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To propose an interview for this new ASE series, please contact Jonathan Wight (jwight@richmond.edu), President of ASE for 2013, or Quentin Wodon (qwodon@worldbank.org), ASE newsletter editor.

Interview with Irene van Staveren: Some of the Main Strengths of Social Economics Lie in its Inter-disciplinarity, its Engagement with Ethics, and its Welcoming of Feminist Scholarship (Interview compiled by Quentin Wodon)

Irene van Staveren is Professor of Pluralist Development Economics with the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam. She also chairs the Institute's PhD program. She is a member of the board of the International Association For Feminist Economics and a Trustee on the Executive Council of the Association for Social Economics. She serves on the editorial board of *Economic Thought*, *Feminist Economics*, *Journal of Economic Issues*, and *Review of Social Economy*. Her research has appeared among others in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *Feminist Economics*, *Journal of Economic Issues*, *Journal of International Development*, *Review of Political Economy*, *Review of Social Economy*, and *World Development*. She is the editor with Mark D. White of *Ethics and Economics: New Perspectives* (Palgrave, 2010) and with Jan Peil of the *Handbook of Economics and Ethics* (Edward Elgar, 2009).



How did you become interested in social economics and who were your mentors?

My interest in social economics developed along parallel routes. One was through my emerging interest in gender issues and feminism as a graduate student. This led me to work by Deb Figart, Ellen Mutari, Nancy Folbre, and Julie Nelson. They showed me that feminist economics goes well beyond neoclassical economics and that social economics is a good theoretical foundation for progressive feminist economic analysis.

The other route was through my interest in ethics and its links with economics. I quickly found out that mainstream economics – the economics that I had been taught at Erasmus University – assumes ethics away. And worse than that, I discovered with a bit more effort that neoclassical economists believe that ethics and

economics are completely separate – the infamous positive/normative dichotomy.

Although it was through Amartya Sen's work that I really developed a thorough critique of welfare economics and began to see how ethics and economics are really interrelated, I realized that social economics had older foundations in the discipline, with important scholars such as Gunnar Myrdal. I was therefore very honored to be awarded the Gunnar Myrdal prize in 2000 from the European Association for Evolutionary Political Economy for my PhD dissertation.

My own work is always a blend of schools: social economics, old institutional economics, Post Keynesian economics and feminist economics. And even, where applicable, some neoclassical economics, such as the concept of diminishing marginal returns, but without the assumptions of utility

maximization, self-centered rationality, and market equilibrium.

Have you encountered any obstacles professionally (or personally) in working on social economics?

Like everywhere else except in North Korea and Cuba, I experienced some professional head-wind on my routes. It took me eight years to find a thesis advisor willing to supervise a PhD in economics with a focus on ethics and gender. But around me I always encountered support. From the professor who did have the courage to supervise my project – Arjo Klamer; from Amartya Sen who responded kindly to the letter I send him in 1994; from Deirdre McCloskey, then visiting professor in Rotterdam, a hard-nosed Chicago economist but acknowledging that facts and values are interrelated; and from the feminist economists around the world whom I learned to know very well.

Have you been able to connect your academic work with the world beyond academia in a way that makes a difference for others?

With hindsight, I see that I carved out my own path in theorizing about and undertaking empirical analysis in ethics and economics. I think that I was among the first who connected the feminist ethics of care to economics. And also one of the first who did that systematically, by arguing how caring makes for a very different economics than utilitarianism and deontology. I began to apply this approach in an exploratory survey among unpaid home care givers in Rotterdam and more recently in two case studies of what I called ‘caring finance’: one case study focused on bail-in bonds by a Dutch cooperative bank and the other on crowd-funding by ‘neighbors’ of organic farms, with a return on investment in farm products.

This pioneering work, with much trial and error, has resulted in an invitation almost three years ago to be part of a new exciting

initiative, the Sustainable Finance Lab – a think tank in the Netherlands taking a lead in pushing for a more sustainable financial sector economically, socially, and environmentally.

Now, I sit at the table with top bankers and regulators, discussing the why and how of changing banking culture towards more diversity, responsibility, and service to society. That appears to be a long and slow process. I have tried to do a survey among bankers on this topic, through the banks themselves. But after two years negotiating I had to give up: they don’t want to cooperate (unless I keep the results secret – this actually tells more about the Dutch banking culture than any survey result).

Now, I will post the survey online with links to it through the wide and growing network of bankers we have built in our Lab over the past three years. This option also gives me the possibility to ask any question I would like to ask, not bound by the banks’ fear for how results end up in the media.

What are the main strengths of social economics and our Association today and where is more work needed?

I find the main strengths of social economics in its inter-disciplinarity, its engagement with ethics, and its welcoming of feminist scholarship. I think these paths should be celebrated more as our strengths. It is the only school of thought, I think, which is genuinely interdisciplinary, open, and engaging with emancipatory movements.

But I also see weaknesses in the current state of social economics and our Association. First, we seem to be too kind to each other, perhaps as a response to the lack of recognition or even hostility from some mainstream circles. But this leads, in my view, to a lack of coherence, robustness, and progress in social economics. It almost becomes a free-for-all for just anybody with anti-mainstream sentiments. Or worse, parts of our conferences and some of the past issues of the *Forum for Social Economics* seem sometimes to have provided a

platform for ad hoc pick-and-choose efforts from social economics which are then integrated incoherently in a mainstream analysis. While the quality of the articles in the *Forum* has been improving, it still compares not so favorably with our flagship journal, the *Review of Social Economy*. I am very proud of this journal and feel honored to be on its editorial board.

Second, we seem too modest towards the outside world. I am writing an introductory economics textbook, in which I try as much as possible to give four theoretical perspectives in each chapter, including social-economics. I now realize how much concepts, measures, and policy tools are in fact related to social economics, but developed outside our own Association circles and thus not labeled as such. Think for example of the precautionary principle, new wellbeing measures such as social

progress and others, or the work on corporate social responsibility. If these are not widely recognized as being part of social economics, as enabled by and building on social economic thought and scholarship, how can we expect to progress?

What is your advice for graduate students and young scholars in social economics?

My advice to young scholars and graduate students is to follow your heart: find your own path, follow a purpose, and make it meaningful. Even if you don't reach the destination you thought you wanted to reach, you will enjoy the ride. I certainly ended up somewhere else than I initially thought I would. But this is a very interesting place.