

Pluralism inside Feminist Political Economy: a Perspective from France

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While feminist theory in the broadest sense has long been recognized as a plural theory that is rife with controversy (Jaggar, 1983), feminist economics appears at first glance to be more homogeneous. This is probably due to its specific institutionalization, centered on the existence of an organization (IAFFE) and a journal, *Feminist Economics*.

This text aims to highlight the fact that feminist political economy is instead subdivided into three main paradigms: the political economy of patriarchy (1); liberal/progressist feminist economics (2); and the social reproduction theory (3), which we present here in chronological order of appearance. These three approaches claim to be feminist economics (even if they are not all produced by career economists but also by sociologists and philosophers), i.e. they take a normative approach from the outset, proposing both to take into account the multiple dimensions of inequalities between men and women and gender minorities in the analysis, and to reflect on the strategies that would enable these inequalities to be eliminated, taking as their point of departure the production and distribution of wealth. Each of these approaches has sub-categories that could be qualified by further work, but we are not interested here in the internal variety of each approach. Instead, we seek to highlight the differences between these three broad groups of theories based on a specific criterion: how they articulate the system of women's oppression to the capitalist mode of production. From there, we make the connection with the struggle strategies for women's liberation that stem from these theorizations of the oppressive system.

1. The political economy of patriarchy

While the domestic and free labor provided by women was unthought of by the political economy – including Marxist – of the time, the feminist struggles of the 1960s and 1970s generated an intense theorization of women's contribution to the economy. In France, this gave rise in particular to an approach carried essentially by activists and sociologists of the "second wave" (Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, among others), who claimed to be "materialist feminists" and who were interested in the family as a place of production and circulation of wealth.

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1.1 Who is the main enemy: the husband or the capitalist?

The first approach to feminist economics was thus developed in the 1970s by sociologists who broke with Marxism, but who nevertheless retained certain concepts, sometimes revisited, such as that of "materialism". They mobilize materialism to explain in a classical way that social relations are built on the material conditions of existence, except that the concept is used to build social classes based on gender. Despite a certain diversity among the contributions forming the core of materialist feminism, their common point is to center their study on the family as a place of production and circulation of wealth. Thus, the main contribution of materialist feminism is to highlight the existence of a system parallel to capitalism, a system described as a "domestic/patriarchal mode of production" by Delphy and "sexage" by Guillaumin. It is precisely the identification of a mode of production distinct from capitalism that allows this approach to be described as a true "political economy of patriarchy", the subtitle of sociologist Delphy's book (2013) gathering her papers published since 1970. Male domination is theorized as an exploitation of women parallel to the capitalist mode of production, based both on female free labor and on unequal patrimonial transmission through inheritance. The coexistence of this mode of production with capitalism implies that women are victims of a double exploitation: by men on the one hand, in the domestic context, and by capitalists on the other, in the context of wage labor. This position differs from that of Engels (1884) who also considered that "in the family, the man is the bourgeois; the woman plays the role of the Proletariat", but for whom intrafamilial exploitation ultimately benefited the capitalists and not men.

1.2 A failed alliance on the side of the struggle?

The identification of a mode of production contemporary with capitalism but distinct from it goes hand in hand with an activist strategy consisting in autonomizing itself from the workers' movement, notably in single-sex organizations. Moreover, the emphasis on the existence of "classes of women" implies putting the struggle for women's liberation at the forefront, subordinating to it, if not abandoning completely, the class struggle. This autonomization has had the effect of distancing autonomous feminist struggles from a revolutionary approach to turn to struggles close to those of the liberal/progressist feminist economy: analysis of the women's labor market, or focus on wage claims, allowing Aurore Koechlin (2019) to assert that part of this feminism has finally become a "state" feminism. The autonomization of this current from the labor movement also explains for Koechlin (2019) the weakness of the theory today, which only survives in a few works of sociology. Analyzing the two systems in a disconnected way thus raises the question of the common struggle: what is the point of fighting together against two systems that are so distinct? (Koechlin, 2019, p. 29).

2. Liberal/progressist feminist economics

The second branch of feminist and gender economics is the best known and most established and has been developed by professional economists. It is an approach known as "heterodox", sometimes even "institutionalist", which constitutes a hardly unified current, bringing together American economists (Nancy Folbre, Julie Nelson, Sylvie Morel, Ann Jennings, among others) and more recently French ones (Rachel Silvera, Anne Eydoux, H el ene P erivier, Guillaume Vallet).

The origins of this approach are well known, with the publication of several major works on feminism in economics in the 1980s and 1990s (Waring 1988; Ferber & Nelson 1993; Ferber & Nelson 2003; etc). These works set out the themes and approach that remain central to feminist economics today: the critique of wealth measurement indicators and their androcentric bias (Waring 1988; Jany-Catrice & M eda, 2011); the objectification of women's place in the profession; the critique of homo  conomicus; the centrality of domestic and care work; the issues of parity in economic organizations (Cullen & Murphy, 2018; Webb, 1997); etc. From a theoretical point of view, liberal/progressist feminist economics still seems to be unstructured today, since several approaches coexist within it. The common point of all these works is mainly the critique of standard economics. *Feminist Economics* finally offers a new critique of standard economics, the market norm, and homo  conomicus from a gender perspective.

The *Feminist Economics* approach can be described as reformist, in the sense that it is not part of a struggle against capitalism. For this feminist economics, capitalism can be rid of all male domination, and its functioning can be "arranged"; it is enough to identify the appropriate public and fiscal policies. Within the framework of capitalism, it is a question of thinking of a capitalism with and for women. This tradition thus joins that of a political economy that advises power, developing expertise on how the state can organize the best possible capitalism.

One of the first courses of action for feminist economists is to campaign to improve the minority position of women in the profession. Thus, Ferber & Nelson's (1993) first book was published following the creation of the *Committee on the Status of Women in The Economics Profession* (CSWEP) in 1972, which is committed to the promotion of women in the profession. In collaboration with the *American Economics Association* (AEA), the goal was to recruit more women to the editorial boards of the two major American journals: the *American Economic Review* (AER) and the *Journal of Economic Literature* (JEL); and to encourage women to publish in these journals as well. There is thus a strategy for institutionalizing the *Feminist Economics* movement in the field of American economics. However, Ferber and Nelson partly criticize this strategy, which has had the effect of selecting mostly uncritical works (2003, p. 6), and consider that *Feminist Economics*, although it has benefited greatly from the help of the CSWEP and the AEA, is more critical: "its objectives include the more radical aim of challenging the masculinist biases in the now well entrenched neoclassical economics" (2003, p.7). The foundation of the Feminist Economics movement was stabilized in the 1990s with the creation of the *International Association for Feminist Economics* (IAFFE) and the creation of

the journal *Feminist Economics* in 1994, which allowed for the publication and recognition of numerous works on feminist economics.

3. The Social Reproduction Theory

A new feminist approach to the economy is being formed, with the emergence of the Social Reproduction Theory. We can distinguish two periods of this theory, a period that can be qualified as "activist", since the middle of the 2000s, and a more theoretical period, which had been initiated in the 1980s but which contemporary struggles are now bringing to the forefront. The SRT claims a return to Marx with an extension of his analyses by articulating them to the ongoing struggles (feminist, anti-racist, ecologist) in the world. This theory is a recent construction (2010s) and mobilizes various theorists (Tithi Bhattacharya, Cinzia Arruzza, Nancy Fraser, among others) around a theoretical and political tradition that is not completely unified.

3.1. Activist roots

If Lise Vogel's 1983 book, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, marks the theoretical basis of the Social Reproduction Theory, it remains a theory that starts from the field. The feminist struggles that mobilize this theory have been instrumental in making the theory known, especially in the 2010s. First the Women's Strike in 2018, then *Feminism for the 99%. A Manifesto* (Arruzza et al., 2019), which definitely presents itself more as a political program than an academic theory. These movements start from a political statement: feminists must unite with anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, ecological activist movements. They take the opposite view of the second wave which advocated nonmixture and that women organize the struggle among themselves. The organization of the women's strike in Spain shows the will for SRT to appropriate "classic" activist modes of action: the strike, far from the shock actions of the Femen, which reintroduces the materialist conception in the organization of the women's struggle. While the claimed strategy is to organize on a class basis within relations of production, social reproduction theory also emphasizes the multiplicity of sites of crisis and struggle (Arruzza et al, 2019, Fraser 2013).

3.2. From the economy of production to the economy of reproduction

SRT includes a critical reappropriation of Engels and Marx attentive to the question of the specific exploitation of women and a consideration of the contributions of the feminists of the Socialist International Women (among them, Clara Zetkin; Alexandra Kollontai; Rosa Luxemburg). SRT intends to develop a common analysis of capitalist production and of what it calls "reproduction", that is to say, everything that concerns the conditions of capital accumulation. Reproductive labor then corresponds to all the labor necessary to manufacture the commodity labor power, the only commodity that is not necessarily produced under capitalist conditions. This is why some social reproduction theorists speak of the "political economy of labor power" (Arruzza 2013). In short, Social Reproduction Theory includes, in

the study of capitalist accumulation, the mechanisms by which the system procures labor power, whether these mechanisms are based on biological processes (gestation) or not (slavery or immigration), whether they are located in a domestic setting, or not (socialized or privatized services). Women are then exploited in their productive work (just like male proletarians) and reproductive work (more than male proletarians), but in both cases, this exploitation allows the accumulation of capital. The fight against capitalism remains therefore central as well as a priority, even if the overthrow of capitalism will not be enough to automatically achieve equality between men and women.

Conclusion and future

Feminist political economy thus refers to multiple conceptions of both the economy and its articulation with feminist struggles, which is what we have tried to show here. Of course, the boundaries between the three approaches are not completely watertight, insofar as the works documenting this or that aspect of male domination are always enlightening for all the analyses. However, the theoretical and political positions at the basis of these three branches are so far apart that it remains difficult to mobilize them jointly to think about the system(s) of domination and even more so about the strategy of action to bring it to an end.

Accepting our share of normativity, we think, on the contrary, that tracks for economic analysis are more promising on the side of SRT, which remains a field to be investigated for economists who are only marginally present in it. In parallel, there have been several attempts at integrating production and reproduction inside (radical) political economy, for example Cohen's (2018) analysis of superexploitation; or Quick's (2016; 2022) analysis of household production in connection to the capitalist sphere. The important literature on care work is also central to the articulation between production and reproduction (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2004; England, 2005; Garrau, Le Goff, 2012). Further work in SRT could rely on these radical political economy perspectives to strengthen the articulation of production and reproduction which is still in lack of a general theory.

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