GENDER AND INSTITUTIONS: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALISM

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) was one of the most influential sociologists, economists, and feminists in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. However, until recently, recognition of her contributions as an economist and to feminist institutionalist thought has been limited, failing to reflect the full scope of her work. This article aims to highlight Gilman's pioneering contributions to Feminist Institutionalism, with particular emphasis on her critiques of gender dualisms. This study addresses three fundamental aspects of her writings: (i) the concept of gender as an institution; (ii) the conception of the "home" as an archaic institution in need of restructuring; and (iii) Gilman's views on progress and institutional change. By revisiting the significance of her work, this article seeks to challenge the androcentrism prevalent in the discipline and reposition her ideas within the context of feminist-institutionalist thought.

Keywords: Charlotte Perkins Gilman; feminist institutionalism; dualisms; history of economic thought and women.
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1 Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) emerged as one of the most influential feminist thinkers in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, marked by a remarkably diverse and prolific intellectual trajectory. Her extensive literary output, which includes pamphlets, poems, social science studies, novels, an autobiography, and numerous magazine articles, remained largely neglected from her death in 1935 until its rediscovery by historian Carl Degler in 1956 (Degler, 1956; Dimand, 2000).

The diversity of Gilman's publications reflects a wide range of topics. Among feminists, she is primarily recognized for her fiction, which explores the position of women in US society during the turn of the century, as well as for her feminist and social ideas aimed at promoting change. These issues emerged in a context marked by the "Woman question." In the early stages of the Progressive Era, there was strong resistance to granting women equal status with men in a predominantly male-dominated society. The belief in "separate spheres" prevailed, according to which men and women had naturally distinct functions, occupying complementary roles arranged in a hierarchical order (Waller & Jennings, 1991). Many women demanded changes that would redefine not only their status and rights but also the institutions of society. In this context, feminist social scientists have focused on Gilman's non-fiction, particularly the institutional analyses presented in *Women and Economics* (1898) and *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903) (see Dimand 1995; van Staveren, 2003), works that highlight how economic and institutions constrain women.

This institutional approach of Gilman often leads to comparisons with her contemporary Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), a precursor of Original Institutional Economics (OIE), a school that became one of the most prominent groups in the first half of the 20th century (Morgan & Rutherford, 1998). Sinclair (1965, p. 272), a historian of the women's movement, referred to Gilman as part of "the Veblen of the movement," noting that *Women and Economics* was published only one year before Veblen's seminal work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899a [1934]). Both addressed the economic and social position of women, although by different perspectives (Sinclair, 1965; (Nils) Gilman, 1999)[1]. Gilman and Veblen not only shared theoretical interests but also met personally. Gilman acknowledged

[1] Nils Gilman is a historian unrelated to Charlotte Perkins Gilman. To avoid any misunderstanding regarding which Gilman we are referring to, we refer to Nils Gilman as (Nils) Gilman and to Charlotte Perkins Gilman simply as Gilman throughout this paper.

and recommended Veblen's work, stating that it was "illuminated by the most brilliant penetrating satire I ever saw" (Dorfman, 1934, p. 196). Veblen, by his turn, appreciated Gilman's writings when his friend Edward A. Ross introduced them to him (Dimand, 1995)[2]. However, while Veblen's has been celebrated and recognized among economists, much of Gilman's writings was marginalized, except for her semi-autobiographical work *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) (Dimand, 1995; Hill, 2011).

This marginalization contrasts with the relevance of her writings for feminism and the rise of socioeconomics (see O'Donnell, 1994, 1996; Sheth & Prasch, 1996). In the early 1970s, "Feminist Institutionalism" emerged as a methodological and epistemological alignment between OIE and feminist theory, exploring the then contemporary perspectives on the role of women and reviewing gender dualisms. Many of Veblen's feminist arguments remain consistent with contemporary feminist theory, and he is widely regarded as a precursor of Feminist Institutionalism. However, the history of economic literature generally does not recognize Gilman as a forerunner. Exceptions include Waller and Wrenn (2021), which highlights the parallel development of feminist economics and OIE in the writings of Veblen and Gilman on the evolution of women's roles and behaviors in modern industrial economies, and (Nils) Gilman (1999), who notes that Gilman addressed the role of sexuality, including sexual enslavement, a topic not discussed by Veblen.

In light of this, the objective of this study is twofold. First, it aims to shed light on Gilman as a significant economist of the late nineteenth century, whose importance has been obscured by the history of economic thought. Barker and Kuiper (2003), Kuiper (2022), and Pujol (2003) emphasize the need to broaden the horizons of the history of economic thought, with particular attention to the contributions of various women whose trajectories have been systematically silenced throughout centuries of economic study and development. Second, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive account of Gilman's contributions within the context of Feminist Institutionalism. By emphasizing the relationships between institutions and gender, this study aims to reposition Gilman as a precursor of Feminist Institutionalism alongside Veblen.

To achieve those goals, we analyze the connections between Gilman's approach and the foundations that would later be developed by Feminist Institutionalism. Her proposal to

[2] Jennings (1998) states that Veblen's address agenda (1929), included Gilman's name. Furthermore, his stepdaughter, Becky Meyers, reported that in 1909 Veblen often told stories about Gilman, for whom he expressed great admiration.

reorganize the economic order aligns with the institutionalist critique of institutional neutrality and the role institutions play in reproducing social hierarchies. For Gilman, women's emancipation could not occur in isolation; it required profound transformations in institutions, a point that is also central to contemporary Feminist Institutionalism.

This study is organized as follows: the next section provides a brief historical and theoretical contextualization of Feminist Institutionalism. The third section discusses Gilman's theoretical approach, with a focus on the definition of institutions, particularly gender and home institutions, and her critiques of the dualisms of her time, especially those related to the domestic sphere. The fourth section analyzes Gilman's reflections on institutional change in the home and its relationship to progress. Finally, the fifth section presents some concluding remarks.

2 The Place of Women in Veblen's Writings: Contextualizing Feminist Institutionalism

Between the Gilded Age and the years preceding World War I, American culture was dominated by a rigid ideal of femininity. Within this model, women occupied a subordinate position, and careers outside the home were generally discouraged, as it was believed they would distract from their "biological function": caring and family. Social norms were based on clearly defined and hierarchical roles (Diggins, 1978; Crue, 2005). During the same period, economic transformations began to expand women's roles and opportunities in the US – a moment that Matthews (2003) terms the "Woman's Era."

Much of those opportunities were driven by the actions of progressivism in promoting a more democratic public sphere and demanding social reforms. Post-Civil War urban expansion and the increasing mobilization of women seeking greater participation in civic life were also central elements of this process. One of its most relevant antecedents was the role of women during the Civil War, which significantly expanded their presence beyond the domestic (private) sphere. Many of these women later refused to return exclusively to the private sphere and became active in organizations dedicated to urban reform and social justice. Among the agendas of these organizations were advocacy for the eight-hour workday, women's legal rights, and women's suffrage (Flanagan, 2007)[3].

[3] The suffrage movement went beyond the fight for the right to vote, encompassing demands for self-determination and basic human rights. By the late nineteenth century, most women lacked political power and faced severe legal restrictions—such as the loss of control over their property upon marriage, legal permission

Eby (1992) observes that few intellectuals of Veblen's time openly challenged the prevailing conceptions of gender. Despite the fact that Veblen lived and wrote during a period featured by intense social and cultural concern with redefining gender ideals. Veblen, although not focusing exclusively on gender issues, incorporated feminist arguments on the role of women in the impact of the rise of capitalism, as an evolution of barbarism (Veblen 1894 [2003], 1899a [1934], 1899b [2003]). Veblen never identified himself as a "feminist." Eby (1992) considers him an anti-anti-feminist, that is, someone who, even without directly affiliating with causes or proposing explicit prescriptions, criticizes the social and institutional norms that subordinate women[4]. This stance is expressed in three main ideas: (i) masculinity as an institutional construction and a critique of hierarchical behaviors that perpetuate coercion; (ii) the deconstruction of gender roles, erroneously interpreted as "natural"; and (iii) the tendency to associate women with positive values.

Veblen's writings (1894 [2003], 1899a [1934], and 1899b [2003]) reveal the persistent subordination of women by linking the origin of property of people as slavers and women. In the case of women, marriage meant (or means) an institution based on property and possession. Veblen (1899a [1934]) argues that while men engage in conspicuous consumption, women are related to vicarious consumption. Men show their wealth, success and power in how much they can spend on consumption. Women, by their turn, put men's wealth, success and power in evidence. Hence, women show the social results that men are looking for, working as an accessory of men's social demonstration of power (see Veblen 1899a [1934]). Veblen's institutional analysis demonstrates that such property of women by men was (or is) realized as "natural," but it is actually a product of habits shaped by the tradition of institutions. These institutions include the constraints imposed on women by marriage, patriarchy, and even standards of femininity and beauty.

In addition to characterizing Veblen as an anti-anti-feminist, Eby (1992) argues that Veblenian theory helps to understand the tensions surrounding the position of women in US regarding resistance to women's rights movements. For many men, feminist demands represented threats not only to the institution of property but also to their power and even their self-image, as the latter was constructed in relation to women. According to Jennings

for "moderate" physical punishment, and exclusion from child custody in divorce cases—as well as educational, professional, and even physical limitations imposed by dress codes. These factors made the struggle for electoral equality even more challenging (Carver, 2008).

[4] (Nils) Gilman (1999) and Hall and Luz (2020) argue that Veblen can be understood as a feminist.

(1998), Veblen supported the women's movement, albeit neither publicly nor explicitly, by understanding gender distinctions as socially exclusive and institutionally constructed.

The resurgence of feminism in the US during the 1960s and 1970s laid the groundwork for a more systematic dialogue between OIE and feminist perspective, contributing to the consolidation of what came to be called "Feminist Institutional Economics." Waddoups and Tilman (1992) emphasizes that Veblen's reflections on the condition of women constitute a relevant starting point for the analysis of feminism during the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the feminist movements of Veblen's time, which focused primarily on legal equality and women's suffrage, second-wave feminism sought equality in the labor market and aimed to an institutional change looking for gender equality. This new agenda included the critique of patriarchal structures and the traditional roles assigned to women within the domestic (private) sphere, significantly expanding the theoretical and political scope of the movement.

One of the central points of convergence between OIE studies and feminist agenda – which characterizes Feminist Institutionalism – is the critique of the public–private dualism, understood as one of the bases of women's exclusion and subordination. Institutionalism and feminism share non-Cartesian methodological and epistemological foundations, recognizing that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by cultural contexts. Both reject the predominant paradigm in Western intellectual discourse of the mind/body dualism, which separates reason and objectivity from irrationality and subjectivity. Original institutionalist and feminist writings reject dualisms, particularly those based on the public–private distinction. Institutionalism denies the notion that certain human behaviors are inherently private and unaffected by cultural norms and values. Feminism emphasizes that what is considered private—seen as disconnected from social life—is, in fact, an integral part of the subordination of women within culture (Waller & Jennings, 1990; Jennings, 1993).

From the perspective of Feminist Institutionalism, this dualism assumed various forms during the nineteenth century, giving rise to additional dichotomies such as economy (market) versus family, man versus woman, rational versus emotional, mind versus body, and independent versus dependent, among others. These dichotomies prioritize one side of the dualism while devaluing the other, elevating "economic" activities above other spheres of life (Waller & Jennings, 1991; Waller & Wrenn, 2021). It is precisely the association of women with the domestic (private) sphere and men with the market economy, public sphere, that

forms the gender distinction, relegating women to the status of dependents and non-economic agents within the family, without access to income and power (Waddoups & Tilman, 1992; Jennings, 1993).

As far as we understand, not only Veblen, but also Gilman, his contemporary, developed what can be understood as feminist-institutionalist approach. Although, Gilman's contribution has been obscured by the history of economic thought, differently than Veblen's. The next section seeks to restore Gilman's ideas as pioneering and foundational, alongside Veblen, in the development of Feminist Institutionalism.

3 The Feminist Institutionalism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman

In her Feminist institutionalist perspective, Gilman (1898 [2021]) address that not only physical aspects – such as climate, location, and other issues provided by nature – influence the livelihood and living conditions of individuals. Institutions do also play an important role. Combining such physical and institutional aspects, Gilman (1898 [2021]) identifies a remarkable and peculiar economic condition that affects humans exclusively: we are the only species in which the female depends on the male for sustenance and sexual relations are intrinsically linked to economic relations. Those conditions create a situation in which a woman's economic status depends on men: "men produce and distribute wealth; and women receive it at their hands" (Gilman, 1898 [2021], p. 13).

In this scenario, economic progress is almost exclusively masculine, and the removal of men workers would paralyze any community economically to a far greater degree than the removal of women workers. Gilman (1898 [2021]) argues that work performed by women, almost exclusively linked to the home, could be done by men, whereas work performed by men could not be executed as effectively by women. This situation results from women's economic condition, a consequence of an androcentric culture – a concept developed by the sociologist and social Darwinist Lester Ward (1841–1913), who influenced Gilman's writings[5]. By androcentric culture, Gilman (1911 [2020]) refers to a system of concepts shaped by men's interests and experiences, which affects human life through domination by men. Women cannot assume the positions and work performed by men in the labor market, not due to physical incapacity or inherent sexual deficiency, but because of institutional factors.

[5] The term "androcentrism" was adopted by Gilman in a 1903 lecture (Finlay, 1999).

At this point, Gilman anticipated the distinction later formalized in feminist theory between the categories of "sex" and "gender." According to Nelson (1994), "sex" refers to the biological differences between men and women, whereas "gender" refers to the associations, stereotypes, and social patterns that a culture constructs based on real or perceived differences between men and women. For Hausman (1998), Gilman made a distinction between "sex" and "gender" in a way that did not involve a semantic separation between institutionally mutable sexual differences and natural immutable ones. Gilman clearly differentiated gender roles, as institutional constructions, from the biological functions of sex. Although Gilman did not use the words "gender" and "sex" with the contemporary semantic connotations, she understood sex as a biological matter and gender as a social institution.

For Gilman (1898 [2021]), gender differentiation results in a distinction extremely so pronounced. The excessive sexual distinction in the human species strongly affects women by excluding them from activities performed by men and labeling everything as "masculine." While the domain of human progress has traditionally been considered a masculine prerogative, women have remained confined to activities deemed "feminine". While acknowledging biological differences between men and women, Gilman argued that men and women should perform the same social functions and develop equally.

Gilman (1898 [2021]) clarifies that in primitive savagery, men and women were comparable to other animals. Both exhibited strength, ferocity, and vitality, and women were as agile and fierce as men, except for the additional aggressiveness of men during sexual competition. In this context, women roamed the forests freely, obtaining food for themselves with the same autonomy as men. The labor of men and women was equally indispensable for the survival of the community. At a certain point, according to Gilman (1898 [2021]), the emerging intelligence of these "savage" beings perceived that it was more advantageous to dominate a smaller woman than to compete endlessly with larger men. Thus, the custom of subjugating women was established, causing them to lose their freedom and ability to provide food for themselves and their children independently. This process marked the beginning of a significant transformation in gender relations and social structures within human communities, resulting in the institutionalization of men's dominance and the systematic devaluation of women's autonomy. In other words, Gilman also offered a perspective in which women would seem as property of men.

What began in primitive savagery persisted across all nations: every child, whether boy or girl, was born into this context, raised within it, and lived according to its norms. Furthermore, the institution of gender distinction is reinforced and regulated by other institutions, such as law and religion. Despite the evolution of society and the economy, women's roles remained almost unchanged in Gilman's time (1898 [2021]), continuing to be marked by subjugation and oppression[6]. New forms of oppression are represented by Gilman (1898 [2021], 1915a [2002]) in clothing, whose primary function is not to "dress" but to announce gender: a tendency toward ornamentation that emphasizes sexual energy. The body of women, modified to emphasize sexual characteristics, is severely constrained in its natural activities. Women's behaviors and manners are entirely oriented toward sexual advantages, often to the detriment of broader human interests. Gilman (1898 [2021]) also criticized the institution of religion: although it initially included women's participation, over time it increasingly excluded them, becoming in some nations an exclusively men's domain.

These illustrations demonstrate Gilman's writings are close to Veblen's thought. Veblen (1894 [2003], 1899a [1934]) exemplifies conspicuous consumption in the context of clothing and fashion: the primary function of clothing was not ornamentation or the enhancement of the wearer's status, but rather to indirectly demonstrate the owner's ability to pay. Veblen also highlighted that any activity without social recognition, such as women's work, was considered of little importance, while honorific activities, associated with warfare, sports, religion, and competitions, were highly valued and socially recognized. In this context, women's work – classified as being viewed as light, mundane, and routine – was devalued. Thus, in addition to exclusion from the labor market, women were also marginalized from "honorific" positions, which were reserved exclusively for men.

Gilman not only challenged the prevailing values of her time but also rejected social norms that confined women to roles restricted to home and family, training them to be housewives and passive dependents within the economic system. One of Gilman's central critiques can be seem as focused on dualisms, such as the public versus private, which served to legitimize women's exclusion from the public sphere. The focus on dualism makes Gilman's writings close to Feminist Institutionalism. She argued that this artificial and

[6] The sexual–economic relationship is a social institution originated since prehistoric eras and persisting to varying degrees across all societies. This institution influences individuals from birth, imposing behaviors that common sense and social beliefs come to regard as adequate. Institutions become familiar through daily use, cease to be noticed. For this reason, such institutions come to be realized by people as natural, simple, and useful laws (Gilman, 1898 [2021]).

arbitrary separation between the two domains not only limited women but also reinforced the notion that the public space was an exclusively men's domain, while women were confined to the private. This dualism contributed to the social construction of gender, placing women in positions of subordination and exclusion. Among the principal institutions criticized by Gilman is the American "home."

Gilman harshly criticized the institution of the American home, which was regarded as the most sacred of all institutions, in her efforts to promote the liberation of women (Sinclair, 1965). Lengermann and Niebrugge (2019) explains that Gilman viewed the home as an archaic, poorly qualified, and disorganized institution that corrupted not only women's lives but also economy, marriage, and the development of young people's virtues. Criticizing the institution of American home make Gilman's perspective close to Radical Institutionalism, a segment of Original institutionalism that focus on recover and develops Veblen's social criticism – see Almeida and Powell (2026, this volume)[7]. William Dugger is one of the greatest radical institutionalists and, for Dugger (1980), the family is the most important institution as in the family people learn how to consume, how to perform social functions, and process habits of thought to be compatible with educational institutions. Hence, Dugger's notion of family is similar to Gilman's American home.

Gilman's view of the American home reflects her critiques of the sexual-economic relationship, which involves the dynamics between gender and labor, and of androcentric culture, which concerns the relationship between gender and culture. These two institutions produce false social concepts and myths, positioning men as masters and women as subordinates. By associating the institution of the home with the idea of myth, Gilman (1898 [2021], 1903), it is possible to identify another connection between her writings and Radical Institutionalism, William Dugger's (1989) notion of enabling myth. According to Dugger (1989), an enabling myth is a mechanism of social control that serves to keep lower classes in the positions assigned to them by dominant classes, teaching both groups that these positions are legitimate and deserved. These myths operate as naturalized explanations for historically constructed social structures, perpetuating inequalities when accepted as truths[8].

[7] As Radical Institutionalism lies on Veblen social criticism and feminism is part of it, not surprising it is possible to identify closeness between Gilman's writings and Radical Institutionalism.

[8] According to Gilman (1903), the home is permeated by myths. The first is the idea that the home provides privacy. Gilman defines privacy as the "decent" seclusion of the individual, where one can act freely, without being hindered, observed, or criticized. However, for Gilman, the home does not offer this privacy, especially for mothers. Another domestic myth is the sacrality of the home, which is considered an inviolable and special space where the woman plays an almost sacred role. The third myth refers to the "economy" of the home,

In this sense, as Dugger (1989, p. 608) states, "Racism is such a myth, as is sexism." In Gilman's view, the myths surrounding female domesticity and the separation between public and private spheres sustain women's subordinate position. This separation of public and private spheres also echoes in Radical Institutionalism, actually in its feminist segmentation, as, according to Waller and Jennings (1991), the doctrine of "separate spheres" during the nineteenth century, together with the "cult of domesticity" and the "cult of true womanhood," codified the gendered meanings of the division between economy and family, further reinforcing the idea that women's roles were confined to the home, while men were associated with progress and the public sphere. The "cult of domesticity" and the "cult of true womanhood" reinforced the notion that the home represented an exclusively feminine domain, in which women were regarded as the natural guardians of morality, decency, and four essential virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Women played the role of providing comfort to their families.

4 Institutional Change and Progress

At the core of Original Institutional Economics lies the notion of progress. This idea was first introduced by Veblen and later reformulated by Clarence Ayres and members of the "Cactus Branch," the Ayresian institutionalist group (see Böck & Almeida, 2018; Waller, 2022). For Veblen (1904 [2009]), business—how goods are distributed—directs technological development—how goods are produced—and thereby exerts a major influence on social provisioning by generating artificial scarcity in pursuit of profits. Ayres's interpretation of Veblen's analysis of the relationship between business and technology became known as the ceremonial–instrumental dichotomy, a duality between institutions and technology. More recently, this dichotomy has been revisited to consider that institutions can sometimes operate as if they were instrumental (Waller, 2022; Powell, 2023; Gil-Vásquez & Elsner, 2024; Almeida & Almeida, 2025). Nevertheless, both Veblen and Ayres argued that progress is driven by institutional change rooted in instrumentalism, that is, by technological development. Thus, institutions may act as barriers to economic development, whereas technology provides its driving force. Moreover, a change that leads institutions to operate as if they were instrumental constitutes institutional change but does not necessarily

characterized by a traditional division of roles: the man is viewed as the provider, responsible for earning money, while the woman is responsible for saving and managing resources. For Gilman (1903), this is a myth because such an arrangement results in greater financial costs for men and more work for women — in other words, more time and effort for both. Furthermore, half of the world's time and labor, performed by women, is viewed as non-economic, which distorts women's real contribution to the domestic economy.

represent progress. As Bush (1987) argues, such a transformation reflects a regressive institutional change.

Gilman's notion of progress is related to her feminist perspective. According to Degler (1956), Gilman believed that true progress would depend on changes in institutions. Hence, it is possible to affirm that process for Gilman could be close to its perspective for Original Institutional Economics. We explore this approach in this section. Institutional change is a central theme for this Original Institutional Economics. According to Bush (1987, p. 1075), "If institutional economics is truly an 'evolutionary' economics, it is because it has the capacity to explain the phenomenon of institutional change and because it incorporates the principles of that explanation in both theoretical and applied inquiry". This change refers to a transformation in the value structure of institutions and occurs when there is a mismatch between existing institutional patterns and new material and technological conditions in society. In this sense, institutional change gives rise to new habits of life and thought results both from technological innovations, particularly the introduction of machinery, and from transformations in the arts and sciences (Rutherford, 1984; Bush, 1987).

Gilman associates her notion of institutional change to the evolutionary ideas of her time. By this association, it would be possible to relate Gilman's institutional change to Original Institutional Economics' perspective. However, there is an important difference between them: despite the closeness between Gilman's notion of institutional change and Original Institutional Economics', their notion of progress is very different – we explore this difference latter in this section. Gilman developed her notion of institutional change under the influence of the reformed Darwinism of Lester Frank Ward, as noted by Allen (2004) and Vallet (2023). According to Vallet (2023), Gilman shared the view that society is an organism in constant transformation, passing through different evolutionary stages in which progress occurs gradually, and institutions change accordingly.

For Gilman (1903), the main institution in need of transformation was the home. Her argument was not for the destruction of this institution but for its adaptation to new social demands in order to redefine its relative position within social organization. From her perspective, social progress depends on the full development of the individual, a development that, in the case of women, was often hindered by the constant and unavoidable demands of the domestic sphere. Gilman's vision was deeply connected to Ward's theories, from which she drew significant inspiration. She even compared the importance of Ward's sociological contributions to that of Darwin in biology, stating that nothing more meaningful

had been offered to women. Ward was one of the first sociologists to support gender equality and to analyze the role of gender in the social structure, earning recognition as a precursor of gender sociology (Scott, 1970; Finlay, 1999; Allen, 2004). He advocated for the emancipation of women from the constraints of outdated pre-Darwinian worldviews, arguing that most observed sexual differences in society stemmed not from biological factors but from traditions, customs, social conventions, and prejudices, in other words, from institutions[9].

According to Finlay (1999), the theory of gynecocracy is presented by Ward as an alternative to the androcentric worldview dominant in his time. For Ward, women occupy a primary position in the biological order, while men are secondary. Evolutionary theory suggests that in many species, women are the primary protectors of their offspring, the centers of families, and the objects of men's competition, though not necessarily of domination. In this sense, "Gynaecocracy, or female rule over the social group, was thus the earliest phase of human development, an inheritance from human ancestors" (Finlay, 1999, p. 254).

Ward emphasized primarily education in the public sphere and the expansion of equal opportunities as pathways to address the subordination of women, measures that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, already indicated steps toward the achievement of equal rights (Finlay, 1999). Gilman, inspired by Ward, introduced her utopian fiction in *Herland* (1915b [2020]), to propose a redefinition of the role of women and a reconfiguration of the institution of the home, offering alternatives to prevailing patriarchal arrangements[10]. According to Chang (2010), the representation of women in *Herland* draws on Ward's gynocentric society and advocates for the reconstruction of the nature of the home and the reorganization of social structure. In this vision, the separation of economic spheres is absent, as there is no "he" to represent the market and the public sphere, nor a "she" to fulfill the traditional role in the private sphere. Gilman (1915b [2020]) reverses gender roles and frees women from the domestic sphere, providing indications of what could be

[9] Rensing (2013) emphasizes that, for Gilman, women were the central agents of racial advancement, aligning with Lester Ward's "gynocentric theory," which postulated the biological and evolutionary primacy of the female sex.

[10] In *Herland*, Gilman presented a scientific expedition into a large, dense forest, seen through the narrator Vandyck Jennings and his two companions, Terry O. Nicholson and Jeff Margrave. The men find themselves fascinated by the tales and myths of the scattered tribes; among these stories, one dangerous and deadly place captures their attention: known as the Land of Women. *Herland* (1915b [2020]) envisions a society composed entirely of women, isolated from any other nation. The work challenges assumptions about gender division and demonstrates how education, labor, reproduction, and social organization are shaped within a patriarchal structure.

considered an "evolved" society based on the transformation of three key institutions: domestic work, which should be integrated into the public economic sphere; technological advancement; and education[11].

In the utopia depicted by Gilman (1915b [2020]), women are skilled workers who support one another, including in motherhood, and are independent. The notion that competition brings advantages and stimulates work is treated with skepticism. According to Chang (2010), the labor-cooperative society created by Gilman constitutes a critique of the capitalist system and large corporations. Therefore, Gilman's community, characterized by the absence of hierarchies and the allowance for professional specialization, is presented as an alternative to the patriarchal society of her time. Similarly, Ward argued that the full moral and intellectual fulfillment of women depended on access to work outside the home, as domestic labor alone would not be sufficient to promote women's health and happiness. On the contrary, external work would stimulate their mental capacities and contribute to their overall development (Scott, 1970).

In her utopia, Gilman (1915b [2020], p. 88) presents a society guided by highly developed industries and describes a scenario in which advanced technology is developed by women, challenging the prevailing androcentric norms that associate progress and technological innovation exclusively with men. Chang (2010) draws a parallel between Gilman and Veblen, arguing that both view technological advances as a driving force for institutional change, providing knowledge to society. However, there is a huge difference between the place of technology in Gilman's institutional change and Veblen's.

For Gilman, institutional change was a necessary condition for technological advancement. In contrast, for Veblen (1904 [2009]), technological progress was the means through which archaic institutions could be disrupted. Thus, Gilman and Veblen addressed fundamentally different processes of institutional change. As their writings suggest, Gilman criticized the society of her time while also offering perspectives on how it might be improved, whereas Veblen's analysis remained primarily critical. The distinction between proposing or not proposing social improvement reflects the evolutionary perspective each adopted. Veblen, a more traditional Darwinian thinker, viewed evolution as the cumulative

[11] Also inspired by Ward, Gilman (1915b [2020]) also emphasizes the role of education as a tool for social reform and institutional change. In *Herland*, the inhabitants attribute much of their survival and prosperity to education. *Herland* highlights the use of books and the teaching as the central role of knowledge in society. Connell (1995) emphasizes that education, for Gilman, is used in a broader sense: it empowers individuals to adapt and change, being shaped according to an evolutionary paradigm.

transformation of the past into the present. In his view, the past influences—but does not determine—the present, and evolutionary change does not necessarily imply progress; it merely indicates a process of path dependence. Gilman, on the other hand, saw evolution as a source of potential improvement in society.

This suggests that Gilman's conception of progress differs significantly from that of Original Institutional Economics. For original institutionalists, progress is associated with technological advancement or with changes driven by instrumentalism. Gilman, however, understood progress primarily in terms of ceremonial transformation—particularly changes in the social roles and functions of women and men. As previously noted, original institutionalists would certainly endorse such changes. Yet, from their perspective, the issue is not which path society ought to follow, but rather how that path is taken. Within the framework of Original Institutional Economics, archaic institutions—such as chauvinism and patriarchalism—are seen as highly resistant to change. This is why Bush (1987) described ceremonial changes as instances of regressive institutional change: they tend to reinforce existing institutional structures instead of liberating society from them, as Gilman envisioned.

5 Concluding remarks

This study sought to provide a more comprehensive account of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's contributions within the framework of Feminist Institutionalism and to establish possible connections between her work and the broader tradition of Original Institutional Economics. By emphasizing the institutional dimensions of gender relations, Gilman developed a perspective that anticipated several principles later formalized by feminist institutionalist theorists and provided a forceful critique of the social and economic institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women.

By revisiting Gilman's writings through the lens of Institutional Economics, this study has suggested that her thought not only complements but also enriches institutionalist analysis by introducing a gendered understanding of institutional change and progress. Her approach aligns with the spirit of Radical Institutionalism, particularly with Dugger's notion of enabling myths, as both recognize the ideological mechanisms that sustain inequality. On the other hand, while Gilman and Veblen shared common ground in their critical examination of cultural norms and in their concern with the relationship between institutions and technological change, they differed fundamentally in their conceptions of progress.

This article represents a first step toward a dialogue between Gilman's feminist institutionalism and the original institutionalist tradition. Further research may expand on this connection, exploring how Gilman's insights on gender, work, and the home can contribute to contemporary debates on institutional change and social provisioning.

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