FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

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The University of Sydney was the first known English-speaking university to teach an undergraduate unit on feminist political economy. This pathbreaking unit, called Political Economy of Women (and commonly known as PEW) was first designed and taught by a collective of feminist scholars from across the University in 1974. Led by Margaret Power from the Political Economy group in the Department of Economics, the collective drew in scholars from disciplines including anthropology, fine arts, history, industrial relations, philosophy, political science and sociology (Power 1995). Students completing a range of Bachelors' degrees could take the unit, which was explicitly interdisciplinary. At this time The University of Sydney had some of the greats of feminist theory and scholarship, including Carole Pateman, Bettina Cass and Elizabeth Grosz, all of whom contributed to teaching PEW.

The later creation of the Department of Political Economy provided the unit with a more secure home; and it has been taught for more than 50 years under various titles such as 'Women In and Out of the Economy', 'Gender and Capitalism' and now 'Gender, Work and Care in Economic Life'. Students have been taught by a variety of academics from the Department including not only Margaret Power, but Gillian Hewitt, Pamela Cawthorne, Sue Himmelweit, Rebecca Pearse and the two of us. In all its iterations, the curriculum has offered students critical feminist perspectives on fundamental economic questions of work, value, wellbeing, and how we define 'the economy'. The connection between academic feminist research in political economy and its contribution to public policy debates and design has also been a consistent theme.

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Our article on these issues takes the form of a conversation between us, as two graduates of the Political Economy program at Sydney University who went on to become professors of feminist political economy. Although our memories and reflections are necessarily incomplete – even in relation to our own experience – we offer them in the spirit of celebration on this, the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Political Economy. We reflect on what the curriculum offered students, the core ideas that shaped our own teaching and research, how Sydney's approach connects with international developments in feminist economics, and the contributions that students who were influenced by the unit have made in public life. Our conversation begins with a discussion of our experience as undergraduate students of feminist political economy.

What was your experience of feminist political economy at Sydney?

Gabrielle: I came to the University when the PE conflict had been partially resolved through the creation of a distinct Bachelor of Economics (Social Sciences) in which students could do a major in Political Economy taught by a semi-autonomous group within the Department of Economics. Although I didn't take the third-year Political Economy elective on women, Margaret Power was an important presence and influence. As a student, my interests converged on questions that are central to feminist political economy: the political economic structures that shape the gendered division of labour and economic inequality between women and men, while our broader education within Political Economy shaped my way of thinking.

At that time, undergraduate majors were a structured progression, which really enabled us to build our knowledge and analytical resources. There was no orthodoxy within the heterodoxy of PE, and exposure to different casts of mind and research interests in our teachers – later colleagues – was intellectually invigorating, even liberating. And despite the ever-presence of the orthodoxy both in the intellectual ether and in the corridors, we learnt from prescribed materials drawn from across the social sciences, which helped us develop a wide and critical view.

Elizabeth: I started my degree two years after Gabrielle. I arrived fresh from three years working as an advisor on commodities and bond trading in international financial markets, keen to understand international

relations of economic power, inequality and gender. Margaret Power taught me the fundamentals of feminist political economy, but I also benefitted from the feminist perspectives included in units run by Stuart Rosewarne on labour, migration and the environment, and Evan Jones on the state. English literature was one of my majors and I loved Evan's use of Jane Austen's novels to illustrate key aspects of the gendered social relations of capitalist development. But the most important text I read as an undergraduate was Marilyn Waring's *Counting for Nothing: what men value and what women are worth* (Waring 1988). This calm, logical exposition of the way in which patriarchal notions of capitalist economic life have been institutionalised in systems of national accounting and global economic policy to extract the so called 'free goods' of nature and women's labour was a turning point for me and formed the intellectual foundation of my honours thesis and subsequent research.

What was it like to teach feminist PE? What was in the curriculum? How were the students?

Gabrielle: I taught Political Economy of Women a few times during the 1990s. At that time, the unit had a hybrid status as an interdisciplinary unit available to a variety of students including in (what was called at that time) Women's Studies, and as a third-year elective unit in a Political Economy major. PEW was also a Third-Year elective in the Economics major, for at least one of the years I took it – and I think some students found some of its subject matter quite eye-opening, in a way I will explain later.

I co-taught some parts with political scientist Lisa Hill (no relation), now Professor at the University of Adelaide. Lisa brought great depth of knowledge about the history of classical liberal political theory. In an early set of lectures, we were able to explore through a feminist lens the connections between classical liberalism -- manifestly a set of ideas about how the world should be – and neoclassical economics, which purported to be value-free.

Alongside lectures on these and other topics you might expect, such as the gendered division of labour, the unit had a structured workshop program that got students working together to write a 'working party report' through which they learnt to analyse and propose actions for change on an important issue for women. I won't go into the detail of the teaching strategy here (for that, see Meagher 1999), apart from saying that some of

the topics students could choose from focused on the intersection of the market and women's bodies – including sex work, commercial surrogacy and pornography. Students from Women's Studies took this in their stride, while some of the Economics majors were quite surprised to have such topics treated in a university subject and to learn about the depth of scholarship and the terms of often vigorous debate on these 'contested commodities' (Radin 1996).

In my other teaching I attempted to integrate feminist questions and empirical evidence about gender in economic life. In the large, team-taught first year survey unit, Structure and Change in Modern Economies, there wasn't the space, and I didn't have the breadth of expertise, to offer a feminist perspective on all topics – for example, on international trade or the role of the state in a globalizing economy. However, in a section of the unit on labour markets, income inequality and social security policy, I had both the room and the necessary knowledge (or a good reason to gain it). I also really enjoyed teaching an introductory Honours unit about theories of class. This was an ideal context for engaging students with debates between feminists and class theorists as well as debates within class theory itself (the unit was the first in what was then a quite fantastic Honours program that began in the students' second year). I often felt I should pinch myself when teaching this class – we had the most amazing and engaged students.

Elizabeth: In 1993, I was engaged as a tutor on Margaret's unit which, at that time, was called 'Women In and Out of the Economy'. I still have the reading kit for the unit sitting on my shelf – a light blue covered pile of photocopied readings bound together with large staples. As Gabrielle said, students in Political Economy were required to read broadly from disciplines across the social sciences and these readings were typically pulled together by lecturers in a student Reading Kit.

In the early 1990s there were often a handful of 'mature aged' students in the Political Economy program. These students were highly engaged and lifted the quality of classroom discussion, bringing their own lived experience of work, family, community and economy into the classroom to contest received ideas and male bias in the scholarship.

As a lecturer in the Political Economy program, feminist political economy has informed the structure of all my teaching, particularly the unit on international development where I draw on the pathbreaking work of scholars such as Esther Boserup (1970) and Maria Mies (1986)

alongside the various works of Naila Kabeer, Ruth Pearson, Diane Elson and Vandana Shiva, amongst others. Each of these scholars highlight the different ways in which the process of economic development is deeply gendered, often producing vulnerability and poverty for women and their households. In response, these authors offer alterative feminist models of development that reflect the realities of agricultural life and the persistence of the informal economy in low-income countries. Political Economy students have always been interested in economic development, and many have gone on to find employment in international development agencies.

In 2024, I started teaching the Political Economy of Women unit. In the pre-COVID years the unit was taught by Rebbeca Pearse, and I inherited a curriculum that provided students with a comprehensive understanding of the multiple theoretical and global feminist traditions that have dealt, in one way or the other, with the gender division of labour and gendered inequalities. Since I am a less skilled theoretician than Bec, the current iteration of the unit is focused more on the gendered dimensions of public policy and how it shapes and rewards (or not) women's work and care. This approach reflects the recent focus in feminist political economy on social reproduction and its reinterpretation for a Twenty-First Century economy. While the unit no longer has so many 'mature aged' students, it does attract international, refugee and migrant students who bring a new type of rigour to the classroom, contesting common Australian approaches to ideas of gender, work, care, family, the body, and community and lifting the bar on the diversity of the scholarship we read. These are all welcome developments that create a more interesting, albeit sometimes challenging, classroom for all.

Feminist political economy has a long history. What are some of the big ideas, key questions and contributions that have shaped feminist political economy?

Gabrielle: Of course, the history of feminist political economy, although not necessarily under that rubric, goes back centuries (see, for example, Pujol 1997). Here I want to say something about some of the key thinkers and ideas that have been important to me.

New Zealander Marilyn Waring's 1988 book, *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, also called *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, was – as for Liz – perhaps the first feminist

political economic text that I was exposed to as an undergraduate student, and it made a big impact. Waring makes a sweeping critique of what she called the 'villainy and incompetence' of the system of national accounts for ignoring the unpaid reproductive work mainly done by women, and for counting activities like weapons manufacture and pollution clean-up as 'productive'. She wasn't just arguing for changing what counts; she was trying to expose the essential brutality and inequity of the global capitalist system and its patriarchal foundations.

Sue Himmelweit (who has taught the feminist political economy unit at Sydney and is a long-term friend of the department) had already examined similar issues in one of her early papers, 'Domestic Labour and Capital', co-authored with Simon Mohun (who also taught in the Department for several years in the early 1990s) and published in the first issue of the heterodox *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (Himmelweit and Mohun 1977). In this and some of her later papers Sue explores how caring labour is both similar to and, critically, *different* from 'work' in capitalist labour markets and argues that it is essential not to lose sight of the distinctiveness of care when trying to make care work visible (Himmelweit 1995, 1999, 2007).

These ideas have been very important in feminist policy advocacy. For example, in sustained interventions over decades, feminist political economists, such as Sue Himmelweit and her colleagues in the UK Women's Budget Group and Australians Rhonda Sharp and Ray Broomhill (1948-2022), have tried to help policy makers recognise the gendered impact of economic and social policies. Their work on gender auditing of government budgets has revealed inequalities and they have proposed gender responsive budgeting to address these (Himmelweit 2002, 2014; Sharp and Broomhill 1988, 1990, 2002).

Elizabeth: Nancy Folbre's scholarship on care and care markets has made a major contribution to feminist political economy. Her insight into the true value of unpaid care work, particularly the care of children, was the focus of her early book *Who Pays For the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint* (1994), which was followed by *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (2001) in which she highlights the complicated relationship between women, altruistic care, and the need for public policy supports for family care.

Theoretical ballast for work on the political economy of care has in part been provided by new feminist scholarship on an expanded notion of

social reproduction that moves beyond the family and household to include the social provision of food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, clean air, as well as safety, values and identity (Bhattacharya 2017; Elson 1998; Picchio 1992) and care for country, culture and community (Banks 2020; Klein et al 2023). The pandemic experience highlighted the importance of this scholarship.

Other critical contributions that have shaped feminist political economy and its teaching at Sydney include the ecofeminist work of Ariel Salleh (1997), who was an honorary affiliate of the Department for many years, and Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) who, like Waring, unpick the destructive patriarchal foundations of economic life to identify capitalist development as 'bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle' (Shiva 1989: 4). Most importantly these scholars advocate and practice alternative definitions of wellbeing and development and different ways of doing economic life. This is also a major contribution of J. K. Gibson-Graham – the pen name used by feminist economic geographers Julie Graham (1945-2010) and Australian Katherine Gibson in their publications (1996, 2013). Like many feminist political economists, Gibson-Graham embed activism within their intellectual practice and have led various community movements that have long motivated political economy students.[1]

The pandemic has put care work on the economic agendas of many national governments and treasuries. How has feminist political economy contributed to the profile, urgency and policy ideas that are currently being discussed?

Gabrielle: I think care work and the value of care are no longer peripheral in public policy and there is no doubt that feminists have brought some essential ideas into mainstream public debate. Many policies and institutions show this in one way or another. Australia's *Carer Recognition Act*, with its object to 'increase recognition and awareness of carers and to acknowledge the valuable contribution they make to society' is now 15 years old. The modern awards objective of the Fair Work Act 'includes the need to achieve gender equality in the workplace' through equal pay and

[1] See: *http://www.communityeconomies.org/*

other provisions. More recently, the Australian government has taken up the concept of the 'care and support economy', having noticed it is 'one of the fastest growing parts of the Australian economy'. And in its 2023 *Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy*, we even saw recognition that 'Funding high-quality care and support provision is an investment in social infrastructure. It provides long-term benefits that go well beyond direct users of these paid services' (PM&C 2023: 1). The draft linked this to gender equality because women are the majority providers of both paid and unpaid care. So far, so feminist – so far as it goes.

Unfortunately, we can see the kinds of problems that Sue Himmelweit warned of when economic concepts are stretched to pull care in. The problem that has exercised me most has been that 'investing' in the 'care economy' mostly involves extending market models across all publicly funded care services (aged care, early learning, disability support). In a handy collision (collusion?) between (orthodox) Economics 101 and human rights ideas, marketisation is justified by reference to 'choice and control' and underpinned by the idea that competition will drive up quality. This policy approach comes with great risks for the *quality* of care work and care jobs, so I think we have quite a way to go before we could say we are all feminists now. But you only get to a destination by taking steps in the right direction, and we can only hold our nerve and keep working together to move forward.

Elizabeth: Gender Equality is now a formal policy priority of the Commonwealth Government and, in 2024, the first National Strategy on Gender Equality, *Working for Women* (PM&C 2024) was released. In my opinion this is the culmination of decades of robust feminist scholarship, across many disciplines, not just political economy, that was catalysed by COVID-19. The social impact of the pandemic disruption to global labour markets and national care infrastructure revealed to all just how interconnected care work is to a functioning economy. This was not news to feminist political economists – we'd been talking about this for decades. What was new, was the new *public* understanding that emerged (W+FPR 2020). Care is now widely understood to be the foundation of the economy, and as a result we are seeing fresh policy attention given to building and funding sustainable high-quality care infrastructure – in early childhood education and care, disability support and care for older people. We've reached a 'turning point' in how care is understood in economic life, but there is much more to be done (Baird *et al.* 2024).

How does Political Economy at Sydney fit into the international feminist political economy landscape?

Gabrielle: Our sense is that political economy under that name has patchy recognition as a discipline/field internationally, and feminist political economy at Sydney has always been quite interdisciplinary. We often connected into the international scene through the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE), which is a lively community of scholars, activists and policymakers.[2] In 2006 we hosted the Fifteenth Global Conference of IAFFE at Women's College. Through our engagement in IAFFE, we came to see that, at Sydney, although we were based in an Economics department, we didn't experience the same pressure to meet the professional norms in Economics as our northern hemisphere colleagues. This gave us freedom to develop curricula and research agendas within feminist political economy, framed in an interdisciplinary way, even as the university sector was tightening constraints around disciplinary research reporting metrics.

We could perhaps pull out two important threads in the international scene – an interest in public policy analysis and an interest in critical theoretical engagement with prevailing ideas in economics. That said, the international scene is diverse; and people are working with a wide variety of methodologies and theoretical frames. There are many feminists with orthodox economic training working on heterodox projects and who have moved into new disciplines. There are others using orthodox tools to address feminist questions in innovative ways. Many we would include in our broad understanding of contemporary feminist political economy have trained in disciplines such as political science, development studies, anthropology, philosophy, sociology and human geography.

Since 2000s, feminist political economy has forged a more complex and open relationship with the orthodoxy in economics as a discipline, particularly in public institutions. Some of the developments and ideas that have dominated research and teaching in PE at the University of Sydney have started to influence thinking in public treasuries, international institutions and economic think tanks. In these organisations, many of the women who have been encouraged in the economics profession are working with questions that have been the mainstay of feminist PE –

[2] See: *https://www.iaffe.org/*.

unpaid work, labour market equality and early learning and other social policy supports – and are seeking solutions to problems women face in rich and poor countries.

What impact have students trained in feminist political economy at Sydney had?

Elizabeth: Our observation is that students who have studied feminist political economy often pursue working lives that seek to promote the public good. For some graduates this has been through school teaching, using insights gained through feminist PE to inform their teaching practice on specific economic questions on unpaid work, value and the social benefits of using a gender lens and gender disaggregated data. Other graduates schooled in feminist PE have found employment in our regulatory authorities such as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) where a sensitivity to the drivers of gendered inequalities in markets and financial systems has shaped inquiries and research. A number of graduates in feminist PE have found employment as policy and research officers in some of the feminised unions and in not-for-profit organisations and peak bodies, where they have brought skill to analysis of feminist questions on older women's economic security, welfare rights for single mothers and children, superannuation and housing. A number work in the public sector, using a gender lens to inform their work in state and federal Treasuries and pressing feminist public policy concerns such as early childhood education and care. Finally, there is a small group of us who have found employment as academics where we have applied the tools of feminist political economy to guide our research agendas and research-informed advocacy across a range of disciplines including discrimination law, the undervaluation of women's work, workplace sexual harassment, international care chains and migrant labour programs, the marketisation of care services and work/care policy regimes.

Training in feminist political economy and a desire to use these insights to shape public policy led me to establish and co-convene (first with Barbara Pocock and then Sara Charlesworth) the Australian Work + Family Policy Roundtable. The Roundtable is a network of 36 academics from 20 universities and research institutions with expertise on work, care and

family policy.[3] The goal of the Roundtable is to propose, comment upon, collect and disseminate research to inform evidence-based public policy in Australia. This collaborative feminist research network has informed the development of work, care and family policy since 2005, shaped by core insights from feminist political economy and amplified by expertise from colleagues from a variety of disciplines. Gabrielle and other graduates of political economy at Sydney are members of the Roundtable.

Gabrielle: Yes, and the Roundtable is classic feminist political economy – collaborative, engaged and grounded! Speaking personally, an education in political economy has given me an intellectual foundation for, and a drive to do work that tries to improve people's lives, with a focus on women. For example, I have been able to support equal remuneration cases in industrial tribunals as an expert witness and to contribute to unions' advocacy for improving aged care services, not least by improving jobs in aged care. Drawing heavily on my PE training, I have also been a persistent critic of social service marketisation (Meagher 2021; Meagher, Perche and Stebbing 2022). I have worked with colleagues in Australia and the Nordic countries to examine how governments have opened publicly funded care systems to private businesses with too little attention to the consequences.

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[3] See: *https://workandfamilypolicyroundtable.org/*.

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