
This book, a collection of selected articles from the Canadian journal Studies in Political Economy, illustrates the evolution and the nuances of a debate that remains relevant in present-day political economy and in feminist theory. Namely, it looks at the ways in which class and gender intersect in any number of critical studies, studies that investigate the workplace, domestic relations, public policy, and more. This does not mean, as the editors carefully point out, that the book is a political economic text that simply grafts feminist theory onto existing work in order to address concerns of “gender-blindness.” Rather, it is a book that acknowledges the many elements of inequity. Class and gender may be central in these elements, but the authors do not limit themselves to these, noting other social hierarchies at work in their case studies, based on issues surrounding race, ethnicity, age, or cultural capital.

The editors provide some preliminary comments on each of the three sections: Production and Reproduction: Feminist Takes, Flexible Workforces and the Class-Gender Nexus, and Engendering the State in SPE: The Interrelations of Theory and Practice, and of Class, Race and Gender. Even without the extra cohesion these preludes offer, the articles meld together well, despite the fact that they were not all written in the same time period and do not tackle the exact same subject matter. In addition to the editors, contributors include Pamela Moss, Jane Aronson and Sheila M. Neysmith, Jerry White, Wenona Giles and Valerie Preston, Bonnie Fox and Pamela Sugiman, Göran Therborn, Gillian Walker, and Lois Harder. The subjects they tackle include space and ideology in the workplace, long-term care for the elderly, the nursing crisis in Canada, technology and “flexible” work, and the way feminists have mobilized around the issue of wife battering. Although some of these articles were written several years ago, with the earliest first published in 1984 and the most recent in 2002, the issues they address are as timely now as they were in the first printing. The fact that some of the problems described in these studies remain unresolved and continue to be misrepresented or underreported in the media today is dispiriting. However, it speaks to the necessity of collections such as this one, particularly for aspiring scholars in this field.

In the introduction, Andrew, Armstrong, and Vosko point out that this book was originally intended to serve as a teaching aid, and in fact it serves as an excellent primer for students. In particular, Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong’s opening chapter on the attempts to reconcile feminism and Marxism provides a thorough and readable discussion of the tensions that have divided not only these two fields, but also scholars working within one, the other, or—more often—both who have disagreed on how the connection manifests itself. Leah F. Vosko’s concluding article cites those scholars who have played a crucial role in such debates, such as Judith Butler, Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, and Michèle Barrett, and even more usefully, notes the Canadians who have contributed to this field, including Marjorie Cohen, Pat Connelly, Meg Luxton, and Martha MacDonald. In combination with these chapters, the other articles selected offer a historical look back at the development of feminist political economy, and also demonstrate the range of topics available for study in this field. At the same time, the variety and the present-day significance of the case studies make this book an engaging read for a wider group than aspiring scholars of women’s studies or political economy—students, academics, and policymakers with an interest in sociology, communication, political science, or social justice in general should also take note of the research conducted here.

This research covers different areas, charting women’s struggles in the private sphere, the workplace, and within social movements. Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong’s
chapter on moving toward a feminist Marxism touches on the question of domestic labour’s value in Marxist terms as well as the debate over how biology is, or is not, a factor in women’s subordination. Pamela Moss discusses her experience working in a housekeeping services franchise, a place where the female staff members were exposed to carefully structured internal hierarchies as well as external discrimination based both on their class and gender. Jane Aronson and Sheila M. Neysmith’s chapter looks at the increasing privatization of care for the elderly, with the consequence that women—in many cases—shoulder the burden of care without expecting or receiving meaningful assistance from governments. On a related note, Jerry White examines the Canadian media’s frequent references to a nursing crisis, which imply that the crisis stems from a lack of nurses when in fact working conditions may cause nurses to leave the profession. Gillian Walker talks about the way the state, feminist theory, and activists have all treated the issue of domestic violence or “wife battering.” These chapters and others show the way theoretical approaches surrounding gender and class have developed. An initial emphasis on women’s domestic labour in relation to men’s employment has given way to analysis of myriad issues, including work that continues to be performed in the home by women, work that is performed in the public sphere but without equal reward, which has implications for all labourers, and the manner in which class struggle can bifurcate the feminist movement itself.

Throughout all of these articles, despite their different points of focus, there are some consistent themes that emerge: the invisibility of the needs of women, and of Canadians with slender financial resources; the impossibility of viewing or resolving problems using a perspective that draws exclusively on gender, class, or any single factor; and the contradictions embodied in the role of the state, which may perversely affect the most minute details of its citizens’ lives in some respects while too often disclaiming responsibility for alleviating the plight of the poor, victims of physical abuse, or others experiencing disenfranchisement. These themes come together here in an absorbing and compelling read for anyone concerned with inequality—its causes, its guises, and its potential solutions.

Faiza Hirji
Carleton University