

WORKERS, WOMEN, AND REVOLUTION:
A MARXIST-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE
ON URPE
(THE UNION FOR RADICAL POLITICAL ECONOMICS)

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As we approach the 50th anniversary of the founding of URPE, the Union for Radical Political Economics, it is a time to take stock of what we have done, and what lies ahead. I want to start with a salutation, and with a bit of URPE history. Then I will discuss the core theme of this paper, “Workers, Women, and Revolution.”

Before I begin, I want to thank Laurie Nisonoff for the invaluable help she gave me in constructing the history of women in URPE’s early years and of Marxist-Feminism. I also want to note that my account here is far from definitive, and I am seeking additions and corrections from others, especially those who were involved in making these histories.¹

CONGRATULATIONS, URPE!

The first thing I would like to say is, congratulations, URPE, for being alive and well, after almost a half a century! We have survived almost 50 years, in the “belly of the beast.” We have developed a field of study that is dynamic, and interdisciplinary, open to innovation. We have developed impressive and useful knowledge of about the workings of “the capitalist system.” We have a fine journal; appointments in colleges and universities, and even some economics departments. We have created, developed, and kept alive the critique of the advanced capitalist system, and the vision of a better, next system, in spite of neoliberalism’s rise to dominance in the 1980s and the purported bankruptcy of the socialist or communist vision . Many many people have contributed to keeping URPE active and dynamic, especially those who have served on its steering committee, editorial board, or staff, and deserve our deep gratitude.

A VERY BRIEF AND INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF FEMINISTS IN URPE

Now, some URPE history, put together from my own experience, and from conversations with Laurie Nisonoff. There were a few women active at the founding of URPE in 1967-68, but it was mostly male (and white!). The group grew in URPE's first few years. At the 1971 summer conference, as part of the emerging "second wave" feminist movement which was sweeping across the country, a core of 10 or 12 women came together to form the URPE Women's Caucus. Marilyn Power, Heidi Hartmann, Paddy Quick, Peggy Howard, Marianne Hill, and Laurie Nisonoff – their spokesperson -- were among them. When the business meeting voted down their demand for more representation on the Steering Committee and Editorial Board, they walked out. To their surprise, they were followed by the wives and partners of the males who were there. The business meeting reversed its decision, and they rejoined.

Later in that same year, URPE women took on the AEA, where they spearheaded the formation of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession. They also provided a Marxist/left/socialist voice in the newly emerging field of Women's Studies. In 1973, they founded an interdisciplinary Marxist-Feminist study group, which I joined soon after, which at its height had expanded to three groups, and included political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, historians, English professors, and lawyers, as well as economists. Because URPE women and our Marxist-feminist sisters were there as the new field of Women's Studies was being formed, we played in key role in making class analysis and the critique of capitalism key to this field.

While I won't say that sexism has completely vanished from URPE since then, URPE has become a supportive home for Marxist/socialist/left feminist economists, and has nurtured the development of left feminist economics, including six special issues on women and gender issues. Laurie Nisonoff has been a mainstay of the editorial board, and Paddy Quick of the

Steering Committee. Heidi Hartmann went on to found the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). URPERs Lourdes Beneria, Gita Sen, Nan Wiegersma, and Radhika Balakrishnan have played central roles in the Women and Development field; Nancy Folbre in the analysis of the care economy; and Randy Albelda, Marlene Kim, Rhonda Williams, Teresa Amott and myself in integrating race, gender and class analysis, just to name a few of the URPE feminist economists and the areas of study we have worked to develop.

MARXIST-FEMINISM, REVOLUTION, AND DUAL SYSTEMS THEORY

There is no way that I can do justice to the wealth of research and research/activism by feminist scholars connected to URPE over the past 50 years. So I have chosen to focus on an issue which was at the core of Marxist-Feminism when it was born in the US – and which, I believe, is a key one for all radical economists to address: our view of radical, systemic economic change.

To give you an idea of the centrality of systemic, revolutionary analysis to early URPE feminists and our sisters in other disciplines, two key edited collections of Marxist-Feminist analysis were Zillah Eisenstein's Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism, which came out in 1979, and Lydia Sargent's Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism. Their titles indicate our commitment to understanding and eradicating both class domination (capitalism) and patriarchy (male domination). The key questions were,

--What is the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy? And between Marxism and feminism?

--Can women wait until after the socialist revolution to be liberated? Answer: resounding no, since existing socialist states were patriarchal, and so were left men.

--Can women be liberated within capitalism? Answer: No, because, even if patriarchy were eliminated, they would continue to be oppressed as workers.

Marxist-Feminists concluded that system class AND gender oppression existed in the current economy, and both needed to be analyzed and overcome. We needed to struggle against capitalism and patriarchy, two intertwined economic systems, by organizing of women against male domination, and of workers against class domination.

However, dual systems theories were short-lived. In 1981, This Bridge Called My Back was published by Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. In 1984, bell hooks' book, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, drove home a similar message. In these path-breaking books, which we read and discussed in our Marxist-feminist groups, feminists of color harshly critiqued white feminists' notions of "sisterhood" or woman-based identity politics. They pointed to racism within the feminist movement: white women's monopolization of leadership positions, and the defining "women's issues" from the point of view of a white woman. To complicate things further, lesbian feminists were protesting about homophobia within the feminist movement. Both groups called on white feminists to explicitly declare ourselves to be anti-racist and against homophobia. And to incorporate this into our practice and platforms. Our Marxist-feminist groups committed themselves to recruiting women of color and lesbians, and into transforming their topics of study to incorporate race and sexuality.

In this process, a key new feminist concept was born, intersectionality: race, gender, and class are mutually determining. As Elizabeth Spelman (1988) put it, they aren't pop beads on a necklace of identity. There is no common experience of womanhood: what it means to be a woman varies greatly depending on one's race and class. The same can be said about the experience of being black or working class. Each is a dimension of oppression, but it can't be

understood in isolation from the others. Just as theoretical intersectionality reflects the lived experiences of women, so also it affects their organizing: feminists cannot be true feminists, if they do not simultaneously seek to eradicate the other forms of oppression which women face. If they only focus on gender, they will not be seeking to liberate all women; they will only be seeking transformation that benefits race and class-privileged women. A good recent example is Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's book, Lean In (2013) which instructs highly-educated upwardly mobile as to how to "break the glass ceiling" by working a little harder and leaving behind their fears – while, as one feminist blogger put it, for poor women, "the basement is flooding" (Penny 2011)

Marxist-feminism was expanding. I was one who signified this shift to intersectionality by adopting the cumbersome but precise self-definition: Marxist-feminist-anti-racist economist (1990) .

Meanwhile, in the realm of political economy, things were looking bad from a traditional Marxist point of view. Thatcher and Reagan began the counterrevolution in 1979 and 1980, respectively. Thatcher response to critics of capitalism's ravages of the working class and the environment with TINA, There is No Alternative. One of Reagan's first acts as President was to break the air controller's strike. By the 1990s, capital, via neoliberalism, reigned triumphant, and the prospect of revolution by the working class was dim. Labor had been vanquished through the global assembly line and the race to the bottom, as URPE scholars sadly reported. With the democratic failures and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rapid decline of the labor movement, in the face of relentless political attacks, Francis Fukiyama pronounced communism and Marxism dead in his widely cited End of History, in 1992. Socialist feminism and Marxist feminism went out of fashion.

MARXISM, FEMINISM, AND THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

But radical organizing against capitalism was not dead; it had simply morphed into a different kind of politics. One of the origins of this shift was the evolution of feminist theory and practice, which Marxist-Feminists were actively involved in. As we have seen, feminists began to transcend a woman-centered identity politics, and adopt a values-based, anti-oppression politics – a politics that seeks to expunge all forms of oppression -- patriarchy, racism, classism, homophobia, able-ism, neo-colonialism, species-ism, etc. – from our economy and society. This key shift in feminism arose just at the time that social movements and NGOs around the world began to come together in a movement of movements to fight neoliberal globalization that was wreaking havoc on workers, women, the environment, and the global South . Jeremy Brechter, Tim Costello and Brendan Smith (2000) termed this process “globalization from below.” This movement of movements was born at the “Battle of Seattle” ant-WTO protest in 1999, and continued at other meetings of the WTO, World Bank, and IMF. Then, in 2001, women’s, workers, environment, LGBTQ, peace, peasant, indigenous, and other social movements came together at the first World Social Forum under the motto, “Another World is Possible,” starting a wave of global and local organizing that continues today (Fisher and Ponniah 2003). A core principle of the Social Forum movement is the rejection of all forms of exploitation and oppression.ⁱⁱ

You will be wondering what all this has to do with actual economic transformation. To realize that we are actually on the path to a 21st century kind of socialism, as it is called in Latin America, one has to adjust one’s conceptual lenses away from traditional Marxist categories. In their 1997 book, The End of Capitalism as We Know It, feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham was among the first in the North to point out the fact that non-capitalist

economic institutions – many of them cooperative, sustainable, and community-based -- coexist with capitalist ones, and have done so for centuries. Gibson-Graham compares these “other economies” to the invisible, underwater part of an iceberg, of which capitalist practices of wage labor and profit-motivated production are but the tip. In the same vein, in the 1990s, Luis Razeto of Chile and Jean Luis La Ville of France coined the term “the solidarity economy,” to represent existent noncapitalist practices, many of them indigenous, as well as newly emerging ones, which embody solidaritous values (Matthaei and Allard 2008).

By the 1990s, solidarity economy organizing and networking was already starting to flourish in Latin America, largely in response to the devastation wrought by neoliberalism. Key solidarity economy institutions and practices include peasant resistance to proletarianization, such as Villa Campesina and the MST (Landless Workers’ Movement), who occupy vacant land and use it form cooperative farming communities; the creation of worker cooperatives, some through factory take-overs; popular economic organizing to fill basic needs; and resistance to corporate encroachment, especially among indigenous peoples. Brazil has a minister of the solidarity economy; the Venezuelan government has taken active steps to grow worker-owned cooperatives and do democratic, community-based development; and the Ecuadorian government has enshrined in its constitution the principle of “Buen Vivir” or “Sumak Kawsay,” based in cooperative sustainable indigenous economic values and practices (Matthaei 2012).ⁱⁱⁱ

In the North, solidarity economy initiatives include similar tactics, such as the occupying of vacant buildings, land, and an occasional factory (remember Republic Windows and Doors), and cooperative development projects, whereas, among the more privileged classes, there is a strong focus on social responsibility to others and to earth, including fair trade and simple living, social entrepreneurship, and corporate watch-dogging. A significant goal is replacing one’s

country's historical pattern of colonization and neocolonization with equalizing economic relationships, and reversing its disastrous effects on the environment . Solidarity economy organizing is widespread in Canada and Europe, and started in the US in 2007; there is some overlap here with the New Economy movement.

These diversities result in the absence of a common definition for the solidarity economy. However, and significantly, rather than creating endless tensions and splintering as was the case in the old-school Left, different definitions and experience of the solidarity economy are accepted, becoming a source of discussion and cross fertilization within solidarity economy meetings, conferences and writings. Such diversity is possible because the practices and institutions of the solidarity economy embody shared, or at least overlapping, values, as do activists and activist-academics in the solidarity economy movement. First, all in the movement share the view of the solidarity economy as a rejection of, and/or alternative to, neoliberal economics -- as the Zapatistas say, “Un solo NO, un millón de SI” (only one “no,” to neoliberalism; a million “yeses.”) Further, the many diverse economic institutions and practices included in the solidarity economy share values and goals, which are distinct from, and opposed to, those that motivate capitalist economics. The core values which solidarity economy advocates promote are:

1. The **provisioning of needs** is the goal of economic life, and has priority over profits and property rights: “an economy at the service of people.” Solidarity economy practices and institutions often spring up in order to fill human needs unmet by capitalist institutions – material needs, e.g. for land, food, housing, healthcare, jobs, and

nonmaterial needs, e.g. for community, meaning, ethics, culture, and mutually respectful relationships.

2. **Solidarity** in the sense of standing with one's comrades; cooperation rather than competition; community, not isolated individualism
3. **Fairness and equity**, including a rejection of hierarchy, domination, and prejudice, and the positive goal of reducing economic inequality and empowering the disempowered and marginalized.
4. **Economic democracy**, especially worker ownership and self-management, instead of capitalist ownership, control, and "bossing."
5. **Sustainability and regeneration of the planet**. Respect for earth and for nonhuman life; awareness that humanity is part of, and dependent upon, "nature," and is responsible for stewarding it.
6. **Diversity**. Difference is good, valuable. Instead of TINA -- Margaret Thatcher's famous phrase, "There is no alternative (to capitalism)" -- TATA, "There are thousands of alternatives.

While very few solidarity economy practices and institutions embody all of these values, all embody one or more of them. Further, participation in solidarity economy economic networks or movement facilitates the adoption of more solidarity economy values and goals.

BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED: THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY AS A MARXIST-FEMINIST ECONOMY

The six solidarity economy values I just listed are congruent with Marxist and feminist values. The first four – provisioning of needs, solidarity, fairness and equity, and economic democracy - are key Marxist values. At first examination, the only feminist value is gender

equity, under #3. However, all are actually part of current feminist value discourse. The provisioning of needs has often been posited by left feminist economists, such as Julie Nelson (1993) or Devaki Jain of the Casablanca Group (2009, p. 3), as the proper goal of economic life. Solidarity in the sense of standing with, and caring for, others is both a union motto, and closely akin to feminism's valuing of the feminine, mothering and caring activities of nurturing human development as exemplified in Nancy Folbre's work. The breakdown of oppressive economic hierarchies of all types – not just gender hierarchy – has become a basic tenet of Marxist-feminist theory, as we have seen. And the struggle to preserve the environment has long been advocated by leftist ecofeminists such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva. This congruence between feminist, Marxist, and solidarity economy values is not an accident. It reflects the involvement of feminists and the left in creating the social environment within which solidarity economy values, practices, institutions have been born, as well as their participation in the solidarity economy theorizing and organizing .

CONCLUSION

My final words to you are, first, be proud of URPE. Be proud to be a Marxist, radical, or Marxist-feminist-anti-racist ecological economist! You are doing important work, in the belly of the beast! And, above all, do not despair! Yes, a heartless form of capitalism is wreaking havoc on the worlds' peoples and on our planet, but a new economy is growing up in response. Besides a vibrant Social Forum Movement and active solidarity economy networking through RIPPSS (The Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy), multi-dimensional grassroots protests have been sweeping the world, from Arab Spring, Wisconsin, and Occupy Wall Street, to the recent wave of anti-austerity protests in Europe and US protests against racist police killings. Latin America is in the lead, currently, but even U.S. cities and

states are beginning to experiment with solidarity economy policies such as eminent domain (Richmond), cooperative development (Cleveland), and state banking, to name just a few. This is an exciting time to be an activist economist, and there is much that each one of us can do to play a positive part in the emergence of a new and better economic system.

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ENDNOTES:

ⁱ For example, Marianne Hill was in the audience, and nodded when I asked her whether she was in the 1971 URPE Women's Caucus, so I added her name on the spot!

ⁱⁱ See principle 10 of the "World Social Forum Charter of Principles," 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ The rest of this section draws strongly on Matthaai 2009 and 2012. Write me if you would like a copy of the 2012 paper.