

Monday, 22.01.2024; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CET

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Gender, Freedom, and Work in Early Modern Europe

Abstract:

In the preface to her 1706 edition of *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, the English philosopher and feminist Mary Astell wrote, 'If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?' This lecture reexamines women's economic position in early modern Europe as 'low paid, low skilled and low status' and asks to what degree that economic position was related to a lack of personal freedom. It begins by detailing gender inequalities in types of work tasks, forms of employment, and levels of pay. New evidence from England is presented and compared to existing research on Sweden and Germany. The lecture then considers the two theoretical frameworks that have been used to explain gender inequality in the economy: one founded in economics and based around ideas of choice, markets and biological difference; and the other originating in feminism that emphasises patriarchy, custom and power. It is argued that the first is insufficient because it largely fails to address underlying inequalities, while the second is insufficiently elaborated, leaving the mechanisms by which such forces operated unexplained. Instead, the lecture explores the potential of placing women on a scale of freedom/unfreedom, using ideas from the history of slavery and other forms of unfreedom, alongside those of political theorist Carole Pateman (*The Sexual Contract* (1988)) and development economist Amartya Sen (*Development as Freedom* (2001)), to reach a deeper understanding of the roots of economic gender inequality.

Bio:

Jane Whittle is professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Exeter, UK, where she has worked since 1995, having studied at the Universities of Manchester and Oxford. Her research addresses themes such as economic development, household economies, property rights, consumption, and material culture in the period from c.1300 to 1750. Most recently, she has focused on the history of work and gender, with an ERC Advanced Grant on 'Forms of Labour: Gender, Freedom and Experience of Work in the Preindustrial Economy' (2019-24). Recent publications include 'A critique of approaches to "domestic work"', *Past and Present* 243 (2019), 'The gender division of labour in early modern England', *Economic History Review* 73:1 (2020), *Labour Laws in Preindustrial Europe: The Coercion and Regulation of Wage Labour, c.1300-1850*, (edited with Thijs Lambrecht) Boydell Press [Open Access] (2023), and a chapter in Macleod, Shepard and Ågren ed., *The Whole Economy: Work and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press (2023).