There is a popular misconception in economics that feminist research is about women’s economic issues. There are no such issues. Economic phenomena associated with women influence economic outcomes for people of all genders. The gender wage gap offers a concrete example: women who are full professors of economics earn less than 75% of what men who are full professors of economics earn, a gap that has widened since 1995. This inequity impacts women – and their children, families, and communities – including sons, brothers, husbands and so on. The gender pay gap is not a women’s economic issue, it’s an economic issue. The same is true of all the other economic issues that feminists research.

Even without the interdependence highlighted above, women’s economic issues are economic issues, no qualifier need, because women are economic agents in their own right. The “women’s issues”-phrasing suggests that women and the work they do are marginal to the analysis of “real economic issues.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Feminist political economy reveals how profoundly this simple point can contribute to economic analyses, especially heterodox analyses.

At the core of feminist political economy are three basic claims. First, there exist hierarchical relationships, inequities, between women and men which reflect power relations, have material ramifications, and can be changed. Second, feminist political economy makes an explicit normative commitment to improving the conditions under which people reproduce themselves intergenerationally and on a day-to-day basis. This commitment is shared by most heterodox economists, even if their work is not focused on “reproduction,” and they do not articulate it, a point that I will return to. Third, “The Economy” as conceptualized in mainstream and much of heterodox
economics is narrowly defined; economists tend to be fixated on a small portion of economic activity and economic behavior, to the detriment of economic analyses.

Beyond that core, what a feminist perspective is depends on who one asks. There are many strands of feminist work in the discipline: feminist institutionalism, feminist post-Keynesianism, Marxist-feminism, post-structural feminism, post-colonial feminism. Most feminist researchers in economics draw from a multiple of these traditions, thus the phrases feminist political economy and Feminist Radical Political Economics are useful.

Feminist theory has had a limited impact on mainstream and heterodox economics. Even though the first women's organization in the discipline was formed in the Union for Radical Political Economics, less than 3% of the articles published in their journal use a feminist lens, or are about women, girls, or gender.

Feminist work is either missing or excluded. There are a number of reasons for this, but two stand out when putting feminist work in dialogue with other heterodox perspectives. First, heterodox economists misunderstand feminist research and the critique it presents. Second, and related, economists do not see how feminism clarifies and strengthens their own heterodox arguments.

Underlying both is productivism. Productivism biases what most economists study, what they think is valuable, and what they understand to be “The Economy.” Feminist work makes two critical interventions. That small portion of economic activity – largely production and paid work – would not and could not exist without the reproductive labor that is disproportionately done by women. Reproductive labor includes “going into labor,” the process of giving birth, and the daily work of producing the well-socialized human beings, who collectively are often referred to as “the labor supply.” People are not born alone, and most do not have lives separable from others, and do not die alone. People are produced through a gendered and racialized division of labor; slavery, apartheid, colonialism, and imperialism are part and parcel of this production process.

Capitalism relies fundamentally on women's reproductive labor in a single, integrated unitary process. The production of people (or containers of labor-power) through a combination of reproductive labor and commodities, and the reliance of production on reproduction, are not “women's issues” that are somehow marginal to the “real economic questions.” They should be absolutely central for heterodox economists, as they are central to the reproduction of capitalism itself. Yet social reproduction goes unacknowledged by the vast majority of economists. Why?
Most economists simply assume that social reproduction is happening and will continue to happen. They ignore the work it requires, the people who do the work, and the fact that the work happens at all — and that it’s relevant to the economy and therefore to economics. This oversight denies the value of women and “women’s work,” relegating both to the sidelines of the discipline. It also denies the valuable contributions Feminist Radical Political Economics has made to the heterodoxy, and cheats heterodox economists of further feminist insight. The benefits of engaging with feminist work are significant.

To return to the earlier point about shared normative commitments, ask yourself what your economic analyses are ultimately for. Is the purpose related to improving the conditions under which people reproduce themselves intergenerationally and on a day-to-day basis? Social reproduction makes a clear normative case for heterodox economists’ analyses and policy recommendations. In some instances, it aids in the identification of the gendered, racialized, and classed people likely to benefit the most from those analyses and policies, strengthening the arguments for them.

In other words, feminist analysis is crucial; one cannot understand capitalism without it. Further, our own individual projects probably make more sense in light of the normative commitment underlying them. The heterodoxy adopting a more reflexive view of the work they are already doing, and locating it in relation to the whole of capitalism, and acknowledging that they are prompted to do so by feminist work, could generate a much richer understanding of capitalism.

Such an effort would require recognizing that social reproduction is neither static nor passive. Maintaining the assumption that social reproduction is just happening and will continue to happen would no longer be feasible. Instead, social reproduction is a process: it is dynamic. This is important because it is precisely this process through which many policies work. Why else agitate for increased state spending on, say, healthcare? It has impacts through social reproduction; that is how the benefit of the policy is realized for most people. Secondly, dynamism means social reproduction is a political space. In this way, feminist thought also reveals the potential for emancipatory politics in people’s ordinary lives.

Endnotes

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Hours worked and average number of publications over the previous five years do not explain the difference. It may be related to subdiscipline. Women economists may disproportionately work in “feminized” subdisciplines like health, education, and welfare or economic history. Feminization is a demographic process as well as a process of devalorization, therefore men in feminized subdisciplines are also likely to have lower earnings than men in other subdisciplines.
