The Different Facets of Injustice: A Critique of Nancy Folbre's 'Manifold Exploitations'

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Abstract: In her recent work, Nancy Folbre (2020, 2021) undertakes an ambitious effort: constructing an intersectional political economy that aims to identify the common mechanisms and logic underpinning the many wrongs that characterise capitalism. In this paper, we focus on what we deem the three fundamental theoretical pillars of her approach. First, she challenges the oppression/exploitation distinction within Marxian political economy and proposes a broader definition of exploitation that can take manifold forms. Second, she questions the Marxian concept of class, and emphasises the variety of forms of subordination and exploitation related to social identities that cannot be reduced to Marxian classes. Finally, she advocates a more comprehensive notion of the economy beyond a focus on capitalist relations of production. It is difficult to understate the theoretical relevance of these claims, which highlight the importance of various contemporary forms of injustice—of which the exploitation of workers by capitalists is only one. As a *complement* to the Marxian theory of exploitation and class, Folbre's approach would broaden our understanding of oppressive social relations. Yet as an *alternative* to Marxian political economy, it is ultimately unconvincing: a shift of emphasis to 'manifold exploitations', social groups, and the economy does not yield a gain in analytical insight but rather an impoverishment of our conceptual toolbox. The struggle against capitalism is different from the struggle against patriarchy and racism, even if the ultimate aim should be the removal of all structures of oppression and domination.

Keywords: exploitation, oppression, injustice, intersectionality

JEL Classification: D63, B51, B54

Nancy Folbre's latest book (Folbre 2021) is the culmination of a decades-long reflection on feminist and radical themes straddling disciplinary boundaries. It is wonderfully written and passionate in its defence of a political economy firmly on the side of the oppressed. Its fundamental aim is, politically, to foster dialogue among different groups that have reason to rebel against the status quo and, theoretically, to develop a more inclusive, *intersectional* political economy to diagnose the many wrongs that characterise modern economies.

It is impossible to summarise and discuss a dense book which deals with some of the most important topics, and thinkers, in economics, political philosophy, and sociology in the brief space of a commentary article. While acknowledging the many merits of Folbre's theoretical *tour de force*, in this paper, we shall focus on one aspect of her work that we deem problematic, namely the claim that her approach builds on, but goes beyond the Marxian tradition: it generalises Marxian political economy while preserving its fundamental insights. This is a fundamental—foundational even—element of Folbre's theory and a constant theme throughout the book, which she has further elaborated upon elsewhere (Folbre 2020).

Three main theoretical pillars underpin Folbre's approach. First, she “challenges the oppression/exploitation binary within Marxian political economy, proposing a broader definition of exploitation that can take manifold forms” (Folbre 2020, 452). Standard, labour-based definitions of exploitation are, in her view, reductive as they do not capture a range of relations of subordination and oppression that characterise modern economies.¹ Second, this limitation calls into question the Marxian concept of class, as the variety of forms of oppression, subordination, and exploitation that exist in advanced economies are related to social identities that, argues Folbre, cannot be captured by standard Marxian class concepts. Building on decades of feminist work on care and unpaid labour, she argues that social conflicts cannot be reduced to class struggle, as they are

¹ A definition of exploitation is *labour-based* if labour time, or (skill-adjusted) effective labour, is used as the relevant exploitation numéraire: labour—rather than wealth, income, utility, and so on—is deemed the key normative variable of interest and the main unit of account of exploitation theory. One way to derive individual labour accounts is by means of the labour theory of value, but this is by no means the *only* way. In exploitation theory, labour accounting is simply the “way of characterizing what it is that people give one another [...] (where ‘give’ is understood very broadly to refer to any way in which some person undergoes a loss that ends up a gain to another)” (Reiman 1987, 9). More on this in section 2 below. For a comprehensive discussion, see Veneziani and Yoshihara (2018).

“more consistent with the intersectional logic of contradictory group interests” (Folbre 2020, 453). Finally, she suggests that the Marxian emphasis on class and labour-based notions of exploitation derives from a narrow view of the economy and “the assumption that capitalism is a hegemonic mode of production that constitutes the ‘economy’ or even the entire ‘world system’” (Folbre 2020, 455).

It is difficult to understate the theoretical relevance of these claims, which highlight the importance of various contemporary forms of injustice—of which the exploitation of workers by capitalists is only one. If one wants to understand the many facets of *inequality of personal* income (and other indicators of personal well-being), for example, then one has to look also at gender, race, and even citizenship. Economic and social disadvantages are the combined effect of multiple forms of subordination, including class. Further, individual motives, aims and beliefs, and therefore collective action, are influenced by various aspects of social relations, including class, race, gender, religion, and even citizenship. Finally, economic determinism suffers from major limitations, and the elimination of capitalist relations of production does not imply—as a matter of either logic or historical necessity—the end of racism, homophobia, and patriarchy.

The general appeal to a multifaceted approach to the complexity of social relations and economic structures is undoubtedly important, and Folbre’s analysis compels us to broaden our normative horizon. Nonetheless, in this paper we raise some doubts on her three key theoretical claims concerning Marxian political economy. If Folbre’s contribution was meant to highlight some social phenomena that are outside the focus of exploitation theory, then it *would* help to provide a more complex, and nuanced understanding of oppressive social relations in advanced economies. Yet Folbre’s aim is to provide an *alternative* to Marxian class and exploitation theory, which generalises it while preserving its fundamental insights. We argue that instead of building solid foundations for a more general theory of manifold oppressions and injustices in advanced economies, the proposed approach yields a loss of analytical power and conceptual clarity.

It is worth clarifying at the outset that we are not advocating analytical rigour for its own sake. As feminist and radical scholars have repeatedly pointed out, the focus on rigour and formalism tends, in practice, to select the contributions by dominant social groups as the only ones that deserve to be read or heard. Our point, rather, is that analytical precision

is required in order to clearly diagnose a form of injustice, or oppression; to explain its determinants; to identify its normative implications; and to propose appropriate remedies. A critical and emancipatory political economy—and a non-ephemeral coalition of the oppressed—can only be built around a clear and precise conceptual apparatus that allows one to identify *both* the similarities *and* the differences among the various forms of injustice that plague capitalist economies.

MARXIAN EXPLOITATION AND MANIFOLD EXPLOITATIONS

Although there are many definitions of exploitation in the Marxian tradition, they all share certain features and in this paper we ignore the differences among them. For our purposes, we illustrate the Marxian approach by focusing on the definition proposed by Erik Olin Wright (2000), which is also the focus of Folbre's critical assessment (Folbre 2020, 464–466; 2021, 67, 124–126).

According to Wright (2000), there is exploitation when three criteria are satisfied:

1. *The inverse interdependent welfare principle.*—The material welfare of exploiters causally depends upon the reductions of material welfare of the exploited.
2. *The exclusion principle.*—This inverse interdependence of the welfare of exploiters and the exploited depends upon the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources.
3. *The appropriation principle.*—Exclusion generates material advantage to exploiters because it enables them to appropriate the labor effort of the exploited. (Wright 2000, 1563)

This is a general definition that holds for various modes of production (slavery, feudalism, capitalism). Consider capitalism: workers are exploited by capitalists because they contribute more labour in productive activities than they are paid for. Part of this unpaid labour is appropriated by capitalists—who therefore improve their lot at the expense of the material welfare of workers—thanks to their ownership of scarce productive assets.

Three points should be noted about the Marxian definition of exploitation: first, labour is the main currency of exploitative relations. Second, production activities and productive relations are at the core of the definition and delineate the scope of the concept. Third, the Marxian theory

of exploitation identifies a specific mechanism which allows exploiters to appropriate labour at the expense of the exploited: property relations and the unequal ownership of certain scarce productive assets. As Wright states:

Exploitation is thus a diagnosis of the process through which certain inequalities in incomes are generated by inequalities in rights and powers over productive resources: the inequalities occur, in part at least, through the ways in which exploiters, by virtue of their exclusionary rights and powers over resources, are able to appropriate labor effort of the exploited. (Wright 2000, 1563)

Folbre suggests that the standard Marxian approach, as exemplified by Wright's definition, suffers from significant shortcomings and advocates the adoption of a broader definition. First, by focusing on productive activities, the Marxian approach ignores a variety of wrongs that happen outside the sphere of production narrowly conceived. Second, and related, it is 'misleading' (Folbre 2020, 458), because it emphasises mechanisms of subordination that arise *only* from relations of production and ownership of productive assets, and that are related to class positions. Third, the Marxian approach puts an excessive emphasis on labour, whose exchange distinguishes exploitation from other wrongs.

In relation to the above definition, for example, Wright argues that if the first two conditions "are present, but not the third, what might be termed nonexploitative economic oppression may exist, but not exploitation" (2000, 1564). The welfare of the oppressor (unlike that of the exploiter) depends simply on the exclusion of the oppressed from access to certain resources, but not on their effort. According to Folbre, this distinction is objectionable. For:

The mutual dependency of groups—their voluntary or coerced cooperation—need not take the form of direct control of labor; it can take more indirect forms such as contributions to public goods or enforcement of the rule of law, which also create interdependence. Many forms of implicitly coerced cooperation lead to an unfair distribution of the resulting gains—forms of exploitation that are not directly based on labor exchange. (Folbre 2020, 464)²

² Folbre argues that her definition blurs the distinction between oppression and exploitation. Yet "Wright's distinction between exploitation and oppression remains meaningful, and discrimination can affect both. Not all economic interactions can be reduced to bargaining, be it fair or unfair" (Folbre 2021, 124). So it would seem that it is more a matter of drawing the line someplace else.

Before examining Folbre's proposed generalisation, two preliminary points should be made. First, the focus on labour is much less narrow than Folbre suggests. As Wright notes:

"Appropriation of labor effort" can take many forms. Typically this involves appropriating the products of that labor effort, but it may involve a direct appropriation of labor services. The claim that labor effort is appropriated does not depend upon the thesis of the labor theory of value [...]. All that is claimed is that when capitalists appropriate products they appropriate the laboring effort of the people who make those products. (Wright 2000, 1563–1564n4)

More generally, the theory of exploitation as the unequal exchange of labour conceives of labour as the exploitation numéraire: the ethically based unit of account that measures the inequalities associated with exploitative relations (Roemer 1982; Veneziani and Yoshihara 2018). Second, it is indeed true that per se the enforcement of the rule of law, or the "willingness to help others" (Folbre 2021, 124) do not fall within the purview of Marxian exploitation theory. But it is also rather unclear that they can be properly described as instances of cooperation characterised by the *mutual* dependency of groups.

Nonetheless, it is certainly correct that the Marxian approach is limited in scope: it does not capture all forms of subordination, let alone all types of injustices; and it does focus on productive relations and on labour as the exploitation numéraire. Thus, gender relations do not fall within the purview of the above definition: women are oppressed, not exploited, because they provide services that are outside the capitalist mode of production yet are necessary for the reproduction of labour power as well as social reproduction. It is possible to appreciate the normative relevance, and the deep economic implications of gender oppression, even if it is distinguished from Marxian exploitation.

According to Folbre, exploitation should instead be defined based on "an analysis of institutional structures of collective power that shape processes of cooperation and conflict that reach beyond capitalist dynamics" (Folbre 2020, 452). Although she does not provide a precise definition, she suggests that the unequal distribution of gains from cooperation could be termed 'exploitation' "if [it] is unfair [...]. Alternatively (or in addition), the process by which the distribution was achieved may be deemed unfair" (Folbre 2020, 461).

Does this alternative approach improve on the Marxian definition? This is difficult to say, given that, lacking a precise notion of fairness, it remains underspecified. Yet, Folbre seems to emphasise the procedural aspects of exploitative relations and in particular the lack of consent, participation, and democratic deliberation. She claims that “a precise definition of ‘fairness’ therefore, may be less important than consideration of the obstacles to the development of a social environment in which truly democratic deliberations can take place” (Folbre 2020, 463).³

It is unclear whether this alternative approach could detect, and condemn, quintessentially exploitative relations: if participation and consent are required at the time certain institutions are established,⁴ then one can imagine a capitalism with a clean (democratically established) origin such that capitalist/worker relations would be deemed nonexploitative.⁵ A similar verdict would be rendered even if one focused on current institutions, since capitalism often coexists with democratic institutions. Conversely, the approach is liable to yield false positives: the relation between prison guards and prisoners, for example, may be deemed exploitative, as the mutual dependency is definitionally not supported by institutions that enjoy the active, democratic participation and support of the agents involved.⁶

At a broader level, Folbre’s discussion points to the existence of a trade-off between generality and theoretical cogency. In her attempt to extend exploitation theory to include all forms of subordination, she blurs a number of theoretically relevant distinctions—for instance, be-

³ She implicitly adopts a slightly different (and slightly more specific) approach elsewhere, when she notes that “unfair bargaining power is a form of value extraction that encompasses what Marx described as exploitation” (Folbre 2020, 464; see also Folbre 2021, 124). Yet, this approach is also problematic since it is unclear how ‘unfair bargaining power’ can be per se a form of value extraction: unequal bargaining power (whether fair or unfair) is neither necessary nor sufficient for value extraction. At best it *enables* value extraction.

⁴ This seems to be Folbre’s interpretation since she emphasises “gain-seeking behavior shaped by social institutions *established by profoundly undemocratic means*” (Folbre 2020, 464: *emphasis added*; see also Folbre 2021, 125).

⁵ Quite aside from its secondary role in exploitation theory, the normative relevance of the emphasis on the historical origin of certain institutions is rather unclear: in the context of a patterned approach to distributive justice such as the one advocated by Folbre, what matters is the *current* structure of institutions, and their *current* effect on bargaining power and distribution, not their origin.

⁶ To be sure, we are not suggesting that the correctional system in advanced capitalist societies is fundamentally just. Rather, our point is that it may be condemned as an oppressive institution without having to say, implausibly, that guards *exploit* prisoners even when no productive relations exist and no exchange of labour takes place.

tween oppression and exploitation; between different forms of exploitation; and even, to some extent, between exploitation and other forms of injustice. This may help rally the oppressed under a single banner, but it is unclear that much analytical insight is gained by saying that the relation between capitalists and workers is the same as that between husband and wife, or heterosexuals and homosexuals. It is certainly worthwhile having a conceptual framework that identifies all types of unjust social relations and the many instances of oppression in advanced economies. By bundling all these phenomena together, however, one loses sight of the fundamental differences between them, and therefore ultimately loses the ability to explain any of them.

Theft and blackmail share one important feature: they are both criminal offences. If one aims to depict the overall level of criminality in a given society, then it is perhaps harmless to bundle them together. Indeed, recognising that both are ‘crimes’ may add an important layer of explanation in that context. And surely the aim should be the elimination of *all* criminal offences. Yet in general, to insist that the distinction between the two be blurred and that they be called ‘crimes’ is not to gain analytical insight. It means losing two concepts.⁷

CLASSES AND SOCIAL GROUPS

Similar issues arise concerning the proposed generalisation of the Marxian notion of class. Folbre rightly rejects “the view that most social conflicts derive from class conflicts, or from capitalist strategies to ‘divide and conquer’” (Folbre 2020, 454). Only the crudest form of economic determinism may support the idea that property rights and the relations of production explain every social conflict in advanced economies. Similarly,

intra-class economic inequalities cannot be explained as a consequence of heterogeneous labor in capitalist wage relations, because heterogeneity itself requires explanation: why do some workers attain more advantageous skills, assets and preferences than others do? (Folbre 2020, 454)

⁷ If Folbre’s theory was conceived of as complementary to Marxian exploitation theory, focusing in particular on certain oppressive social relations that the Marxian definition ignores, then it *would* provide significant conceptual clarity. Yet Folbre’s aim is not to provide an *additional* definition of exploitation to the Marxian one, but rather an *alternative* to it, which generalises it while preserving its fundamental insights. We are thankful to the Editor of this journal for pressing us on this point.

And yet, it is unclear what is gained by generalising “the Marxian analysis of class to all socially assigned groups that share at least some common identities and interests” (Folbre 2020, 452).

A first problem is the loss of conceptual clarity at the highest level of abstraction, namely at the definitional level. Folbre argues that:

As Marxist scholars have long recognized, it is difficult to reach consensus on the operational meaning of class. It is equally, if not more difficult to reach consensus on the definition of other aspects of socially assigned (as distinct from individually chosen) group membership. (Folbre 2020, 457).

Indeed. But while the Marxian concept of class may be difficult to *operationalise*, the notion of socially assigned groups is fuzzy and vague even *at the conceptual level*. How is a socially assigned group actually defined? Is it meaningful to extend the Marxian analysis of class to *all* socially assigned groups that share *at least some* common identities and interests? Taken literally, that would imply extending Marxian class theory to football supporters, fan groups, readers’ clubs, professional associations, and so on. And yet, it is unclear, in Folbre’s theorisation, what are the common identities and interests that underpin a theoretically relevant concept of socially assigned group which generalises the Marxian notion of class.

Perhaps one objective, distinguishing feature of social groups identified by Folbre’s general approach is their position in the social structure: socially advantaged vs. socially disadvantaged groups. And yet this immediately invites the question: How does one define social (dis)advantage in a theoretically relevant way? Clearly, not all social (dis)advantages are salient, and certainly not all of them are akin to the (dis)advantages associated with Marxian classes.

Folbre seems to suggest a theoretical focus on social disadvantage that is associated with, or conducive to economic disadvantage. She notes that “all else equal, memberships in socially disadvantaged groups contribute to individual economic disadvantage” (Folbre 2021, 123). This statement is intuitively plausible, but it can meaningfully identify a causal mechanism only if the notion of *social* disadvantage is defined independently of *economic* disadvantage. This raises two main issues.

First, if socially assigned groups are to be identified based *both* on economic disadvantage *and* on a conceptually distinct social disadvantage, then it is unclear that Folbre’s approach represents, logically speaking, a generalisation of Marxian class theory in which class status is

defined entirely within the economic sphere. Second, and perhaps more important, it is not obvious how to define a theoretically salient concept of social disadvantage that is completely independent of economic disadvantage, especially if economic advantage is conceived of in a broad sense, as Folbre does. In any case the notion of social disadvantage is left largely undefined by Folbre.

More generally, one wonders how far a generic emphasis on disenfranchised agents, or socially disadvantaged groups takes us in the understanding of modern economies. “The institutional economist William Dugger has described diverse inequalities in terms of ‘top dogs’ and ‘underdogs’” (Folbre 2020, 453). But what is the analytical purchase of these categories?

In contrast, the Marxian notion of class does not explain all forms of subordination: it only partially contributes to explain patriarchal institutions and racial tensions. Yet, as complex to operationalise as it may be, it is conceptually crucial in order to understand the logic of capitalism, and its central conflict.⁸ It may be limited in scope, but this is more than compensated by the gain in analytical power.

That “capitalists, men and whites became codependent beneficiaries of the exploitation of disempowered groups” (Folbre 2021, 76) is surely true, but not particularly helpful in understanding the specific mechanisms underlying various forms of domination and oppression. To continue with our legal metaphor, it is surely true that thieves and blackmailers are both criminals. But they commit different crimes with different consequences and have different motivations. By bundling them together we do not fully understand either. Different institutions shape different group identities, and the relevant social cleavages follow different logics and are determined by different mechanisms. So, both statistically and historically, black working-class women tend to suffer from multiple oppressions. And yet, a black female owner of the means of production, who only earns profit (or dividend) income, remains a capitalist and, as a capitalist, will follow the logic of capital.

The limitations of this quest for generality are particularly evident in the conceptualisation of collective action and group conflicts. Folbre (2021, 115ff) develops a stylised model of bargaining over the gains from cooperation in which distributive outcomes are largely determined by

⁸ This does not mean that class conflict is the only or the most important conflict in advanced economies. It only means that it is conceptually the central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production.

fallback positions. According to Folbre, her “approach to collective conflict subsumes both the neoclassically-influenced concept of rent-seeking and the Marxian theory of surplus extraction under a larger rubric of ‘gain-seeking’” (2021, 115). This is not entirely correct: the emphasis on rent-seeking is characteristic of but one sub-field in neoclassical economics. Her model *is* (a version of) the general neoclassical model of bargaining: the idea of bargaining over the gains from cooperation (what she terms ‘gain seeking’) and the emphasis on the role of fallback positions is entirely consistent with neoclassical game-theoretic models of bargaining going back at least to John Nash (1953).

There is nothing wrong in adopting the neoclassical bargaining model, which provides useful insights on a number of economic conflicts. But the adoption of a theoretical framework is not neutral with respect to the kind of questions that one may ask, and the conceptual tools consistent with that framework. For example, a generic emphasis on groups and bargaining misses the specific aspects of class conflict which explain capitalist dynamics. “The notion that social institutions have intersectional effects on the bargaining power of entire groups of people builds on feminist models of bargaining between husbands and wives in married households” (Folbre 2021, 127). This may be true. But what analytical purchase does this allegedly more general framework gain us to understand different phenomena, such as race, or class?

CAPITALISM AND THE ECONOMY

In the previous sections, we have argued that there is a trade-off between an abstract appeal to generality and analytical precision. The Marxian concepts of exploitation and class may be inadequate to explain all forms of oppression, all social conflicts, and all group identities and cleavages that characterise modern economies. But this is not a shortcoming: they are not meant to subsume everything that is relevant in capitalism. They identify specific, but fundamental, phenomena that help us understand certain important aspects of social reality.

According to Folbre (2020, 455; 2021, 257), however, the narrow focus of Marxian theories on such concepts is explained by an even more fundamental theoretical problem, namely a reductionist view that equates the economy with capitalism. She proposes “an expanded definition of ‘the economy’ that extends beyond commodity production, which in turn points toward a definition of exploitation that facilitates attention to its complex interactive forms” (Folbre 2020, 452). This is the key theoretical

move, and the fundamental underpinning of Folbre's analysis: it is the shift in theoretical focus from capitalism to 'the economy' that justifies the move away from the Marxian concepts of exploitation and class.

In the previous sections, we have defended the specific analytical relevance of such concepts in the analysis of capitalism. The point is not to identify a hierarchy of wrongs based on their badness. Capitalist exploitation is not definitionally worse than slavery, and patriarchal institutions are not definitionally worse than colonialism. The point, rather, is to identify the right conceptual tools for the problem at hand. The Marxian concepts of exploitation and class do not capture all features of modern economies, but they are the right tools to understand capitalism, and more generally the relation between property rights and relations of production.

But this defence is moot if one believes, as Folbre does, that a focus on capitalism as the object of analysis is excessively narrow, if not positively misleading. For a focus on capitalist institutions and the 'logic of capital' implies, according to Folbre, the neglect or at least the downplaying of the relevance of race or gender.⁹

From this perspective, a focus on capitalism as the object of analysis makes it difficult to understand the intersectional logic of contradictory group interests, which can only be analysed if one adopts a more comprehensive view of the economy, and of production. "The concept of 'production' can be widened to include both 'reproduction' defined as the production, development and maintenance of human capabilities—and 'social reproduction'—defined as the production, development and maintenance of social groups" (Folbre 2020, 455).¹⁰

As important as the spheres of reproduction and social reproduction may be, it is again unclear that much is gained in terms of analytical power and theoretical clarity by bundling all these phenomena together under the umbrella of 'the economy'.

On the one hand, this move does not allow one to construct an approach that generalises (some aspects of) Marxian theory. In Marxian theory, production, reproduction, and social reproduction are fundamentally distinct: they are governed by different laws and agents interact in these spheres in very different ways. Contrary to Folbre's claims, to obscure the

⁹ "David Harvey notes, for instance, that capitalism is permeated with race and gender oppression, but that the 'logic of capital' is not affected by them. He makes no mention of any 'logic' of race or of gender" (Folbre 2021, 74).

¹⁰ In Folbre (2021, 20), the definition of economic activities is further expanded by including "appropriation (such as theft and war)".

distinctions between capitalism and, say, patriarchy is fundamentally extraneous to a Marxist theoretical project. For Marxists it is at best conceptually misleading to call everything a productive, or economic activity. An economy without the clergy remains capitalist, an economy without the proletariat is not.

Indeed, it is unclear what remains distinctively Marxist in the general approach outlined by Folbre. She lists three features of Marxian social theory that her approach builds on: an explanation of group-based economic inequalities focusing on how strong groups can exploit weak groups, with consequences for the individuals within them; an explanation of why people may voluntarily consent to exploitation due to structural constraints; and the emphasis on the potential for collective action to transform such structural constraints. None of these features, individually or even collectively, are distinctively Marxist.

In contrast, the approach she proposes is congenial to neoclassical economic theory, in which production, reproduction, and social reproduction can all be subsumed under the term ‘economics’. This is especially evident today, given the developments in the discipline which have led to a significant widening of the scope of the neoclassical approach to a range of phenomena outside traditional disciplinary boundaries. But it follows directly from the classic definition of economics as “a science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” (Robbins 1932, 15). Observe that nothing in this definition implies per se an individualist focus, or the neglect of social conflicts. The fact that in mainstream analyses parental activities are often not explicitly and fully evaluated (Folbre 2021, 88ff) is a matter of prejudice, not the product of a theoretical barrier.

On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, one is led again to wonder whether obliterating the fundamental differences between social phenomena obscures more than it enlightens. True, “the similarities among different forms of authoritarian hierarchy provide some clues to their coevolution” (Folbre 2021, 129). But such similarities are arguably rather superficial. One should not lose sight of the fact that production, reproduction, and social reproduction—and the authoritarian hierarchies that emerge in these spheres—are essentially distinct and no obvious relations exist between them. As Folbre herself acknowledges, “reproduction and social reproduction have particularly important implications for the evolution of patriarchal institutions that long predate capitalism” (Folbre 2020, 455). After all, “the production and maintenance of human

capabilities is a necessary—and costly—aspect of *all* economic systems” (Folbre 2021, 82–83; emphasis added). Politically, the struggle against capitalism is different from the struggle against patriarchy, even if the ultimate aim should be the removal of all structures of oppression and domination.

To return again to our metaphor, crimes against property are not the same as crimes against the person and it is not theoretically insightful to insist that they be bundled together in a more ‘general’ approach to criminality as a whole. They are different phenomena that require different analytical tools, as well as different solutions. Once this is acknowledged, then it follows that the distinction between theft and blackmail is important: it is not that one crime is more alarming, or a more severe offence, than the other. Rather, if the aim is to understand offences against property, then one should focus on theft and ignore blackmail, even if ultimately the aim should be to reduce criminality in general.

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