

**Political Economy of Marriage**  
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Most economists deal with households without paying much attention to household composition and to the institutions which regulate households. The political economy of marriage provides an economic analysis of household formation, dissolution, and of production and distribution within marriage, while taking account of the political and legal constraints which influence the way individuals marry and function within marriages. Most research dealing with the political economy of marriage has been inspired by three intellectual traditions: marxist economics, neo-classical economic analysis, and game theory.

Ever since Engel's *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Marxist economists have recognized that much production and reproduction occurs within families. Scholars trained in this tradition have emphasized women's economic role as producers in the household, their traditional role being the maintenance and reproduction of the work force (e.g. Himmelweit and Mohun 1977). Early marxists such as Engel emphasized the impact of property structures on marriage and family. Many contemporary economic analyses of marriage examining the impact of men's political power on women's relative well-being--analyses usually associated with FEMINIST ECONOMICS--have been influenced by marxist thought (see Folbre 1994).

A second tradition is based on Gary Becker's neo-classical theory of marriage first published in 1973 (see Becker 1992 and NEW HOME ECONOMICS). While this research draws on the tools of individual utility maximization and marriage market analysis, it recognizes the influence of the legal and political system. Marriage market analysis is very similar to labor market analysis (see Grossbard-Shechtman 1995). Consider some of the production occurring within marriage, such as cleaning, listening, or gardening, and define spousal labor as work performed for the benefit of a spouse. Given that many women can potentially substitute for each other's spousal labor, and the same can be said for men, there will be markets for spousal labor.

In a market for female spousal labor women are on the supply side and men on the demand side. The market has an aggregate upward-sloping supply of spousal labor by women, and a downward-sloping demand by men. If a market equilibrium is obtained, the intersection of demand and supply determines both how many people marry and how much time they spend working in marriage (the quantity and production dimension) and how much spousal workers get paid for their work (the price and distribution dimension). It follows from here that the value of an individual's time in marriage is a function of marriage market conditions. Similarly, one could have markets for men's spousal labor.

As is the case with any other market, marriage markets function within a political economy. Laws, customs, and policies typically prevent these markets from clearing at the levels corresponding to a free market solution. Nevertheless, economists writing on marriage in the tradition of the NEW HOME ECONOMICS consider that individual wives and husbands are influenced by the market value of time in marriage established in marriage markets. After marriage, an individual's actual value of time in marriage may differ from that market value due to the existence of one-to-one ties and divorce costs. Intra-marriage bargaining may occur.

A third tradition in the political economy of marriage deals with bargaining between husbands and wives. This tradition, started by Marilyn Manser, Murray Brown, Marjorie McElroy and Mary Jane Horney in the early 1980's, relies on (cooperative and non-cooperative) game theories. These theories typically take marriage as given and analyze the determinants of production in marriage and distribution between husband and wife. This perspective is useful in analyzing how husbands and wives make decisions regarding the allocation of joint resources (see Lundberg and Pollack 1996).

Political, legal and religious institutions affect men and women's value in marriage by influencing (1) the levels of demand or supply, and therefore the market value of time in marriage, (2) the prevalence of a market mechanism in the allocation of brides and grooms into marriages, or (3) bargaining rules and resources inside a marriage. Here are a few examples. Laws regulating marriage and divorce influence aggregate conditions in markets for spousal labor. No-fault divorce laws, which lower the value of divorce settlements traditional women can expect, are likely to lower the supply of women's spousal labor. Where divorce is prohibited, marriage markets are less free to facilitate reallocation of husbands and wives and market value in marriage is less likely to vary with duration of marriage. Laws which automatically allocate custody over children to husbands or to wives at divorce will also influence the relative marriage market values of men and women, as well as the bargaining power of individual husbands and wives in a particular marriage.

Other examples of laws and practices influencing marriage market values include regulations about minimum age at marriage, exogamy and polygamy. Rules raising the minimum age at marriage are likely to increase the marriage market value of young women of marriageable age. Cultures often impose gender-asymmetric rules on exogamy, i.e. who can marry outside a group. For instance, Islam does not impose restriction on Moslem men's marriages to non-Moslem women, but Moslem women are not supposed to marry outside their religion. This asymmetry will hurt women's market value in marriage. In contrast, asymmetric polygamy allowing men to have multiple wives but not vice-versa is likely to benefit women's market value in marriage.

Furthermore, value in marriage and allocation into marriages depends on whether a market mechanism or a command mechanism regulates the allocation process. Where command mechanisms prevail, one expects more divergence from (free) market value of time in marriage. Command mechanisms have more influence where physical domestic violence, typically aimed at women, is tolerated more. At the extreme, if men feel free to kill their female relatives over issues of sexual behavior, women's freedom to make their own marriage choices will be limited, leading to women's inability to capture the market value of their time in marriage. Domestic violence against women may be more prevalent in cultures and in situations where the market value of women's time would otherwise be very high, such as polygamous societies (Guttentag and Secord 1983). Whether people are free to choose their own mates or whether they are forced to follow their parents' choice is another dimension of the extent of allocation by command.

The political economy of marriage helps us explain various aspects of marriage and divorce, such as incidence of marriage and divorce, type of marriage (formal or consensual union), and number of wives in a polygamous society. It is also helpful in explaining topics closer to the core of economics, such as consumption and labor supply. Some applied work in this field explains why child-oriented and wife-oriented

consumption is more likely to occur when wives have relatively more access to the family's income (e.g. Thomas 1990).

The political economy of marriage has also contributed to the study of labor supply. Studies have shown that marriage and divorce institutions, sex ratios, and individual resources of value in marriage markets affect the labor force participation of married women (e.g. Peters 1986, Grossbard-Shechtman 1995). The political economy of marriage has helped explain political movements as well. According to Heer and Grossbard-Shechtman (1981), the rapid growth of feminism in the U.S. in the early 1970's was partially the result of entry into adulthood of large numbers of women born during the baby-boom. Given that on average men's age at marriage exceeds that of women, baby-boom women faced a small demand for their spousal labor, and the market value of their time in marriage was lower than that of preceding cohorts of U.S. women. One of the reasons why feminist ideology appealed so strongly to young women at that time, is that they needed help in adjusting to objectively lower market value of time in marriage, and therefore lower opportunities for traditional marriage.

Being a new field, the political economy of marriage is in the process of integrating its various intellectual traditions. The various schools of thought tend to ignore each other. Many economists trained in the marxist/feminist tradition cast Becker and other neo-classical economists as villains, even though most Beckerian analyses of marriage are compatible with structural analysis and game theory. Most game theorists of marriage include minimal marriage market analyses, and most neo-classical economists ignore the research of economists taking a marxist/feminist perspective. Opportunities for political economists of marriage to interact with colleagues trained in a different tradition are rapidly increasing with the advance of computerized communication and with the internationalization of academia.

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