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Introduction to Special Issue of *Social Politics*: “Gender, Class, and Capitalism”

Introduction

“Restructuring” has emerged as one of the key concepts of contemporary social science, as scholars attempt to make sense of profound transformations in political economies, welfare states, families, and communities. Many of these shifts are associated with changing gender relations, which figure as both cause and consequence. Women workers have emerged as key actors in this changing and ever more global political economy: Productivity gains, sustainable pension systems, and the quality and size of the future labor forces depend on women’s decisions about employment, childbearing, and childrearing—to say nothing of their potential as an electoral bloc. Much recent attention focuses in particular on “work–family reconciliation.” Most governments in the developed world are committed to enhancing or sustaining women’s employment, and feminist analysts have focused on gender regimes that differ in the public support given to women’s employment as key to understanding variations in gender equality. This focus in the feminist literature has resulted in a tendency to ascribe differences in gender equality to differences in social policy frameworks, which is to say, politics. But it has become clear that there is no straightforward link between women’s employment, the social policies that support it, and gender equality.

Meanwhile, new approaches in comparative political economy give greater primacy to the competitive demands of the new economy than did earlier welfare state approaches that, like the feminist literature, focused more on the decisive role of politics. Varieties of capitalism (VOC), the analytic approach pioneered by Peter Hall and David Soskice, has emerged as a leading contender in explaining cross-nationally varying and enduring trajectories of development, focusing on the behavior of firms and distinguishing between liberal market economies and coordinated market economies. (Thus it complements other work, such as Esping-Andersen's, in identifying long-lasting national patterns while offering a distinctive view of the causes of regime characteristics.) Of particular concern to scholars in this area are the competitive prospects of the complementary institutions of the coordinated market economies, with low wage dispersion and generous welfare states in the context of globalization and the increasing dominance of the Anglo-American model of capitalism. When extended to the issue of gender inequality, as in the contributions to this special issue of *Social Politics*, this approach is promising in some respects and runs against the grain of feminist work in other respects. For example, in highlighting the significance of an economy's coordination mechanisms and the preferences of its employers, it assumes that choices about investments in skill formation are rational. Yet extensive scholarship on occupational sex segregation and gendered employment choices shows, for example, how evaluations of skill depend importantly on gender and how women's employment options are socially constrained by prior decisions about their responsibility for housework and care.

In short, gender scholars downplay the economy in political economy, but political economists downplay gender's structuring role, and gloss over the gendered stakes both in politics and in economic choices. Although gender scholars' notions of reconciling employment and family is better informed by understandings of the broader context of gender relations than is that of mainstream political economists, one can make the case that questions of support to women's employment must be more strongly linked to the broader economic context and to more robust notions of equality. To help bridge this divide, and building on a conference held at Northwestern University in the fall of 2003 on the same topic, we invited debate for this special issue on the familiar theme of comparative differences in gender inequality from a new vantage point, the VOC perspective.

Because explaining cross-national variation in gender inequality is a notoriously vexed endeavor, we should emphasize at the outset that we do not enter into this debate with the expectation that the VOC and related perspectives can provide a unified framework for

explaining all dimensions of gender inequality. We therefore limit our focus in this issue to gendered divisions of labor, primarily in paid labor (i.e., occupational gender segregation) but also in the household. We add to this an interest in how gendered divisions of labor are shaped by social divisions of other kinds. Whereas much feminist work has focused on the relationship between race and gender, we focus here on the relatively understudied relationship between class and gender. As will become clear, this stems in part from the central place that issues of income distribution and redistribution hold in the VOC model. The main thrust of the VOC approach, however, is to contrast patterns of gender inequality with those of class inequality while maintaining an analytical separation between the two. Although this is an important start in linking gender and class in a broader analysis of inequality, we seek a stronger analytical bridge, in which *intersections* of class and gender are considered (e.g., McCall 2001; O'Connor et al. 1999). One of our main objectives in this introduction, then, is to draw out the implications of the articles for understanding class inequalities among women and class differences in the nature and patterns of gender inequality.

In building the argument and weighing the evidence in favor of a VOC-type approach to understanding gendered divisions of labor and how these interact with structures of class inequality, we consider the alternative feminist explanations already mentioned. In addition to explanations that emphasize the role of social policy or welfare state regimes in affecting gender inequalities in employment, we consider explanations that downplay the role of formal (or at least nationally specific) institutions. Instead, such approaches explain occupational segregation, as well as the gendered aspects of skills systems, in terms of the relatively universal processes of gender socialization and female devaluation (though by “universal” we do not mean to imply that these processes affect all women and men in the same ways). Maria Charles and Paula England, for example, place greater emphasis on the remarkable degree of similarity across countries in the level and character of occupational segregation by sex and attribute much of that similarity to gendered cultural norms. Changes in occupational segregation are also seen as the result of relatively universal transformations, such as the transition to postindustrialism and the dramatic increase in women’s labor force participation. One way to reconcile this approach with the VOC approach is to see the universalist perspective as concerned primarily with the causes of a relatively high and stable *mean* level of occupational sex segregation, whereas the more institutionalist perspective is concerned with the causes of *variation* around that mean level. Given our focus on VOC, we begin with the latter.

Institutionalist Perspectives

In contrast to earlier perspectives on the welfare state in which politics served as a counterweight to market forces (Esping-Anderesen 1985; Huber and Stephens 2001; Korpi 1989), the VOC perspective reinterprets the role of the welfare state as a potentially complementary force in the development of distinct national economic strategies with comparative advantages, or what are called welfare production regimes. The lynchpin of each regime is the skills profile that is required to sustain a particular product market strategy. Social policies are complementary if they structure the incentives of individuals and employers in such a way as to deliver the skills profile that is needed. For example, if workers are to invest in firm-specific skills in countries where the product market strategy requires them, they ought to support social policies that protect against the limited value of their skills in the external labor market when they are laid off. In contrast, in countries that rely on general skills profiles, presumably workers can find new work more readily, eliminating the need for extensive employment and wage protection policies (for further details and elaborations, see contributors as well as Estévez-Abe et al. 2001). Because the external labor market functions relatively well, countries with this latter regime are referred to as liberal market economies (LMEs); the United States is the prototypical example. In the former regime, where firm-specific skills predominate, more coordination is required among workers, employers, and the state to train, match, and protect workers; they are therefore referred to as coordinated market economies (CMEs). A wide range of countries fall into this category, including Sweden, Germany, and Japan.

Not incidentally, each regime is associated with a different structure of inequality. As in the early welfare state regimes literature, the VOC literature's emphasis is on the implications of each regime for structures of class inequality. In this issue, Margarita Estévez-Abe's and Iversen, Rosenbluth, and Soskice's contribution to the VOC perspective is to delineate the gendered aspects of inequality, adding both to the VOC perspective and to feminist perspectives on the sources of cross-national variation in gender inequality. Specifically, whereas specific-skills regimes tend to reduce disparities among workers based on education and training, they tend to exacerbate disparities based on the gendered division of labor, in the realms of both paid work (Estévez-Abe) and household work (Iversen et al.). General-skills countries, on the other hand, foster greater class disparities and weaker gender disparities. We note here that this argument implies an understanding of class

and gender inequality as separate rather than intersecting structures of inequality.

The difference in gender outcomes between the two regimes is attributed to the difference in skill regimes. Because turnover is more costly for employers who invest in firm-specific training, a specific-skills regime penalizes interruptions from work more than a general skills regime does. Women bear the brunt of this penalty because their interruptions from work for family reasons are more predictable than are men's. Thus employers rationally discriminate against women in hiring, training, and promotion, and this in turn limits the incentives for women to invest in specific labor market skills and increases the incentives to invest in general skills and to specialize in family work. The role of social policy in facilitating women's employment in a skills-specific regime is to provide child care—rather than generous parental leaves, which are disproportionately taken up by mothers—so that the employment of mothers is as continuous as that of fathers, or to offer less discriminatory employment in the public sector. By implication, public sector and social policy supports for women's employment in general skills regimes is less imperative, as it is for investments in firm-specific training. Paradoxically, as Iversen and colleagues argue, support for such social policies among women is lower in specific skills regimes because of women's greater investment in family work and their lesser risk of family dissolution (i.e., divorce). In other words, dependency breeds dependency. In such an environment, states would have to work against popular sentiment (though an important question is how strong and influential such sentiment is) in adopting policies that shift women's incentives and opportunities in favor of employment, assuming women's opportunity for economic independence is seen as an important goal among political elites.

The tight integration and logical interdependence of economic and political institutions is readily apparent from this brief summary of the VOC perspective. Nationally specific economic institutions are an important filter through which social policies are formulated in accordance with congruent economic interests or overriding political interests, though the VOC emphasis is decidedly on the former, perhaps too much so in our opinion. Kimberly Morgan's analysis of child care policy paints a more complicated picture. Although she concurs with the VOC inclination to foreground labor market constraints on social policy formation, she places less emphasis on skills specificity as an exogenous factor and more on wage-setting structures and institutions that are differentially articulated in the political realm across VOC regimes as well as *within* them. An unequal wage structure in the United States creates the conditions for an affordable

private market in child care because of low wages at the bottom for child care workers and high wages at the top for consumers of child care. In CMEs, higher median wages and stronger regulations make a private market for child care unaffordable unless it is heavily subsidized. Some CMEs choose to opt out of the provision of child care altogether (e.g., Germany and Austria), whereas others increasingly allow for more private, low-cost family-based care, particularly in response to the fiscal constraints of the welfare state that have arisen at the same time of women's expanding employment. In Sweden, strong and centralized unions have thus far limited subsidies to private family care, whereas in France, weak and fragmented unions have been unable to do so (though in the VOC typology of countries, France is considered a mixed case).

Morgan, therefore, leans somewhat back in the direction of politics against markets while at the same time illustrating the larger point of this special issue, that labor market structures and economic institutions exert an important influence over the perceived need and political support for social policies typically deemed central to women's economic equality. To push the argument farther than perhaps she would, we suggest that Morgan's emphasis on wage structures and wage institutions brings us closer to an intersectional account of gender and class inequality than is currently present in VOC-type analyses. Whereas the VOC perspective sees gender disparities as more limited in LMEs, Morgan's analysis implies that women who work in the low-wage sectors of the human services do not benefit in absolute terms from a general skills economy as much as women in high-wage sectors do. Moreover, this may result in class differences in support for social policies among women. Conversely, women working in nonmanagerial occupations in social service industries most likely benefit more than women in managerial occupations in CMEs, because high-skilled women would probably fetch higher earnings in a less discriminatory private sector. This is implied in the VOC perspective on class inequality in LMEs, which presumably applies to class inequalities among both men and women, but class differences are then largely neglected in the analysis of gender disparities. Perhaps these inconsistencies are also the result of the VOC's emphasis on divisions of labor rather than gender wage disparities, which tend to be higher in LME's.

Morgan is not alone among contributors in highlighting economic factors other than skills-specificity and of identifying variation within welfare production regime types, thus raising the question of how the VOC theoretical approach holds up to empirical scrutiny. Estévez-Abe's empirical analysis is preliminary but it points to subgroups within LMEs (the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) and CMEs

(Sweden and Finland) in which occupational sex segregation is stronger than would be expected based on the original model's prediction of less segregation in LMEs. The link, she suggests, is "the importance of a political factor, the strength of the labor movement, which the VOC literature downplays. Interestingly, strong unions characterized both the Scandinavian subgroup and the Commonwealth subgroup." Nevertheless, she also provides evidence that supports the model: the United States and Canada have less vertical segregation (in the form of a greater percentage of women in private sector managerial occupations) than other countries and less male-dominant occupations. Iverson and colleagues provide the most systematic test of the VOC model using both microdata and macrodata and find significant positive effects of skills specificity on the gender division of labor and divorce. However, they do not test the effects of skill-specificity against other macro-level factors, such as unionization or industrial composition. These analyses are promising, however, and open up new questions for empirical researchers interested in the intersecting dynamics of class and gender inequality.

Universalist Perspectives

As some may have already observed, at its core the VOC perspective relies on a familiar economic theory of discrimination called statistical discrimination, which in turn relies on a familiar economic theory of the family by Gary Becker. Even though VOC embeds these microeconomic theories in a cross-national institutional framework, arguing that specific skills regimes foster the gender division of labor and family-based gender discrimination more than general skills regimes do, this core aspect of the VOC perspective must be evaluated, both theoretically and empirically. Paula England's and Maria Charles's contributions focus on this issue.

According to the theory of statistical discrimination, employers can save on the costs of searching for productive workers by using the social characteristics of applicants as a signal for their productivity and thus selecting individuals from groups that are believed to be more productive on average. If women exit the labor force more often than men to care for their families, then on average they will be deemed less productive, resulting in employer preferences for men. According to Becker's theory of the family and later extensions, women respond by specializing in unpaid household labor or in female-dominated occupations that accommodate their domestic labor. This in turn results in a gender division of labor in the household and in the paid labor force.

A key point of contention is whether women's greater propensity to engage in family care and to be underrepresented in higher-paid male-dominant employment is a matter of choice, constraint, or choice within constraint. In the Becker model, the gender division of labor is economically rational because of women's comparative disadvantage in the labor market due to interruptions associated with childrearing, which are freely chosen. As England argues in a model that emphasizes constraint, gender norms and socialization are what structure the gender division of labor. On the supply side this occurs through the development of preferences for gender-appropriate kinds of work and on the demand side through employers' ideas of gender-appropriate work. In the Becker model, the consequence of the choice for motherhood is occupational segregation. In the latter model proposed by England, motherhood is one aspect of a wider range of gendered behavior and norms, all of which are treated differentially in the labor market, without economic rationale, to women's disadvantage. Thus England reviews a significant body of previous research, including her own influential contributions, that shows that occupational segregation and pay differences between male- and female-dominated occupations cannot be reduced to differences resulting from women's greater responsibility for family care. Most of her evidence, however, comes from the United States, the very place where VOC argues that family-based discrimination against women should be least prominent. Still, she cites some research on occupational segregation in other countries that corroborates her argument, including the work of Maria Charles and her colleagues.

Maria Charles is as well positioned as anyone to empirically evaluate the VOC theory of occupational segregation as her body of work in collaboration with others has focused precisely on the sources of cross-national variation in occupational segregation. She carefully specifies occupation-specific hypotheses that follow from the VOC model, a very fruitful approach that should be emulated in future empirical work. Although she sees sources of variation, to be discussed momentarily, Charles emphasizes the remarkable degree of similarity across countries in the kinds of work that men and women do and attributes this to the universal cultural norms of gender essentialism and male primacy. On the one hand there is pervasive horizontal segregation between manual (male) and nonmanual (female) occupations, arising from cultural norms of hegemonic femininity and masculinity. On the other hand, there is pervasive vertical segregation between high-paying and low-paying occupations within the manual and nonmanual segments (e.g., managers and secretaries) arising from norms of male authority. She compares the degree of female over/underrepresentation in eight major occupations across

groups of countries defined by skill specificity, unemployment protection, and family-friendly social policies and finds some notable differences consistent with the VOC model but within an overall pattern of segregation that is surprisingly similar.

The one area where Charles does see difference is structural in nature but also culturally reinforcing of gender-appropriate work norms. As countries develop according to a logic of postindustrialism, they increase their share of the kinds of nonmanual care and service occupations that tend to be female-dominated. This draws women into the labor market, which in turn increases the demand for (1) further female-dominated services to partially replace women's previously unpaid domestic labor and (2) work arrangements that accommodate women's childrearing responsibilities, such as part-time work. Altogether, these shifts reinforce the sex-segregating effects of gender ideologies, particularly the horizontal segregation between manual and nonmanual occupations associated with gender essentialism. Furthermore, new and growing low-status nonmanual occupations are typically filled by women with few skills and opportunities, creating pink-collar ghettos. By contrast, Charles argues, ideologies of male supremacy are less resistant to change. At the other end of the occupational hierarchy, then, growing support for ideologies of gender egalitarianism has resulted in greater vertical integration in the professions and management.

As with Morgan, we would like to push the argument farther than perhaps Charles would and suggest that embedded in Charles's analysis is an intersectional account of gender and class inequality that could deepen her own analysis as well as the VOC account of gender and class. Charles's analysis implies that women who work in the low-wage segments of the nonmanual sector do not benefit in absolute terms from a shift to postindustrialism as much as women in high-wage segments do. At the same time, she corroborates evidence provided by Estévez-Abe in showing that "women are better represented in managerial occupations in [general skills] labor markets and their representation among university graduates (at both the bachelor's and postgraduate levels) is considerably stronger in these systems." Taken together, one could infer that the class and occupation stratifying effects of postindustrialism *among women* are more pronounced in LMEs than in CMEs—a finding that is consistent with the pattern of class inequality predicted by the VOC model—and therefore that the gender equality of general skills economies is one that benefits women at the top more than women at the bottom. An interactional approach, combining skills regimes *and* postindustrialism, would provide a more systematic test of the relationship between economic structures and

institutions on the one hand and intersections of gender and class inequality on the other.

Directions for Future Research

Should one emphasize similarity or difference in gender divisions of labor across countries? If difference wins the day, what are the key sources of those differences? On the former question, we are persuaded by both perspectives. Strong gender segregating effects are embedded in durable cultural norms of gender-appropriate behavior that shape choices within a structure of constraint; yet at the same time, both gender and nongender specific political and economic institutions and policies can reinforce or mitigate these tendencies. On the second question—of identifying the key determinants of variation in gender divisions of labor—we are less confident in our ability to draw firm conclusions at this early stage in the research. Much of the evidence provided by the contributors is descriptive; that is, there is little formal testing of alternative explanations so that one can assess the comparative strength of wage-setting institutions, industrial composition, skills specificity, cultural norms and attitudes, public sector size, and social policy packages. Although the degrees of freedom needed for this kind of testing are limited by the small number of countries, more systematic comparisons along at least two or three of these dimensions should be an important goal for future research. In addition, we believe that an intersectional account of gender and class inequality would improve both universalist and institutionalist approaches, and we hope that future research will move in this direction. Finally, we and our contributors have said relatively little about *changes* in political, economic, gender, and class dynamics, a topic that should only add to the promising collaboration of comparative research on gender inequality and political economy that we see in this special issue of *Social Politics*.

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