

2006

Fragments of Development, by Suzanne Bergeron and
*A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy:
Integrating Productive, Reproductive, and Virtual
Economies*, by V. Spike Peterson

Drucilla K. Barker

University of South Carolina - Columbia, barkerdk@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/wost_facpub



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Signs*, Volume 31, Issue 4, 2006, pages 1143-1149.

<http://www.signs.rutgers.edu/>

© 2006 by University of Chicago Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the Women's and Gender Studies, Program of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Book Reviews

Fragments of Development: Nation, Gender, and the Space of Modernity. By Suzanne Bergeron. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy: Integrating Reproductive, Productive, and Virtual Economies. By V. Spike Peterson. London: Routledge, 2003.

Drucilla K. Barker, Hollins University

Postpositivist approaches to feminist social research are enthusiastically embraced by some and vigorously resisted by others. In the middle are those who want to understand how such approaches can make a difference to their research projects. The feminist, postpositivist readings of globalization by V. Spike Peterson and of economic development discourse by Suzanne Bergeron provide answers to that question. Their work demonstrates the significance of rejecting the notion that the material conditions of economic and political life are radically separate from their ideological and cultural representations in favor of an analytic that recognizes that the material, the cultural, and the symbolic are mutually constituted. For both authors, theory, whether feminist, economic, or political, is never disengaged from politics, power, and culture but, rather, thoroughly implicated within it. Thus, their work is interdisciplinary, drawing on economics, feminist theory, international political economy, international relations, and social theory.

Fragments of Development: Nation, Gender, and the Space of Modernity, by Bergeron, examines the construction of the national economy as an imagined collective of cohesive and shared economic interests amenable to control and manipulation by economic experts. Bergeron's book is important because mainstream economics is one of the last bastions of modernism in the social sciences. Perhaps the majority of economists, both mainstream and heterodox, believe that their models mirror economic reality, and their debates are concerned with which is the most

Permission to reprint a book review printed in this section may be obtained only from the author(s).

accurate representation. Bergeron's work argues, however, that rather than mirroring reality, the economic discourse partially constitutes its objects of inquiry. Understanding economic metaphors, concepts, and models as constitutive rather than referential facilitates examinations of the "social, political, and cultural processes of representation" (2). Such an understanding is important if progressive counternarratives are to avoid reproducing the very social processes and politics of knowledge that they are challenging. Although specifically concerned with economic development as a discourse, her interdisciplinary analysis has far-reaching implications and will be of interest to any social researchers interested in global political economy.

Bergeron begins by tracing the emergence of development as a field from its genesis in the breakup of the colonial empires following World War II. Liberals, socialists, and nationalist leaders all conceived of development as a process of national economic growth aided by the state and guided by the expert knowledge of economists.¹ Although development theory was based on the experiences of Europe, it was assumed that the traditional, agricultural economies of the third world would follow the same path and become modern, industrialized economies. The promise of development did not, however, match the results, and much of the third world remained mired in poverty. During the 1960s a group of scholars, referred to as the Latin American dependency school, challenged the prevailing view. They argued that the problem of underdevelopment was caused by capitalist processes that impoverished the global South through unfair trading agreements and financial practices.

Bergeron argues that although the dependency theorists called attention to international economic processes and power relations, they nonetheless reinscribed the centrality of the nation-state in their policy prescriptions and accepted the development/underdevelopment dualism in which Europe is the rational, orderly subject and the global South the chaotic, unruly Other. By failing to challenge the gendered, Eurocentric narratives of rationality and control, the dependency theorists reinscribed the very narratives of modernization and progress they were seeking to displace.

By the 1980s the notion that economic development could be furthered by state-led planning was replaced by the notion that the state itself was a constraint on economic development. The metaphor of the nation as an imagined community of shared interests, amenable to manipulation

¹ She is using the term *liberal* in the political economy sense to denote a philosophy based on a belief in the efficacy of free markets.

through expert knowledge, remained intact, albeit in a slightly changed form as governments all over the global South implemented structural adjustment policies (SAPs). The SAPs are based on mathematical models (again conceiving of the national economy as a legible, knowable object), and these models position the economist (or other appropriately trained mathematical adept) outside the subject of inquiry. This privileged gaze from everywhere and nowhere fosters the illusion that the results are objective, value free, and separate from power interests. Moreover, since the models assume that national economies are discreet objects peopled with homogenous, rational “economic agents” pursuing their own self-interest, the differential effects of structural adjustment are effectively obscured. And ironically, even though the ideology of free markets downplays the role of the state, the state is the necessary apparatus through which adjustment policies are implemented and enforced.

Neoliberalist and feminist accounts provide two significant critiques of the economic effects of SAPs. Bergeron argues that while neoliberalists take issues of class difference and social conflict seriously, they nonetheless embody many aspects of the discourse of expertise, take the national economy as the appropriate object of study and intervention, and implicitly assume that the less developed countries need the help of international development experts. These narrow economic assumptions reduce the range of policy alternatives and foreclose examinations of the ways in which cultural, political, and economic forces intersect and disrupt otherwise orderly outcomes. Moreover, gender is conspicuously marginalized in these accounts.

Feminist economists, however, argue that analyses that fail to account for gender are biased and incomplete. Taking gender seriously will produce more accurate models of the economy and hence lead to policies that will improve women’s lives. Like the other critical accounts discussed here, this account remains inscribed within the disciplinary boundaries of economics. This circumscribes its critical potential, reproduces the development tropes of modernity/tradition and developed/underdeveloped, and “increases the power of economic analysts even as it diminishes the power of social movements and other alternatives” (139).

Bergeron concludes her book with a brief discussion of the discursive construction of the global economy. She shows that the globalization literature ignores gender, regardless of whether it treats globalization as an irresistible force that can be countered only by global resistance movements or assumes that the logic of global capital leaves room for the nation-state to protect its citizens against the excesses of globalization. This omission is being addressed by feminist scholars, and Bergeron briefly

summarizes some of the emerging feminist literature that explicitly seeks to not reproduce global imperatives or national management scripts. Peterson's book, *A Critical Rewriting of Global Political Economy: Integrating Reproductive, Productive, and Virtual Economies*, is in this new tradition.²

Peterson critically rewrites global political economy in a way that facilitates the mapping of identities and culture in relation to conventional economic phenomena and denaturalizes the cultural codes that provide the foundation for the acceptance of the uneven and unjust effects of global capitalism. To do so she develops a "triad analytics" that posits identities, meaning systems, and social practices/institutions as coconstituting dimensions of social reality. She calls this approach interpretivism and applies it to her alternative framing of global political economy in terms of reproductive, productive, and virtual (RPV) economies. The RPV framework understands the three economies as mutually constituted sites through which power operates. In addition to familiar economic exchanges—of goods, services, information, and money—these economies are sites where identities and meaning systems are produced. Gender is central to these productions: it is a governing code that casts the subordinate—women as well as economically, racially, and culturally marginalized men—as Other and naturalizes hierarchy and domination. The symbolic, discursive, and cultural privileging of masculinity is key to naturalizing the power relations constitutive of the structural hierarchies embedded in globalization. It is not that gender oppression is the root of all other oppressions. Rather, it is that the denigration of the feminine "*produces even as it obscures vast inequalities of power, authority and resource distribution*" (28).

Globalization, according to Peterson, is characterized by the rise of information and communication technologies that have made possible the emergence of global financial markets and the growth in informal and flexible work arrangements. Her discussions of the productive and reproductive economies show that flexible and informal work arrangements depend on feminized labor empirically and conceptually.³ Women make up the majority of workers in both global production networks and the

² Given the closeness of the publication dates and length of time in production, it could not have been included in Bergeron's summary, although Peterson's earlier work is cited.

³ The productive economy is the formal economy where wages and salaries are determined and goods and services are produced and exchanged. The reproductive economy is the site of social reproduction and informal economic activities such as domestic work, home work, and sex work.

informal sector, and cultural ideologies regarding gender, work, and families naturalize inferior working conditions and constrain the efforts of workers—both women and men—to change those conditions. Limited employment opportunities, economic vulnerability, and responsibility for the welfare of families combine to make it difficult for workers, especially poor women, to avoid devalorized work, and this reproduces the identities and structural hierarchies of gender, race, class, and nation on which global capital depends. As a result of these global processes, employment has become more and more polarized, with relatively few valorized workers possessing the requisite informational, technical, and knowledge-based skills on the top of the hierarchy (the majority of whom are elite men in the industrialized countries) and semiskilled or unskilled workers (the majority of whom are poor women, stigmatized minorities, and migrant laborers) at the bottom. By virtue of their participation in the virtual economy, those on the top have the power to make the rules, to determine whose interests are served, and to shape the dominant cultural coding of valued economic practices.

The discussion of the virtual economy, where money, information, and signs are digitally coded and instantaneously exchanged across frictionless space, is perhaps the most innovative and ambitious section of the book. It highlights the increasing importance of symbols and signs in constituting power relations in the global political economy. Although most people participate in this economy through consumption, saving, and investment, power is wielded by elites in control of financial, informational, and media activities. They are able to shape the dominant cultural coding of valued economic practices. In this era of global finance, the value of money and other commodities is becoming increasingly distant from material economic conditions. Value is subjective and linked to “shared perceptions, information, assumptions and expectations” (126). The notion that the value of money, or of any other commodity, is subjective is not a new idea in either economics or political economy. But Peterson’s feminist interpretive analysis of it is. She argues that “value is determined not by any inherent measure of labor inputs or material needs but by reference to positioning with a *system* of signs/values” (117). Gender is a crucial analytical category for understanding the value of signs and the significance of cultural codes.

The book concludes with a critique of neoliberalism and a discussion of the significance of the rise of credit money, money whose value is loosed from the underlying economic fundamentals. In global financial markets, value is not created from production but from the buying and selling of financial assets, that is, by speculating on the price movements of stocks,

bonds, and other financial instruments. While financial speculation is not new, what is new is the growth in the “scale, complexity, and velocity of financial transactions” (164). Value depends on trust and expectations (perhaps it always has), but the rub here is to understand the ways in which trust and expectations are produced and exchanged in a globalized, hypermediated context. Peterson’s work provides us with a method for reaching this understanding.

Taken together, these two books make an important contribution to critical feminist understandings of economics, politics, and globalization. They provide answers to the question of relevance in postpositivist, feminist social theory. Peterson shows that mapping identities and ideologies in relation to conventional economic phenomena allows us to examine how the exchange of signs, information, and money in the virtual economy affects the valorization of activities in the productive and reproductive economies. Bergeron’s work shows that attention to representation and discourse is necessary in order to create social theory that does not reinscribe the social relations that it seeks to critique. These two books provide methodologies for further feminist social research that works toward a more just and equitable world. ■

Incest and Agency in Elizabeth’s England. By Maureen Quilligan. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

Helen Hackett, University College London

Maureen Quilligan has produced some of the most exciting and innovative criticism of Renaissance literature of recent decades, from *Milton’s Spenser* to her coeditorship of *Rewriting the Renaissance* to her inspiring essays on Mary Wroth.¹ In her new book she describes

¹ Maureen Quilligan, *Milton’s Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), “Lady Mary Wroth: Female Authority and the Family Romance,” in *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, ed. George M. Logan and Gordon Teskey (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 257–80, and “The Constant Subject: Instability and Female Authority in Wroth’s *Urania* Poems,” in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth Harvey and Katherine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 307–35; Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).