



**POLITICISING THE PRODUCTIVE: SUBJECTIVITY, FEMINIST
LABOUR THOUGHT AND FOUCAULT**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the implications of Foucault's genealogical analyses and related commentary in political philosophy for the English speaking, academic, feminist literature about women and work. Although the field positively subverts the universal masculine subject of economic theory and policy, the thesis demonstrates that much feminist thought problematically retains a vision of the subject as defined by re/productive contribution. Foucault and those who share a Foucauldian approach have argued that conceptions of the subject as defined by productive contribution and reproductive drives have been, and continue to be, involved in the reproduction of the existing order of production. The thesis raises the concern that, in some of its central assertions and practices, feminist labour thought reproduces this kind of subject as universally and ahistorically 'true', and in doing so unknowingly participates in the production and circulation of the knowledges that support the social hierarchies, divisions and normative assumptions it attempts to challenge.

This argument is demonstrated in four parts which follow upon a summary of Foucault's middle period genealogies and a re-conceptualisation of feminist labour questions in light of them. The first part argues that the association of (emotional, domestic and familial) labours with the 'invisible' economic contributions of women within much feminist labour thought repeats normative meanings that are the product, and the means by which, women's work has been derided. Second, the subject frequently reproduced within feminist work and welfare thought does not undermine the market as the principle for social distribution, as feminist labour thinkers have sometimes asserted, but demands 'rights' and 'needs' that give the market a central role in the determination of value and security. Third, the subject of much feminist labour thought is sometimes imagined to be predisposed to the development of labour capacity or, alternatively, to find power, autonomy and freedom in material wealth and economic choice. This conception normalises lifetimes committed to the market and echoes a more widespread and immanent social drive towards the increased participation of the population in market-based production. Finally, the thesis argues that feminist critiques of comparable worth misunderstand the role that job evaluation plays in producing the normative conditions upon which occupational hierarchy depends. The debate about comparable worth does not prevent the reproduction of statements and practices that participate in the discipline of women at work.

In closing the thesis answers traditional labour feminist critiques of Foucault's work. Here I argue that an increased awareness of the conditions and possible effects of universalist assumptions about the subject offers feminist labour thinkers and practitioners more strategic and subversive responses to economic problems than current theoretical paradigms allow. It also encourages greater sensitivity to a diverse range of cultural positionings.