

Review of Counting on Marilyn Waring: New Advances in Feminist Economics, edited by Margunn Bjørnholt and Ailsa McKay, Demeter Press 2014 in Morgenbladet, Norway 4-10 July 2014

While Thomas Piketty's bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* barely tests the discipline's boundaries in its focus on the rich, *Counting on Marilyn Waring* challenges most limits of what economists should care about.

Maria Berg Reinertsen, Economics commentator in Morgenbladet, Norway

The article translated:

Should breastmilk be included in gross domestic product?

Maria Berg Reinertsen

Morgenbladet, Norway 4.July 2014

[Translated from Norwegian]

We run into one of my former university professors, and I take the opportunity to expand the three-year old's knowledge of occupations beyond firefighter and barista. "This man is doing research on money ..." "No, no," protests the professor, "not money ..." "Sorry. This man is doing research on the real economy. " The three year old is unperturbed: "That man is very tall." But the correction is important.

Economists will not settle for counting money and millions, they will say something about what is happening in the real economy. But where are the limits of it?

The most underestimated economic book this spring is perhaps the anthology *Counting on Marilyn Waring: New Advances in Feminist Economics*, edited by Margunn Bjørnholt and Ailsa McKay. Waring is a pioneer in feminist economics, and while Thomas Piketty's bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* barely tests the discipline's boundaries in its focus on the rich, *Counting on Marilyn Waring* challenges most limits of what economists should care about.

The clearest example is the question: Should breast milk be included in the gross domestic product (GDP)? Yes, says Julie P. Smith, a researcher at Australian National University. But if you count the mother's milk, it must be valued.

In pursuit of the proper milk price Smith takes the reader on a journey to the frontier of the discipline of economics. First, breast milk was valued as cow's milk, writes Smith. Not exactly good since breast milk is better for babies. It is even possible to start with either breastmilk substitutes or the breast milk market between hospitals.

In Europe one liter of milk is valued at 130 euro in the "hospital market," but then you have also included the cost of storing milk.

Perhaps one should rather look at the salary of a wetnurse (\$ 50 day in the USA), the time it takes for the mother to breastfeed or what breastfeeding saves society? Australia would save \$ 32 million in special education if 20 percent more infants were breast-fed. The U.S. spends \$ 13 billion annually as a result of infant diseases due to artificial nutrition, writes Smith.

When the numbers are so large, they also affect the national economy. Valuing the mother's milk produced in sub-Saharan Africa even at a dollar a liter, will increase the region's GDP by between 2 and 5 percent. Since breast milk is not counted in GDP, the decline in breastfeeding in many developing countries is considered as increased GDP because more breast milk substitutes are sold.

But once Smith has breast milk in the national accounts, it also involves political reforms. There were savings to health and education in 2009 that convinced the productivity commission in Australia to recommend four months of maternity leave. Even in Norway breast milk does not count in the national accounts. However, the experience shows that it (counting the value of breastmilk in the GDP) is not necessary for society to facilitate breastfeeding. It was not economics but medicine that secured status for "mother's milk", says historian Kristin Asdal in a recent article. As leading medical professionals a hundred years ago recommended breastfeeding, the major argument was that the alternatives were so bad. Gruel, preserved milk and boiled cow's milk all gave risk of vitamin C deficiency and the dreaded disease "children scurvy."

Raw cow's milk was in itself good, but unsatisfactory hygiene by some manufacturers or distributors led to scandals where entire neighbourhoods were infected by bad milk.

Doctors found that the free milk market was difficult to control - it was easier to control families, writes Asdal. Under the threat of bacteria and vitamin deficiency and with appeal to the "natural", Norwegian mothers were encouraged to breastfeed their children.

The therapeutic value of breast milk was firmly established as the women's movement later demanded breastfeeding friendly reforms in the labor market. But viewed from the Ministry of Finance's perspective, money for maternity leave and paid time off to breastfeed is still only a cost, not an investment in the future. Does it matter? Yes, says Smith and refers to two "Nobel Prize winners" in economics. Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen use human milk as textbook example of how a lack of appreciation of "home production" in national accounts can mean an important factor is also overlooked by politicians.

GDP is excellent if you are looking for a measure of everything that you could potentially levy taxes on in a country. As a measure of the state of the country it's

pretty bad. Neither the depletion of natural resources, unpaid care or pollution are visible in the GDP.

This is part of the freshman curriculum in economics, so I thought most economists see it the same way, but this spring I started doubting. Then, on behalf of the Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK), Statistics Norway (SSB) calculated the cost of a six-hour working day. In their calculations Statistics Norway distinguishes only between work (productive) and leisure (unproductive). This is despite the Statistics Norway's own time use surveys showing that the average Norwegian on average spends as much time on paid work as on unpaid work. Shorter working hours obviously seem like an expensive luxury when it does not allow for the fact that time can be used for work that has value for ourselves or others, refurbishment of their home, child care, elderly care, or breastfeeding ...

In this way, the economics discipline limits the debate on political reform through its somewhat arbitrary definition of what counts in a country's economy. Following the same principle people will also be divided into "those outside" and "those who are in 'working life'". Those who create and those that spend - to use the Labour Party slogan ("Create and Share"). In the Danish debate called the "providers" and "enjoyers". Here we see more clearly the inspiration from the rightwing ideologue Ayn Rand's producers (producers) and looters (freeriders).

Is a mother breastfeeding her baby in maternity leave a provider or an enjoyer? Does she create anything? She will receive funding from the Norwegian state welfare system, but is she outside of the society? Hardly.

A member of what the Swedish Moderate Party call "the outsiders"? Well.

But one enjoys? I'm still unsure if the solution is to put the price tag on the milk in the boob. Because the distance from a full breast to a full and happy baby can be quite cumbersome.

It can involve sore boobs, crying sadly, the father walking around burping the baby, telephone counseling from a nurse, telephone consolation from grandma or an experienced friend.

Should this also count? An alternative to including even more into the GDP is insisting that the economy must be seen in context. Another article in Counting on Marilyn Waring is titled "Everything needs care": Everything needs care. Diapers should be changed, machinery needs maintenance, fields must lie fallow for not being depleted, workers must rest body and mind. Much of this care is provided in the family or in the public sector. There again, with the current systems of valuation it appears to be something the community allows itself to afford, not something that is essential to the part of the economy that actually shows up in GDP, the roads being built, light milk sold, the studycredits being produced, for everything to run smoothly.

Can we afford to raise the standard of care for the elderly? we ask. But not a word about the lost labor productivity of the son sitting distracted at work because he wonders where his demented father is heading right now. It is difficult to measure, but it is as real for that.

NEW APPROACH. 65 student organizations from 30 countries published a manifesto this spring- "International Student Initiative for Pluralist Economics" - demanding that the economics curriculum becomes more diverse.

NOK 150 Compensation from milk banks at Norwegian hospitals to women who donate breast milk.

