

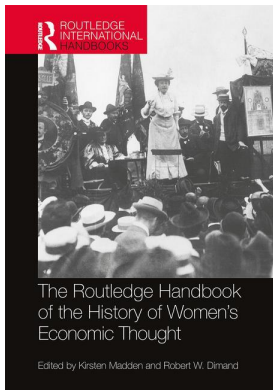
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HARRIET TAYLOR MILL, MARY PALEY MARSHALL AND BEATRICE POTTER WEBB

Women economists and economists' wives

Virginie Gouverneur

Introduction

The chapter focuses on three English women who lived between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and were married to well-known economists: Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–58), Mary Paley Marshall (1850–1944) and Beatrice Potter Webb (1858–1943). These women evolved in similar social backgrounds and expressed economic ideas, either by producing their own written works or by taking part in the production of works. Nevertheless, their stories diverge on several points.

First, they faced different contexts. Important changes occurred at the society level during the Victorian and Edwardian periods in England, notably regarding women's emancipation. Among these changes, women's access to education became possible as did academic teaching posts for female students.

In parallel with these social circumstances, great differences appear in the three women's personal experiences. After the initial developments of their intellectual circle and interest in Political Economy, they engaged in different types of relationships with eminent economists (John Stuart Mill, Alfred Marshall and Sidney Webb). These relationships took the form of partnerships, which had distinct effects on their "career" as economists, their participation in economic circles and the dissemination of their economic ideas.

The main purpose of the chapter is to compare the implications of these partnerships on the three women's contributions to the development of economic thought. While the role of Harriet Taylor Mill has always been discussed, the role of Mary Paley Marshall has been rediscovered recently (Hayek, 1951; McWilliams Tullberg, 1991, 1995). As for Beatrice Potter Webb, she was quickly reputed as a social researcher and never considered only as the wife of Sidney Webb.

The chapter also reviews, for each of the three women, a particular piece of their contribution, linked with the issue of the inequalities between men and women. These pieces, all distinct in form and in content, reflect great variations in their independence as thinkers and writers.

Harriet Taylor Mill

Born Harriet Hardy on 8 October 1807, Harriet was probably educated at home, no attendance at an outside school appearing in her biography (A. Robson, 2004: 1). This “largely self-educated woman” married John Taylor in 1826, a man noticed by her father (Rossi, 1970: 24). Harriet and John Taylor were active members of the Unitarian parish of William J. Fox, who, in 1827, became the editor of the *Monthly Repository*, the journal of the Unitarian Radicals. Harriet Taylor met John Stuart Mill in 1830. They married two decades later, in April 1851, two years after the death of Harriet’s first husband and they lived together until her death in 1858. Their long relationship, defined by Hayek as “friendship and subsequent marriage”, was marked by regular discussions and exchanges of views (Peart, 2014: *Editor’s introduction*). Moreover, Harriet Taylor’s intellectual circle widened through John Mill’s connections, even if several members of the *Philosophic Radicals*, the social circle to which Mill belonged in his youth, were rather sceptical about her intellectual capacities and influence on Mill (Rossi, 1970: 37). Her ideas have been expounded by way of her own works, published under Mill’s name, and works to which she contributed significantly.

Harriet Taylor’s writings

In 1831–32, Mill and Taylor exchanged their *Essays on Marriage*, in which, influenced by Taylor’s first marriage, they talked about marriage laws and the problem of divorce¹ (Rossi, 1970: 22–3). In 1851, *Enfranchisement of Women* was published under Mill’s name. He explained in the preface of the second edition that the treatise was entirely hers (Taylor, 1851: 91–3). Taylor’s authorship has since been confirmed (Rossi, 1970: 41–2; J. Robson, 1984: lxxiii–vii; Forget, 2003: 288, 299–302). A question then immediately comes to mind: why didn’t Taylor publish in her own name? Two reasons can explain that. First, it might be due to the long extra-conjugal nature of the Mills’ relationship, which was not acceptable at the time (Rossi, 1970: 40–1). Second, it has to be linked to the prevailing circumstances: women’s voices were rarely heard or considered equivalent to those of men. Therefore, Taylor and Mill might have chosen, through pragmatism, to publish under Mill’s name, to allow the ideas expressed about women’s emancipation to receive greater consideration.

Besides these individual productions, Taylor also collaborated with Mill on philosophical and economics books.

Mill’s and Taylor’s partnership

It is difficult to determine precisely Taylor’s contribution to the works presented by Mill as the fruit of their collaboration. In his autobiography, published in 1873, almost 15 years after Taylor’s death, Mill undertakes to bring into light her participation to these “joint productions” (Mill, 1873: 251). Then began a controversy about her real contribution to Mill’s writings, which has raged for more than a century (Rossi, 1970: 31–9). Several commentators have presented Mill’s portrait of Taylor as an exaggeration. Mill was indeed very eulogistic about Taylor’s intellectual capacities. Numerous passages describe her as a brilliant woman. However, it cannot be said that these remarks were solely the reflection of Mill’s great affection for Taylor. Other elements confirm both the influence that she had on Mill’s thought – including a socialist influence² – and the existence of a true collaboration (Hayek, 1951; Rossi, 1970; Pujol, 1995). In his autobiography, Mill detailed their complementarities. He affirmed that her mind was more practical than his and bolder in foresight:

The writings in which this quality [practicality] has been observed, were not the work of one mind, but of the fusion of two, one of them as pre-eminently practical in its judgments and perceptions of things present, as it was high and bold in its anticipations for a remote futurity.

Mill, 1873: 197–9

Moreover, he established a precise list of works to which Taylor would have contributed. He mentioned in particular the *Principles of Political Economy*, the first edition of which was published in 1848,³ and *On Liberty*, published in 1859 (Mill, 1873: 249, 255). The absence of mention of Taylor's name as co-author, or at least as contributor, might be linked to Mill's and Taylor's fear of the detrimental effects of such a mention on the reception of the works and to their belief that Mill's established name would attract a larger readership. A dedication was, however, added in the copies of the first edition of *Principles* given to friends (Hayek, 1951: 121–2).

Several elements indicate that Taylor was deeply involved in the production of the *Principles*. First, Mill, as thinker, was not easily influenced by the ideas of others (Rossi, 1970: 39). Second, in the list that he established of the works to which Taylor would have contributed, he did not include his *System of Logic* (1843), thus separating clearly his own works from the “joint productions” (Rossi, 1970: 39). Third, Taylor's and Mill's correspondence and Taylor's letters to her husband about her work on the *Principles* show that she contributed extensively to the book (ibid.: 39–40). Last, Mill distinguished Taylor's contribution to the *Principles* from his. He asserted in particular that Taylor was the main author of the chapter entitled “On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes” (Mill, 1848: 758–96; 1873: 254–5; Jacobs, 1998: 291). This assertion can be supported by the examination of the chapter in parallel with the argumentation adopted by Taylor in *Enfranchisement of Women*. Many points of convergence appear between both. In particular, Taylor, adept in socialist ideas, offered an interesting comparison of the relations between the poor and rich classes and the relations between the sexes, as they prevailed at the time.

Sex and class in Taylor's economic thought

At the beginning of *Enfranchisement of Women*, Taylor explains that “the division of mankind into two castes, one born to rule over the other, is [. . .] an unqualified mischief; a source of perversion and demoralization [. . .] forming a bar [. . .] to any really vital improvement, either in the character or in the social condition of the human race” (Taylor, 1851: 98). The law and custom by which women are instituted as a dependent class, men as their superiors, must be fought (ibid.: 97, 109, 118). This statement appears in line with the critique of the “theory of dependence and protection” which is contained in the chapter in the *Principles* on the future condition of the labouring classes. In this critique, a direct parallel is made between the social relations between men and women and the relations between rich and poor as they are legitimated by the “theory of dependence” (Mill, 1848: 759, 761):

The relation between rich and poor*, according to this theory [of dependence] (a theory also applied to the relation between men and women)*⁴ should be only partly authoritative; it should be amiable, moral, and sentimental: affectionate tutelage on the one side, respectful and grateful deference on the other.

Mill, 1848: 759

The *Principles*' chapter points out the idea of a progressive transformation of the relations between capitalists and hired labourers: “it is not to be expected that the division of the human race into

two hereditary classes, employers and employed, can be permanently maintained” (Mill, 1848: 767). Moreover, it expresses a strong belief in the capacity of “self-government” of the individuals and denounces the patriarchy and paternalism implied in the “theory of dependence and protection”: “[t]he rich should be in loco parentis to the poor, guiding and restraining them like children” (ibid.: 759, 762, 763–4). Similarly, Taylor explains in *Enfranchisement of Women* that men have not to decide for women their “proper sphere”, namely “private and domestic life”: “The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to. What this is, cannot be ascertained, without complete liberty of choice” (Taylor, 1851: 100).

The enlargement of women’s sphere of action requires the opening of all occupations to women. A greater efficiency of work would follow from *laissez-faire*. It would lead to the specialization of each labourer, whatever his or her sex or class, in the paid occupation to which his or her aptitudes are the best adapted:⁵

Each individual will prove his or her capacities [. . .] by trial; and the world will have the benefit of the best faculties of all its inhabitants. But to interfere beforehand by an arbitrary limit, and declare that whatever be the genius, talent, energy or force of mind of an individual *of a certain sex or class*, those faculties shall not be exerted [. . .] is not only an injustice to the individual, and a detriment to society [. . .] but is also the most effectual mode of providing that, *in the sex or class so fettered*, the qualities which are not permitted to be exercised shall not exist.

Taylor, 1851: 101; italics added

Then, Taylor examines the negative effects of the increase of competition which would be induced by women’s free participation in the labour market. She admits the idea, often invoked at the time, that women’s freedom of occupation, by leading to an increase of the number of competitors, would depress wages in the “employments monopolized by men” (Taylor, 1851: 104). The worst consequence would be that “a man and a woman could not together earn more than is now earned by the man alone” (ibid.: 104). But even in this case, Taylor considers that married women should work to contribute to the family income⁶ (ibid.: 105). By this contribution, the wife “would be raised from the position of a servant to that of a partner” (ibid.: 105). The *Principles*’ chapter describes the same kind of evolution regarding the relations between employers and employed. With the progress of society, hired labourers would be raised from the position of servants to that of “partners” (Mill, 1848: 766–9).

Finally, to strengthen her argument in favour of women’s work, Taylor mentions several forms of compensation for the depression of wages that would be caused by women’s massive entry into the labour market. The interdiction of children’s work would limit competition: contrary to women, they “are necessarily dependent, and under the power of others; and their labour, being not for themselves but for the gain of their parents, is a proper subject for legislative regulation” (Taylor, 1851: 105). Taylor evokes also two positive ultimate results of the progress of society:

With respect to the future, we neither believe that improvident multiplication, and the consequent excessive difficulty of gaining a subsistence, will always continue, nor that the division of mankind into capitalists and hired labourers, and the regulation of the reward of labourers mainly by demand and supply, will be for ever, or even much longer, the rule of the world.

Taylor, 1851: 105

The decrease of population growth would eliminate progressively the evil of over-population and its negative effects on individual wages. This decrease would be permitted by factors exposed in the *Principles* chapter. A change of habits, in particular through education and mental cultivation, shall be accompanied by “the opening of industrial occupations freely to both sexes”; indeed, “the industrial and social independence of women” would probably lead to “a great diminution of the evil of over-population” (Mill, 1848: 763–6). More generally, women’s confinement to maternity and their dependence on men form a bar to human improvement:

The ideas and institutions by which the accident of sex⁷ is made the groundwork of an inequality of legal rights, and a forced dissimilarity of social functions, must ere long be recognised as the greatest hindrance to moral, social, and even intellectual improvement.

Ibid.: 765

Therefore, law and custom should not prevent women from gaining a livelihood:

The same reasons which make it no longer necessary that the poor should depend on the rich, make it equally unnecessary that women should depend on men; and the least which justice requires is that law and custom should not enforce dependence [. . .] by ordaining that a woman, who does not happen to have a provision by inheritance, shall have scarcely any means open to her of gaining a livelihood, except as a wife and mother.

Mill, 1848: 765

Taylor, in *Enfranchisement of Women*, refers to the end of the division of mankind into capitalists and hired labourers (Taylor, 1851: 105). This reference echoes the idea, defended in the *Principles* chapter, that the “[t]endency of society towards the disuse of the relation of hiring and service” will induce the replacement of the concurrence by the cooperation between labourers (Mill, 1848: 766). Then, men and women would become partners rather than competitors.

Questions remain about Taylor’s capacities as an economist: would she have been able to write her own economics books? Or to write entire parts of the *Principles* without Mill’s touch? But also consider a simple inversion of this question: would Mill have been able to produce the *Principles* as they were published in 1848 and modified in subsequent versions without Taylor’s influence and comments? With regard to at least one chapter, it was most certainly her ideas, although edited by Mill, that were expounded.

Mary Paley Marshall came into the world in 1850, 43 years after Taylor. Contrary to Taylor, Marshall had access to higher education and revealed the required capacities for becoming an economist; yet her contribution to economic thought was limited, partly because of her marriage to Alfred Marshall.

Mary Paley Marshall

Raised in a broad-minded family, Mary Marshall, supported by her father, was among the first women to be admitted to Cambridge University. There, she discovered an interest in studying Political Economy (M. P. Marshall, 1947: 50). She was the student of her future husband, Alfred Marshall, who encouraged her to study for the Moral Sciences Tripos, which included examination papers in Political Economy (McWilliams Tullberg, 1995: 152–4). Mary Marshall

passed her Tripos examinations with distinction in 1874. In 1875, she was invited to return to Newnham College to lecture on Political Economy in place of Alfred Marshall, being thus the first woman economics lecturer at Cambridge. She and Alfred Marshall became engaged in 1876. During their engagement, they began to work together on *The Economics of Industry*. They married in 1877, contracting out of the clause whereby wives vow to obey their husband (ibid.: 155).

From Marshalls' The Economics of Industry (1879) . . .

Mary Marshall was living proof that women could attain formal qualifications and academic recognition in the field of Political Economy. She had a long career as a teacher in Political Economy and was regarded as a role model by female students.⁸ Additionally, she started a career as an economist, which was shortly afterwards interrupted. She collaborated with her husband on *The Economics of Industry*, published under both their names in October 1879. John Maynard Keynes wrote in his biography of Mary Marshall that the book, “which was originally hers”, was an excellent text (Keynes, 1944: 333). Her personal contribution is nevertheless difficult to delimit. The production came about through a request from Professor Stuart, who asked Mary Marshall in 1876, two years after her success in the Moral Sciences Tripos, to write a small economics textbook for the University Extension Lectures, which had just started at Newnham (M. P. Marshall, 1947: 22). Mary Marshall, who was soon scared by the work required by such a book, asked help from her fiancé Alfred Marshall (ibid.: 22). Thus, while the first part of the book is mainly hers, the following parts are probably his in great part.

The joint production was a sales success. It was reprinted nine times between 1879 and 1891 and a revised edition was published in 1881. Yet, Alfred Marshall never liked the book, criticizing its elementary nature and brevity (M. P. Marshall, 1947: 22). Despite continuing high demand, the book was allowed to go out of print in the early 1890s (Keynes, 1944: 333–4). It was replaced by an abridged version of Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics*, which was published in 1892 under the title *The Economics of Industry*⁹ and with Alfred Marshall's sole name.

. . . to Alfred Marshall's Principles of Economics (1890)

The Marshalls' first experience of co-authorship was never repeated. After the revised edition of *The Economics of Industry* (1881), Mary Marshall put her capacities totally into the service of her husband. She contributed to the production of the *Principles of Economics* through proofreading and suggestions (Keynes, 1944: 336). Alfred Marshall wrote in the preface of the first edition: “My wife has aided and advised me at every stage of the MSS and of the proofs, and it owes a very great deal to her suggestions, her care and her judgement” (A. Marshall, 1890, vol. 2: 37; cited in Groenewegen, 1993: 104). He reiterated these acknowledgements in the fifth and final editions. However, Mary Marshall was not cited as co-author. Her work was one of secretary and subeditor rather than that of a colleague taking part in content and structure (McWilliams Tullberg, 1995: 167). Her help was also recognised by her husband in the preface of *Elements of the Economics of Industry*: a slight compensation for the fact that her name disappeared from the front cover. Mary Marshall accepted without complaint the deletion of the evidence of her contributions. She assisted Alfred Marshall until his death in 1924, notably in the production of his last two works, *Industry and Trade*, published in 1919, and *Money, Credit and Commerce*, published in 1923, when Marshall was more and more unwell. After Marshall's death, she played an important role in the last 20 years of her life in the development of the Marshall Library of Economics in Cambridge.

Keynes described the Marshall partnership in this way:

This was not a partnership of a Webb kind, as it might have become if the temperaments on both side had been entirely different [. . .] Yet it was an intellectual partnership just the same, based on profound dependence on the one side (he could not live a day without her), and, on the other, deep devotion and admiration, which was increased and not impaired by extreme discernment.

Keynes, 1944: 335

Unfortunately, Mary Marshall was married to a man who, “in spite of his early sympathies and what he was gaining all the time from his wife’s discernment of mind [. . .] came increasingly to the conclusion that there was nothing useful to be made of women’s intellects” (Keynes, 1944: 335). In 1894 for example, Alfred Marshall said: “Economics is like a fine chest of tools, which will not turn out anything of value except in skilful hands. This indicates that economics is a subject generally unsuited for advance by women” (Manuscript note, 28 May 1894, Marshall archives, Box 5, Item 1b; cited in McWilliams Tullberg, 1991: 235).

Apart from *The Economics of Industry*, Mary Marshall’s bibliography comes down to two contributions in the *Economic Journal*. In March 1896, she reviewed some of the papers presented at the “Conference of Women Workers” held at Nottingham in October 1895 under the aegis of the National Council of Women. The most substantial section of her review consisted in a critique of Beatrice Webb’s plea for “Further restrictions on women’s labour” (B. Webb, 1896). She mentioned “more moderate advocates” of such restrictions, among whom her own husband, in his *Principles of Economics*, presented the regulation of women’s labour as a necessary condition to enable women to perform properly their maternal and domestic duties (A. Marshall, 1890, vol. 1: 69, 685). Six years later, in 1902, she reviewed Clara Collet’s book *Educated Working Women*, a collection of some of Collet’s papers. In her review, she agreed wholeheartedly with Collet’s idea that there are natural differences between men’s and women’s intellects which lead them to exercise different and complementary occupations, rather than to be in competition (M. P. Marshall, 1902: 252).

So, Mary Marshall was not inclined to voice her opinions loud and clear. And some of her words were clearly taken from her husband. Nevertheless, her exceptional devotion for Alfred Marshall did not prevent her having personal ideas, in particular on women’s education and wages. A paragraph of *The Economics of Industry*, which focused on the inequalities between men’s and women’s wages, disappeared totally in Alfred Marshall’s *Principles of Economics*, although this book was supposed to enrich the previous one. This suggests that the paragraph was largely based on Mary Marshall’s ideas.

Mary Paley Marshall on inequalities of wages between the sexes

The object of the paragraph about inequalities between men’s and women’s wages is to identify the sources of the wage discrimination¹⁰ which affected women on the labour market. No principles-writing economist had addressed the subject since John Stuart Mill, who devoted a chapter of the *Principles of Political Economy* to the study of the causes of women’s low wages (Mill, 1848: 337–8).

The main idea defended in the paragraph is that a great part of women’s relative low wages comes from custom and general opinion, despite equal productivity:

In England many women get low wages, not because the value of the work they do is low, but because both they and their employers have been in the habit of taking it for granted that the wages of women must be low. Sometimes even when men and women do the same work in the same factory, not only the Time-wages, but also the Task-wages of the women are lower than those of the men.

A. and M. P. Marshall, 1879: 175–6

This departure from a marginal productivity determination of wages is explained by several factors. To the extent in which differences in pay are due to “custom”, they would decrease through “the progress of intelligence” and the “habits of competition” (A. and M. P. Marshall, 1879: 176). However, an important part of the differences is due to causes of a permanent character. Employers “say that if a man and a woman are equally good workers, the woman is of less service in the long run” (ibid.: 176). A woman’s thoughts are considered more likely to be occupied about her home rather than her work abode and her work is “more liable to be interrupted than that of a man” (ibid.: 176). Moreover, women would have “on the whole less persistence, and less judgment and resource in cases of difficulty” (ibid.: 176). As a result, “the employer often prefers to have men, because he can select from them foremen and overlookers as well as workers in those branches of the business in which discretion is wanted” (ibid.: 176). Women would also be at a disadvantage in many kinds of work which, while generally regarded as light, “occasionally require the use of great physical strength, and perhaps the working overtime in special emergencies” (ibid.: 176). In the end, the occupations for which women are well fitted are few. They therefore are “overcrowded and badly paid”, the excess of labour supply inducing a decrease of labour productivity and wages (ibid.: 176). Then, this fact “influences custom and general opinion, and causes women to be underpaid when they are doing difficult work well” (ibid.: 176). While the law of normal wages implies that “[t]rades in the same industrial grade generally required an equally difficult and expensive education and have equal wages”, this is not the rule with regard to women’s wages (ibid.: 131). In their case, custom and tradition are greater determinants than actual productivity.

The last part of the *Principles*’ paragraph shows that the effects of the occupational segregation on women’s wages are decreasing with the progress of society. First, “the progress of science and machinery is opening out to women many new occupations”, as telegraphy or lighter metal trades, “in which very little physical strength is required” (ibid.: 176). Second,

the progress of education is fitting women to do more difficult work and is making them more ready to demand, and employers more ready to grant them higher wages for it: and it is much increasing their employment in the higher part of the work of education itself

Ibid.: 176

Third, “the progress of enlightenment” is breaking down barriers, as “prejudice, and trades union rules”, which limit women’s entry in “a very few occupations for which they are well fitted”, in particular the “medical treatment of women and children” (ibid.: 176). Last, the paragraph forecasts a gradual increase of women’s employment in works of business management (ibid.: 176–7).

Several elements indicate that the ideas expressed in this paragraph are rather those of Mary Marshall. The emphasis on women’s access to education and on the increase of their employment in the higher part of the work of education is in line with her proper experience. In contrast, Alfred Marshall’s position on these subjects changed rapidly. He refrains totally in his

ulterior works from addressing the question of the inequalities between the sexes on the labour market, rather insisting on the fact that women's place is, above all else, at home. The ideas contained in the paragraph contrast clearly with those that Alfred Marshall defends less than ten years after in his *Principles of Economics*. In this book, he affirms that too high wages can lead women "to neglect their duty of building up a true home, and of investing their efforts in the Personal capital of their children's character and abilities" (A. Marshall, 1890, vol. 1: 685). In order to oblige women to stay at home, he preconizes the control of their wages (Pujol, 1992: 128). As for Mary Marshall, she remained all through her life an active champion of women's education and of the increase of their employment, particularly in the domains of teaching and business management. For example, in her review of Collet's book *Educated Working Women*, she agrees with Collet's plea for the introduction of women in business and in factory management (M.P. Marshall, 1902: 256).

To sum up, if Mary Marshall had probably the means to engage in a career as an economist, she used her talents, beyond a successful career as teacher, for contributing to her husband's works as assistant rather than as collaborator. This can be explained by the circumstances of the time – women had only just been introduced into the sphere of high studies and still met great difficulties in being admitted to the same positions as men – by her marriage to a man who quickly adopted a one-way vision of intellectual partnership, and by her own personality, which was discreet and opposed to conflict. A question nevertheless arises: could Alfred Marshall have had the same career without his wife helping him and taking care of him?

Beatrice Potter Webb was only eight years younger than Mary Marshall. However, her character, experience and inclinations were quite different. While a professional career and a happy marriage were thought to be incompatible for women at the time, she had both.

Beatrice Potter Webb

On 8 March 1889, Beatrice Potter, future Beatrice Webb, recounted in her diary a particular piece of advice from Alfred Marshall concerning her research interests:

There is one thing that you, and only you can do – an inquiry into that unknown field of female labour. You have (unlike most women) a fairly trained intellect, and the courage and capacity for original work, and yet you have an insight into a woman's life. There is no man in England who could undertake with any prospect of success an inquiry into female labour [. . .] A book by you on the Co-operative movement I may get my wife to read to me in the evening to while away the time, but I shan't pay any attention to it.

B. Webb, 1926: 398–9

Yet, making choices contrary to Alfred Marshall's advice, Beatrice Webb received the highest recognition as an economist among the three women considered here. Several facts proved her acceptance by academics. She was the first woman to be elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1930. She was Visitor of the London School of Economics, a high honour, and was also invited by the School from the early years of its foundation to come and speak on various subjects, contributed a standard teaching practice of a series of five lectures on a specialist subject. In 1909, she gained an honorary doctorate from the University of Manchester for the Commission on the Poor Law's Minority Report that she submitted.

Beatrice Webb was born in 1858 in an affluent upper-middle-class family of radical dissenters. She was "educated at home by governesses, by extensive travel on the continent and by a

wide and serious range of reading” (Hamilton, 1959: 936). She received her earliest political inspirations through discussions with her father’s distinguished visitors, including Herbert Spencer. One of her first contributions was to assist her cousin Charles Booth in carrying out his immense and pioneering survey of the Victorian slums of London, which eventually became the massive 17-volume *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902–1903). She contributed research into the conditions of labour for homeworkers in the East End garment trade. In 1887, she published an article, entitled “Dock Life in East London”. The following year, five of her articles on sweated labour had been published. She began to enjoy a reputation as a knowledgeable social scientist and gave evidence before the House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System (Magill *et al.*, 1999: 3905).

Beatrice Webb also participated in philanthropic work carried out by the Charity Organisation Society based in London. She was rapidly critical of the usual *modus operandi* of charitable work which, according to her, was ineffective to improve the condition of the vast numbers of the poor. She thus started to give priority to the understanding of the causes of poverty in order to use charity “as a means to prevent poverty, not just relieve it” (Cicarelli and Cicarelli, 2003: 217). She visited incognito relatives of her family who lived in the industrial towns of Lancashire and discovered the labouring class and its organisations. Her experiences with workers in sweatshops led her to conclude that “destitution is a disease of society itself” and resulted in the publication of her first book, *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, in 1891 (B. Webb, 1948: x). In this book, she coined the terms “co-operative federalism” and “co-operative individualism”. She identified herself as a co-operative federalist, advocating consumer co-operative societies. Her research on co-operative societies led her to study another form of working-class organisation: the trade unions. The task of gathering information about these “democracies of producers” proved more complicated than the job she did for the “democracies of consumers” (S. and B. Webb, 1921: vi). She thus looked for help and was recommended to Sidney Webb in 1890. His name was then moderately well known in circles interested in social reform. Introduced in 1884 to the Fabian Society, which was founded in 1883, he rapidly became a member of its executive committee and started to write and to lecture for the Society. It was through him that Beatrice came into contact with the Fabian Society. Married in June 1892 when Beatrice Webb was 34 years old, they shared from that time on professional and political activities.

The Webb partnership

Contrary to Taylor and Mill, Beatrice and Sidney Webb enjoyed a reputation for truly shared work. Their biographer Mary Agnes Hamilton has described their partnership in the following terms:

It is not only that they have written, together, books in which no one can detach what belongs to one from what belongs to the other [. . .] They are in fact [. . .] the brightest example of what she has called a “double-star-personality, the light of one being indistinguishable from that of the other”.

Hamilton, 1932: 1–2

The first product of the Webb partnership was a book in the field of economic history: *The History of Trade Unionism*, published in 1894. It was followed in 1897 by *Industrial Democracy*, which, as a sequel to the preceding study, was devoted to an analysis of the structure, function and theory of trade unionism (Cicarelli and Cicarelli, 2003: 218). The book recommended the transformation of some of the doctrines of British trade unionism to put them in conformity

with modern democratic principles. It contained policy proposals addressed to the government, defending the idea of a “national minimum” necessary to prevent poverty (ibid.: 218). Two years after, in 1899, the Webbs began a great study of the history and problems of English local governing bodies, called later “democracies of citizens”. This study resulted in ten large volumes published at intervals between 1906 and 1929, in addition to some half-dozen smaller books on specialized local government problems. In 1921, they returned to the study of the associations of consumers and published *The Consumer's Cooperative Movement* (S. and B. Webb, 1921: vi). In 1928, they retired to Hampshire and lived there until their deaths in the 1940s. After the fall of the second minority Labour government, their interest turned to the Soviet Union, where, during travel in 1932, they virtually discovered a Fabian paradise. This led them to their last large-scale book, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* published in 1935, which was strongly criticized for its reckless glorification of the Soviet economic experiment. In particular, their denial of the famine and defence of Stalin's purges and show trials was a dramatic shift from their long upholding of Fabianism rather than revolution.

The Webb partnership was also effective in the creation of social institutions and political activism. In 1895, they co-founded the London School of Economics and Political Science. Their other major achievements were the co-founding in 1913 of the *New Statesman*, a weekly review of politics, and of the Fabian Research Department, with a view to providing information to support trade union activity and campaigns. In 1914, they became members of the Labour Party. Some years later, Beatrice Webb collaborated with her husband in his writings as Fabian representative on the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, which include the policy statement *Labour and the New Social Order* (1918).

Moreover, Beatrice and Sidney Webb did not neglect questions related to women, whether it be in partnership or independently (Nyland and Ramia, 1994). Beatrice Webb already showed a concern for working-class women's living conditions before she met Sidney Webb¹¹ (ibid.: 110–11). One year after their meeting, in 1891, Sidney Webb wrote an article upon the “Alleged Differences in Wages Paid to Women and Men for Similar Work”. The paper indicated several possible causes of the inferiority of women's wages, namely custom and public opinion, lower standard, lower productivity and lack of protective power (S. Webb, 1891: 660–1). In 1896, Beatrice Webb argued in favour of the legal regulation of wage-earning women's hours and conditions of labour in a plea entitled “Women and the Factory Acts”.¹² She then explained that such a regulation induced more advantages than free competition supported by liberal feminists. According to her, it promoted (female) workers' economic independence and industrial efficiency (B. Webb, 1896: 4). The question of sex equality was also directly included in Beatrice and Sidney Webb's preoccupations. Deploring the sweating system, they pointed out the disastrous effect of unrestrained competition on the lives of the many thousands of workers in the sweated trades, especially on women. Between 1905 and 1909, they wrote together a Minority Report of which the purpose, according to Beatrice Webb, was to call for policies designed to “secure a national minimum of civilised life [. . .] open to all alike, of both sexes and all classes” (B. Webb, 1948: 481–2).¹³ Then, over the years, Beatrice Webb became somewhat more involved in the women's movement. In 1914, she published five papers about women's “Personal rights and the Woman's Movement”. The last two papers dealt with women's rights to unrestricted entry into all occupations and to equal remuneration with men under a national minimum wage. In 1919, she wrote a Minority Report published under the title “The Wages of Men and Women: Should They Be Equal?” Nothing indicates that Sidney Webb contributed to this report. While it contains ideas that Sidney shared with Beatrice, notably on destitution and the need of a national minimum, it conveys also a more personal evolution in Beatrice Webb's ideas.

Beatrice Webb's Minority Report on men's and women's wages

In 1918, the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry appointed a Committee “to investigate and report on the relation which should be maintained between the wages of women and men having regard to the interests of both as well as to the value of their work” (B. Webb, 1919: 3). Beatrice Webb was “unable to agree with the Majority Report” which was produced by the Committee, “either in its scope and substance, or in its conclusions and recommendations” (ibid.: 7). She thus wrote the Minority Report in which she proposes her own recommendations about “the relation that should prevail in future between men's and women's wages” (ibid.: 4).

In her report, Beatrice Webb links the problem of the inequality between men's and women's wages to the more general question of the inequality between capitalists' and labourers' incomes:

The present inequality between men's and women's earnings – an inequality without any relation to their respective efforts and sacrifices – is only part of a larger question, the inequality between the incomes of those who live by owning and organising the instruments of production, and the incomes of those who live by using these instruments.

B. Webb, 1919: 5

Challenging “The formula of ‘Equal pay for Equal Work’”, that she considers too ambiguous and easy to get round by employers, she argues that wages must be determined by the occupational rate (ibid.: 21–4, 46–8).

She first affirms that “[t]he principle of individual bargaining” must be rejected (ibid.: 7–8). According to her,

experience has demonstrated [. . .] that to leave the determination of wages, in a capitalist organisation of industry, to the unfettered operation of “individual bargaining” in the “higgling of the market” between individual employers and individual wage-earners, is to produce, in the community, a large area of “sweating”.

Ibid.: 9, 27–8

Instead of payments settled by individual bargaining, an occupational rate must be fixed by collective bargaining “between representative organisations of the employers and the employed” in all occupational grades (ibid.: 31, 72). This “principle of collective bargaining and of the occupational rate” would address the need for “minimum conditions of service” (ibid.: 11). As Beatrice Webb explains, “[t]he argument in favour of a common standard rate as a minimum for each occupational grade [. . .]” is “much the same as that in favour of the national minimum, only stronger” (ibid.: 28, 30).

Other reasons, “applicable both to manual workers and to brainworkers”, justify the existence of “an occupational rate” (ibid.: 32). If the employer must pay the standard rate as a minimum to every person engaged, “he will be continually seeking to pick, for the common price, the most efficient worker” (ibid.: 31). The enforcement of standard conditions of employment makes for maximum production in the sense that it affects positively the productivity of industry through “increased efficiency in the selection of the workers and the stimulus to their progressive improvement” (ibid.: 32).

Nevertheless, Beatrice Webb condemns the fact that, “at present”, the principle of the occupational rate leads to a female rate and to a male rate:

The determination of wages by the occupational rate operates [. . .] largely to keep down women's wages in relation to men's. For reasons into which we need not here enter, women have so far been unable to make as much use as men of collective bargaining or political pressure, and they have found the balance of power against them.

B. Webb, 1919: 13

She mentions some additional influences that have “tended to lower the occupational rates for women, as compared with those for men” (B. Webb, 1919: 13). First, she explains that “the more or less adjustment of money wages to the cost of living has worked against women” (ibid.: 13). For her, the principle of raising money wages in correspondence with any substantial increase in the cost of living must apply equally to men's and women's wages. Second, she considers that “[t]he principle of determining wages by [the extent of] family obligations” must be rejected (ibid.: 13). She criticizes the assumption that women, contrary to men, have no family obligations, which is used as “an argument in favour of a lower national minimum and lower occupational rates for women than for men” (ibid.: 16, 44). Last, Beatrice Webb objects to the maintenance of “[t]he principle of the vested interest of the male”. She disapproves “[t]he long-continued exclusion of women from nearly all the better-paid occupations”, which “has been largely the result of the assumption that these occupations were the sacred preserve of men” (ibid.: 17, 20). To prevent women accessing better-paid occupations is not only a restriction of their liberty, but is also damageable from an economic point of view: “any such narrowing of the field of selection, and any such limitation of choice of occupation, necessarily detracts, to an unknown degree, from that utilisation to the fullest extent of every available talent upon which maximum productivity depends” (ibid.: 44). It is necessary to open “all posts and vocations to any individuals who are qualified for the work, irrespective of sex, creed or race” (ibid.: 72). The best utilisation of the available talents in society would be guaranteed by the extension to all kinds of occupations of “the principle of making employment conditional on the possession of a specific technical qualification for the calling” (ibid.: 20). Brain-working as well as manual occupations would become professions requiring “a prescribed minimum of technical efficiency” (ibid., 45).

Beatrice Webb's opposition to the existence of a male rate and a female rate reflects an evolution in her views. It coincides with a reversal of her opinion upon regulation of women's work; she indeed maintains in her report that there is no case for a sex-specific protective labour law (B. Webb, 1919: 10, 40; Nyland and Ramia, 1994: 138). It eliminates also any margin for concession. In *Industrial Democracy*, Beatrice and Sidney Webb accepted the idea that segregation, or the existence of male and female occupations paid at different rates, was justified by women's lesser strength and skill (B. and S. Webb, 1897: 506–7; Nyland and Ramia, 1994: 128, 138). In her 1919 report, Beatrice Webb denounces the fact that the segregation of men and women in industry caused by the First World War, whether it “was influenced by custom and convention, or determined by relative aptitude”, has given rise to “markedly different rates of remuneration for what was recognised as a ‘man's job’ and what as a ‘woman's job’” (B. Webb, 1919: 19). In “Personal Rights and the Woman's Movement” (1914), Beatrice Webb conceded, although reluctantly, that it was still necessary to maintain a separate female and male standard rate in many trades in which women could be hired only by taking employment for less than the standard rate (Nyland and Ramia, 1994: 140). In her Minority Report, she advocates the enforcement of identical occupational rates and admits no exception to the rule (B. Webb, 1919: 35–9):

The existence within any one occupational grade of higher and lower rates of wages, or of special deductions which make it equally profitable to the employer to engage at the lower rate, or with the deductions, workers of relatively inferior efficiency – and, as must inevitably happen, sometimes in the employer’s opinion, even more profitable – is accordingly positively inimical to maximum production. The proposal to allow a lower occupational rate, or exceptional deductions from that rate, for women than for men engaged in the same occupational grade must therefore be definitely condemned.

B. Webb, 1919: 3

She explains at the end of the report that it is necessary, in order to reduce “the chaos in which the relative earnings of individuals and classes had been left” by the War, to adopt an “additional principle of general application”, “on which the relation between [sexes] can be based”, namely that of “a closer correspondence of occupational rates to relative efforts and needs” of all grades and sections of the wage-earning population (ibid.: 53–4, 56).

Conclusion

The contributions of Harriet Taylor Mill, Mary Paley Marshall and Beatrice Potter Webb to the development of economic knowledge vary greatly. This is in part linked to the different nature of the marital partnerships that they experienced with prominent male economists. While Taylor and Webb had partners who supported their complete intellectual engagement, Marshall’s husband denied her advanced intellectual participation after the initial stage of their relationship.

Taylor’s work as a researcher took diverse forms after her encounter with J. S. Mill. Nowadays, she is largely recognised as the author of *Enfranchisement of Women*. She collaborated also in J. S. Mill’s philosophical and economics books. Her contribution was in part hidden with a strategic purpose, few men being then ready to recognise women as colleague economists. Mill later affirmed in his autobiography that she contributed greatly to several works published under his name, including the *Principles of Political Economy*. He asserted that the chapter on the futurity of the labouring classes issued from her mind. A close reading of this chapter in parallel with the *Enfranchisement of Women* confirms this statement, while it clarifies Taylor’s contribution to socialism and to the question of inequalities between men and women.

Born 43 years after Taylor, Mary Marshall undertook graduate studies at one of the first women’s colleges, Newnham College, founded in 1871. She thus was trained to become an economist. However, her contribution to the development of economic thought was limited by her husband’s refusal to live with a competitor; he demanded a “true wife”. After the young couple’s joint production, *The Economics of Industry*, her name disappeared from her husband’s works. Although she assumed conscientiously the role of assistant, her help was not fully recognised. So, her major contribution as an economist appears in *The Economics of Industry*. In addition to writing the first chapters, she most likely instigated the paragraph examining the economic and social factors of the inferiority of women’s wages.

Contrary to Mary Marshall, who was only eight years her senior, Beatrice Potter Webb did not undertake formal economics studies. During her youth, she met eminent thinkers of her father’s circle and early on was involved in the field of social research, contributing notably to Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London*. After her marriage to Sidney Webb, she co-authored many books with him. Beatrice and Sidney Webb shared socialist ideas and concern for working-class women’s condition. They addressed this topic in co-productions and in separate works. Beatrice published several pamphlets on the subject and, in 1919, wrote a Minority

Report about the relation between men's and women's wages. In comparison to her preceding works, this report gives insight into the evolution of her ideas on women. Nevertheless, Beatrice's writings on women were only a small part of a substantial contribution to socialist thought, which put her among the first women economists to be really recognised contributors.

The three women's personal circumstances, including early family environment, individual skills and intellectual stimulation supported their aptitude for economic reasoning. But Webb made more effective contributions than Taylor, and Taylor made greater contributions than Marshall. During the 1800s and early 1900s, women were at the mercy of circumstances. Timing meant Taylor was less able to be recognised as an economist than Webb. Women's romantic involvement also had consequences for their contributions to economics. Women were at the mercy of their partners' inclinations, well illustrated in Marshall's case.

Additional differences might have influenced the nature of the three women's marital relationships and contributions to economic thought. While it is difficult to distinguish differences of intellectual capital, some contrasts are apparent in the women's characters and convictions. First, Taylor and Webb had big personalities and were surely less accommodating than Marshall. Second, Taylor and Webb constructed and defended socialist ideas. While Taylor's contribution in this domain has been recognised with difficulty even by male liberal economists, Webb's fame as a Fabian socialist was almost immediate. It would be interesting to consider in future work whether mutual support for intellectual endeavours is more likely among couples, and whether women were more "easily" accepted as researchers, within socialist rather than liberal spheres.

Notes

- 1 Before his marriage to Harriet Taylor, Mill wrote a text (*Statement on Marriage*, 6 March, 1851) in which he morally renounced the powers that the law would give him over Taylor in case of marriage (Mill, [1984]: 99):

[T]he whole character of the marriage relation as constituted by law being such as both she and I entirely and conscientiously disapprove, for this among other reasons, that it confers upon one of the parties to the contract, legal power and control over the person, property, and freedom of action of the other party, independent of her own wishes and will; I, having no means of legally divesting myself of these odious powers (as I most assuredly would do if an engagement to that effect could be made legally binding on me), feel it my duty to put on record a formal protest against the existing law of marriage, in so far as conferring such powers; and a solemn promise never in any case or under any circumstances to use them.

Mill, 1963–1991, vol. XXI: 99

- 2 On Taylor's socialism, see Hayek (1951: 17–18, 117–51), Peart (2014, Editor's introduction), Pujol (1995: 84, 95) and Forget (2003). This socialist influence might explain the scepticism of several members of the *Philosophic Radicals* against her.
- 3 Four editions of the *Principles* (1848, 1849, 1852, 1857) were published before Taylor's death, while three were published posthumously (1862, 1865, 1871).
- 4 The passage ** was added in the 1852 edition of *Principles*, one year after the publication of *Enfranchisement of Women*, and remained in the later editions of 1857, 1862, 1865 and 1871.
- 5 Mill, in *The Subjection of Women*, written in 1859 and published in 1869, would never treat the categories of class and sex simultaneously.
- 6 Unlike Taylor, Mill distinguished two states of things. In the unjust conditions which then prevailed, he considered it preferable that wives contribute to the family income, even if "no more is earned by the labour of a man and a woman than would have been earned by the man alone" (Mill, 1848: 394). In a just state of things, where legal equality between spouses would have been established, he recommended the traditional sexual division of labour between husband and wife, by which the man is the sole breadwinner (Mill, 1869: 483–4).

- 7 An analogous reference to the distinction of sex as “accidental” is made in *Enfranchisement of Women* (Taylor, 1851: 96).
- 8 On Mary Marshall’s career as a teacher, see McWilliams Tullberg, 1995: 155–64.
- 9 The small book’s full designation is *Elements of the Economics of Industry*, but the spine bears the title *Economics of Industry*.
- 10 The term discrimination refers here to differences in wage rates for equally productive groups of workers.
- 11 A debate exists on Beatrice Webb’s feminism. In 1889, she signed an article opposing women’s right to vote. Even if she later publicly retracted this, her act has induced commentators such as Caine and Pujol to call into doubt her feminism (Caine, 1982; Pujol, 1992: 84). Unlike them, Nyland presents her as a socialist feminist (Nyland and Ramia, 1994: 125; Nyland, 1994).
- 12 This plea was strongly criticized by Mary Marshall (see previous section).
- 13 In 1905 Beatrice was appointed to the Royal Commission on the Poor Law and Relief of Distress. For four years, she headed the production of the Minority Report, which called for reform of the Poor Law system and established the foundation of the modern Welfare State in Britain. Although Sidney was not a member of the Commission, they co-produced the report (Nyland and Ramia, 1994: 130).

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