

February 2023

## Book Review Essay: The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy

Charles T. Wallace-Thomas IV

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### Recommended Citation

Wallace-Thomas, Charles T. IV (2023) "Book Review Essay: The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 29. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss1/29>

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***Book Review Essay: The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy***<sup>1</sup>

Charles T. Wallace-Thomas IV<sup>2</sup>

Just what is economics, anyway? Answering this question is deceptively tricky for economists and non-economists alike. The conceptualization asserted by mainstream theoreticians and practitioners of economics argues that economics is simply the study of market-sized problems. That is, at the highest level, economics is the study of how to logically allocate some finite resource among a group of people. In *Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems*, the eminent political and feminist economist Nancy Folbre remains at the vanguard of a generation of economists taking a different tack. For Folbre, it is important to understand the contours of the economic contexts we study, and to ask the more fundamental question: just how and why did this become the context at all? Here, she makes an audacious attempt to connect the roles women have played in economies throughout history with the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts of those roles. In so doing, she gives particular attention to the unequal distribution of reproductive labor, or care work, to women from the emergence of hunter gatherer social groups, through antiquity and modern history, up to the present day. Her account reconditions and explicitly seeks to situate our conceptualization of the discipline of economics within the context of Western patriarchy.

Folbre's latest tour de force is an academic triumph, but her conversational tone signals her insistence on expanding popular access to her indispensable analysis. Drawing on her years of experience as an economist steeped in the heterodox feminist tradition, she reconciles and refashions mainstream neoliberal economic views of care work with analysis of reproductive labor in the Marxist tradition. She produces a lucid and encompassing intersectional analysis of patriarchal systems' strategic gendering and undervaluing of care work in the labor market for the appropriation of sociocultural, economic, and political power. Having reconstructed a truly intersectional conceptualization of political economy, Folbre ends by offering pragmatic pathways for the advancement of feminist social, economic, and political goals and a well-honed lens for future academic analysis.

The book is divided into two sections: Theoretical Tools and Restructured Narratives. Theoretical Tools is at once didactic and earnest but limited by its sparse analysis of facets of identity upon which the notion of intersectionality was built, notably race and even sexual orientation. Folbre frames the pillars of intersectional political analysis and invites readers to consider more deeply how patriarchy propels its aims through the reorganization of social and economic systems, notably the vastly unequal distribution of care work among men and women.

This type of economic analysis is not new. Indeed, in her seminal work *Caliban and the Witch*, Sylvia Federici explores the inextricable connections between the rise of patriarchy and the emergence and eventual dominance of capitalist political economy. Here Federici argues that with the advent of capitalism and the decline of the feudal age in Europe, women were thrust into

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<sup>1</sup> Folbre, N. (2021). *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.

<sup>2</sup> Charles T. Wallace-Thomas IV is a recent graduate of Northeastern University where he majored in Economics and Mathematics. Email: wallace-thomas.c@northeastern.edu

gender-based social functions of reproduction which were critical to reproducing a controllable workforce. Having been disconnected from free access to the land, serfs were forced to find gainful employment for wages or face the prospect of starvation. For the budding capitalist classes who desired to control production as effectively as possible, this was a boon. Concomitantly with the emergence of this capitalist order was the social insistence of patriarchal domination. That is, women, who controlled the future of the workforce by function of their ability to give birth, had to be controlled for the sake of ensuring the continued existence of the workforce. Federici's central claim is that the patriarchal capitalist class organized their near total control of this dimension of their economy through the social control of women. They accomplished this through the development of social mores and virtues enforced with the threat of ostracization and physical violence (see: the branding of so-called delinquent women as witches and their subsequent punishment). While Federici's analysis, and the expansive literature it generated, were critical to expanding a materialist conceptualization of women's subjugation, it is hindered by a critical oversight common to feminist political economy in the Marxist tradition. Namely, it accounts for only gender, class, and religious dynamics while eliding the way that dynamics like racialism and racial subjugation affected the development of patriarchal political economy.

Ambitiously plumbing chronological and historiographical depths predating even the feudal order, Folbre agrees that a more expansive intellectual treatment is necessary and moves away from such a low-dimensional mode of understanding of the role of women in patriarchal economies. Folbre retains key insights from Marxian theory and utilizes a variety of modern microeconomic theories to "call attention to forms of exploitation that long predated the emergence of wage employment and were internalized, modified and coevolutionary with socially constructed inequalities" (Folbre 4). It is precisely her insistence on intersectional analysis that seeks to remedy oversights in works like Federici's, as it requires the construction of conceptual models of political economy that consider as many relevant social dynamics as possible. By this method, she unlocks more complete understandings of history, more accurate diagnoses of present crises, and more effective recommendations to alleviate these crises.

Folbre elaborates and utilizes several theoretical tools to accomplish this. She begins with precise definitions of patriarchy, where she identifies the nature and contours of patriarchal systems throughout history. She then discusses gender, structure, and collective agency, offering that women have and maintain common interests from their specialization in reproductive care, a care which subjects them to obligations to group and individual welfare that are uniquely costly to women. She goes on to explain how patriarchy uses and reinforces these conditions through methods of appropriation, reproduction, and production. Finally, she offers that these dynamics coalesce to constitute a system of hierarchy and exploitation.

As comprehensive as this analysis seems to be, Folbre's discussion of the role that race plays is not as substantial as the reader hopes it will be. While Folbre indeed goes further than many Marxian political economists in noting that a rigorous treatment of racialism and racial subjugation is imperative to creating a political economy supporting "concerted efforts to ally disempowered groups around common long run interests" (Folbre 59), readers will not find a substantial analysis in this volume. Readers may turn instead to classics such as Angela Davis's in *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), which Folbre herself cites, where Davis outlines the history of women's movements for liberation throughout history. Readers searching for a still more thorough

historiographic account of the interplay of socioeconomic and sociocultural forms of domination rooted in race and class will find this in Cedric Robinson's (1983) vastly influential tome *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Even with such a sparse racial analysis, Folbre's broad strokes and strong repointing of conceptual foundations enables a compelling demonstration of the degree to which her vast reformulation of political economy enables new, still more relevant analyses in her narrative reconstructions.

Within her reconstructions, Folbre focuses on the dynamics of patriarchal assents, trajectories of capitalist projects, tensions emergent in welfare states, costs associated with gender and care, and the faults along which divisions and alliances form entities countering patriarchal cultural and economic hegemony. It is within these reconstructions that Folbre can demonstrate how useful an intersectional political economy is towards constructing pathways for social progress. It is an extended conversation in the most fundamental sense, an essaying through the different ways worldviews and understandings of history related to women's involvement in history can be reformulated towards the accomplishment of feminist goals.

Folbre's work occupies a key place in the literature, filling a gap that manuals on praxis such as adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy Series* (2017 to Present) are not often able to fill: the succinct elucidation of economic practice guided by sound technical theory. Succinct though Folbre's analysis may be, she acknowledges that a continued dedication to this form of analysis is necessary, arguing finally that the "rise, decline, and indefinite future of patriarchal systems show that political rights must be accompanied by not only economic rights, but also by obligations to care for one another and for generations to come" (Folbre 229). For Folbre, this care means centering analyses of increasingly urgent crises we face with a well-considered theoretical framework. Finding common ground among her often-disparate audiences of academic economists and those less familiar with well-defined, precise terms defined specifically within the context of economic theory is a difficult task. In seeking to reach a broader audience writers like Folbre would do well to be guided by the question: for whom is this articulation of theory truly useful? In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks reminds readers that theory is not inherently liberating. hooks asserts,

One of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references...any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public. (hooks 64)

Folbre's work is a useful guide and moves in the right direction by outlining an expanded definition of economics capable of meeting the demands of our time. It is not positioned, though, to bring along the most marginalized, specifically those without access to the idiomatic domain of academic economic theory.

Nevertheless, in a time marked by rising neo-fascistic sentiment and constrictions on women's rights in the U.S. and abroad, Folbre's *Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy* reminds that there is yet so much farther to go by committing our respective talents towards an intersectional future. While dense at times, anyone interested in understanding just exactly what feminist political economy is should read this book. Perhaps more

importantly, this work's casual didacticism, considered approach, and rich bibliography will be particularly useful for undergraduates and graduates in economics programs seeking to deepen their exposure to heterodox approaches to economics.

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