The Sex Factor: How Women Made the West Rich
BY VICTORIA BATEMAN. Polity, 2019, 248 pp.

This provocative book mounts a feminist critique of much modern economic theory and policy, which the author claims has a strong and continuing male bias. Bateman seeks to widen the discipline’s focus on marketable goods and services to include other social and personal activities that affect economies. The most striking thesis of the book is that the “rise of the West” during and after the Industrial Revolution—a development that still puzzles many economic historians because Europe had long lagged behind China, India, and the Islamic Middle East—was due to the way women were treated differently in western European societies. Although women are subordinate to men in most societies, women enjoyed relatively greater freedom in western Europe (particularly in Protestant northwestern Europe) than in other parts of the world at the time. Women married later, had fewer children, and were better educated. This greater freedom led to more saving and more productive investment.

More From Less: The Surprising Story of How We Learned to Prosper Using Fewer Resources—and What Happens Next

McAfee offers an optimistic outlook for the future of mankind—or at least for those who live in wealthy, democratic countries. This unusual book highlights “four horsemen of the optimist”: effective capitalism, technological progress, public awareness, and effective government. Free markets and advancing technologies provide the basis for material well-being; a free press and strong governance check uncontrolled greed and protect against social and environmental harms. McAfee favors social democracy over socialism, insisting on a sharp distinction between the two. His most surprising finding concerns the U.S. economy. Over the past two decades, the material standard of living of Americans has continued to rise even as Americans consume fewer physical resources, such as water, metals, and building materials. McAfee sees these trends spreading to the rest of the world.

Digital Transformation: Survive and Thrive in an Era of Mass Extinction

The “mass extinction” of the subtitle refers to business firms that fail to digitize their operations. Successful digitization, according to Siebel, involves mastering four key technologies: flexible cloud computing, big data, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things. In the public sector, digitization will allow governments to reduce costs and improve services. Siebel details useful case studies of U.S. and European firms that have benefited from digitization, such as John Deere, 3M, and Italy’s Enel. He also examines the U.S. Air Force’s use of artificial intelligence to anticipate maintenance requirements for airplanes. The book sounds a note of warning in tracing the ambitious pace of digitization in China, which is virtually at war with the United States and other Western countries in developing and exploiting new technologies.