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Forum

»Most heterodox economists still think that feminist questions relate to ›special issues‹«
Interview with Professor Diane Elson *

You are well-known in Germany as an economist who has been also dealing with feminist issues for – compared to German scientists – a relatively long period of time, as in your article on market socialism published in 1990. How did you come across feminist subjects at such an early point in time – at least for (German) economists?

I am a part of the generation that came to feminism in the late 1960s. I began to do feminist research as a young researcher in the mid 1970s at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex in a group that studied the subordination of women in the process of development. I was also a member of the Conference of Socialist Economists, part of a group debating the interaction of Marxism and feminism.

Did you have academic teachers who raised such questions? Who were your academic teachers?

My teachers did not teach me feminist economics or Marxist economics, but they did teach me heterodox economics, especially Keynesian, structuralist and institutionalist economics. This provided a much broader education in economics than most students in economics departments get today, and was a good foundation for my subsequent work. I was a student at Oxford University and the teacher who influenced me most was Dr Keith Griffin who taught me development economics. He was a heterodox economist.

Economics still is one of the most male dominated sciences – regarding its exponents as well as the approaches and issues economics is dealing with. Do you have an explanation for this phenomenon?

Economics has become dominated by a narrow approach – that of mainstream neo-liberal economics, which prioritises proving mathematical theorems. Many women scholars who

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are interested in understanding how real economies work tend to want to use a wider range of conceptual frameworks and research methods. So they do research on economic issues in the context of other social sciences – geography, political science, public policy and sociology, for instance.

Do you think feminist economics is a separated branch of economics or is it – or rather can and should it be – an integral part of at least some of the economic approaches?

I think it is not possible to fully understand how economies work without paying attention to questions feminist economics addresses, such as the role of unpaid care work, and the implications of the differential social and economic power of women and men.

Do you think Keynesian – or more generally – »left« heterodox economics are more prone and also more open for feminist questions than neoliberalism?

Neoliberal economics has tools which can be used to investigate questions like discrimination in labour markets. But it is not open to recognising how inequalities in power permeate the ways that economies operate. I think heterodox economics provides a better starting point for addressing feminist questions. But most heterodox economists still think that feminist questions relate to »special issues« and don't need to be taken into account in understanding how economies work. So there is still a lot of work to do.

Neoliberalism opens opportunities for many women, even if this is at the expense of more inequality between women and men. This seems to hold true in particular for the developing and the emerging countries. What do you think about this conflict – if it is a conflict?

The strength of market-led capital accumulation is that it weakens pre-capitalist forms of gender inequality, particularly restrictions on women earning their own money. But at the same time, it creates new forms of capitalist gender inequality, which limit the gains for women. Women enter the labour market, but typically don't earn enough to be completely economically independent, and are subject to new insecurities. There always needs to be a struggle to ensure that women don't just become commodities.

Is there a common understanding of what feminist economics is? What is the core of feminist economics for you?

There are a variety of understandings. For me the core is an economics that recognised that all economies are permeated by gender. There may be domains which appear to be gender-neutral, like monetary policy and the government budget, but this is misleading. All domains of economics are permeated by gender relations; it is just that this is much more visible in some domains, like the labour market, than others.

Did Mr Livingstone introduce gender sensitive budgeting when he became Mayor in London?

He didn't introduce something labelled »gender sensitive budgeting« but he did introduce changes in resource allocation that are beneficial to women – such as charging for private cars to enter central London and using the money to improve public transport. So he has done some gender sensitive budgeting in practice, if not in theory. It is important

to focus on the real changes that we want to see made. Gender budgeting is a tool, not an end in itself.

You are one of the leading and most renowned economists worldwide specialising in gender sensitive budgeting. The concept has its roots in development economics and was first applied in developing countries or countries in transition – for example South Africa. Why is that so, and is it possible to directly transfer these experiences to the industrialised countries?

The first country to introduce gender sensitive budgeting was actually not South Africa, but Australia, in the mid 1980s. South Africa learned from Australia, as did the UK Women's Budget group, which was formed in 1989. I think that gender sensitive budgeting encompasses a variety of ideas, tools and procedures which always need to be adapted to particular circumstances. It is never possible to directly transfer experiences from one location to another. But it is possible to learn a lot from experiences in other countries. Also, there are two important principles that underlie gender sensitive budgeting that are applicable internationally: that policy and resource allocation should take into account the implications for unpaid work as well as paid work; and that households should not be treated as units in which all resources are equally pooled and shared – inequalities within households need to be recognised, as well as inequalities between households.

What can and should be done to promote gender budgeting in Europe? What should the general thrust of gender sensitive budgeting in Europe be – also compared to (and maybe in contrast to) developing countries?

An important way of promoting gender sensitive budgeting in Europe is to share ideas and experiences. There are now a large number of such experiences, as gender budgeting initiatives are under way in a wide variety of European countries. Sometimes the initiatives are led by women's organisations, and sometimes by governments. Sometimes both women's organisations and governments are involved. A network on gender sensitive budgeting in Europe is being developed by the European chapter of the International Association for Feminist Economics. Tax and welfare benefits tend to be more important issues in Europe, whereas in many developing countries, basic services are more important.

In the last years German Keynesians often take Great Britain and the US as positive examples for economic policy. This mainly refers to fiscal policy: to accept even large deficits in an economic downturn instead of strictly applying the narrow EU deficit criteria. What do you see as positive aspects of British economic policy and where should we be sceptical? Which are in your opinion Germany's most striking economic problems, and what should be done about them?

I think the rules under which the Eurozone countries and the European Central Bank are supposed to operate are deflationary, and make it harder to address gender inequalities. The macroeconomic policy rules adopted by the Labour government are better than those in the Eurozone. But I am critical of the policies of deregulation, privatisation and commercialisation of the public sector. I don't know a lot about the German economy – but 5 million unemployed sounds like a major problem. I think there probably do have to be some reforms of labour markets and welfare benefits, but it is important not to de-

regulate the labour market to the extent that has been done in UK. I would say changing the Eurozone rules for macroeconomic policy is a priority. Of course, in the longer run, I would like to see more profound changes in all European economies. We need to find ways of creating a new, progressive, synthesis between individual and collective social and economic rights that will enable us to democratise our economies.

The interview was conducted by Sabine Reiner in January 2005.

Selected publications of Diane Elson:

Male Bias in the Development Process (ed.), Manchester: Manchester University Press 1995 • Special Issues of World Development on Gender, Adjustment and Macroeconomics (co-ed.) 1995, 2000 • UNIFEM Report on Progress of the World's Women, 2000 • Socializing Markets, Not Market Socialism, in: Socialist Register 1999/2000 • The International Financial Architecture – A View from the Kitchen, in: Femina Politica – Zeitschrift für feministische Politik-Wissenschaft 2002 • Human Rights and Corporate Profits: the Case of the UN Global Compact, in: Beneria, Lourdes/Bisnath, Savitri (eds.), Global Tensions: Challenges and Opportunities in the World Economy, London: Routledge 2004

Mehr Beschäftigung durch Arbeitszeitverlängerung?

*Ewald Walterskirchen**

Zur politischen Diskussion

Mit seinem Buch »Ist Deutschland noch zu retten?« hat ifo-Präsident Hans-Werner Sinn die Diskussion um eine Verlängerung der Arbeitszeit beflügelt (vgl. Sinn 2003). Er forderte die Wiedereinführung der 42-Stunden-Woche ohne Lohnausgleich. Der Präsident des Deutschen Instituts für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW) Klaus Zimmermann ergänzte, man könnte auch mal die Arbeitszeit auf 50 Stunden erhöhen. Der deutsche Sachverständigenrat zur Begutachtung der gesamtwirtschaftlichen Entwicklung sekundierte und schrieb in seinem jüngsten Gutachten ein Plädoyer für eine Arbeitszeitverlängerung (vgl. Sachverständigenrat 2004). Unternehmerverbände und PolitikerInnen überboten sich in immer neuen Forderungen zur Verlängerung der Wochenarbeitszeit und zum Abbau von Urlaubs- und Feiertagen. In einigen deutschen Bundesländern wurde die Arbeitszeit der öffentlich Bediensteten auf bis zu 42 Stunden erhöht. Die Gewerkschaften setzten

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