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The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy

by Nancy Folbre. New York: Verso Books, 2021. 320 pp. ISBN: 9781786632951 (pbk.). US$29.95.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy, by Nancy Folbre. New York: Verso Books, 2021. 320 pp. ISBN: 9781786632951 (pbk.). US$29.95.

This is a pathbreaking book in several ways. Over decades, Nancy Folbre has provided important insights into the various structures and implications of the gender construction of economies and societies, particularly with regard to how the care burden is distributed. In this book, these ideas coalesce into an analytical framework that helps us understand how patriarchal systems have shaped economies, polities, and societies through history, and how they affect our current reality in different parts of the world. In the process, Folbre cuts through past debates and revises traditional Marxist and other approaches that have provided more clear-cut and therefore more simplistic perceptions of gender differences and their economic outcomes.

Folbre's approach is fundamentally "intersectional," focusing on intersecting and overlapping forms of exploitation that cannot be easily pigeonholed into either neoclassical economics or traditional Marxian political economy. Folbre rejects some standard binaries: economic interests versus social identities; class versus non-class divisions; exploitation versus oppression. She interrogates and extends concepts that have been seen as fundamental to political economy. The idea of production has to go beyond the generation of market values, to recognize the production, development, and maintenance of human capabilities, making human labor also something that is "produced." She argues that the concept of exploitation as expropriation of surplus or surplus value in production must be extended to a more general definition: taking unfair advantage of another person or group. Then exploitation can be defined as the unequal distribution of the gains from coerced cooperation, where coercion is defined in terms of the processes that influence individual and collective bargaining power.

Folbre provides a clear-eyed critique of the argument by Friedrich Engels that many socialist feminists were effectively brought up on, that the original sin responsible for gender inequality was the rise of private property in early class-based societies. This traditional Marxist approach makes class conflict the main protagonist in the unfolding of capitalism as a unitary and hegemonic system. She implicitly prefers the prior argument of August Bebel (which Engels sought to contradict), that inequalities based on class and gender were parallel, rather than sequential, phenomena: both resulting from the violent imposition of coercive laws and norms that favored the more powerful. But she also goes beyond that, to emphasize

that people belong to many different groups simultaneously, making them winners in some respects, losers in others. This makes both class and feminist struggles much more complex than is often recognized.

Instead, Folbre notes that patriarchal norms of control predate private property because they are concerned with the ability to control women's labor power – specifically, the labor directed toward social reproduction and care activities broadly defined. This essential feature determines the different and intersectional ways in which such control is and has been exercised through history. Folbre highlights that the historical specialization of women in care activities (which is only partly determined by physical attributes like childbearing) has served through history to resolve tensions between individual and group welfare because social reproduction and care are universal necessities creating tasks that must be performed.

Of course, this specialization – and the associated gendered division of labor not just within homes but across society – has been costly for women, in many ways. In addition, however, care activities also create complex patterns of integration and exclusion. Essentially, Folbre suggests that what is seen as cooperation can also be collusion; in turn, collusion can be conspiracy; and engaging in care for in-groups can lead to hostility toward out-groups. It can even entail a sometimes violent enforcement of group definitions and boundaries, such as in the social reproduction of "whiteness" or "masculinity" as accepted tropes.

Folbre draws on the ancient history of different cultures to point out that patriarchal forms of control created forms of subordination and exploitation that were parallel to and intertwined with other forms of control based on class, ethnic, or other socially defined differences (like caste). She notes, for example, the evidence that the enslavement of women both preceded and informed the enslavement of men. Folbre's sweeping historical scope allows her to comment on how this has played out in other historical contexts as well. In a very effective passage, she analyzes colonialism as an extension of intergroup conflict in which gender roles and ascriptions once again played a critical part.

This does therefore suggest a greater unity in some respects: women in completely different contexts share common interests, many of which grow out of this historical specialization in reproductive activities. While the basic terms of "the patriarchal bargain," as Folbre describes it, are shaped by many factors and contingent on specific circumstances, there is an underlying commonality that is determined by the affective element in care work. The emotional content of care renders women more vulnerable: women care *about* those whom they care *for*. This dramatically reduces bargaining power as it affects the ability to withhold care (since it would affect those whom women care about), which is central to the ability to

bargain. This critical interplay between these two notions of care therefore makes women more vulnerable to exploitation.

This affective element in care provision means that women typically collude in their own disempowerment. This in turn affects so many other aspects of women's lives, resulting in greater confinement within homes, less mobility, worse labor market conditions, occupational segregation with concentration in disadvantaged activities, less political power, reduced social voice, and much more. Conversely, there is a "patriarchal dividend" to those who do less care work, (typically men) which reinforces their relative power, superior social and economic status, and political control.

It is inevitable that capitalist systems would make use of this vulnerability. Folbre points out that "Patriarchal and capitalist institutions have this in common: they are both institutional structures that disempower those who invest in the capabilities of other people, putting women at a particular disadvantage" (p. 41). Gender essentialism is simultaneously costly for women and advantageous for capitalist development. But this also spans different socioeconomic systems and cultures, as the examples of women's role in the Soviet Union or the welfare state's use of women indicate.

A note on Folbre's title, which is certainly optimistic. She alludes to current indications of some decline in the more obstructive elements of patriarchal systems, at least in certain societies. Lower fertility in advanced economies, for example, tends to weaken patriarchal institutions. Yet, intersectionality and potentially conflicting interests of women have also come to the fore, as suggested by Folbre's descriptions of the complex interactions between religious, race, class, caste, and national identities, on the one hand, and gender inequalities, on the other, and how these can lead to the suppression of gender concerns in what are seen as the "larger interest" in a particular context.

The decline of patriarchal systems would involve the eventual fall of one of the most resilient social constructs in human history. This could be seen as an example of optimism of the will, and Folbre's innovative analytical perspective and wide historical sweep do not allow for rose-tinted glasses. But, as she notes, bargaining over reproduction inevitably involves bargaining over production, which in turn can bring about the coalescence of otherwise potentially competing forces. In a memorable phrase, she points out that "necessity can be the mother of coalition." Such coalitions can be successful only if the intersecting nature of oppression and vulnerability is truly understood, which is what makes Folbre's contribution to our understanding so significant and so necessary.

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Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey Toward Equity, by Claudia Goldin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. 218 pp. ISBN: 9780691201788 (hbk.). US$27.95

The main argument in Claudia Goldin's new book, *Career and Family*, is that "greedy jobs" are the main obstacle for an economy to complete the last stage of the gender revolution: women's equality in the labor market and in the home to the same degree as men. The production function of greedy jobs exhibits a low degree of labor substitutability, making it costly to the firm to give a worker control over the amount and the timing of work. Importantly, the technological feature in the production function of greedy jobs leads to hourly wages that exponentially increase with work hours. As a result, having one partner specializing in a greedy job and another specializing in a standard job is the efficient outcome that maximizes a couple's income (while still allowing taking care of family responsibilities). Couple's equity and women's careers suffer.

Bringing the timing of work into an economic model of wage determination to explain the incompatibility between careers and family is simply revolutionary. Goldin's book does real service to academics in the social sciences and to the public more generally by bringing together much of her groundbreaking work. She has been making the point of greedy jobs for decades, and this book is fundamentally based on her past articles, all of which have been published in top journals and have been widely cited. The important lessons from the book go beyond the United