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Introduction: defining feminist political economy

Feminist political economy is a body of work that has emerged from feminist critiques of classical political economy, which encompasses the theories of Marx, Smith, Ricardo, Mill, Polanyi, and Veblen. The classical political economy approach is summarized by four basic questions posed by Bernstein (2017): (i) who owns what, (ii) who does what, (iii) who gets what, and (iv) what do they do with it? In the classical tradition, the “who” may be a group or an individual, and the context is predominantly production for pay or profit. In the feminist reshaping of this tradition, these questions are asked for both market and nonmarket contexts, and, as will be explained, for both production and social reproduction.

This chapter reviews the Marxist-feminist strand within feminist political economy (hereafter FPE). As the largest and most influential body of work within FPE, this literature has two core characteristics. First, it explores the mutually constitutive relationship between gender and class, where class is defined as the relationship of a person/group to the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus. Second, most contemporary feminist political economists view capitalism not just as an economic system but as an institutional order that shapes the culture, polity, as well as the economy, through its tendency to prioritize the accumulation of surplus, which is the “front story” of capitalism (Fraser 2014, 102). Feminist political economists have developed a critique of this drive to accumulate, arguing that it cannot be reconciled with a feminist vision that prioritizes life-making, in the broadest sense of that term (Bhattacharya 2017).

Feminism shares with Marxist political economy an ethical position against concentrations of power and an emphasis on processes of social construction that are specific to particular historical and social contexts (Federici 2012). Despite these commonalities, the “unhappy marriage” between 20th-century Marxism and feminism (Hartmann 1979) drove many feminists away from Marxist political economy by the 1980s and, given the even greater hostility of mainstream economics to feminism, away from economic analyses more generally (Luxton 2006).

There has been a recent resurgence of FPE (Arruzza 2016; Bhattacharya 2017). This resurgence is in part a response to rising inequality, as global markets were liberalized and social safety nets were rolled back in the 1990s and 2000s. It is also a response to the Great Recession and its aftermath, as owners of capital were able to monopolize the gains from any economic recovery,
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leaving workers to grapple with austerity and a backlash against feminism in countries as diverse as the US, Turkey, and India. Neither liberal feminism nor critical feminisms disengaged from economic analyses seemed able to provide a satisfactory explanation of this material context and the state’s exercise of power on behalf of capital (Fraser 2016). With its skepticism about capitalism’s capacity to provide solutions to the problems of gender, economy, or nature, FPE has a renewed analytical and political relevance.

The basics of Marx’s critique of political economy

Marx’s political economy begins with the distinction between labor and labor power in the process of production. When labor power is a commodity, its purchase allows the buyer, usually the owner of capital, to extract its use-value, human labor. In Marx’s conceptualization, the value of labor power (VLP) represents the historically specific standard of living of the working class. Even when the capitalist does pay the worker a wage that is equivalent to the VLP, however, Marx argued that the capitalist is still able to gain from this transaction. Labor itself produces more value than is embodied in the VLP, producing what Marx called “surplus value.” Since the capitalist buys the right to consume labor power, he owns the product of the labor and thus is the first appropriator of this surplus. In the Marxist framework, when someone other than the producer of surplus appropriates it, class exploitation occurs.

The tendency toward capital accumulation, that is, an increase in the surplus appropriated by capitalists, characterizes capitalism as a system. Marx himself concentrated on two ways in which such accumulation occurred: firms seek to increase absolute surplus by either lengthening or intensifying the workday at a given technology, and/or they aim to increase relative surplus by adopting technological changes to increase labor productivity. Workers, meanwhile, push back against these attempts, creating a specifically capitalist form of class conflict.

For capitalists, keeping wages from growing faster than productivity is important to sustain accumulation through exploitation. Capitalists can achieve this goal by lowering workers’ bargaining power through technological, legal, and ideological changes, as well as through violence. Processes of automation, legal restrictions on unions, and ideologies that emphasize hard work as a central virtue can all serve this goal. One such capitalist strategy is the use of gender or racial discrimination to develop a “reserve army of labor”—a group of easily hired but also fired workers who could be used to bring down wages and weaken labor resistance. Early FPE viewed women workers, particularly those from middle-income groups, as constituting such a reserve army of labor (Humphries 1983).

Marx did describe some of the ways in which women workers faced different conditions than men within the wage labor force, including the systematically lower wages they were paid. He also argued that the structure of the family and the position of women were not immutable across time but shaped by particular material conditions. He pointed out the difference between the working-class family, in his time one in which all members of the family, including women and children, were wage laborers and the bourgeoisie family, where being a wife or a mother usually implied being outside the wage labor force (Marx 1976, 577). This argument emphasized that class differentiates gender and is congruent with later feminist understandings of gender as the social construction of biological difference (Scott 1988).

Marx briefly discussed an alternative form of accumulation, which he called “primitive accumulation,” where surplus is extracted by the outright expropriation of resources through explicit violence, as in the case of colonialism, or less overtly violent but coercive changes in property rights law, as in the case of the enclosure movement in Europe (Marx 1976). A growing body of Marxist scholarship argues that accumulation by expropriation or dispossession, far
from being primitive, continues to be an important aspect of capitalist accumulation in the early 21st century and is beginning to explore how it is gendered (Hartsock 2008; Moore 2017).

In Marx’s view, the drive to accumulate capital rested on a host of contradictions that could not always be managed, resulting in periodic crises that interrupted accumulation, each time increasing unemployment and poverty for the working class. His critique was thus twofold: that capitalism was based on exploitation rather than freedom and that it was an inherently unstable system. The implication, less fleshed out in his work, was that an alternative institutional order that allowed the collective appropriation of surplus by those who produced it might be more compatible with human flourishing.

The feminist critique of Marx’s political economy

There are several notable problems with Marx’s analysis from a feminist perspective. First, Marx had a limited interest in the two-way relation between changing forms of accumulation and gendered power relations. Second, Marx never explored the production of labor power itself. For Marx, the term “social reproduction” referred to the entire complex of social, cultural, and political processes required to reproduce capital–labor relations. This definition, however, omitted the labor of life-making required to produce and sustain the labor force, despite such labor being a vital condition of existence for capitalism. In most parts of the world it is women and girls who perform this labor, much of it unpaid. But Marxism was a theory of “empty places” with no explanation of why it was indeed women who performed the bulk of this work (Hartmann 1979). The omission of women’s unpaid labor from Marxist analysis meant that Marxists had little analysis or critique of the gender division of labor (Molyneux 1979).

Second-wave feminism and Marxism

Early feminist political economists expanded the definition of social reproduction to include (i) the daily sustenance of the workers; (ii) the intergenerational reproduction of the labor force, including biological reproduction and the care of dependents; and (iii) the work involved in transmitting the norms, culture, and skills required to reproduce workers as a class (Benería 1979). One of the most important contributions of FPE is to fill the gap left by 19th- and 20th-century Marxism’s unwillingness to grapple with the details and dynamics of social reproduction and its links to production.

As participants in the social movements of the 1960s, women who brought feminist questions into Marxism found some initial answers in the works of Engels (Vogel 2013). Engels (1978) argued that every economic system had to have counterpart institutions of reproduction that needed to be examined from a materialist perspective. He argued that the origins of gender inequality and male control over women’s reproductive power under capitalism lay in the establishment of the institution of private property. However, since the proletariat was effectively propertyless under capitalism, proletarian women would come to achieve equality with men, which would become universal for all women, with the establishment of socialism and the abolition of private property.

Unfortunately, within the working class and in the socialist countries of the 20th century, gender inequalities in wages and access to political power persisted, convincing feminists that the success of the socialist project would not automatically end the oppression of women (Molyneux 1979). Yet when feminists raised questions about the unequal distribution of power by gender, most Marxists dismissed these questions as trivial, as a secondary contradiction (when compared to class conflict), or as dangerous, because they had the potential to divide the working class (Beechey 1987).
The standard Marxist explanation for the persistence of discrimination against women was that it helped capitalists to push down average wage rates for the working class as a whole and was thus functional for capital. But this analysis seemed to subsume gender inequality under class inequality and, as radical feminists argued, take the onus off men as a group by emphasizing the antagonism with capital (Barrett 1980).

One alternative for feminists trying to reconcile Marxism with feminism was to see patriarchy and capitalism as two equally important but different modes of production, in what came to be known as the “dual systems” approach (Hartmann 1979). However, given the variations in the forms of gender inequality experienced by women across the world, feminists of color in the Global South and North found the positing of a monolithic patriarchal system problematic (Benería and Sen 1981; Davis 1981). Specifying the internal dynamics of such a patriarchal mode of production proved difficult, and laying out a systematic relationship between the patriarchal and capitalist modes of production proved to be even more challenging (Rowbotham 1981; Beechey 1987).

A second stream of feminist theorizing in the 1970s focused more narrowly on unpaid domestic labor and its relationship with what Marxists called “productive labor,” defined as being productive of surplus (Himmelweit and Mohun 1977). Since the VLP presumes production of goods and services by unpaid domestic labor, feminists argued that domestic labor is also productive of surplus and deserving of a wage (Dalla Costa and James 1972). Those who performed this labor were seen as super-exploited by capital or by the (male) heads of their households (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Folbre 1982; Cohen 2018). Most feminist political economists today do not see unpaid domestic labor as directly productive of surplus but rather as indirectly subsidizing capital (Vogel 2013), or as a form of accumulation by appropriation (Moore 2017).

One of the major weaknesses of the domestic labor debate was that it remained limited to heterosexual, (nuclear) kin-based, White middle-class households in the Global North, even as evidence mounted that most households in the world look quite different (Whitehead 1984). By the 1980s, these difficulties, the relative indifference to feminist issues on the part of the largely male Marxist community, as well as the decline in left social movements and analyses more generally pushed many of the participants in these debates away from Marxist-feminist analyses (Luxton 2006). However, the dual systems and domestic labor debates laid the foundations for the rich empirical work on unpaid labor, care work, and time-use that has now become central to feminist economics (Moos, this volume).

Contemporary FPE

The recent revival of FPE, led by the proponents of social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya 2017), is an attempt to understand the material underpinnings of gender inequality in 21st-century capitalist societies. Feminists within the economics profession and in wider civil society have forced the discipline to begin to confront the realities of gender inequality. Da Corta (2009) points out, however, even when there is a critique of inequalities the nature of the analysis matters. FPE explores the relationship between gender inequalities and processes of capital accumulation, arguing that feminist policies need to be explicitly pro-labor, grounded in an analysis of how labor itself is produced by the work of social reproduction. The resurgence of FPE has occurred in the context of increased skepticism that capitalism as a system can deliver solutions to the multiple crises of finance, food, fuel, and climate we confront today, all of which seem to be related to the prioritization of capital accumulation over all else.
The Great Recession provides multiple examples of such a prioritization of capital accumulation over considerations of gender or racial equality. To give just one, despite impressive pre-crisis commitments to gender equality on the part of the European Union, in the aftermath of the Great Recession austerity policies across Europe prioritized finance capital over social spending, shifting the costs of an accumulation crisis into the realm of social reproduction. Official commitments to gender equality were quickly shed as austerity took hold, with the most severe burdens of increased work time and lost income then falling upon single working-class mothers and elderly women pensioners (Karamessini and Rubery 2014). Feminist political economists argue that a feminist analysis of this outcome, and indeed of the Great Recession more generally, would be incomplete without a recognition of the nature of class as well as gender relations in the global economy.

Feminist political economists today are attempting to more systematically place race, ethnicity, gender, and class on an equal analytical footing (Ferguson 2014). Since capitalism has no mechanism for automatically ensuring the reproduction of workers, they argue that successful capital accumulation depends upon the maintenance of the gendered, generational, or racialized divisions of labor that ensure that the work of social reproduction is performed (Katz 2001). This means that class exploitation requires gender as well as other non-class forms of oppression (Arruzza 2016). Feminist political economists thus employ intersectionality as a methodology within the theoretical framework of Marxism (Ferguson 2016).

Contemporary FPE extends Benería’s (1979) definition of social reproduction to include the paid labor of social reproduction, performed for wages by nannies, maids, cooks, and so forth, and other means of replenishment of the labor force, such as through immigration (Vogel 2013). FPE thus examines the considerable work of social reproduction that is performed outside the context of the kin-based household as well.

FPE then focuses on the contradictions between the imperatives of life-making, which drive the labor of social reproduction, and those of capitalist accumulation. One such contradiction arises from the fact that while the performance of unpaid labor could help lower average wages, those who perform unpaid labor are then less able to enter the wage labor force, reducing labor supply. The promise of “lean-in” (to capitalism) feminism is that paid work under capitalism can undo gender inequalities, while markets can solve the problem of the care deficits generated when women enter the (paid) labor force.

In the Global North, technological advancements have helped to reduce unpaid domestic labor, allowing women’s labor force participation rates to rise (Vogel 2013). For highly paid women workers in the North, some of the care work that remains has been commodified, allowing them to relieve their double burden to some extent. But FPE analyses emphasize that this labor is now performed by non-White, often immigrant, relatively low-waged women workers who then bear the most intense forms of the double burden. This displacement of care deficits onto more marginalized women then affects their well-being and the social reproduction of the working class in their home economies/regions (Katz 2001; Ghosh 2018). The apparent liberation of highly paid women workers in the North thus rests upon the intersecting inequalities of race, citizenship, and income that ensure the supply of low-wage nannies and maids. An FPE counterpoint to “lean in” feminism would be one that seeks to disrupt these gendered/racial labor market hierarchies, while also constraining the mobility of capital (Ghosh 2018).

Thus, while there is a great deal of scholarship focused on the question of whether wage work decreases gender inequalities, feminist political economists follow Marxist-feminists of the second wave (Elson and Pearson 1981) in arguing that the answer varies by class, as well as race, ethnicity/caste, or geographical context (Benería, Berik, and Floro 2015; Naidu and Ossome...
Redressing these intersecting inequalities requires social and economic policies that are broadly pro-labor while also targeting specific racial and gendered disparities.

To avoid purely functionalist explanations of the role of social reproduction or gender inequality, feminist political economists also emphasize social reproduction and non-class hierarchies as (relatively neglected) sites from which resistance to capitalism can emerge. Thus, a spate of women’s strikes across the world from 2016 to 2018 involved organizing within households, as opposed to just workplaces, and drew on resistance to injustices of gender and race, as well as class (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019).

The aforementioned are examples of contexts where wage labor is dominant. But in many parts of the Global South, we encounter forms of capitalism in which the standard capital–wageworker relationship is not as dominant as it is in the North, with very high shares of informal sector–independent producers such as marginal farmers or tradespeople (Charusheela 2010; Harriss-White 2012; Ferguson and Li 2018). These producers often pursue a complex set of diversified livelihood activities, occasionally entering wage work, both agricultural and nonagricultural, and engaging in spells of circular migration. The difficulties in classifying their occupations using standard Marxist categories have led to Bernstein (2017, 15) terming them “classes of labor.”

Feminist political economists thus have to grapple with forms of capitalism where owners of capital are able to extract surplus not just directly from wage workers but through interest and rent, or “formal subsumption” to capital (Marx 1976, 1021). Far from vanishing with the expansion of capitalism, precarious forms of labor, and the kinds of un-freedom that they are associated with (debt-bondage in particular), appear to be pervasive in the 21st century (Guérin 2013). FPE scholars have to think more deeply about how gender relations in postcolonial contexts intersect with forms of accumulation by dispossession/expropriation and fragmented livelihoods that do not conform to classical Marxist divisions between the wage-laboring proletariat and capitalists (Mezzadri and Fan 2018). There are at least two aspects of these emerging analyses that are worth mentioning here.

The first is a revived interest in the concept of the “relative surplus population” and how it is gendered. Marx had argued that discrimination against women helped create a reserve army of labor. In the Global North, the generally high labor force participation of women indicates that women are not necessarily part of a cyclical reserve army. In the Global South, many women small-scale petty commodity producers have been marginalized but not incorporated into the wage labor force, again suggesting that they may not act as a reserve army of labor (Harriss-White 2012). Marx’s argument about a reserve army was part of a broader discussion of capitalism’s tendency to create groups of long-term unemployed and underemployed that he termed the “relative surplus population” (Humphries 1983). This is a category broader than that of the cyclical reserve army and makes room for the possibility that not all members of the relative surplus population may ever enter the wage labor force (Ferguson and Li 2018). New research is thus exploring how gender relations might shape the different components of this relative surplus population (Naidu and Ossome 2018).

A second important development is the move away from assumptions about male-headed nuclear household structures in earlier FPE analyses. This follows feminists’ definitive critique of unitary household models in both neoclassical and Marxist economics, exposing the pervasiveness of intra-household conflict and showing how household relations vary by class and race (Deere 1990; Safri and Graham 2010). Scholarship on the Global South also reminds us that, unlike in much of the North, the household can be a site of activities that directly produce surplus, as well as a site of social reproduction. There is a rich literature on gender and peasant production (O’Laughlin 2008), and on the continuing significance of home-based piece-work as capitalists outsource to informal sector activities taking place within households (Raju 2013).
Last but not least, in a world where the consequences of climate change have become increasingly apparent, FPE scholarship has become central to new work that tries to understand how capital accumulation in our “Capitalocene” era has accelerated the human–nature divide. Moore (2017) argues that feminist analyses of the ways in which capitalism has channeled women’s unpaid labor into surplus value production can be extended to the analysis of capitalism’s appropriation of natural resources.

This approach is contrary to 20th-century official Marxism that saw capitalism as progressive, because of, and not in spite of, the technological progress and mastery over nature that it brought. Rapid industrialization was a goal of 20th-century socialism. New work in feminist political ecology (Elmhirst 2011) has more in common with the eco-feminism of Mies (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999), or the argument about “commoning” that Federici (2018) makes. These are FPE arguments that prioritize the logic of reproduction over that of accumulation and reject the assumption that capitalist accumulation is a necessary step to something better. FPE’s long history of critiquing mainstream Marxist positions, and of recognizing value created in spheres otherwise treated as unproductive, makes it an important resource for scholars attempting to respond to the ecological crises that confront us.

Conclusion

The renewed FPE project we summarize here is far from complete. It has not solved all the theoretical difficulties encountered by second-wave Marxist-feminists (Ferguson 2014), nor has it fully overcome the relative indifference to feminist debates within the still male-dominated field of Marxist political economy (Cohen 2018). And yet, the stark inequalities of our age do seem to be shot through by the capital–labor divide, while also being sharply gendered, in ways that call for an FPE approach.

Without an understanding of the effects of capitalist accumulation upon our culture, politics, and economy, we believe feminists will be unable to fully analyze gender inequality. Meanwhile, as Cohen (2018) points out, the feminist insight about the importance of social reproduction is often what gives Marxist political economy its radical edge, even if the feminist originators of this analysis, who were often women, are rarely cited or acknowledged.

Despite the difficulties of reconciling Marxism and feminism, we see this engagement as intensely productive. In thinking of class and gender relations as mutually constitutive, along with race/ethnicity/caste/sexuality; in employing a more complex and fluid understanding of both gender relations (i.e., identities) and class relations (beyond peasant versus wage worker) than 20th-century Marxists did; and in thinking of production alongside social reproduction in ways that include the role of nature, we see FPE as pointing the way to a richer feminist theory and politics, one that can produce gender-aware analyses of contemporary global capitalism.

References


