work are not really explored. Would the economy collapse if women all simply refused to raise the next generation unless they were paid for it? Or would it thrive from a massive influx of women, suddenly free to focus on careers the way married men can? There are some frightening or exhilarating futures possible here, but they're hardly even mentioned.

The general gist of the argument seems to be: 'Women do a lot of necessary but unpaid work. That's a bit unfair, isn't it?'

Or perhaps: 'Men may refuse to do anything without immediate personal gain, but women aren't so selfish.'

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## **Megan says**

I'm giving this 5 stars, not in the sense of "best book ever" but rather "everyone should read." I've never studied economics, but I'm familiar with the pretty much ubiquitous idea (in America et al) of the invisible hand of the market--if everyone acts in their own self-interest, it benefits the economy. But this idea doesn't take into account the vast amount of unpaid labour, usually done by women, that actually makes everything run. (E.g. The famous economist Adam Smith's mother cooked his dinner for her entire life.) The book presents critiques on historical and contemporary economic and social theories, but I found that the same thesis was presented several times without leading to "next steps" for economic theory and policy. So I'm left

wanting to read more about feminist economics!

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### **Milena says**

As cinco estrelas são para incentivar a todos a lerem essa ótima reflexão sobre a economia global e como a tentativa de se anular as atividades que foram culturalmente atribuídas às mulheres afastam a possibilidade de termos um sistema econômico mais humano.

A reflexão será da tentativa de se masculinizar a economia, de dar a entender que tudo e todos podem ser guiados e previstos pelas leis econômicas. Mas essas leis excluem os cuidados, o feminino, as tarefas ditas da mulher.

"Como seu jantar chega a você? é a pergunta fundamental da economia e, mesmo se Adam Smith tivesse escrito que a resposta é o interesse pessoal, a mãe dele garantiria a comida na mesa toda noite e cuidaria dele quando tivesse febre."

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### **Wanda says**

If you are wondering what the answer to the title's question, it was his mother. Adam Smith never married and was cared for by his mother and a female cousin. Without whom he would never have had the time to write *The Wealth of Nations*.

Very appropriately, this book was penned by a young Swedish woman. She is properly outraged by the assumptions of the field of economics that women and many of the tasks that they undertake really don't count. She points out that the world gets split in two—male/female, logic/emotion, spirit/body, etc. and the female/emotional/physical gets short shrift in economic theory. Which is silly when you truly consider it, as we are all emotional and physical beings and we are all far from completely logical. It's this kind of deliberate omitting of important things that leads to environmental destruction (assuming it to be without cost) and the difficulty of getting food and medical care to those that need it around the world (because feeding & caring are "female" responsibilities, so they should be done for free and shouldn't be a factor in economic systems or a worry of politicians).

Self-interest exists, we all have it. But we also have people that we care about and for whom we do things that don't make sense logically. We also do nice things for people we don't even know—give directions, hand over spare change, say 'please' and 'thank you.' It doesn't make sense to run the financial world as though none of this exists or to act as though it only exists outside the financial world. While we are working to make the world a more equal place, maybe we can renovate economics to acknowledge reality?

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