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ABSTRACT

A Strictly Economic Explanation of Gender Norms: The Lasting Legacy of the Plough^{*}

We show that the descendants of ancient farmers may have an interest in maintaining the gendered division of labour originally justified on comparative-advantage grounds by the advent of the plough even after they emigrate to a modern industrial economy where individual productivity depends on education rather than physical characteristics. The result rests on the argument that, if an efficient domestic equilibrium requires the more productive spouse to specialize in raising income, and the less productive one to specialize in raising children irrespective of gender, a norm requiring the husband to do the former and the wife to do the latter will implement this equilibrium even in an economy where individual productivity reflects education rather than gender. But, an efficient equilibrium may not involve specialization if education and time spent with children give direct utility.

JEL Classification:	C78, D02, J16, J61
Keywords:	plough, comparative advantage, matching, hold-up problem,
	migration, social norm

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1 Introduction

Alesina et al. (2013) bring empirical evidence in support of the hypothesis advanced by Boserup (1970) that the gendered division of labour, whereby men work outside the home in raising income, while women specialize in domestic, prevalently child-raising activities, draws its origins from the introduction of the plough some four thousand years ago. Unlike shifting cultivation, which is very labour intensive but requires no special physical characteristics, plough cultivation is in fact less labour intensive but requires "upper body strength, grip strength, and bursts of power" which are more likely to be found in men than in women. That gives the former a comparative advantage over the latter in agricultural production. The first of the two articles cited reports that European and US residents descending from populations who used the plough in their countries of origin display still today, in their country of destination, less equal gender attitudes than the descendants of populations who did not have that experience. That is amazing. Why is the legacy of the plough still felt after countless other innovations have drastically reduced the importance of physical characteristics in the determination of individual productivity, and the share of the population employed in the agricultural sector? And why was this legacy not lost when migration offered the descendants of ancient plough users the opportunity to marry outside their ethnic group?

The often heard argument that women are genetically programmed to enjoy raising children more than men do is irrelevant in the present context, because it should apply to everybody, not just to the descendants of ancient plough users. Another often heard argument is that men took advantage of the power achieved when physical strength mattered to indulge their taste for discriminating against women. The problem with this argument is that discrimination has an efficiency cost (Becker, 1957), and that the cost of discriminating against women rises as technological progress increases the importance of education vis-a-vis physical characteristics. Yet another argument is grounded in the identity approach advocated by Akerlof and Kranton (2000). According to that approach, people derive utility from, and are thus willing to pay a price for, remaining true to what they regard as their identity. Suppose that being a true man means producing income, and being a true woman means looking after the home. Men and women will then be willing to pay a price in order to conform with their identities. But, where do those identities come from? Where ancient plough users and their descendants are concerned, the answer could be that they are the result of thousands of years of gendered division of labour. A problem for us economists is that we are not equipped to explain how this happens (Akerlof and Kranton rely on the findings of sociology and social psychology). Without such an explanation, we cannot then explain why the importance of identity does not diminish and eventually vanish as men lose their comparative advantage in income production.

In the present paper we use a simple economic model of marriage and household decisions where men and women are matched by their potential income as singles, and then Nash-bargain the allocation of their joint time and money endowments. Parents have no gender preferences. We show that, so long as utility depends only on the agent's consumption of a private good, and on a domestically produced public good reflecting the quality (of life) of the couple's children, then, in equilibrium, the higher-wage spouse will specialize in income production, the lowerwage one will specialize in domestic activities, and the two will consume the same amount of the private good. There is a potential hold-up problem however. If the spouses command different wage rates (in an industrial economy, because they have different amounts of education, in a plough-using agricultural one, simply because one is a man and the other a woman), the lower paid of the two will not agree to specialize in domestic activities unless the equilibrium is enshrined in an enforceable pre-marital contract or, failing that, the better paid spouse compensates the less paid one at front (before the children are born, and resources are expended on them). The latter may not be possible because the more productive spouse's initial endowment of the private good may not be large enough. The former may be prohibitively expensive if the enforcement can only be done by legal means. In a primitive agrarian economy, a hold-up problem can arise only if the plough gives men a comparative advantage over women in the production of the private good. In the traditional society that we usually associate with such an economy, however, the equilibrium is costlessly implemented as a social norm.

So long as education does not yield direct utility, children will not get one in a primitive economy where productivity is independent of education. That may change with emigration to an industrial economy where education raises the probability of getting a high wage rate. We show that, in the destination country, the descendants of ancient plough users will invest in their sons', but not in their daughters' education. Their children, their children's children and so on will have an interest in marrying among themselves and abiding by their ancestral norm. Not so if people derive direct utility also from luxury goods like education for its own sake, and time spent with children, because an NB equilibrium may then involve little or no specialization, and there may not be any need for a norm that enforces the equilibrium. If people derive utility from conforming with their perceived identity as theorized by Akerlof and Kranton (2000), and the identity of plough users' descendants is shaped by their long acquaintance with the gendered division of labour, that will not, by itself, affect behaviour. It could do that only if education and time with children also give direct utility. Whichever is the case, the ancestral norm in question will tend to vanish as more and more people become rich enough to want the luxury goods mentioned, but it will vanish more slowly if identity also matters.

2 Basic assumptions

As in much of the economics of the family literature,¹ we assume that the agent derives utility from her or his own consumption of a private good ("money") and, if married, from a number of domestically produced, couple-specific public goods representing the quality (of life) of the couple's children. Later in the paper we shall allow for additional sources of utility. For simplicity, we further assume that, if individual *i* marries, the couple have a daughter D and a son S.² Therefore, the decision to marry coincides with the decision to become a parent.

Let c_i denote *i*'s consumption of the private good, and g_K the quality of *K*'s life, where K = D, S. To fix ideas and facilitate calculations, we take the utility function to be linear,

$$U_i = c_i + g_D + g_S,\tag{1}$$

and g_K to be a log-linear function of the amount of money y_K , and time ("attention") a_K , that the couple jointly spend on K,

$$g_K = \ln y_K + \gamma \ln a_K, \ \gamma > 0.$$

Notice that not only maternal and paternal money contributions, but also maternal and paternal time contributions, are perfect substitutes in the domestic production of child quality. Notice also that parents do not harbour gender preferences. If daughter and son entered the picture symmetrically also in every other respect (as is very often the case in the economics of the family literature), there would then be no need to keep their identities separate. We keep them separate because, in Section 3 below, we will find that gender may matter even if daughter and son are interchangeable where their parents' utility is concerned.

¹See, among others, Becker (1981), Cigno (1991) and Folbre (1994).

²Allowing for the number of children to be a random variable with probability distribution conditional on certain parental actions, and assuming that a child will be born male or female with equal probability, would complicate the analysis without altering our results in any substantial way.

Parents and their children play a two-stage game. At stage 1, the couple allocate their children a certain amount of money (optimally allocated between cash-in-hand and educational expenditure), and a certain amount of attention. At this stage, their children's stage-2 wage rates or productivities may be uncertain. At stage 2, when these wage rates or productivities are revealed, the children decide whether and whom to marry. The model is solved by backward induction.

3 Modern economies

We start by considering a modern industrial economy where the probability of earning a high wage rate increases with education. Specifically, we assume that individual *i*'s wage rate is $w_i = w^H$ with probability $\pi(z_i)$, where z_i denotes *i*'s education,³ and $w_i = w^L < w^H$ with probability $1 - \pi(z_i)$. The function $\pi(.)$ is increasing and concave, with $\pi(0) = 0$.

3.1 Stage 2

At this stage, i is endowed with one unit of time and b_i units of money, and commands a known wage rate w_i . If i stays single, her or his utility is

$$R_i := c_i = b_i + w_i.$$

If *i* marries, the couple Nash-bargain the allocation of their joint time and money endowments, and the distribution of their joint income. Player *i*'s reservation utility is equal to her or his utility as a single, R_i . We plausibly assume that men and women are matched by their reservation utilities, and that the distribution of these utilities is the same for men and women. If several individuals of each gender have the same reservation utility, they are sorted into couples in such a way, that *i*'s utility is maximized given R_i .

Take the couple formed by a particular woman, f, and a particular man, m. Having assumed that

$$R_f = R_m = R, (2)$$

it follows that

$$w_m - w_f = b_f - b_m. aga{3}$$

The Nash-bargaining (NB) equilibrium maximizes

$$N = (U_f - R) \left(U_m - R \right)$$

 $^{^3\}mathrm{If}$ education is compulsory up to a certain level, z_i is measured from that minimum.

subject to f's and m's budget constraints,

$$c_f = b_f + (1 - 2\delta a) w_f - y + T$$

and

$$c_m = b_m + [1 - 2(1 - \delta)a]w_m - y - T,$$

where $0 \leq \delta \leq 1$ denotes f's share of a, and T is defined as a transfer (positive, negative or zero) from m to f. Each parent is conventionally assigned the monetary cost of one child, y, but the amount effectively contributed will depend on the sign and size of T. In equilibrium,

$$U_K = U.$$

Given that D and S enter the optimization symmetrically, in equilibrium, D and S are treated the same,

$$y_K = y, a_k = a \text{ and } g_K = g.$$

Given also that a_f and a_m are perfect substitutes in the production of g, the choice of δ will be either at a corner (1 or 0), or indeterminate.⁴ For any given δ , the first-order conditions on the choice of a, y and T are, respectively,

$$\left(-2\delta w_f + 2\frac{\gamma}{a}\right)\left(U_m - R\right) + \left[-2\left(1 - \delta\right)w_m + 2\frac{\gamma}{a}\right]\left(U_f - R\right) = 0, \quad (4)$$

$$\left(-1+\frac{2}{y}\right)(U_m-R) + \left(-1+\frac{2}{y}\right)(U_f-R) = 0$$
 (5)

and

$$(U_m - R) - (U_f - R) = 0.$$
 (6)

In equilibrium,

$$U_f = U_m = U$$

and

$$y = 2. (7)$$

The values of the other variables depend on the parents' relative wage rates.

For

$$w_f = w^L, \ w_m = w^H,$$

⁴If the mother's and the father's time contributions substituted at a diminishing marginal rate, the solution would be interior, and the specialization could be less than full, but this would make no difference of substance to the results.

the couple choose

$$\delta = 1, \ a = \frac{2\gamma}{w^L}, \ T = 2\gamma.$$

In this case, f allocates all her time to the production of child quality, and m to the production of income. Consequently, he compensates her for forgone earnings. Their common utility level is

$$U^{*}(R) := R - 2(1 + \gamma) + 2\left(\ln 2 + \gamma \ln \frac{2\gamma}{w^{L}}\right).$$

In the opposite case, where

$$w_f = w^H, \ w_m = w^L,$$

the couple choose

$$\delta = 0, \ a = \frac{2\gamma}{w^L}, \ y = 2, \ T = -2\gamma.$$

The only difference between this and the previous case is in the sign of T. As m now does all the child related work, and f all the income related work, it is now her who compensates him for loss of earnings. But the common utility level is still $U^*(R)$.

For

$$w_f = w_m = w,$$

the couple are indifferent between splitting the two types of work equally between them, or spinning a coin. Assuming the former,

$$\delta = \frac{1}{2}, \ a = \frac{2\gamma}{w}, \ y = 2, \ T = 0$$

There is no compensation. If $w = w^L$, the couple's common utility level is again $U^*(R)$. But, if $w = w^H$, the common utility level is only

$$U^{\circ}(R) := R - 2(1 + \gamma) + 2\left(\ln 2 + \gamma \ln \frac{2\gamma}{w^{H}}\right) < U^{*}(R)$$

because the children's opportunity-cost is in that case higher than in the other.

Therefore, a marriage between two high-wage persons is inefficient. In an efficient matching, a high-wage person is always married to a lowwage person, because the latter is indifferent between marrying a highwage or a low-wage person with the same R, but the former is better-off marrying a low-wage person with the same R. Realistically assuming that children are born at the start of stage 2, but wages are paid at

the end (or at any rate in the course) of it, however, an NB equilibrium where the spouses have different wage rates may not be implementable. Given that once the children are born they cannot be sent back, and making the usual assumption that a complete, legally enforceable premarital contract is out of the question because the transactions cost is prohibitively high for ordinary folk, the low-wage spouse will in fact demand to be paid at front. But, this payment will not be forthcoming if the high-wage spouse's money endowment is lower than the compensation due, and credit is rationed. If that is the case, there is a hold-up problem. The efficient equilibrium cannot be implemented. For $w_i = w^L$, *i* will then marry a high-wage member of the opposite sex with money endowment greater than 2γ or, if there are not enough of these, another low-wage person. In either case, i will get the utility level $U^*(R_i)$. By contrast, if $w_i = w^H$, and b_i is less than 2γ , *i* will have no choice but to marry another high-wage person, and get the utility level $U^{\circ}(R_i)$, which is not as good as $U^*(R_i)$, but still better than remaining single and getting only R_i .

It may be argued that, in a developed society, there are legal instruments, other than a court-enforceable contract, which may obviate the emergence of a hold-up problem. Cigno (2012) shows that marriage may substitute for a fully contingent pre-marital contract if divorce is sufficiently inexpensive, and divorce courts can be relied upon to award compensation to the party who sacrificed her or his career prospects in order to specialize in domestic activities, because the party in question can then credibly threaten divorce if the other party does not deliver the compensation voluntarily. But this is unavoidably uncertain, because there are verifiability problems, and also because of court discretionality. Therefore, the availability of low-cost divorce, and the possibility that the compensation for the spouse who specialized in domestic work would be mandated by a divorce court, reduces but does not eliminate the probability of a hold-up problem.

3.2 Stage 1

At stage 1, *i*'s parents choose (b_i, z_i) and (b_j, z_j) , where *j* is *i*'s sibling, so as to make the sum of *i*'s and *j*'s expected utilities as large as possible. Given that *i* and *j* enter their parents' optimization symmetrically, and will thus receive the same treatment, these parents then maximize the expected utility of the representative child,

$$EU^{*}(R) = \pi(z) (b + w^{H} + C) + [1 - \pi(z)] (b + w^{L} + C),$$

where

$$C = 2\left(\ln 2 + \gamma \ln \frac{2\gamma}{w^L}\right) - 2\left(1 + \gamma\right),$$

subject to two constraints. The first is that these parents jointly spend on the representative child the equilibrium amount of income (the same that the child in question and her or his future spouse will jointly spend on each of their own children at stage 2),

$$b + z = 2.$$

The second is that, if the representative child's future wage rate turns out to be high, the she or he must then be able to pay her or his future spouse the equilibrium amount of compensation at the start of stage 2,

$$b \ge 2\gamma. \tag{8}$$

That is the same as maximizing

$$ER = \pi (z) (2 - z + w^{H}) + [1 - \pi (z)] (2 - z + w^{L})$$

subject to (8). This problem has an interior solution at $z = z^* \ge 0$, where z^* solves

$$\pi'(z) = \frac{1}{w^H - w^L},$$
(9)

and a corner solution at $\overline{z} = 2(1 - \gamma)$. Assuming that educational investment is profitable,

$$\pi(z^*) w^H + [1 - \pi(z^*)] w^L - z^* \ge w^L, \tag{10}$$

the couple will never choose $z = \overline{z}$. Therefore, either $z = z^*$, in which case $EU(R) = EU^*(2 - z^* + w)$, or z = 0, in which case $U(R) = U^*(2 + w^L) \leq EU^*(2 - z^* + w)$.

4 From primitive to modern economies

A primitive agrarian economy differs from a modern industrial one in that a person's wage rate is independent of education (we continue to talk of wage rate even if there is no labour market, and we should thus be talking of physical productivity). Parents may then give a child money, but never an education.⁵ All we said in the last section regarding the need to guarantee the actual delivery of T for an NB equilibrium with domestic division of labour to be implementable, still applies. Let there be two such economies, A and B. For geographical reasons, the plough is available in country B, but not in country A.⁶ In the latter, the wage rate

⁵That is a simplification. In reality, a small minority of prospective priests, scribes and astrologers will receive an education of sorts.

⁶Using a wealth of archaeological and linguistic evidence, Diamond (2005) argues that the reason why agriculture and certain agricultural technologies developed in certain parts of the world rather than others, and spread in certain directions rather than others, is due to geographical factors.

is equal to w^L for everybody. Consequently, $\delta = \frac{1}{2}$ for all couples. There is then no question of a spouse having to compensate the other, and no risk of a hold-up problem. In country B, by contrast, the woman's wage rate is w^L , but the man's is w^H thanks to the plough technology. Therefore, $\delta = 1$. Is there then a potential hold-up problem as in a modern industrial economy?

In the traditional societies that we associate with primitive agrarian economies, a contract may be enforced not only by a law court, but also, if it is in everybody's interest that the contract should be honoured, by the threat of prohibitively severe extra-legal sanctions (ranging from ostracism to physical punishment, or even murder) at the hands or with the approval of the entire community. This form of enforcement costs nothing, because the threat is never actually carried out. In country B, this applies to pre-marital contracts, because every couple has a daughter and a son. At stage 1 of the game, it is thus in every couple's interest that their son should be able to follow his comparative advantage in agricultural production, but their son-in-law should not be allowed to turn his comparative advantage into a bargaining advantage at their daughter's expense. A simple contract specifying that the wife must spend all her time attending to the children (and the home), that the husband must spend all his time producing income, and that the spouses will consume the same amount of the private good, is thus costlessly enforceable by the threat of extra-legal sanctions. As this contract is the same for all couples, it is effectively a social norm. Generation after generation, all country B couples will comply with this norm and achieve the same NB equilibrium with $\delta = 1$. No such norm will arise in country A, where the NB equilibrium is characterized by $\delta = \frac{1}{2}$

Now suppose that a number of couples emigrate from either A or B to a modern economy. Observing that, in their new country, educated workers command a higher wage rate than uneducated ones, these immigrants will consider the merits of investing in their children's education. Let us now use f to denote the daughter, and m the son of a particular immigrant couple. If the couple originate from country A, they have no reason to treat f differently from m. As shown in the last section, the optimization problem that this couple solve at stage 1 of the game reduces to the maximization of their representative child's expected utility. Depending on whether (8) is or is not satisfied, both children will then be given the same amount of education, either z^* or zero, and consequently achieve either the expected utility $EU^* (2 - z^* + w)$, or the utility $U^* (2 + w^L) \leq EU^* (2 - z^* + w)$.

Not so if the immigrant couple originate from country B, because they know that, if their children comply with their social norm, (8)

will be irrelevant. Expecting this to be the case (in what follows we will show that it will), the couple's optimization problem cannot then be reduced to the maximization of their representative child's expected utility, because the norm in question makes different prescriptions for husband and wife. The couple will then maximize the sum of f's utility and m's expected utility by setting $z_f = 0$ and $z_m = z^*$. As a result, f 's utility will be $U^*(2+w^L)$, and m's expected utility $EU^*(2-z^*+w)$, irrespective of whether (8) is or is not satisfied. Plausibly assuming that the norm in force in country B (where it is in all parents' interest that it should) will be invoked in the destination country only if it is in the interest not only of f's and m's parents, but also of f's and m's respective parents-in-law. Will f and m marry the children of other country B immigrants (practice homogamy)? If (8) is satisfied, f(m) is indifferent between doing that, or marrying a man (woman) with a different ancestry (practicing heterogamy). If (8) is not satisfied, however, she (he) will be better-off practicing homogamy. Therefore she (he) will go for homogamy. But, given $z_f = 0$ and $z_m = z^*$, f and m will then specialize in the way prescribed by the norm in either case. This makes their parents' expectations self-fulfilling. The same will apply also at the next round, when f and m are parents, an so on. Under present assumptions, therefore, the norm will remain operative for ever.

Given that the norm arose in a plough-using agrarian economy, where individual productivity depends on gender, would an amended version of it, saying that, irrespective of gender, the spouse with the higher wage rate must specialize in raising income, and the one with the lower wage rate must specialize in raising children, but the spouses must still get the same amount of consumption, do just as well in a modern industrial economy where individual productivity depends on education rather than gender? So long as education does not give direct utility as we have assumed so far (but more about this in the next section), the answer is no, because the amended norm would induce country B immigrants and their descendants to give their daughters the same amount of education as their sons. Given that, under present assumptions, educating a person who will not produce income is wasteful, the waste will be double if both children get an education, than if only one of them (the daughter or, equivalently, the son) does. The amended norm would thus be inefficient.⁷

⁷Besides, it is difficult to imagine how a new norm applicable only to the descendants of country B immigrants could get off the ground in a modern society, where the majority of the population are either natives or descendants of country A immigrants.

5 Extensions and conclusion

In the last two sections, we used a bare-bones model where people derive direct utility only from consumption, and from their children's quality, to demonstrate that the descendants of ancient plough users have an interest in marrying among themselves, and practicing the gendered division of labour, even in a modern industrial economy where wage rates reflect education rather than gender. The story changes somewhat if education and time spent with children yield direct utility. Realistically assuming that these are luxury goods, the demand for them will be negligible in a poor economy, but not in a prosperous one. In the latter, an NB equilibrium might in fact be characterized by little or no specialization. Such an equilibrium is not implemented by the social norm described in the last section, but that is no great loss. If, in this equilibrium, the spouses earn exactly the same, there is in fact no need for an enforceable contract. But there is a good chance that such a contract will not be needed even if, in the NB equilibrium, the spouses do not earn exactly the same, because the advance compensation due to the lower earning spouse will be smaller than it would with complete specialization. A share of the descendants of those ancient plough users will then have no interest in practicing homogamy and carrying forward their ancestral norm. This share will get larger as more and more of them become rich enough to appreciate education for its own sake, and to derive pleasure from spending time with their children.

Would it make a difference if people derived utility from conforming with their perceived identity as in Akerlof and Kranton (2000), and the descendants of ancient plough users had their identity shaped by their long practice of the gendered division of labour? So long as education and time spent with children do not figure in the utility function, the answer is no, because the descendants of those ancient farmers will specialize along gender lines anyway. The answer could be yes, however, if education and time spent with children give direct utility, because the rise in the demand for these luxury goods will then tend to compensate for the fall in the demand for contract enforcement. If that is the case, the flight from homogamy and the gendered division of labour will be slower than it otherwise would. The evidence reported by Alesina et al. (2013) is consistent both with the hypothesis that identity has no role to play, but a share of the descendants of ancient plough users are not yet rich enough to behave like the rest of the European and the US population, and with the alternative hypothesis that identity has a role to play. Both hypotheses imply that it takes time for an ancestral norm to vanish, but this time will be longer if the second one is correct.

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