Feminist Perspectives on Labour and Work

Feminist economic geographers have produced rich and nuanced scholarship on the processes, practices and subjects of economic transformations, including globalization (Nagar et al. 2002; Roberts 2004), neoliberalism (Larner 2003) and financialization (Pollard 2013; Rankin 2013). Leading up to the critical turn in economic geography, this field tended to focus on the role of the state in economic restructuring, the geography of firms, class-based labour markets and
global production networks. Feminist economic geography challenges these traditional sites of economic knowledge production by shifting the focus of analysis to diverse social relations and the corporeal and affective aspects of economic processes within varied scales and spaces of the economy (Gibson-Graham 2006; Oberhauser 2000; Werner et al. 2017). For example, feminist geographers have expanded research on care work, such as nursing, eldercare and other professions, where the work is devalued as a result of women’s naturalized identity as caregivers (Atkinson, Lawson and Wiles 2011). These analyses consider the ethics of solidarity and revaluing labour from standpoints that are different from market-based activities and outcomes (Lawson 2007; Pratt 2012).

Critical insights to the nuanced and fluid dimensions of capital and labour are key aspects of feminist economic geography. Cindi Katz’s (2001a) work on vagabond capitalism has been particularly inspiring for this field, as it underscores the social relations of capitalism that benefit those who are already resourced while dispossessing certain people and places based on class, racialized and national components. According to Katz (2001a, 709), ‘vagabond capitalism puts the vagrancy and dereliction where it belongs – on capitalism, that unsettled, dissolute, irresponsible stalker of the world’. By highlighting the temporary and fleeting commitments of capital, she provides a relational framework for understanding the workings of capitalism writ large.

Feminist economic geography also analyses embodied experiences of labouring and the demands made on bodies that are performing work in particular sectors of the economy. Exploring these workspaces and the creation of worker subjectivities, Daniel Cockayne (2016) examines how workers invest in creative forms of entrepreneurial labour in San Francisco’s digital media sector. This research highlights the deleterious effects of precaritization, which includes a shift from salaried work to consultant and contract forms of labour, as well as the ongoing ‘flexibilization’ of the workforce and working conditions (MacLeavy 2011; Richardson 2016). While ‘flexible’ aspects of work are often celebrated by employers, in practice the changing nature of work often erodes worker protections and devalues the skills required to perform the work. As Kim England and Caitlin Henry (2013) demonstrate in their research on international nurses in the UK, this type of work is often performed by women, immigrants and racialized minorities. Indeed, feminist scholarship has shown that contemporary economic conditions and their historical inequalities render some bodies, workforces and communities more precarious and subject to exploitation than others (Meehan and Strauss 2015; Pulido 2016).

Feminist analyses of labour relations and exploitative work conditions have recently been applied to academic institutions. In these contexts, critical scholars document an increasing reliance on casual labour (Berg et al. 2016), the politics of citation (Mott and Cockayne 2017), the speed-up of research demands (Mountz et al. 2015) and the overall neoliberal logics that influence higher education (Mott et al. 2015). In response, feminist geographers have offered slow scholarship (Mountz et al. 2015) and collective biography (Kern et al. 2014) as ways to counter neoliberal and metric-oriented narratives of success in the academy. These alternative approaches provide a bold vision of a more collaborative and sustainable version of academic life that reimagines the university through a feminist sensibility and ethics of care.

Geographies of social reproduction and scale

While the economy is often depicted in the form of hegemonic capitalist production, feminists point to the equally important role of social reproduction in maintaining the social, cultural and material subsistence of individuals, families, households and communities. In this vein, the framing of distinct public and private domains is critiqued by feminists who view these socially and spatially embedded spheres as fluid and overlapping, especially in the context of
gendered labour practices. For example, Katie Meehan and Kendra Strauss (2015, 1) critique the mainstream focus on public spaces, production and the market economy, and instead provide a ‘framework for examining the interaction of paid labour and unpaid work in the reproduction of bodies, households, communities, societies, and environments’. Furthermore, the ‘fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz 2001a, 711) that comprises social reproduction is an important aspect of production, from the standpoint of both labour and the means of production. Katherine Mitchell, Sallie Marston and Cindi Katz’s (2004, 23) analysis of social reproduction contributes to these discussions through the concept of ‘life’s work’ or the ‘various ways in which life is made outside of work … and how differentiated subjects of transnational capitalism are produced in the course of everyday practices’. Feminist economic geography thus dismantles dichotomous categories, such as the public and private, which have been forwarded by mainstream economics in order to emphasize the contested and dynamic nature of labour and work.

Feminist geographers also trace the fluidity of production and reproduction within and across scales through empirically and conceptually rich cross-cultural research. Katz (2001a, 2001b) suggests that we harness the metaphorical power of contour lines to develop ‘counter-topographies’ that draw analytical connections between distinct places that are similarly situated in relation to global processes. Counter-topographies are thus a tool for building a politics of resistance against the imperial, patriarchal and racist operations of globalization. Katz’s rich analysis of Howa village in South Sudan and East Harlem in New York City illustrates how these strategies work across intersecting scales. Members of these communities work within and develop resistance to structural adjustment, civil war and the expanding scope of agricultural and late-industrial economic activities (2004). Ann Oberhauser (2010) applies the analytical concept of scale in her research on spaces of resistance in gendered livelihood strategies of women in Accra, Ghana. Here, informal markets serve as important sites of economic activity and social dynamics in the context of Ghana’s structural adjustment and neoliberal globalization. These examples illustrate how globalization and, by extension, scale appear to shrink or compress differences at the household and local levels, while also expanding the global reach of production and social reproduction.

Reconceptualizing the economy through the analytic of scale involves exploring the relationship between the global and the intimate. The situated nature of the global and the intimate is often studied by feminist scholars at ‘local’ scales, such as individuals, households and communities, which are also sites of social reproduction. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner (2006) suggest that focusing on the intimate, rather than the global/local binary, reconfigures our understanding of spatial relationships by politicizing their meaning through incorporating sensory experiences such as sound, smell, taste and touch. In addition, Sara Ahmed (2004) engages with a feminist re/construction of scale through her work on affect and geographies of fear, hate, love and other intimacies. According to Ahmed, gender and sexuality involve emotions that stem from the body through the international politics of asylum and migration, terrorism and reconciliation. In this section, we argue that feminist economic geography has disrupted conventional meanings and practices of social reproduction in a way that inserts the fluid and dynamic nature of multiple contexts and scales of work. The following discussion positions these social processes with the dynamics of globalization and the mobility of labour.

**Globalization and migration**

Feminist economic geography engages with transnational and global frameworks of migration and mobility in ways that highlight the dynamic and multi-scalar aspects of these economic
processes within and through diverse social identities (Silvey 2013). Recent studies focus on the circular and transformative movement of migrant labour and the multiple labour markets and social contexts that they occupy (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). Furthermore, globalization and the migration of labour influence capital investment, finances and the embodied practices of workers in distinctively gendered ways. Saskia Sassen’s (2005) foundational work on global cities and finance capital analyses the large proportion of low-paid service-sector jobs that are disproportionately occupied by female immigrants in places such as New York, London and Tokyo. These cities are built on and intensify social and spatial disparities, as the wealthy professional class exploits the labour of workers who are poorly paid and who experience insecurity in the workplace, including citizenship status (Kern and Mullings 2013). Labourers experiencing these conditions have found opportunities for resistance, including contesting unfair and unsafe working conditions. Brenda Yeoh and Kamalini Ramdas (2014, 1198) address the contested experiences of migrants who ‘straddle the multiple places of being “here” and “there” simultaneously’, thus revealing both ‘the emancipatory and constraining nature of gendered migrant spatialities and identity politics’. Feminist geography offers critical analyses of how these social and spatial aspects of transnational migration affect the economic and political spheres of migrants’ lives.

Moreover, feminist analysis of labour has shown that racialised and gendered identities are actively constructed through economic activities, both within and across national borders. For example, Rachel Silvey’s (2006) analysis of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia examines how the status of temporary workers excludes them from formal citizenship. Repressive legal systems such as these position them as racialized migrant workers, whose cultures are perceived as immoral, disruptive and generally threatening to civil society. In addition, McDowell’s (2013, 231) research on migrant female labour in Britain during the post-World War II era shows that these women made significant contributions to the nation even as they were continually excluded from the ‘imaginary version of Britishness’. This geographical research shows how embodied experiences of labouring are highly racialized and gendered across industrial sectors, categories and conditions of employment, as well as national and historical contexts.

Feminist scholarship examining the transnational lives of migrants and their diasporic connections to home expands how we understand migration. In these contexts, experiences of migration are often gendered and defined by strong material and emotional connections, including ties to family and community elsewhere through, for example, the payment of remittances, which are often crucial to sustain households and family members in the home country. Beverley Mullings’s (2014, 56) research on the Jamaican diaspora demonstrates that:

While women’s migration … has been instrumental to the alleviation of poverty in their households and communities, women’s ability to financially support their families and communities has often come at the expense of their ability to be a present source of emotional support and protection … for their most vulnerable members.

Araby Smyth (2017) approaches remittances from a different perspective, arguing that transnational sharing of wealth through remittances is an alternative, or even an anti-capitalist, economic practice. While the dominant narrative of remesas is one of development and state-guided contributions, her research on Mexican hometown associations in New York City shows that this practice of sending money home is one of solidarity. In many instances, migrants and labour movements have stood up to the denial of access to healthcare, social services and basic worker rights through sanctuary cities, immigrant reform policies and other advocacy groups. Thus, the
economic and social dynamics of labour mobility are contested arenas and processes that align with feminist analyses of these transnational and global networks.

**Intersectional approaches to the economy**

The feminist concept of intersectionality is attentive to how privilege and power operate through multiple intersecting forms of social difference that compound and transform experiences of oppression and exploitation (Crenshaw 1991; Peake 2010; Valentine 2007). The theory of intersectionality has been mobilized in feminist scholarship on the economy to show how capitalism relies on classed, gendered and racialized hierarchies to reproduce the dominant power relations and systems of privilege, such as hetero-patriarchy or racial capitalism. Recently, Werner et al. (2017, 1–2) argue that the production of social difference is ‘integral to the functioning of political-economic systems and knowledge production processes’. An intersectional analysis, therefore, shows how socially produced categories of difference cannot be analysed in isolation if scholars seek to attend to and dismantle oppressive and exploitative systems of power.

In the tradition of feminist political economy, feminist economic geographers examine how social difference is used to fracture the labour force and discourage collective organizing. As part of this, feminist economic geographers have examined how worker remuneration depends on where the labour is performed and who performs it. Melissa Wright’s (2006) research on maquiladoras and female labourers along the US–Mexico border shows how a woman is made ‘disposable’ through gendered and geographical (Third-World) discourses that devalue her life and her labour. Similarly, in research on the restructuring of firms in the Dominican Republic, Marion Werner (2010, 2012) explores how firms upgrade by devaluing labour through defining work as skilled or unskilled, based on interlocking forms of social difference including, but not always, gender. By attending to how social difference is used to create exploitable workers, these scholars offer a feminist analysis of value that is attentive to the intersectional production of the perceived worth of labour.

While class has been the traditional object of inquiry for economic geographers and while gender has been a long-standing focus of feminist economic geography, recent work in this field draws attention to the significance of race and racism to the history of capitalism. Anne Bonds (2013, 399) argues that economic geography should examine race ‘not just as an effect or product of capital accumulation but rather as a systemic presence that is thoroughly embedded in economic paradigms, institutions, practices, and actors’. Recent events in the US have underscored the need for this type of analysis. Following Donald Trump’s election, Roy (2016) and Gökarıksel and Smith (2017) have employed an intersectional approach, including identifying how discourses of masculinity and Whiteness work in tandem with narratives of economic abandonment to deconstruct Trump’s reactionary cultural politics. In particular, Roy (2016) called on academics in their roles as scholars and educators to challenge the normalization of ‘white supremacy, misogyny, and virulent nationalism’.

In recent years, scholars have examined how anti-Black violence articulates with other forms of oppression. Deborah Cowen and Nemoy Lewis (2016) offer specific examples of the ‘shifting geographies of black dispossession’, citing gentrification, subprime mortgage lending and the ‘entrepreneurial racism of the Ferguson police’, who disproportionately levied traffic fines on Black residents in order to generate revenue for the city. Furthermore, in her research focus on the murder of Michael Brown at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, Kate Derickson (2017) calls for geographers to examine the racialized legacy of US urban growth and development. These examples clearly illustrate ongoing racialized violence in many parts of the US.
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Feminists thus argue that an intersectional approach is vital to addressing inequality at its root and connecting the struggles across populations for transformational change. As feminist economic geography learns from colleagues who embrace Black geographies and postcolonial approaches, scholarship on the economy must account for the co-production of social difference through an intersectional approach to understanding the economy.

Gender, financial subjectivity and financial inclusion

Since the 1980s, economic geographers have been particularly interested in studying how globalization and neoliberal economic change manifests across space in uneven and contested ways. More recently, and especially since the 2008 financial crisis, geographers have studied the growing significance of finance and new forms of exclusion and marginalization. Feminists studying the institutions and cultures of financial services incorporate the spread of financial logics into daily life through gendered practices and values. For example, Linda McDowell’s (1997, 2010) research focuses on the distinctly masculinist cultures of banking and financial institutions, while Caitlin Zaloom’s (2006) Out of the Pits and Karen Ho’s (2009) Liquidated provide rich ethnographic work in this area. Feminists have also examined investor subjectivity and the ideology of shareholder value, including the gendered notions of risk and responsibility that inform underwriting practices and financial regimes more broadly (Amoore 2011; Joseph 2014).

In recent years, feminist scholarship has been attentive to how finance operates beyond these institutional spaces, including the way that financial logics are a part of everyday life, thus replicating and sometimes exacerbating experiences of exclusion, dispossession and marginalization. In the wake of the Great Recession, feminist economic geographers paid attention to the gendered causes and consequences of the financial crisis. This scholarship examines how social relations and familial responsibilities are reconfigured alongside changes to the welfare state (Elwood and Lawson 2013; MacLeavy 2011; Pollard 2013). The austerity measures taken after the financial crisis disproportionately impacted on those households and communities living ‘on the edge’ in ways that are strongly gendered, racialized, classed and militarized (Ettlinger 2007; Waite 2009). Everyday experiences of austerity (Hall 2015) are also embodied as people find strategies to cope with scarcity and uncertainty, including crafting, homesteading and food sharing (Hall 2011; Parker and Morrow 2017). This work shows how the lives of individuals and families are altered as they adjust to the economic recession and the ongoing financialization of the economy.

Development projects have also taken a decidedly financial turn, as they aim to promote social and economic empowerment by expanding access to credit. Microfinance programmes extend small lines of credit to women, primarily in the Global South, in order to encourage entrepreneurship (Aladuwaka and Oberhauser 2014; Roy 2010). These programmes target women who, based on essentialized views of their role as responsible stewards of the family’s finances and moral debtors, are believed to use the funds more responsibly than men (Maclean 2013). Similar gendered assumptions inform conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes that provide cash assistance to women who meet certain conditions, such as consistently sending children to school or bringing children to the doctor for regular check-ups. Examining the effects of the CCT programme Oportunidades, Claudia Radel, Birgit Schmook, Nora Haenn and Lisa Green (2016) report optimistic outcomes in the areas of land control and tenure for women engaged in the agricultural sector in Mexico, yet they suggest that the programme’s benefits have been successful despite, not because of, the neoliberal programme’s requirements. Similarly, in her examination of Peru’s CCT programme Juntos, Tara Cookson (2018) argues...
that well-meaning CCT programmes do not adequately address the legacies of exclusion that underlie low-income rural women’s experiences and, as a result, replicate inequality and reproduce poverty.

In the US context, Jessa Loomis’s (2018) research examines how nonprofit financial literacy and capability programmes are teaching previously unfit market actors, such as women living on limited incomes, to manage their debt, monitor their credit scores, avoid predatory lending and invest using mainstream financial products. Her research illustrates how financial empowerment programmes are helping financial institutions to expand their reach into new consumer markets as they encourage participants to be responsible debtors. In general, programmes of financial inclusion and empowerment, such as CCT, microfinance and financial capability programmes, have been criticized for making women responsible for their own poverty alleviation (Rankin 2013; Roy 2010). In contrast, programmes that encourage individuals to be accountable to and responsible for their debts have received widespread political support, even as regulation of the financial industry remains contentious. Thus, feminist geographic analyses of finance provide critical dimensions to our understanding of both empowerment and further marginalization within the economy.

**Strategies of resistance – transforming economic livelihoods**

In their efforts to create a more capacious definition of the economy, feminist economic geographers have argued for new representations and metaphors of economic activity and have imagined alternatives to exploitative and oppressive relations of economic production and consumption. Included in this reimagining are efforts to articulate and enact a feminist politics of the economy beyond capitalism (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). The work of feminist scholars J.K. Gibson-Graham theorizes economic exchange beyond a capitalist framing and imagines a post-capitalist politics (2006). This work has since inspired research on diverse economies (2008), or the varieties of economic activity, as well as how community economies envision a different economic practice, which involves ethics, values and interdependence. These alternative and diverse economies shift the economic focus from market-based capitalism to household and community needs and resources. For instance, Oona Morrow and Kelly Dombroski’s (2015) research on canning, gardening and self-provision identifies a range of communal responses to the most recent downturn and shows the coping strategies that families and communities use to survive in times of economic contraction. As Fickey and Hanrahan (2014) suggest in their review of scholarship on diverse economies and alternative economic spaces, there remains a need for scholars to take seriously the inequalities and questions of power within these hopeful examples.

While some resistance arises in opposition to capitalism, other strategies for transforming livelihoods arise from changing the means of economic exchange and altering the terms under which that exchange occurs. Scholarship on food justice and ethical consumption has been a particularly fertile topic for conceptualizing different modes of economic practice. For example, Sarah Lyon, Josefina Bezaury and Tad Mutersbaugh’s (2010) work on coffee production in Mesoamerica reveals how women gain greater control over their participation in fair-trade organic coffee organizations than in smallholder agricultural production. Of course, not all attempts to create fair-trade and ethical consumption have produced the expected or desired results. Feminist approaches recognize that these results are sometimes mixed, in that women can be empowered yet still experience restrictions. Lyon et al.’s (2017) recent scholarship complicates earlier findings by suggesting that the women who gained agency and power through their coffee production still contend with domestic obligations; this ‘time poverty’ is a
particularly gendered burden that is an all-too-common experience when economic rights do not coincide with advances in the social status of women.

Strategies of resistance often arise in attempts to engage in more ethical or collective economic practice, suggesting moves towards social and economic justice. For example, the movement #GiveYourMoneytoWomen, started by feminist Lauren Chief Elk and colleagues, calls for a direct transfer of wealth from men to women as a form of gender justice. This initiative acknowledges the long-standing structural inequality that has undervalued and refused to pay women for their labour (Hanson and Pratt 1995), including work in the home and emotional labour and care work (West 2016), and advances a radical politics of wealth redistribution from men to women. Diprose’s (2017) research examining the practice known as ‘timebanking’ shows how the inequalities of waged work can be challenged by rethinking the value of one’s own and others’ labour. While often not understood in political terms, Diprose argues that these localized and embodied experiences of labouring beyond the wage can be an antidote to the powerlessness that people feel in uncertain and precarious times.

Reimagining feminist alternatives for the economy

In this chapter, we argue that feminist scholars have enhanced geographical approaches to understanding the economy by broadening the scope of analysis to diverse economic processes and practices. Our discussion highlights how feminist economic geography considers gendered, racialized, classed and militarized forms of insecurity, and provides critical spaces for activism and resistance to the dominant forms and discourses of capitalism, including worker-owned collectives, alternative economies and different ways of measuring and performing academic success. We also examine how the erosion of social support systems, austerity measures and reactionary movements in many areas of both the Global North and South are embedded in hetero-patriarchal, racialized regimes of political economy. These processes underscore the need for an intersectional approach to understanding economic marginalization, exploitation and dispossession. Drawing on feminist scholars of finance, we also suggest that financial inclusion under terms that remain predatory or discriminatory are inadequate responses to ongoing and insidious economic exclusion.

By drawing on empirical examples and reviewing major themes in the history of the subdiscipline, including work, migration, social reproduction, finance and strategies of resistance, we have shown that feminist economic geography innovates the theories, methods and objects traditionally employed in economic geography. These approaches offer alternative narratives that complicate the well-worn explanations that circumscribe economic analysis to categories such as labour, production, consumption and markets. Feminist economic analyses of contemporary events such as Brexit, the election of Trump and the rise of populist movements in the Global North, for example, illustrate what feminist theory of the economy offers for analysing political economic issues. These examples demonstrate that feminist scholarship on the economy has not only augmented economic geography writ large but also offers a capacious understanding of the workings of the economy that should be understood as more than a mere complement to mainstream economic geography. Indeed, feminist approaches to the economy have been foundational to capturing the depth and complexity of economic life. Through these approaches, feminist economic geography has reframed conventional notions of globalization and neoliberalization to instead highlight spaces of radical possibility and to offer alternative paths for ethical and productive alliances in the economy. Here, we find solidarity and resolve to reimagine these economic spaces and to create more just approaches to pressing economic questions, including those related to the provision of care and the distribution of wealth, now and into the future.
Key readings


References


Feminist engagement with the economy


