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## **Feminist Inclusions in Economic Geography: What Difference Does Difference Make?**

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### **Introduction**

This special section of *Environment and Planning A* is the outcome of a panel we organized at the Fourth Global Conference on Economic Geography (GCEG) held in Oxford, UK in August 2015. The panel was intended to reflect on the role and influence of feminist work in economic geography; a sub-discipline distinguished by its heterogeneous theoretical and methodological approaches. In particular, it sought to encourage reflection on the extent to which economic geography as a sub-discipline has responded to feminist interventions that have drawn attention to the cultural construction of difference in ways that pose a challenge to its more generalized categories and frameworks of analysis (for example, regional development, labour, the firm, the state). Taking as our starting point Linda McDowell's (1991) article "Life without Father and Ford: The New Gender Order of Post-Fordism", which was published a quarter of a century ago (and revisited ten years later, see McDowell, 2001), we asked to what extent and in what ways feminism (here referred in the singular, but clearly 'feminisms' in practice) has changed the way economic geography is done? To what degree has the sub-discipline benefitted from the attention paid over the past 25 years to reproductive and domestic labour, the gender order, and the interactions of categories of difference like gender, class and race in our research enquiries?

In presenting a case for the importance of gender in understanding an emerging post-Fordist economy, McDowell's (1991) article was tremendously significant in pushing scholars of economic geography to examine the interconnections between the sphere of production and the sphere of social reproduction (a category of analysis which includes the family, the community and the welfare state). It highlighted the gendering of skills and the changing value of so-called masculine attributes in the labour market, and in doing so called for further research into the service sector, as well as sweated and informal work. Conceptions of the changing space-economy, McDowell argued, had been too narrowly focused on transformations occurring in the manufacturing sector and formal work place of the factory. As a consequence, the significance of gender relations in post-Fordist economic restructuring had been overlooked. Placing women's labour at the centre of analysis, she asserted, would not only reveal the increasing participation of women in waged work, but also the manner in which the flexibilization of labour was impacting both sexes as irregular employment conditions were becoming much more widespread.

Taking on the regulation school and the Fordist orthodoxy, McDowell's (1991) article highlighted the limits to economic geography's heterodoxy by pointing towards the reliance of economic theory on the notion of a patriarchal-capitalism in which women's interests were assumed to be in opposition to those of

men and of capital. By identifying how *gender relations matter* to post-Fordist economic restructuring, it also drew attention to a series of broader questions concerning what gets recognized as economic, which actors get counted in economic analyses, and what processes and institutions figure in the theorization of economic systems and economic change.

These are questions that have long since preoccupied economic geographers that self-identify as feminist scholars (as well as those who do not ascribe to the label of feminist theorist or feminist geographer, but utilize feminist ideas and approaches in their research enquiries). Indeed, the commentaries in this special section illustrate very different personal and professional trajectories leading to different, but formative (albeit in very diverse ways) encounters with feminist thought. They also give a sense that such encounters with feminism are never one time things, but more a series of engagements with a shifting set of questions and an on-going struggle regarding how to actually create or practice feminist economic geography, if one chooses to do so. What is clear from the commentaries is that there is no completed transformation that can be attributed to the role and influence of feminism in economic geography; the difference that difference makes or might make to economic geography is entirely unsettled it seems.

Whilst we celebrate the impact of early feminist work in economic geography and of subsequent feminist economic geographic scholarship, we are reminded of the limits to the heterodoxy of the sub-discipline that Jamie Peck celebrated in his opening plenary at the same GCEG conference. Peck (2015) reflected on the nature of the heterodoxy that characterizes economic geography and using terminology borrowed from nineteenth century geographical botany compared approaches in the sub-discipline with Darwin's classification of the 'lumpers' and 'splitters' who differently constructed knowledge in the scientific occupation of taxonomy at that time. The difference Peck identified was epistemological, between scholars who sought theoretical and empirical traction in the generation of generic categories, versus those who promoted the proliferation of categories of analysis. In extending this analogy to economic geography, Peck (2015: 10) also noted that in the practice of academic heterodoxy "persuasion is not simply a narrow matter of "science," but also a rhetorical, ideological, institutional, cultural, and sociological issue". This implicitly acknowledges that while a discipline or sub-discipline may be able to encompass heterogeneous theoretical positions, there is likely to be a hierarchy to those positions, and that hierarchy is determined by power relations that are at play in the way 'persuasion' works.

In the case of feminism and economic geography, the framing of scholars such as McDowell as splitters working against (or outside) of prevailing categories of analysis gives rise to an understanding of economic geography as a dynamic body of scholarship that emerges through reflexive and self-aware lumpers internalizing the challenges splitters pose. While lumpers and splitters might need each other, the analogy leaves aside the question of *what* gets recognized in this dialogical process. As Spike Peterson (2005) notes, there is a 'continuum' of feminist knowledge building projects that understand and deploy gender in different ways. Thus whilst the incorporation of gender as a category of difference in prevailing economic analyses is indicative of the success of feminist scholars in making women

empirically visible, continued resistance to gender as an analytical category that pervades meaning systems more generally demonstrates the work still to be done in persuading economic geographers of “the breadth, depth and specifically *theoretical* implications of feminist scholarship” (ibid: 500).

### **Feminist Contributions to Theorizing the Economy: Critical Reflections**

The commentaries in this special section address the question of how much difference feminist approaches have made to economic geography. They revisit McDowell’s (1991) article and offer their insights on the challenges posed by diverse feminist thinking in and beyond the sub-discipline, noting gains made, as well as ongoing struggles to articulate and practice feminist economic geographies. In the first commentary, Wendy Larner traces a movement from what Peterson (2005) would term ‘gender as an empirical category’ to a more poststructuralist approach that recognizes the analytical implications of making women visible in economic geography research. When we ‘put women in’, Larner argues, we see that taken-for-granted economic categories no longer hold in the same way. Increased attention to women and gender therefore demands a rethinking of the economy as the object of empirical analysis. Larner’s own research underscores the new forms of work and life that are emerging in the contemporary economy, and in particular a context of generalized precarity in feminized labour that she illustrates with reference to the fashion industry. Echoing McDowell (1991), she argues for the centrality of gender in research enquiries, and attributes the development of economic geography as a heterodox field of social scientific interest to the long standing conversations between economic geographers and feminist scholars both within and beyond the sub-discipline.

The dynamism of contemporary feminist research is also noted by Patricia Yocie Hierofani, whose own background has encouraged a close attention to questions of difference. Whilst an increased focus on women and gender has enriched the landscape of economic geography, Hierofani argues, there remains a need to attend to the analytical implications of other categories of difference. At one level, this requires the identification of ‘hidden biases’ in our sub-disciplinary discourses; most notably proclivities towards masculine, middle class, white, heteronormative and able-bodied readings of the economy. At another, it involves the collective consideration of the diversity of economic geography’s practitioners. Hierofani’s comments chime with conversations held elsewhere regarding the whiteness and maleness of geography, particularly as it is displayed in core disciplinary spaces, and at events such as international conferences (see, for example, Braun et al, 2015). To change the power dynamics of the discipline and encourage the pluralization of economic thought, we need to commit to the representation of minority groups through an increased attention the processes of hiring, evaluation and promotion of faculty, and the composition of course syllabi, conference panels and journal special issues. In this respect, the ambition to pluralize economic geography is as much a political goal, as it is a theoretical one.

In her commentary, Jamie Winders describes different disciplinary engagements with questions of race and ethnicity, and underscores the ongoing failure of economic geography to adequately consider the interlocking nature of

race, gender, class, ethnicity and nationality in research enquiries. She points to the work being done in fields like sociology and history at the time McDowell's (1991) article was published to illustrate the extent to which theoretical development in economic geography was (and arguably still is) reflective of western, urbanized and industrialized, economic realities. To address the research lacunae, Winders argues, scholars of economic geography need to revisit the conditions in and through which theory is generated. It is no longer sufficient to apply western idea(l)s about economic life to the case study analysis of 'other' parts of the world. Instead we should seek to decentre our norms through the examination of economic activities in the Global South according to the realities of life for the people that live there. Her call to attend to the deeply varied picture of work and household organization, as well as the relationship between production and social reproduction from a postcolonial perspective has clear political implications.

A close attention to the assumptions embedded in the shifting scholarly field of economic geography is also evident in the commentary provided by Barbara Ellen Smith. Drawing on Marxist readings of the period of Fordism in the sub-discipline, Smith suggests a tendency to present gender as a non-capitalist axis of social differentiation resulting in the occlusion of women's oppression in economic geography research. She suggests that a feminist *epistemological* transformation is needed to address the inertia of the Marxist conceptualization of work (as dominantly wage labour) and encourage reflection on the many different ways in which poorer people are surviving in the contemporary period. In directing us to the multiple social relations and plethora of activities through which working class men and women make their livelihoods, Smith echoes Winders in highlighting the consequences of thinking about various forms of difference in isolation, and provokes us to consider how capital and class are indistinct from gender and patriarchy. Only by attending to the theoretical status of gender and its relationship to class, she argues, will the sub-discipline be able to move beyond the relative orthodox theoretical paradigm of 'Fordist Marxism', which she sees as predominant in research enquiries, and build on the range of empirical, theoretical and methodological resources it has available.

MaryAnn Feldman and Erica Schoenberger's commentary explores the shifts in economic geography over time, drawing from their individual scholarly biographies to raise questions about the uneven uptake of feminist approaches in economic geography. Feldman and Schoenberger note that as feminism came to influence economic geography they were among women economic geographers whose explicit focus was not on women's lives and that this meant that they were sometimes challenged by those whose scholarship was self-described as feminist. Yet, they argue, this does not mean that they do not identify in their lives as feminists, or that they are not attuned to and working against the many everyday masculinist practices that are seen to define economic geography, such as the tendency to associate theoretical innovation with male scholars.

In the final commentary, Linda McDowell reflects on the ways feminist approaches have challenged and enriched understandings of changing labour markets over the years since "Life without Father and Ford" was written. She points out the significance of the traffic in ideas between economic geography and other

fields, especially in informing more holistic work on how gender relations intersect with other axes of difference in capitalism. Indeed, she asserts that “Understanding the intersection of gender with class, ethnicity, age and ability, and the ways in which capital divides, rewards and excludes not only the cast of multiple Others but also the once unmarked male worker – the pillar of Fordist waged employment - is now or should be a central element on the agenda of economic geography” (this issue). Whilst there is cause for frustration about the apparent continued necessity to explain why and how gender matters in and to economic geography in the face of resistance, dismissal or indifference, McDowell observes there is also plenty of evidence that attention to the gendered dynamics of economic life has suffused economic geography, catalyzing and informing analyses of emotional labour and embodied performativity, among other examples.

### **The Foundation and Future of Feminist Economic Geography**

“Life without Father and Ford” certainly changed economic geography and the insights it presented continue to resonate. As these commentaries suggest though, economic geographers’ engagements with feminism are ongoing, complicated, and sometimes fraught. But, like Linda McDowell, we are confident that feminist and feminist-inspired debates about the difference that difference makes in and to economic geography will continue to animate the field and set agendas for future work, and that is a welcome prospect.

### **Acknowledgements**

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