

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Conversations with GC Harcourt on Social Justice in the Face of Economic and Ecological Uncertainty

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### Abstract

In this article, I share insights from the conversations I have enjoyed with my father GC Harcourt on gender, social justice, and economic policy in the last years of his long and fruitful life. Our conversations reflected our overlapping but at times divergent responses to the disruptions caused by environmental, climate, health, economic, and political crises. The article reflects on our conversations around population, alternatives, the pervasiveness of racism in Australia, and the recurring questions of how to bring about change and how to continue despite political disappointments. The article teases out in a gentle way how my perspective, as a feminist political ecologist, diverged from GC Harcourt's views, and what our conversations together suggest as important challenges to overcome as we confront the current crises of modern capitalism.

**Keywords:** capitalism; economic policy; environment; gender; population; social justice

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### Introduction

In this article, I share insights from the conversations I have enjoyed with my father, GC Harcourt, on gender, social justice, and economic policy in the last years of his long and fruitful life. Our conversations reflected our overlapping but at times divergent responses to the disruptions caused by environmental, climate, health, economic, and political crises. We exchanged views aware of our different standpoints: GC Harcourt, as an economist actively engaged in policy debates since the mid-1950s and I as a feminist ecologist involved in social movements and international development advocacy since the late 1980s. Our conversations were, as anyone would expect who knew GC Harcourt, carried out with great respect and kindness but were also marked by our disciplinary, gender, and generational differences. The article teases out in a gentle way how my perspective, as a feminist political ecologist, diverged from GC Harcourt's views, and what our conversations together suggest as important to overcome as we confront the multiple crises of modern capitalism today.

In the following, I share the tenor of the recurring conversations I enjoyed with GC Harcourt as we debated issues of why does social injustice and the precarity of the world we saw around us continue, and what we could do about it as scholars and sometime activists. Over the years we discussed many topics, often determined by our shared admiration for public intellectuals whom we both regularly followed in *The Guardian Weekly*,

*New York Review of Books*, and the *London Review of Books*, as well as the biographies and novels we read and who influenced our academic and political engagements. With those rich and wonderful discussions in mind, which I miss dearly, I reflect here on some of the most pressing social and economic issues that were part of our regular conversations.

First, we were both concerned about the troubling issue of population – are we too many or are some of us too greedy? Second, we both looked for alternatives to capitalism but in different ways. One of our major disagreements was around how we saw growth. I was interested in the principles of the degrowth movement, whereas GC Harcourt embraced growth but with fair distribution policies managed through a just state. The third concern was around the pervasiveness of racism in Australia and the vital need for redress historically as well as in the present and future. This was a major personal preoccupation of GC Harcourt who, on his return to Australia in the last decade of his life, was deeply concerned about racialised violence. And lastly, there was the recurring question of how to bring about change and how to continue despite political disappointments.

### **The thorny issue of population**

One of the more intensive discussions I had with GC Harcourt was when I was invited to review Partha Dasgupta's book *Time and the Generations: Population Ethics for a Diminishing Planet* (2019). Given GC Harcourt's long intellectual and personal engagement with Dasgupta in Cambridge, I was keen to discuss Dasgupta's points of view with him, particularly as population is one of the most tabooed issues in development debates (Harcourt, 2020). Dasgupta's book asks what level of economic activity can our planet support and what does that imply for the optimal global population? This form of what he calls population ethics allows mathematical logic to arrive at an optimum population number. The book is in honour of Kenneth J. Arrow, a hero also of GC Harcourt, so we had much to discuss, including the contributions from some of the greats of economics – Robert Solow and Joseph Stiglitz as well as an essay by Dasgupta and his daughter Aisha (who works at UNFPA) on population in relation to inequalities and reproductive rights.

Dasgupta argues that proper awareness of the limitations of our biosphere should lead to a smaller optimum population and, as Dasgupta states, in this book he is 'just' trying to get the numbers right. The questions he asks around 'birth and death' touch economic demography, reproductive decision-making, and a host of other socio-ecological discourses. GC Harcourt and I both noted and questioned Dasgupta's assumption that neoclassical economics is the best way 'to study the population-consumption-environment nexus, in order to tell us how far we are today from where we probably should be' (Dasgupta, 2019: 218). Was this an 'imposition of a sort of conceptual apartheid' (Putnam & Walsh, 2009)? As Putnam puts it:

The world we inhabit when we describe the world for the purposes the economist is interested in – is not describable in 'value neutral' terms. Not without throwing away the most significant facts along with the 'value judgments' (2010: 295).

If we are to reach sustainability, then we require methodological pluralism. What I discussed with GC Harcourt is how to translate back to ordinary people what the economic modelling of real-world problems claims to tell. But, we agreed that reducing real-world questions about intergenerational fairness, population, and the Earth's carrying capacity into neoclassical mainstream economic models eludes the complexity and erases the position of the person producing the knowledge (Sasser, 2018). As GC Harcourt has often stated (see for example, GC Harcourt, 2014), it is crucial to recognise the values underlying economic methods, and how people see their applicability to the real world, particularly in relation to the appropriate policy measures which build on the underlying assumptions of those theoretical models.

Countering Dasgupta's arguments, we discussed how to consider environmental and intergenerational justice particularly around social reproduction. I define social reproduction here as 'intersecting complex of political-economic, socio-cultural, and material-environmental processes required to maintain everyday life and to sustain human cultures and communities on a daily basis and intergenerationally' (Di Chiro, 2015: 281).

The focus, then, should not be on the optimal numbers but on the lives of people on the economic margins whose environments are exploited and who are engaged in life and death battles. 'Birth and death' are then not only about states and markets but also about social processes and institutions which create communities and provide the social, economic, and ecological conditions that support human security and sustainability upon which, ultimately, all production, exchange and accumulation rest. In other words, environmental struggles are about fighting for and ensuring social reproduction (Di Chiro, 2008).

The deeply entangled relationships between population growth and environmental problems certainly need to be exposed, but the assumption that population growth is a threat to nature and the environment is not an immutable biological fact. Instead, it 'reflects long-standing debates among scientists, activists, academics, and policymakers working to define population problems, their impacts, and how to solve them' (Sasser, 2018:50).

Reflecting on our conversations on Dasgupta's text and my response to it, we both agreed that the issue is not population numbers as such, but how all of us can learn to live within our limits to stop ecological and social destruction (Kallis, 2019). The focus needs to be squarely on the lives of people on the margins whose environments are exploited and who are engaged in life and death battles. 'Birth and death' issues are about social processes and institutions which create communities and provide the social, economic, and ecological conditions that support human security and sustainability. I still strongly contend, and I am sure GC Harcourt would agree, that population is about reproductive justice but not only about individual women's reproductive rights and freedom of choice, wherever they are living, but also about social, economic, civic, and environmental goals.

These were not easy discussions. Population debates engage us on intensely emotional and personal levels. GC Harcourt had four children, a situation which he always described, with his characteristic humour, as the outcome of a successful familial strategy of planned balanced growth. It was a decision he and his wife could make in the 1960s, encouraged by the Australian Government who provided child benefits for mothers. Deciding to have children when I did in the 1990s was not about providing citizens for a nation, but about a personal feminist fight for the biological, technological, and economic choice to have children, and then for me, how to balance work and family life. Now 25e years later, the choice to have children is entangled in social and environmental responsibilities for our planet's future which diminish the possibility to speak of individual choice unaware of our collective responsibilities in the face of environmental destruction, and for many even in the richer countries, fearful futures.

### **Alternatives to capitalism**

Fearful futures are something we often discussed, particularly in relation to the wicked problem of capitalist exploitation. In a contribution to GC Harcourt's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations on 'The Future of Capitalism' organised in Cambridge by his students in 2011, I contributed a paper on alternatives to capitalism. I suggested there are possibilities: to live with and redefine capitalism aware of social and ecological limits and to see how to change our economic values to include care and respect for our families, communities, other knowledges, and cultures. The concept of living economies proposes that we

redesign our economies so that life is valued more than money and power resides in ordinary women and men who care for each other, their communities, and their natural environment. The challenge for the future is to build a broad platform for living economies or alternatives building up from community needs, which are inter-generational and gender aware, based on an ethics of care for the environment (Harcourt, 2014: 18–19).

GC Harcourt enjoyed the paper, and we continued to discuss the search for social justice and my approach towards alternative economic visions based on the values of ecological, gender, and social justice. We debated the responsibility for oneself and for human and non-human others and community livelihoods. In GC Harcourt's vision, it was about better and fairer policy, reorganising labour that allowed for social justice based on the principles of social democracy, decency, and honesty. He was true to his economic training and values, proudly in the Cambridge tradition. This was different from my messy questions around how to respect nature, racialised others, and values that differ from Eurocentric concerns with individuality. We had lively and respectful discussions about how democracy, sustainability, and the economy could operate differently in solidarity politics in communities where relationship building and care for each other is key. While not too sure about feminist political ecological concepts such as *socionature* (Nightingale, 2011), he certainly conceded that it was possible to move beyond capitalist logic.

For example, we were both admirers of Susan George who was a fellow of the Transnational Institute (TNI), a think tank founded in 1970s based in Amsterdam. GC Harcourt particularly admired George's contribution to the project of a green new deal and her call for an ecological Keynesian solution. We read and discussed her 2010 book which damns modern capitalism where: 'finance and the economy dictate a hugely unequal world where the most basic of all resources food and water are disappearing for hundreds of millions and the planet is mostly reduced to the status of an exploited quarry and rubbish tip, for these reasons we will continue to fight each other' (George, 2010: 1).

George sees finance and the economy, increasing poverty and inequality as a four-sided prison and argues that instead of finance determining the economy it should be the needs of the planet that determine our environmental, social, and financial behaviours. Her psychological insights into the reign of fear of losing jobs, losing houses, losing savings, losing the better life for our children, losing health care, and losing pensions in the West helped explained our pervasive sense of frustration and powerlessness. We agreed with George that even if there was not going to be a revolution, it was still important for citizens to convince the politicians that ecological and social transformation can pay off politically in a series of alliances. For her 'going green' requires social justice, more equality, and more trust as well as institutions that contribute to both. George's grand narrative appealed strongly to GC Harcourt, as did her conviction that there is enough for all, and what is required is better distribution, more equal relations, and better democracy. I also agreed that 'going green', being more socially aware, using technologies in a more savvy, less greedy way, putting care, family, and wellbeing should be at the centre of modern (Western) life.

But where we agreed less was on feminist imaginaries for alternatives to capitalism.

Deep feminist probing into the masculine bias that informs capitalism with a profound critique of capitalist practice and values was not something GC Harcourt could easily accept, though he was always open to listen. As a feminist, I was seeking to challenge masculine bias and patriarchal values that inform women's experiences of their lived body, the local economy, and the environment and which, to my mind, feature in economic thinking and practice. My feminist approach to economics and how it differed from his, we often discussed, and mostly agreed to disagree.

I recall one major conversation we had around the work of US economist Nancy Folbre whose work points to the masculine bias in economics which leads to economic theory

ignoring social reproduction, care, and gender relations as key components to the workings of capitalism. A man of his generation GC Harcourt could not fully agree that male bias was at the heart of economic thinking and practice. Folbre's (2010) book *Greed, lust and gender: a history of economic ideas* brings women's work, sexuality, and feminism into the centre of the history of economic ideas. She maps out the link between the evolution of patriarchal capitalism and the larger relationship between production and reproduction. Folbre challenges standard economic narratives of economics as neutral. She highlights how the history of the economics discipline was shaped by the patriarchal politics of UK, France, and US capitalism over three centuries of capitalist development. She argues that gendered desires, greed, and want have driven capitalism in its glorification of the pursuit of individual self-interest, especially for men, and sees economic progress as founded on a moral double standard for men and women.

Folbre argues that the cultural legitimization of selfish pursuits has gone further than the father of economists Adam Smith would have ever imagined, something that GC Harcourt did agree with. But he did not necessarily agree that that social reproduction is central to economic theory and practice, nor did he accept that women continue to assume most of the costs and risks of family care, through their fear of consequences for the family if they do not, or that men simply would not pull their weight. Feminists have shown how the value generated by women's care work, paid and unpaid, is crucial for the workings of capitalism. They have demonstrated the difficulty of replacing acceptance of this exploitation with new forms of economic thinking, and consequently with new policy that recognises and rewards social reproductive work (Fraser, 2016). We have discussed further the crisis of social reproduction (Barca, 2020; Fraser, 2016) and how to value care as life-sustaining labour (Tronto, 2015) and replace efficiency with sufficiency (Wichterich, 2015). And I hope he was excited as I was by the narratives of restorative and transformative justice which go beyond our comfortable modern consumerist logics and look to 'fostering reciprocity, community and care; (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) as key to new economic practices.

It was hard to tell. Indeed, when it came to considering environment in this mix of how to achieve wellbeing and new economic thinking, GC Harcourt and I were not sadly able to discuss as we once could. As I began to address these issues in my academic work, his health was failing, and other preoccupations took up his life. In his last years, I embarked on a large EU research project on wellbeing, gender, ecology, and community. I would report back to him the early findings of the PhD students on issues of sufficiency, degrowth, and commoning as ways to challenge the logics of capitalist economic growth and extractive nature–society relations. I would share how I was learning about feminist degrowth (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019) and other worldviews that question the Eurocentric paradigm of growth (Kothari et al., 2014; Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). It is unspeakably sad that I can no longer enjoy my talks with him as the project reached its conclusion (Harcourt et al., 2022).

### **Racism in White settler Australia**

Another difficult but important issue which we both shared and were deeply concerned about (as were all member of GC Harcourt's family) was how racism continues to pervade Australian socioeconomic and ecological life and our own position in the debate as White Australians. We were keen to understand and take responsibility for the 'social and ecological wreckage of white settler capitalist developments and the effects on Country and all Australian peoples' lives' (Hinkson & Vincent, 2018: 242). I recall when GC Harcourt and I discussed the impact of the bushfires in 2019–2020 and our obligations to learn from Indigenous Australians knowledge about fires and how to care for Country. GC Harcourt welcomed the possibilities to learn and listen to Indigenous

knowledges and joined other Australian citizens to demand that the politicians recognise the need to honour and learn from First Nations Australians.

His fight against racism began many decades earlier when he was actively involved in fighting for black rights in the 1960s and 1970s in Adelaide as a member of the South Australian branch of the Howard League for Penal Reform. On his return to Australia in the last decade of his life, he participated in important conversations and activities as an Emeritus Professor at the University of New South Wales where he was involved through his younger daughter in the work of the Nura Gili, the indigenous business education centre. His fight against racism was an extension of his fight for social and economic justice.

He and I discussed the unravelling of our White privilege as we learnt about the violence that was dismayingly part of our heritage – the displacement of 100s of Aboriginal nations, erasure of their cultures, and the horrors of the stolen generation all in the name of civilisation, integration, and education. This long history of exploitation, extractivism, and erasure is becoming much more recognised as our shared (shameful) history, but First Nation Australians are still peripheral to the dominant narrative of settler colonialism where cultural loss and environmental damage are understood as inevitable to the building of the modern capitalist Australian state.

We found it difficult to talk about the racialised histories of violence which are buried under layers of other forms of oppression in Australia's checkered history, including the antisemitism which GC Harcourt experienced as a boy growing up in Melbourne or Narm, the traditional Aboriginal name for Melbourne. (GC Harcourt grew up in Glen Iris the traditional name of which is Glen Eira, of the Boonerwung Country Indigenous Australians of the Kulin Nation.)

While there are many processes and institutions that now recognise the contributions that Indigenous Australians make to the community and Country, unmet land claims continue, as do incarceration, poor health, and poverty. The historical and environmental damage continues to be embodied in living memories and belie the once cherished notion of White Australia as a lucky country. What is comforting, when I recall our conversations which were marked by a deep sadness, was that GC Harcourt offered support and fostered relations of respect and care through his mentoring of young Indigenous scholars and was honoured at his funeral with a smoking ceremony by members of the Gadigal mob.

### ***Carrying on despite political failure***

GC Harcourt and I would often discuss how to keep going even if it seemed things were falling apart ecologically, politically, and economically. Especially in the last years with Covid and climate change, our nearly daily conversations turned on to how to look forward and not give up. GC Harcourt was, famously, a wonderfully supportive person always listening and encouraging others' aspirations. I recall one long conversation I had with him some years ago when I was reflecting on my 25 years of engagement as a feminist advocate for gender equality and how difficult it was for me to share memories of those days of hope with my students, given the state of the world today. I recalled talking with him about the events leading up to the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and how the accumulation of years of transnational feminist actions to propose a holistic political agenda became, post Beijing, a technocratic mantra of gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in ways that lost sight of the original feminist vision.

I confided that I was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, I wanted to push for a feminist agenda, acting in solidarity with women across the globe. I, like many others, had seen the UN mechanism as a solid process, backed by governments, with funding, to support women's collective efforts. But now I saw, by engaging in the UN mechanism,

how we also had embraced highly technocratic structures that were exclusive, bound by profound class, race, caste, and age divisions, leading to tensions and ultimately failing to overcome deep systemic inequalities among genders, and among women.

I realised that the UN is far removed from the fiery upfront politics of the feminist movements around the world to which I felt I truly belonged. Was gender and development policy just ‘UN speak’ and a space for meaningless bureaucrats haggling? What has happened to feminist calls for power, when empowerment has come to mean funding women entrepreneurs in small-scale economic projects, or when it is measured by the numbers of women in parliament or firms? And how can we believe in women’s empowerment, in the face of social media attention to the never-ending struggle to end gender-based violence? The issues that I thought counted – those that would address race, class, environmental justice, and militarism were pushed to the far edge of gender and development (Harcourt, 2009).

I asked, whose bodies, lives, experiences, and knowledges count in development? How do different places, histories, and communities converge in, or become subsumed in, the mainstream of development? Stepping back, I shared with him how the reality of the fight for gender equality was messy and unpredictable. It led to important questions about institutions, policies, and governmentality. We discussed how governance practices by bureaucratising gender and development could leave many women out. Learning also from the experience of Indigenous Australians, something that GC Harcourt would remind me means noting that gender relates to race, class, colonial histories, religious, social, and cultural categories and can be ‘othering’. It is important to look at diversity among women and peoples and how there are differential ways of belonging to social, economic, and cultural groups which a singular focus on women and gender does not allow.

While GC Harcourt was open to intersectional justice which included race, class, gender, age, bodily ability, religious, and social difference, we were less in agreement on how sexuality, while it informs and abounds in our lives, could be part of the broader economic and social agenda (Nightingale, 2011). He saw sexuality as a moral problem something that, ultimately, belonged to the private realm. So, while he understood sexuality was not bound by heterosexual norms, it was not something central to his concerns for social justice. This was one arena where our generational differences came into play.

Similarly, in the discussion of gender and development as a global programme of action, he did not agree that this implied a critique economic growth nor that growth led necessarily to environmental destruction and climate devastation. He did not see the need to decentre capitalist growth in order to create a more just social and economic world. While his sympathy was for the poor and vulnerable and for sharing resources equitably, he felt the flaws in capitalism could be righted by fair and just economic policy which would include gender equality and alt the division between the global South and North.

GC Harcourt did not resolve my dilemmas around the failures of international development to address gender inequalities. The problem of how to bring about just and lasting transformation remains, and I confess I can still feel co-opted and dispirited. Nevertheless, his patience in listening and encouragement to continue to teach and engage in gender issues was, as ever, timely and needed.

## Conclusion

It was a wonderful privilege to have those many years of conversations with my father. We learnt together. We enjoyed humour as well as the moments of grief as we shared how hard it was to stick to our political beliefs about equality, social justice, and fairness given the crises we saw happening around us. As so many can attest, conversations with GC Harcourt meant that you did not give up hope, but you kept on searching for justice,

sharing your puzzles, and valuing connections with others who were equally concerned by the disruptions caused by environmental, climate, health, economic, and political crises. Among the many things I learnt from GC Harcourt was that it is important to listen with respect to those with whom you do not agree and to be honest in those disagreements. And, in that process both of you will learn so that you might just find ways forward, together.

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