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THE RADICAL ROOTS OF FEMINISM IN ECONOMICS

Jennifer Cohen

ABSTRACT

This contribution explores the history of women and feminism in the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) using concepts from feminist radical political economy. A feminist approach changes the categories of economic analysis to offer a new interpretation of an older history: the formation of the Women’s Caucus. I reread the early history of the feminist project in economics through the lens of social reproduction to understand the influence of life experience on practice, particularly on the 1971 women’s walkout during a URPE conference, and on economic theory. Highlighting women’s multiple roles, as graduate students, mothers, wives, girlfriends, and/or caregivers — but ultimately as women — reveals social reproduction as a site of radical politics and demonstrates the importance of reproductive labor for understanding solidarity. In doing so, the analysis provides an example of how a feminist perspective contributes uniquely to economics.

Keywords: Social reproduction; history of economics; feminist economics; radical political economy; labor; URPE; CSWEP

INTRODUCTION

We got together to hang out, we sang, we made up songs, we, you know, we made love to each other.

— Herbert Gintis, 2003, as cited in Mata, 2005

Those of us who attended left the [summer] Conference with a feeling of unity which could not have been attained in any other way.

— Bob Hinckley, 1969, as cited in Mata, 2005
The wives were often mothers and concerned about the child care (lack of, I think) and poor, very poor toilet and shower facilities [...].

— Heidi Hartmann, personal communication, January 2, 2018

I want to address tendrils of Women’s Caucus prior to Mufly [...] code word is women’s bathroom [...] the abominable conditions at Mufly [...] Goldee (then Meyer) taught us how to repair toilets since many, many cold and hungry women were sharing three, yes, three, toilets for all the women and the small children.

— Laurie Nisonoff, personal communication, January 2, 2018

One is occasionally confronted with personal accounts of experiences that make it seem as if women and men live in different worlds even while they occupy the same space. The different recollections (above) of URPE’s summer conferences help explain the 1971 formation of the Women’s Caucus. Responsibility for reproductive labor and the work itself, undertaken in close quarters in inadequate facilities, generated solidarity among women attendees.

The Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) was the home of the first women’s organization in economics. The roots of the feminist project in economics in the United States are in URPE, and they reach back to its founding in 1968.

In the tumultuous period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, New Left organizations, including the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), were increasingly challenged by feminists who argued that they reproduced women’s subjugation. Some feminist historians and activists describe the summer of 1967 as “a dam breaking” and a “flood” of energy in the women’s liberation movement (Evans, 1980, pp. 201, 205). The feminist movement took hold in multiple academic disciplines; in history (Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession, est. 1969; https://theccwh.org/about-the-ccwh/history/), modern languages (Women’s Caucus for the Modern Languages, est. 1969; http://www.wcml.org/?page_id=70) sociology (Sociologists for Women in Society, est. 1971).

I explore the history of women and feminism in URPE using concepts from feminist radical political economy and demonstrate how a feminist approach changes the categories of economic analysis to offer a new interpretation of an older history: the formation of the Women’s Caucus. I reread the early history of the feminist project in economics through the lens of social reproduction and analyze the influence of life experience on practice, particularly on the 1971 women’s walkout during a URPE conference at Camp Mufly, and in economic thought. Highlighting women’s multiple roles, as graduate students, mothers, wives, girlfriends, and/or caregivers — but ultimately as women — reveals social reproduction as a site of radical politics and demonstrates the importance of reproductive labor for understanding solidarity.

In 1971 a group of women made four interrelated demands of URPE that reflected their interests given the role(s) they occupied. Despite each demand having the appearance of being about representation in the organization, the demands center on valuing women and their work, or at least on improving the conditions in which they do paid and unpaid work. The source of solidarity among the women was their oppression, which manifested for some of them as...
unpaid gendered labor, for others as paid labor focused on gender, but for most as both. The women’s demands were met, but not before some men in URPE exposed how claims to professionalism functioned to marginalize the women economists that those men saw primarily as wives or girlfriends rather than as professionals. These claims devalue the work associated with all women: the work of social reproduction. Paradoxically, most male radical economists seem unwilling or unable to recognize and acknowledge that human beings spend much of their time in the valuable activities of social reproduction even though it is precisely these conditions that they hold a normative commitment to improving. This contradiction reflects regrettable resistance to integrating feminist insight in economic theory and practice.

The women who played key roles in the early development of feminist economic thought were not the first women economists, nor were they the first feminist economists but they were the first generation with the numbers, consciousness, and geographic concentration — in Boston, New York, and New Haven — to come together to challenge the economics discipline, the men organizing it in the mainstream and in radical political economics, and each other.

**ORIENTATION: FEMINISM AND ECONOMIC THEORY**

The critical bases of radical economics and of feminism in economics overlap: both are skeptical of the self-proclaimed neutrality of orthodox economics. Both are critical of the ways ideology functions to enforce constructed disciplinary and definitional boundaries to maintain the status quo from which it benefits. For example, the orthodoxy’s claim to objectivity — to economics being “science” — enables it to resist normative critique — and further to define it as “not-economics,” therefore better left to the normative theorists in other disciplines. Who in the discipline holds the power to define what is and what is not “economics” is an important issue for feminists and radicals alike.

Feminism challenges the very character of what economics is, how it is defined, and what is legitimate and appropriate to study. Feminists argue that the discipline itself is created by human actors who make choices about research questions influenced by their particular social, cultural, economic, political contexts (Ferber & Nelson, 1993), by the availability of empirical data on categories of interest (DeMartino, 2000), and by their own experiences, which are subject to the norms and history of the space they occupy.

More specifically feminists tend to argue that economics is biased by the overrepresentation of men in the discipline and suffers a consequent overemphasis on the aspect of the economy in which men typically to work: production. That is to say that men project men’s experiences onto the (male) economic actor. For feminists, production processes and the production of commodities are overvalorized — ascribed too much value and status — in the economy, in the economics profession, and in economic theory. Production is also overvalorized in the sense that it is presumed that value arises exclusively from production of commodities, not the production of people, despite the fact that commodity
production depends fundamentally on the daily and intergenerational reproduction of laborers.

Feminists argue that productivist bias extends to radical political economy which may acknowledge that reproduction is necessary, but for which reproductive labor largely remains invisible, presumed “natural,” and is un- or under-valued. Productivism is a pervasive ideology that lends itself to an intense focus on paid work and the use of wages to buy commodities. It obscures the unpaid time and effort that is required to convert those commodities into, say, a meal, simultaneously blocking from view the gender of the people who typically do that work. Because much of that work has historically been considered women’s responsibility and has been done by women, people’s gender-differentiated lived experiences are a feminist concern. The work is reproductive labor, the labor that reproduces human beings, without whom production would cease.

For Marxists, social reproduction refers to the “perpetuation of entire social systems” (Laslett & Brenner, 1989; Marx, 2003), which, in capitalism, enables capital accumulation. This use of the term reproduction is taken from Marx (2003) who uses the phrases “simple reproduction” and “reproduction on a progressively increasing scale” to describe the continuous process of production and capital accumulation in capitalism. Feminist theorists include in social reproduction the day-to-day work of “maintaining existing life and reproducing the next generation” through a gendered division of labor in which women are disproportionately tasked with this typically unpaid or poorly paid work (Laslett & Brenner, 1989). The Marxist-feminists who developed the term as an analytical category (Mutari, 2001) were among the first to describe the ways in which these two aspects of social reproduction are structurally and intimately related in capitalism: without the day-to-day work of social reproduction, entire social systems could not be reproduced. Capital accumulation is contingent upon the reproduction of labor-power.

The dependence of production on reproduction, of waged work on unwaged work, is an insight from feminists who redefine what counts as economics and what constitutes legitimate economic analysis. They argue that economic analyses that do not consider the reproduction of humans are not merely incomplete, they are incorrect. Social reproduction in toto includes more than the paid and unpaid work of reproductive labor. It includes leisure, socialization, and internalization of social norms, and other aspects of life itself. To radical political economy, which tends to emphasize class, surplus, and the potential for change through those compelled to sell their labor power to capitalists, feminism contributes a holistic analysis of production overall: production of commodities and of laborers (Cohen, 2018; Lee, 2011; O’Hara, 2007; Quick, personal communication, March 22, 2018).

The men and women in URPE share a normative commitment to change in the discipline of economics and to change in the world, such that social reproduction would be carried out under more peaceful and equitable conditions. Yet it is unusual for men to acknowledge that it is the conditions of social reproduction that they wish to improve, or that related work happens at all (Cohen, 2018). Instead, perhaps because of this disregard for social reproduction, their
theoretical focus is almost entirely on the goal of reclaiming from the capitalist class the surplus value extracted from the labor of the (mainly) male wage-labor force and restoring it to those same (male) wage laborers (Quick, personal communication, April 5, 2018). Thus they assume an unchanging process of social reproduction and the reproductive labor it requires, effectively devaluing that labor and removing women from their analyses.

The Women’s Caucus brought an aspect of URPE members’ broader normative commitments — women’s liberation — into conversation with the discipline and its organizations. Valuing gendered reproductive labor and acknowledging the process of social reproduction is an ongoing feminist pursuit. In this way feminism, and the women who brought it to economics, have worked to change the profession, the institutions and organizations with which they are affiliated, and economic theory.

**THE HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN URPE, AND IN ECONOMICS**

Most histories of URPE begin at the University of Michigan, where a group of men wrote the URPE prospectus in the first week of September in 1968 (Lee, 2004). Instead, I begin at Harvard, also in the fall of 1968, where Paddy (Patricia) Quick (PhD Economics, Harvard 1974), a graduate student and teaching fellow, worked with a committee of a dozen male faculty members and graduate students developing a “new curriculum [...] motivated by the conviction that the orthodox approach to economics cannot deal with the important problems of modern society” (Edwards, MacEwan, & the Staff of Social Sciences 125, 1970).

Boston was a site of activity because of the work at Harvard and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where Ted Behr, a graduate student attendee of the Michigan conference, organized the New England Regional Conference held in November 1968 (Lee, 2004). Also at MIT was Laurie Nisonoff (M.Phil Economics, Yale 1972), who, as an undergraduate student worker did the “secretarial” work of typing “the first newsletter and key punch [ing] the first mailing list” in the national office that Behr set up in one of the graduate student offices (Nisonoff, personal communication, January 2, 2018).

During the 1968 and 1969 New England Regional Conferences Nisonoff met Lourdes Benería (PhD Economics, Columbia 1975) and “the women from Yale”: Heidi Hartmann (PhD Economics, Yale 1974) and Peggy Howard (ABD Economics, Yale 1972). Nisonoff moved to New Haven, as did Marianne Hill (PhD Economics, Yale 1982), where Flavia Behbin (ABD Economics, McGill 1975) and Francine Blau (PhD Economics, Harvard 1975) rounded out the “New Haven Six.” They became the base of the Women’s Caucus (Nisonoff, personal communication, January 2, 2018), which unified during the 1971 URPE summer conference.

The summer conferences were held at campgrounds and were “family-friendly” events to which URPE members, mostly men, brought partners and children. Mata and Lee (2007) write that the conferences,
[...] were an occasion to debate organizational strategy for URPE, but they were also a place to celebrate and to play. The announcement for the first conference read:

All of the facilities of the camp including tennis courts, sailboats, canoes, power boats, swimming, archery, baseball, football, etc. are available to conference participants. We are planning to arrange the conference so that at least one-third of your time can be spent in recreation. Child care will be arranged. Participants should bring their own bedding and tennis balls. Pets are allowed (URPE National Conference, 1969).

It is the element of play and passionate political debating that radicals recall best in interviews.

Likewise, Mata (2005, pp. 75, 141) notes that the early summer conferences were “recalled with great fondness” but also describes fiery debates, and even “sectarian strife.”

In the October 1971 URPE Newsletter, following the August conference at Camp Muffy, Howard Wachtel describes the gatherings in a somewhat more beleaguered tone:

We must understand what the conference is and what it is not. The annual conference is a place where URPE people and their families and friends get together in an unhassled more natural environment to get to know each other, renew old friendships, conduct some important mind work, exchange political and intellectual experiences, conduct some important organization business (which always gets neglected), learn something, and develop political economic programs for the next year.

We should not expect instant community although we strive for community by holding the conference away from our usual environments with attention to form designed to create better social relations.

It was at the 1971 summer conference that tensions between the men in URPE and the women in and of URPE, including those introduced to the group through a partner, came to the fore, and in response the women formed the Women’s Caucus.

What was the source of the tensions? Peggy Howard described the women connected to URPE saying:

Some were members of URPE, and were concerned with discrimination both in URPE and within the economics profession. Others of us resented any obligation to become involved in what was our husband’s or boyfriend’s organization, not ours. (Mata, 2005, p. 129)

Given mixed motivations, what generated the solidarity among the women URPE members and the women connected to the organization through a spouse or partner that resulted in the formation of the Women’s Caucus?

Early in the conference week the “about 45 women, or most of the women at the conference” held an initial meeting; some were graduate students in economics, others were activists or academics in other disciplines, and some were wives or partners of male URPE members (Horowitz et al., 1971). The women “agreed to set up a series of workshops during the week reflecting the different interests of the women involved” (Horowitz et al., 1971). Midweek, following a morning meeting mainly attended by women economists, many of whom were
themselves wives or partners of male URPE members, Laurie Nisonoff delivered four interrelated demands to the organization’s evening business meeting. The first two demands were that two women be added to the URPE Steering Committee and three women be added to the editorial board of URPE’s journal, the Review of Radical Political Economics (RRPE) (Horowitz et al., 1971; Mata, 2005; Mata & Lee, 2007). The third was that there be a woman “family” member on the committee planning the next summer conference (Horowitz et al., 1971). And fourth, that “family” membership in URPE be permitted (Horowitz et al., 1971; Mata, 2005).

The men balked and a comment from one prompted a walkout, not only of the women graduate students but, to their surprise, of the “wives of other URPE members” (Mata & Lee, 2007; Matthei, 2015). Mata and Lee (2007) quote Nisonoff, who says,

> Every woman in the room pretty much got up and left, so all their wives and girlfriends went with us! So it’s one thing when it’s ten or twelve annoying women graduate students—there was no woman faculty at URPE—but it’s quite another thing when every damn woman in the place goes out and stands outside.

From an interview with Laurie Nisonoff, and in a discussion limited to the first two demands, Mata and Lee (2007) infer that the demands were centered on the concerns of the economics graduate students. They write (2007, p. 166):

> The climax of the Nisonoff story is the summer conference and the women’s protest. Its message is one of solidarity [...]. And it is thanks to the show of solidarity from the noneconomist women at the business meeting, by storming out with the economist women, that their demands were met.

Mata and Lee’s explanation emphasizes the actions of the women graduate students at Yale. It is consistent with interpreting the origins story as one of women-as-economists and as driven primarily by that role. But the women graduate students were not at the conferences or in URPE solely as economists; about half of them were also in relationships with men in URPE. Of course, this means that a substantial number of the men at the conferences also were there not solely as economists. However, because men tend to be perceived and to perceive themselves in terms of their occupation-based identities, as economists rather than husbands, and because their role as husband or father does not imply the same responsibility for reproductive labor, their dual roles do not impact them in the same manner. Nisonoff (personal communication, January 2, 2018) writes of the women’s overlapping roles that “the wives who were themselves economists were sort of seen as wives anyway.” Nisonoff’s point suggests that the women economists that URPE men perceived to be linked to the organization primarily through occupational identity were treated somewhat differently from those perceived to be connected to URPE primarily through a husband or partner and, implicitly, through her reproductive labor. That is to say nothing of the women’s own identities, which, as feminist economists whose paid work is often related to the study of reproductive labor, tend to be
inseparably informed by their experiences as economists and wives, partners, and/or mothers.

Therefore the multiple roles the URPE-partnered women economists play, and the attached paid work and reproductive labor they are assigned, are salient. In fact, because the assignment of reproductive labor and feminized work are produced by gender norms and discrimination against all women, those multiple roles are salient for all women. For example, they extend even to those graduate students who were not wives or girlfriends but who were tasked with doing feminized work, including when Quick and Nisonoff were assigned to work at the desk to check people in instead of attending a business meeting (Mata & Lee, 2007), or when they are assigned to take a shift of childcare (see below). That happens because they are women. This is the nature of the gender oppression from which they wanted to be liberated: it crosses discipline, education level, and relationship status and assigns women uncompensated or poorly compensated gendered work such as secretarial assistance and childcare.

From a feminist perspective that draws conceptually on social reproduction, the formation of the Women’s Caucus becomes a story in which women’s solidarity action reflects the gendered work of reproductive labor done by women, be they economists, noneconomists, partnered, or single. The four interrelated demands each push back against oppression and seek greater academic and real-world recognition of women and women’s paid and unpaid work, and more generally of social reproduction.

The conditions of social reproduction at Camp Muffly were a key contributor to the demands. Heidi Hartmann (personal communication, January 2, 2018) explains,

The wives were often mothers and concerned about the child care (lack of, I think) and poor, very poor toilet and shower facilities and very subpar food—all carbs. And no women had been on the planning committee and we deduced that that is why these things were not properly attended to.

Likewise, Laurie Nisonoff (personal communication, January 3, 2018) writes, “I want to address tendrils of [the Women’s Caucus prior to the walkout at Muffly] […] the code word is ‘women’s bathroom’.” Laurie tells the story of “the abominable conditions at Muffly” in which “many, many cold and hungry women were sharing three, yes, three toilets for all the women and the small children etc.” Three toilets for 45 women alone would be inadequate infrastructure. The addition of at least a dozen children, many under the age of five, contributed to the tensions between the women and men at the conference. The issue is not the toilets alone, of course, but the way in which they reflect the men’s disregard for and disengagement from the reproductive labor required for the conference to take place. Wachtel (1971) wrote that the conference is held “[…] with attention to form designed to create better social relations,” but some (gendered) aspects of form received little attention. According to Nisonoff, Goldee Meyer, at the time the wife of a URPE member on the faculty at Penn State, taught the other women how to repair the toilets, which suffered from the overuse.
The 1971 newsletter summarizing the events at the conference explains the third demand:

Another motion proposed that there be a woman “family” member of URPE on the committee planning the next summer conference. Many women and some men were dissatisfied with the planning of this year’s conference – it was felt that the information about conditions at the camp which was given in advance was insufficient, that not enough attention was paid to the food and sanitation facilities at the camp, and that there was not enough advance planning of daycare. Because of this, it was thought inadvisable to rely on the promises of the men to do better next year.

With this in mind, the announcement for the 1969 camp in Mata and Lee (2007), above, has a line worth revisiting, “Child care will be arranged.” By whom? Who will do the arranging and who will do the childcare? Referring to Camp Muffyly in 1971, one woman, a graduate student in economics at the time, said “the brilliant plan for daycare is we each took a shift” (anonymous, personal communication, January 2018). “We” being the women at the conference. She proceeds to describe, “a daycare story I am afraid to tell out loud […] I remember being alone with the kids in a cabin near the road.” A story recounting a swiftly resolved mix up of children follows. Fortunately, that confusion, stressful at the time, ended up being an amusing anecdote; merely another example of a woman doing what is presumed to be unskilled reproductive labor so that other conference-goers can meet. Paddy Quick (personal communication, March 21, 2018) writes that in later years she “was always involved in organizing the daycare for these conferences (including recruiting my kids’ pre-school teacher to take charge of this one year).”

None of this means that the summer conferences are not fondly remembered by the women who attended them. Indeed Nisonoff is one of the people that Mata (2005) cites as recalling conferences with fondness. It does, however, mean that the women who were at the camps experienced them differently from the men due to their responsibility for reproductive labor. Part of what unified the women at Camp Muffyly was the shared experience of responsibility for this work in a challenging environment. It bears noting that the environment was not arbitrarily challenging; it was challenging as a result of poor planning by men in URPE, and it was challenging specifically for women, be they graduate students, activists, or partners or some combination thereof, thus the tension.

The fourth demand Nisonoff presented to the business meeting was that: “[the women] also wanted ‘family’ membership to be recognised in URPE (‘family’ defined broadly as including people living together) which would give voting rights to family members (nearly all female)” (Mata, 2005, p. 129), “so that there was no formal difference within URPE between economists and their ‘families’” (Horowitz et al., 1971). The language of the demand suggests that it was designed to get rid of formal, occupation-based, gendered inequality within the organization. The women, maybe especially those graduate students in disciplines other than economics, activists, and partners who were neither graduate students nor activists, had found themselves treated as lower status, less valuable contributors to the conferences.
About “family” membership Mata (2005, pp. 129-130) writes,

The latter proposal was contentious to those that at the time saw URPE as an eminently professional organization — a forum to discuss and develop radical economics. For some men it made no sense to have non-economists as URPE members. The Women’s Caucus saw it differently; they argued that non-economists (mostly women) were already an active part of URPE’s organizational life (not least as members of the Caucus) and deserved full recognition.

Sharpening the contrast between these views, the members of the Women’s Caucus argued that the organizational life of URPE depended fundamentally on women’s unrecognized work, without which the summer conferences would not have been possible. They wanted their contributions to the conferences to be recognized, valued, and wanted some say in URPE matters. Some men, on the other hand, sought to cast URPE as a professional and intellectual space in order to question the “appropriateness” of the Caucus’ demand for recognition. For example, Lawrence Tharp (undated), wrote that he was only “able to make sense of these events — as emotional rather than as intellectual phenomena,” after which he asks himself, “if URPE is the appropriate place” for such activities (emphasis added).

Against a rhetorical backdrop of professionalism, the substance of Nisonoff’s note that “the wives who were themselves economists were sort of seen as wives anyway” takes on a new role; that of constructing boundaries. The women’s roles as economists and as wives or girlfriends are inseparable in practice. They are bound together as identities, they influence the way that the women were viewed, and affect how they are treated. For the women economists, then, the men’s resistance to URPE being anything other than a “professional organization” must have been particularly galling: the women, perceived by the men primarily as wives, could never fully be members of a strictly professional organization because it was impossible for them to be perceived primarily as professionals — by precisely the same men who claimed it was a professional organization.

To clarify, the claim voiced at a gathering at a summer camp — where arrangements are made so that at least one-third of participants’ time can be spent in recreation (see above); tennis, boating, swimming, archery, baseball, and football, and where multiple interviewees included sex as one of the camp activities (Mata, 2005, p. 162; anonymous interview, personal communication, March 2018) was that the organization is primarily professional. In reality, the conferences were distinctly oriented toward valuing social reproduction as much as “professional” work — even advertised on the basis of valuing leisure — and were lamented by some (Mata, 2005, p. 75) and acknowledged by others (Wachtel, 1971) for the lack of professional work done at them. I am not suggesting that academic organizations, especially radical organizations, should be narrowly professional, or that recreation and camaraderie are incompatible with intellectual work in any way. Rather, the rhetoric of professionalism paints a rather unsavory picture when juxtaposed with the conference announcement: one stated position is “we value leisure,” part of social reproduction, and the
other is “this is a professional organization” for economists only. Read together, the joint statement appears to be “we value men’s leisure,” and we assume the existence of women’s unpaid reproductive labor — upon which men’s professional work and their leisure both depend.

The problem is not that the up-close confrontation with social reproduction at the conference revealed that women economists are women, and therefore subject to gender norms, problematic as those norms are. It is also not that women economists are not “primarily” or “solely” professionals. It is the men’s perception of themselves as “primarily professionals.” The problem is that some of the men sought to distance themselves from the apparently unprofessional, probably dirty, certainly gendered labor of reproduction. They were quick to claim their higher status, more valued occupational identities and wield them to maintain that status, despite their dependence on women’s unpaid work. And they did this instead of recognizing their own multiple roles as male economists, husbands, partners, and fathers, an acknowledgment of which would render visible the ways in which they too participate in social reproduction. In other words, some men deployed professionalism, consciously or not, in a way that devalues reproductive labor and the people who do it. This rhetorical, theoretical, and practical strategy makes sense as a way to retain status but it contradicts the claimed normative commitment of radical economics: to create a more equitable world.

The rhetoric of professionalism is therefore used to impose an artificial boundary between professional, productive labor and unprofessional, reproductive labor, and not coincidentally, to maintain men’s higher status while marginalizing women. The women graduate students, maybe especially those with male partners, recognized the ways their “professional” and their “unprofessional” work were related, as did the women who were not graduate students, all 45 of whom “were involved in doing something about political, social, and intellectual problems” (Horowitz et al., 1971, p. 2). Thus the women’s four demands center on valuing women and their work, or at least on improving the conditions in which they do paid and unpaid work. Ultimately, the source of solidarity among the women was their oppression, which manifests for some as devalorized gendered labor, for others as paid labor focused on gender, but for most in the Caucus as both.

**OUTCOMES**

When the Women’s Caucus returned to the business meeting at the 1971 conference, their demands were accepted. Horowitz et al. (1971, p. 4) note, however, that by the end of the week, “some men expressed regret, to other men, of course, at ‘having given in so easily.’” Clearly, tensions remained; the Women’s Caucus wrote this summary of the events in the URPE newsletter (Horowitz et al., 1971, p. 6):

> URPE is a male-dominated organization and is oppressive to women. Moreover it has shown very little remorse at being so. We hope that the need for change in the organization is now seen. We will continue to struggle within URPE on the assumption that there are men willing to struggle with us against sexism in URPE. However, unless progress is made within the organization as a whole, some of us may be forced to consider leaving URPE.
The Women’s Caucus became a political force in URPE and its members contributed to the formation of several other groups concerned with women and feminism in economics. Change within URPE was one aim; change in the profession through the American Economic Association (AEA) was another. Both reflect the Caucus’ normative commitment — an activist commitment — to women’s liberation.

The Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP) came into existence through the work of members of the Women’s Caucus. The Caucus proposed six resolutions for promoting gender equality in economics to the AEA. In passing the resolutions the organization adopted “a positive program to eliminate sex discrimination among economists.” The second resolution established CSWEP. Carolyn Shaw Bell (1998), appointed as the founding chair by John Kenneth Galbraith in 1972, describes its beginnings,

The credit for initiating CSWEP must go to the young women studying economics at Yale, Peggy Howard and Francine Blau and Heidi Hartman and others who didn’t accept the usual answers. ‘Why aren’t there more women giving papers at the AEA meetings, and holding faculty positions at the universities, if not the men’s colleges?’ To an economist, this is a simple question about demand and supply, and the answer was also simple. ‘Because there aren’t any—or I don’t know any—qualified women.’ But the new questioners were not satisfied: ‘Well, why aren’t there qualified women?’

CSWEP is a credit as well to three other Caucus members. Laurie Nisonoff and Marianne Hill met with James Tobin (1971 AEA president) and Paddy Quick who met Galbraith, the president-elect of the AEA. Quick approached Galbraith in his office at Harvard to get the resolutions, including the resolution establishing CSWEP, onto the agenda for the December 1971 AEA meetings, held in New Orleans. Quick (personal communication, March 8, 2018) recalls that Galbraith was not only supportive and saw the need for the Committee, he even made an exception to the posted deadline for proposals in order to add the resolutions to the agenda. In a hand-written letter to Hill, Quick (1971) writes that Galbraith also “put in a word for us with Rendigs Fels […] an AEA parliamentarian.”

During the discussion of the resolutions, Laurie Nisonoff recalls a group of women motioning the AEA (Mata, 2005, p. 83). They were, “accusing the organization of making economics ‘a man’s field’ and called for greater equality in training and hiring of women economists” (Mata, 2005, p. 83). Indeed the original language in the first resolution was, “economics is not a man’s field,” but it was changed by amendment to read, “economics is not exclusively a man’s field” (emphasis added. Bartlett, 1997; CSWEP, undated).

If economics was not to be exclusively a man’s field, the AEA needed to combat the sex discrimination that kept women out of the discipline. It would also need to acknowledge the existence of reproductive labor and the different lived experiences resulting from women’s disproportionate responsibility for it. In the first two resolutions the AEA adopts an anti-sex discrimination position and establishes CSWEP; in the fourth and fifth the AEA agrees to put women on editorial boards, encourage the appointment of women as program “chairmen,” and to openly list all employment opportunities. In the third and sixth
resolutions, the AEA resolves to encourage flexible education and employment opportunities on a part-time basis for women and men and to “provide well publicised child care arrangements at future sessions” to “facilitate attendance at its meetings, especially by younger members of the profession” (CSWEP, undated). The resolutions were designed to increase women’s participation and influence in the AEA and the profession.

Despite its radical roots in URPE, CSWEP was always intended to be located in the mainstream of the discipline, as part of the AEA. The committee was tasked with investigating sex discrimination in the discipline, recommending an affirmative action program, and reporting and publishing the results. Shaw Bell (1998) describes recognizing that convincing male economists that the lack of women on the AEA program and as interviewees was not the result of a lack of qualified women would require documentation, solidifying CSWEP’s ongoing work of collecting data and reporting gender disparities in the discipline.

In URPE, the Women’s Caucus gained representation on the Steering Committee and Editorial Board and members published seven special issues of the organization’s journal, RRPE, focused on the political economy of women. The special issues were a major accomplishment for the Caucus. Published in 2001, 1991, 1984, 1980, 1977, 1976, and 1972, they are where feminist articles in RRPE are concentrated. The special issues were self-consciously political documents featuring articles written to “contribute to feminist visions of political economy” and “represent significant landmarks along a journey” (Mutari, 2001, p. 380).

In the introduction to the 1980 special issue Nancy Folbre describes the political project in compelling terms, making clear how the normative commitment to women’s liberation informs feminist theory in economics and how, in part, the project is an effort to change the distribution of reproductive labor:

The creation of this special issue has been, for this collective, a political process, one which forwards our struggle. A hundred years ago, with the fight for higher education for women still in its infancy, a group such as the eight women who put together this issue could not have existed. The content of this issue would not have had authors to articulate it or editors to develop it. The theory that is developed in these pages is designed to lead to a world, within the next hundred years, where our practice will be within the norm and the production of it will be easier than we have found it. The very existence of this issue is evidence that the struggles of our foremothers to free at least some time for political and intellectual work has been successful.

The purpose of this issue is to speed our continuing struggle along, to move us toward a future where work and its rewards will be equally shared by all. Specifically we seek a world where women will not do the disproportionate share of the tasks that women now do. All such reproduction work will be shared equally and will be reciprocal. Such a society does not exist anywhere in the world. Varieties of socialism have been established. Feminist Utopias exist only in novels. Not only is there no society that is to patriarchy what socialism is to capitalism, there is not even a word for such a society.

Both Mutari (2001) and Folbre (1980) note that the special issues were intended to be collections of feminist scholarship in economics and they were; the feminist theorists publishing in RRPE effectively established the building blocks of feminism in economics. But as Mutari (2001) writes, “[…] one of the
purposes of the special issues is to open the door to the integration of feminist concerns throughout work in political economy.” A key aim of feminists in economics has been, and remains, to change the substance of economic analyses, in part to include gendered reproductive labor. In this final aim, success has been more elusive.

Albeda (1995, 1997) documents the perception that, at least as of 1992, feminism had little impact on the discipline according to economists. A third feminist organization, the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) was established in 1991 and its journal, Feminist Economics, in 1995. Feminism’s perceived impact may be higher now, but most journals and economists remain resistant to feminist analyses, even in radical political economy (Cohen, 2018), where one might expect it to be more welcome than in the discipline at large. Yet a feminist perspective continues to generate insight that remains hidden by other approaches.

This contribution is, itself, an example. In rereading the history of the walk-out and the Women’s Caucus, this piece demonstrates how a feminist perspective contributes uniquely to economics; here, economic historiography by focusing on social reproduction. The analysis reveals that the reproductive labor assigned to women URPE members lies behind the formation of the Caucus. It documents how oppression operates across seemingly different work activities, roles, and identities to shape women’s lived experiences regardless of their level of education — the majority of the women in the Caucus not only earned PhDs, they earned them at Ivy League universities — and despite their impressive accomplishments. Solidarity developed among women in and of URPE because all women are “women workers” in the sense that they are all tasked with reproductive labor. I find that social reproduction is a space for radical politics, in this case politics unintentionally provoked in part by the conditions of social reproduction secured by male URPE members.

Male economists’ resistance to acknowledging and valuing the time and effort people spend in the activities of social reproduction reflects resistance to insight generated through feminist analyses. This resistance by men in URPE is all the more puzzling because it is precisely these conditions that feminists and radicals share a normative commitment to improving.

NOTES

1. Historically economics was a relatively common field of graduate study for women but representation declined as the discipline specialized away from “social concerns” (Albeda, 1997). More women earned PhDs in economics in the 1920s in the US than in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Albeda, 1997, pp. 23—25). Early women economists include Harriet Taylor Mill (b.1807—1858), Helen Francis Page Bates (PhD Economics, U of Wisconsin 1896), Rosa Luxemburg (PhD Law, U of Zurich 1897), Edith Abbott (PhD Economics, U of Chicago 1905), Hazel Kyrk (PhD Economics, U of Chicago 1920), Sadie Alexander (PhD Economics, U of Pennsylvania 1921) first black woman economics PhD, Joan Robinson (PhD Economics, Cambridge U 1925), Carolyn Shaw Bell (PhD Economics, 1949 London School of Economics), Irma Edelman (PhD Economics, Berkeley 1955), Barbara Bergman (PhD Economics, Harvard 1959).
2. See Albeda (1997) for a history of this boundary construction in the economics discipline.

3. The group included 12 graduate students and faculty members: Howard Wachtel, Sander Kelman, Barry Bluestone and John Weeks from Michigan; Michael Zweig from SUNY Stony Brook; Ted Behr and Peter Bohmer from MIT; Michael Reich from Harvard; and others from Eastern Michigan, Miami University, and the Institute for Policy Studies (Lee, 2004; Mata, 2005).

4. The first time each woman is named in the article her academic credential is listed, in part to make clear that the majority of the women were graduate students, including those who were wives of URPE members, and earned graduate degrees.

5. In addition to Paddy Quick the group included Richard Edwards, Arthur MacEwan, Keith Aufhauser, Peter Bohmer, Roger Bohmer, Herbert Gintis, Carl Gotsch, Stephan Michelson, Ralph Pochoda, Michael Reich, and Thomas Weisskopf (Edwards et al., 1970). Notably one of the six problems that concerned the committee was that “[t]he division by sex and the concomitant subjugation of women pervade the entire society”; the others are income inequality, alienation, environmental destruction, imperialism, and racism (Edwards et al., 1970).

6. In New York, Lourdes Benería (PhD Economics, Columbia 1975), Harriet Zellner (PhD Economics, Columbia 1975), and Amy Bridges (PhD Political Science, U of Chicago) were early members URPE. Zoe Best, Julie Boddy (PhD History, SUNY-Buffalo 1982), Dawn Day (MSW Social Work, U of Michigan 1968), Carmen Diana Deere (PhD Economics, UC Berkeley 1978), Kim Edel (PhD Sociology (ABD), SUNY 1995), Tucker Pamela Farley (PhD English, Penn State 1973), Diane Flaherty (PhD Economics, NYU 1978), Rita Garst, Martha Herman, Grace Horowitz (PhD Economics, Cornell), Jane Humphries (PhD Economics, Cornell 1973), Ivy Leichman, Collette Moser (PhD Economics, U of Wisconsin), Eileen Stillwagon (PhD Economics 1979, American U), Marilyn Power (PhD Economics, UC Berkeley 1977), Joanne Spitz (MA Economics, Northeastern 1973), and Nan Wiegersma (PhD Economics, U of Maryland 1976) were among the other women involved.

7. The quotation marks around “family” are included in the original text and mean the wife or partner of a male URPE member.

8. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI/PSAI Z4.3–2016) recommends one toilet for every ten people, so the number should have been about double what was available.

9. See Albeda, 1997 for more detail on CSWEP.

10. Carolyn Shaw Bell (1997) notes that when the study was completed the editor of the American Economic Review “[…] asked me repeatedly to forget the whole thing, not to write and publish a piece that could only be divisive, that should be tactfully ignored for the sake of professional collegiality, that would cause hard feelings among the men and not help women at all.”

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