

Feminists Theorize International Political Economy

Written by Kate Bedford and Shirin M. Rai

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KATE BEDFORD AND SHIRIN M. RAI, MAR 30 2013

When we first set out to map the field of feminist political economy, in late 2007, the US and Europe were being shaken by economic crisis.[i] China and India appeared to be gaining prominence within global economic policy making, and throughout the world it seemed that advocates of free-market reform and deregulated finance capital were losing ground. Six years later, with banking bonuses again skyrocketing and savage austerity policies in place across Europe, 'the crisis' (as many Northern scholars parochially term it) seems less a rupture than an opportunity to deepen neoliberal political and economic relations. A conversation about feminist political economy at this juncture remains crucial, because gendered questions at the heart of international political economy continue to be neglected. For example, inadequate weight is being given to what we already know: that African American women and Latinas in the United States were overrepresented as targets of subprime lending (National Council of Negro Women 2009); that the repossession crisis will have a disproportionate impact on women dealing with relationship breakdown (Nettledon et al. 1999); that shifts in consumption patterns are likely being funded by women working harder inside and outside the home (Moser 1993); that dislocations in production have gendered effects on unemployment. Ethnographic accounts of the trading floor have long detailed its gendered and racialized nature (McDowell and Court 1994), and scholars have many times unpacked the hegemonic racialized masculinities evident in mainstream celebrations of global capitalism (Benería 1999): yet discussions of racialized masculinity in international political economy remain rare.

A second factor motivating us to consider what feminist literature and activism could add to current debates within international political economy was the observation that this capitalist crisis – albeit deep and shocking – is neither the first nor will it be the last. Women and men have survived crises through everyday struggles, and feminists have analyzed and campaigned on economic crises, for decades: the gendered impacts of the 1980s debt crisis (Sen and Grown 1987), the East Asian crisis (Truong 1999), and the Argentine crisis (RIGC 2003), among others. That history of struggle and analysis in the South must not be lost in our concerns with the current crisis. Consumption in the North (fuelled by accumulating debt) has transformed the economies of the developing world, where a new international division of labour occurred alongside an increasing mobilization of female workers and the consolidation of a gendered division of labor. Care chains grow longer as migrant laborers provide the domestic and market-based care work necessary to sustain Northern economies (Raijman, Schammah-Gesser, and Kemp 2003). Simultaneously, these modes of exchange deepen class divisions while creating new metropolises in the South that are migration magnets of historic proportions. Taking such historical links and power relations on board provides us with an alternative perspective from which to view the current crisis, whereby we approach systems of production, exchange, consumption, and social reproduction together in a distinctive, feminist light.

Feminist work in international political economy is exceptionally varied, but we can identify three important themes. First, feminist work often addresses the gendered regimes of capitalist production and consumption, which illuminates the changing relations between nation-states and the global economy; processes of globalized capital accumulation and investment; the nature of social reproduction; the relationship between material and discursive production and the circulation of goods, services, and knowledges; gendered patterns of consumption; and changing relations between local communities, states, and globalized markets. The second theme is gendered systems of exchange, which allows analyses of the gendered international division of labor; the nature of exchange, whether involving care or cash within private and public spheres of the economy; and the effects of monetary exchange in fashioning, challenging, and transforming gendered relations. Finally, the third theme takes up gendered struggles for

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emancipation and equality, which leads to examinations of challenges to capitalism in the post-Cold War era; analyses of the class, race, and gender relations underlying particular strategies of empowerment or theoretical critiques of concepts such as emancipation, equality, and transformation; and the place of gender in current critiques of IPE.

While the themes of production/consumption, exchange, and resistance underpin much feminist political economy scholarship, here we map three areas of analysis – governance, social reproduction and work, and sexuality and intimacy –where alternative feminist perspectives on IPE are clearly evident in ways that we believe analytically cut across these thematics. In drawing attention to them, we aim to underline both the continuities with and departures from previous debates and suggest how these contribute a feminist response to the current crisis of capitalism.

Gender and Governance

Struggles over meanings attached to the term governance have characterized debate in both the North and South.[ii] With shifts in the regulation of capitalist relations and formulations of social policy, feminist thinking has focused on the changing relationship between states, markets, and civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). While the earliest interventions considered gendered mobilizations outside the state and international institutions (Meyer and Prügl 1999), there also emerged a strong body of literature on gender mainstreaming that sought to unpack the processes through which social policy is framed and transformed within institutions.[iii]

The state-centric nature of governance analysis has also been challenged. While Shirin Rai and Georgina Waylen have argued that global governance needs to be the focus of our analysis because we “need to historicize the contemporary situation as the state has been reconfigured under globalization/neo liberalism” (2008b, 7), other scholars have challenged state-centric analyses from the perspective of local political spaces. Crucially, some have examined how parallel sovereignties work within the nation-state as parallel legal and carceral systems and how governance of polities and governance of communities are mutually imbricated to reproduce structures of power and oppression through spectacular practices of punishment and exile, in the context of a deepening economic and social crisis (Baxi, Rai, and Ali 2006). While these approaches differ in their focus and conclusions, all acknowledge the multifaceted and complex nature of governance structures and discourses. In this light, much current work explores the multilayered nature of governance regimes involving, inter alia, states, international aid organizations, religious actors, and local communities. Feminists committed to building political-economic alternatives to the current order must thus grapple with both definitional parameters of governance as well as alternative modes of governing.

Social Reproduction and Work

The discussion of governance outlined above of course builds on key feminist debates regarding the public and the private, which shed light on the exclusion of social reproduction from what is recognized as work. Despite some differences of emphasis in feminist analyses, social reproduction has three key components: first, biological reproduction or the production of future labor, and the provision of sexual, emotional, and affective services (such as are required to maintain family and intimate relationships); second, unpaid production of both goods and services in the home, particularly of care, as well as social provisioning (by which we mean voluntary work directed at meeting needs in the community); and third, the reproduction of culture and ideology, which stabilizes dominant social relations.[iv] These components are institutionalized through gendered labor, discourses, and the organization of everyday life (Laslett and Brenner 1989). While the family is considered the primary institution engaged in social reproduction, current feminist scholarship is developing the concept of the “care diamond” to examine the variations in the provision of this work between the market, state, community, and family (Razavi 2007, 20).

Despite its everyday importance to our lives, social reproduction is rarely included in analytical work done by political economists (be they mainstream or critical), nor is it usually accounted for in national statistics. However, the significance (conceptually, methodologically, and politically) of what one set of observers term the “glorious tangle of production and reproduction” that characterizes people’s lives (Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian 2003, 8) has long been recognized by feminists (Waring 1988). In particular, they established a powerful critique of 1980s-style neoliberalism on the grounds that it pushed women into the paid labor force while increasing their caring

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responsibilities (Elson 1998). There has been, however, a less unified response from feminists to subsequent formulations of capitalism. As states and international financial institutions temporarily turned away from the savage varieties of neoliberalism imposed via conditionalities and toward a post-Washington Consensus about institutional strengthening, good governance, inclusion of the marginalized, and social safety nets, feminist political economists responded divergently. While some welcomed the shift, working within the development apparatus on the grounds that gender is being taken far more seriously now (Tinker 2006), others argued that the anti-indigence projects associated with this new phase of policy have further increased social reproduction burdens on women by institutionalizing their roles – forged under crisis conditions – in securing community and family survival (Truong 1999; Rai 2002; Lind 2005). This raises crucial questions about the extent to which the new poverty programs that characterize “inclusive neoliberalism” are reliant on “female altruism at the service of the state” (Molyneux 2006, 437) and how these may evolve in a crisis context. Issues of work – paid and unpaid, formal and informal – remain central to feminist IPE debates and the promise of paid labour and market inclusion as routes to women’s empowerment continues to be critically interrogated.

Intimacy and the Household

The regeneration of policy interest in the family has been, in part, a response to the privatization and individualization of care, with increasing surveillance of parenting in many countries, an economic reframing of childcare involving the idea of the investable child (Prentice 2009), and punitive, even criminal measures to enforce the responsibility of some parents. Globally, the United Nations’ 2009 Commission on the Status of Women meeting focused on the theme of equal sharing of responsibility between men and women, especially in the context of caregiving and HIV/AIDS, in further evidence that familialism is undergoing a resurgence as a model of securing care (Bedford 2010). Against this, the need to critically interrogate the links between political economy and models of kinship from a queer antiracist perspective was noted nearly twenty years ago by Jacqui Alexander (1994), who identified the heteronormative nature of much feminist political economy as a barrier to comprehensive scholarship on gender and structural adjustment. Other scholars have argued, to use Sasha Roseneil’s (2004) terminology, for “queering the care imaginary,” or moving outside a heteronormative paradigm for care provision. Roseneil turns attention to what friendship might offer feminists interested in care; others have examined how members of communities bound together by desire might care for one another, how sex may be understood as a form of care (Cooper 2007), how community solidarities and kinship bonds might be rethought outside a racialized model of the family (Safa 1999), and how normative ideals of family are being restructured by states seeking to increase women’s labor force participation rates or create legal obligations within nonconjugal couples. These debates about what we want as a model of feminist care provision have always been fraught, but they are especially pertinent now, given the increasing interest being taken in family provision by some national and transnational policy agencies addressing the social reproduction dilemma.

The challenges posed from queer perspectives to the heteronormative framing of the economy and the policy landscape extend beyond a need to sexualize social reproduction debates, however. A growing body of feminist work on sexuality and IPE has outlined and analyzed the intertwining of markets and sexualities and the complex connections between changing formulations of capitalism and intimacy.^[v] Many countries have witnessed the expanded marketization of sexual possibilities, for example through commercial venues for sexual minority communities, or newly legitimate opportunities for purchasing some sorts of sex, while in other cases state and suprastate surveillance of sexual markets has intensified (Ho 2009). As made clear in recent work on the commodification of new reproductive and stem cell technologies (Ikemoto 2009) and the immense profits being made from global sex industries, the classic debates over the role of heteronormativity in capitalism (e.g., Butler 1997 and Fraser 1997) are far from resolved.^[vi] We urgently need “to consider the possibilities that contemporary formulations of global capitalism open up for alternative sexual and gender politics as well as the new sexual norms and regulations being forged in the neoliberal world order” (Bedford and Jakobsen 2009, 9). In a similar light, as certain normative queer populations are, to use Jasbir K. Puar’s framing, “folded into life” (2007, xii) through state recognition of marriage rights, parenting rights, and so on, other differently racialized, gendered, and sexualized populations are targeted for death, or are rendered disposable. The complex links and ruptures between these sites and processes are only beginning to be teased out, and there is much to be learned about mobilizing a critical anti-imperialist feminist response – one that refuses the market-celebrating libertarianism of the (nonreligious) Right,

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the erotophobia of some left movements (Binnie 2009), the militarized humanitarianism of some transnational gender activism, and the continuing heteronormativity of some feminist political economy.

Conclusion

Feminist political economy offers a unique way to understand the linkages between micro- and macro-trends, institutional forms, and sites of struggle. These contributions are fruitful to us as we ponder why neoliberal regimes are extant rather than diminishing in the context of the current economic crisis. In particular, we note that feminist research typically involves grounded inquiry that refuses the alleged dichotomy of empirical versus theoretical work, which is sometimes mapped, more perniciously, as a distinction between theoretical work with a supposedly universal reach, versus empirical research with only local connotations. Feminist IPE has long been characterized by critical, theoretically rich, and methodologically radical grounded research and theorization, and this is a key source of its most important analytic insights.

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[i] This is a much-condensed version of Bedford, Kate and Shirin Rai. 2010. Feminists Theorize International Political Economy. *Signs* 36.1: 1-18.

[ii] For feminist analyses of governance debates see Nussbaum et al 2003; Rai and Waylen (2008), and Waylen (2008).

[iii] See Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2002), Rai (2003), True (2003).

[iv] See Elson (1998), Bakker (2007), and Hoskyns and Rai (2007).

[v] E.g. Wilson (2005), and Padilla et al. (2007).

[vi] This debate, which Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser carried out in the pages of *Social Text*, concerned the extent to which queer politics challenges capitalism, the desirable relationship between sexuality activism and Left mobilizing, and the best way to understand the links between the economic realm and normative heterosexuality.