Identities

Reproduction, Globalization and the New War Against Women

Bionote

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I will begin by speaking about the concepts I am using in this presentation/text: reproduction, globalization, and the war against women. The topic is very vast, particularly if we take a global perspective. So I will be very schematic.

The concept of reproduction has a long history. Reproduction was first used in the 18th century in the context of the natural sciences. Soon it migrated into the social sciences. It was used in the 18th century, by the Physiocrats, the first economists of capitalist society. They used the concept of ‘reproduction’ to define the mechanisms by which society perpetuates itself. Marx used the concept in his work also in this sense. He spoke

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Reproduction became a political concept with the feminist movement of the 70’s, as feminists began to analyse the roots of women’s oppression and the specific forms of exploitation to which women are subjected in capitalist society. Reproduction, in this context, defined the activities by which our life is reproduced: domestic work, procreation, sex work, as well as the family and social relations that sustain them. In the process we discovered that in capitalist societies the activities of reproduction are appropriated by capitalism. They are channeled towards the reproduction of the work force. However, despite the fact that they reproduce the workforce, they are not recognized as labor and are not remunerated.

In the 1970’s I was part of an organization that campaigned for “wages for housework.” We said that Marx was wrong and the founding fathers of socialism were mistaken for putting the production of commodities in the center of the capitalist organization of work. In reality, without the reproduction of labor-power, people’s capacity to work, no other kind of work can take place. If you don’t have workers, if you don’t have people capable of showing up every day at the doors of the factories and offices, no activities can proceed. Starting from this premise, we analyzed the use of the wage and the wage relation, showing that they serve to hide the importance of domestic work. They serve to naturalize this work, to make it appear as a personal service. And, in this way to make it invisible as a form of exploitation. The wage has been used also to create a labor hierarchy. This begins in the family as the center of the reproduction of labor power. The husband, the wage

of reproduction of the capitalist system referring to the mechanisms by which capitalism reproduces itself. Marx instead used the concept ‘simple reproduction’ to define the reproduction of the work force. I’ll come back to that concept later on.

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worker has become the supervisor of his wife’s unpaid reproductive work. We realized that through the wage the capitalist class and the state have delegated to the man the power to control women’s domestic labor, and to punish them if they do not perform it according to the social expectations. In this way, domestic violence has become an integral part of reproductive work. Violence is the classic punishment for the wageless. What else can you use to make somebody who is unpaid for the work she does perform according to what the state and capital need?

This has been the organization of reproduction that has prevailed in capitalist society until the 1970’s. But with the restructuring of world economy that began by the late 70’s, reproductive work was restructured internationally as well. It is important to recognize that it was not only the production process that was re-structured on a global level.

Looking at globalization from the point of view of reproduction was important since it showed that globalization is a political process, and an economic one. It has many structural characteristics that Marx defined as ‘original accumulation.’ Like the original process of accumulation, globalization was and is intended to restore the ruling class’ command over the work process that had been put into crisis by the struggles of the ‘60s and ‘70s. In the 1960’s and early ‘70’s, a whole wave of anti-colonial, anti-apartheid struggles, factory struggles, student and feminist struggles, shook the foundations of the capitalist political economy, and undermined the hierarchies and divisions that capitalism has constructed within the proletariat on an international basis.

Globalization was and still is a response to this crisis. Capital had to restructure the world economy to restore its capacity for accumulation. The means that were used were the classic means of capitalist power
since its beginning: the separation of the producers from the means of production and, I would add, the further devaluation of reproductive work. I will look at consequences particularly for women of both the new forms of reproduction and some of the struggles that are taking place today in response to their development.

One of the main tools of the restructuring of the world economy has been the structural adjustment program that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have imposed on many countries of the so-called Third World, in the name of the ‘debt crisis’ and ‘economic recovery.’ In reality, this has been a process of recolonization of entire regions of the world: Africa, Latin American parts of Asia. Structural adjustment has been a recolonization program because it has wrecked local economies, forcing governments to open the doors to foreign investments and removing all protectionist regulations; it has also re-oriented the ‘adjusted’ economies towards the export of raw materials and by giving the green light to extractivist companies (mining, petroleum companies) it has caused different forms of dispossession, the privatization and commercialization of land, major change in the property relations and the destruction of many communal land regimes. All these processes have expelled millions of people from their lands. Even prior to the recent refugee crisis, all through the 80’s and the 90’s, the policies of the World Bank and the IMF and the politics of extractivism, have led to a massive expulsion of people from their lands and a constant flow of migrants. Today across the world, but especially in countries rich with mineral wealth, the mining companies dominate the field as the main force of production. This means that lands and waters are contaminated, rivers are turned into toxic dumps. Add to this the precarization of work and the dismantling of the welfare state, which has reduced or eliminated the social services that had been introduced in many countries after independence.
The consequences of this restructuring have been especially devastating for women. This is not an accident, because globalization has been an attack on the reproduction of the work force. It has been finalized to destroy the most basic means that people have had for their reproduction. It was inevitable then that women in particular would be affected as they are the primary subject of reproduction work. Wherever we turn our eyes, in every region and in every sphere of work, we can see that women have been particularly affected in terms of their access to resources, levels of exploitation and social power. I stress this to counter the idea promoted by the United Nations, and accepted by many feminists, that ‘globalization’ has been good for women, as many have entered the waged work-force.

The capitalist class and the state politicians in the United Nations very early realized the significance of the feminist movement. The feminist movement was a broad, autonomous movement that expressed women’s refusal of unpaid labor, of economic dependence on men, and confinement to domestic work. The United Nations quickly saw the subversive implication of this struggle. This is why already in 1975, it entered the field of feminist politics with the first of the global conferences for women held in Mexico City. I think there is a very interesting parallel here between the intervention of the United Nations in the feminist field and the intervention of the UN a few years earlier in anti-colonial politics. Namely, when the UN realized that the anti-colonial struggle could not be defeated, they placed themselves at the head of it. They appointed themselves as the ‘decolonizers’ to make sure that this process would happen in terms not hostile to the interest of international capital. Something very similar has happened with the feminist movement. The United Nations came into the sphere of feminist politics to ensure that the women’s demands for autonomy, economic independence and the end of social and
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The significance of the feminist movement. The feminist movement was initially a movement of women. It expressed a rejection of unpaid labor, economic dependence on men, and the confinement of working at home. The United Nations recognized the subversive implications of this struggle. Therefore, in 1975, they entered the feminist sphere with the first global conference for women held in Mexico City. I think it was a tragic mistake that the feminist movement was not able to devise strategies to block this project, particularly in view of the political context of the time. This was a political context in which many workers, especially factory workers were refusing the regimentation of industrial work, when capital was beginning to dismantle the traditional work places and decentralize production, when waged work was losing its benefits, when wages were being cut, and unions were only able to offer give backs. This is the context in which the United Nations in the name of women’s emancipation took on the task to fully integrate women into the new globalized world economy.

Despite the rhetoric of the United Nations, globalization has been an attack on women and a step towards the further devaluation of reproductive work. Today women are the first victims of the process of displacement that is taking place in large areas of the world. Displacement by petrol companies, mining company that with the complicity of local governments and local chiefs destroy the communitarian regimes prevalent in many regions of the world, and expel people in order to be able to steal their resources. I’ve been recently at a feminist conference on feminicide in Colombia, in an area that has seen massive displacements of people. A key theme was that attacking and killing women serves to force people out of their lands, to make space, for instance, for gold mining, which is very destructive of the environment. Throughout history, women have been attacked, brutalized because they are the ones who keep the communities together, and the ones who are in the frontline to resist the destruction of their lands, their forests and waters, as they have to reproduce their families. Terrorizing them is one of the most effective economic subordination to men would be actually used to re-launch the capitalist work-machine. Women’s labor has been one of the main engines of the re-launching of the world’s economy. I think it was a tragic mistake that the feminist movement was not able to devise strategies to block this project, particularly in view of the political context of the time. This was a political context in which many workers, especially factory workers were refusing the regimentation of industrial work, when capital was beginning to dismantle the traditional work places and decentralize production, when waged work was losing its benefits, when wages were being cut, and unions were only able to offer give backs. This is the context in which the United Nations in the name of women’s emancipation took on the task to fully integrate women into the new globalized world economy.

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Women are today the main defenders of the rural areas of the world, and the main losers when land is privatized and commercialized. This is why there is now a war against women internationally. One of the missions of the World Bank has been to destroy subsistence agriculture, the argument being that land should be used as collateral for bank loans with which to start some business. The World Bank blames the fact that many women use the land for subsistence as one of the causes of poverty in the world.

In the early 80’s, the World Bank was one of the agencies that accused women in the “Third World” of causing poverty by producing too many children. It encouraged population control policies that led to the sterilization of many women in India, Indonesia. Today they accuse them of engaging in backward form of agriculture. In reality, for many people across the world subsistence agriculture has made the difference between life and death in regions that were totally pauperized by international economic policies.

As a result of the commercialization of agriculture, women today are losing access to land. As the land available to communities is shrinking, in communitarian regimes those who control the land (men) are redefining the rules of participation. They are redefining who belongs, who doesn’t belong, who has access, who doesn’t have access to the land. This process of exclusion helps to explain some of the surges of violence against women taking place in several parts of the world. As I already mentioned, women are often brutalized and murdered because they resist land dispossession, whether by companies or by members of their families and communities. Another factor for the increase of
одржливоста на земјоделството оправдувано со тоа дека земјата треба да се користи како гаранција за банкарските заеми со кои може да се започне некаков бизнис. Светската банка обвинува дека фактот што многу жени ја користат земјата за прехранување е еден од причинителите на сиромаштија во светот.

Во раните `80-ти, Светската банка беше една од агенциите што ги обвинуваше жените во „Третиот свет“ за предизвикување сиромаштија со произведување на премногу деца. Ги поддржуваше политиките за контрола на населението што довеле до стерилизација на многу жени во Индија, Индонезија. Денес ги обвинуваат дека се занимаваат со застарена форма на земјоделство. Реално, за многу луѓе во светот земјоделството за прехранување е основната разлика межу живот и смрт во регионите што се целосно осиромашени од меѓународните економски политики.

Како резултат на комерцијализацијата на земјоделството, жените денеска го губат пристапот до земјата. Како што се намалува земјата достапна за заедниците, во комунистичките режими, оние што ја контролираат земјата - мажите, ги предефинираат правилата за учество. Предефинирање кој припаѓа и кој не припаѓа, кој има пристап, а кој нема, до земјата. Овој процес на исклучување помага да се објаснат некои насилнички напади што се случуваат во неколку земји во светот. Како што веќе споменав, кон жените често се однесува брутално и се убиваат затоа што се спротивставуваат на одземањето на земјата, или од компаниите или од членовите на нивните семејства и заедниците. Друг фактор за зголемувањето на насилството кон жените се суперексплоатативните форми на вработување што ги воведуваат за да се справат со економската криза со која се соочени.

Пример за тоа се условите за работа на жените што работат за Apple во Кина. Тие се толку лоши и ут-

violence against women is the super exploitative forms of employment they are now taking in response to the economic crisis they face.

An example are the work conditions of women who construct computers for Apple in China. They are so bad and repressive that women working at Foxconn have often threatened to kill themselves. How women have been impoverished by the globalization of the economy can be seen by the rise of “surrogate motherhood.” Surrogacy is emblematic of the position of women in capitalism. In capitalist society, women have been forced to produce workers for exploitation. We have now reached a new level of exploitation, where women have to sell not only their work in the process of production and reproduction, but have to sell their children as well. I refer to the development of a ‘baby market’ based on adoption and surrogacy. This is emblematic of the type of crisis that women are facing and the struggle they have to make to acquire some income.

Women have also resorted to emigration, also to countries across the ocean, where most of the jobs they get are domestic work or sex work. To be able to support themselves and their families, women have had to work in situations that have jeopardized their security without at the same time providing real economic autonomy and guaranteeing a really safe future. Immigrant domestic workers, for instance, in the countries where they migrate, face a lot of abuse, especially when they are not documented. In sum, women’s entrance into labor force and the commercialization of entire areas of reproductive work have not benefitted women. Surrogacy is a violent process. It is the violence of carrying a child for nine months knowing that at the end you will have to relinquish it.
On the positive side, women are organizing many forms of resistance. I see the struggles that women are making moving in two directions: the wage, often obtained through migration, and the commons. Migration is certainly a struggle because at each step you have to fight to be able to migrate, and it is a refusal of poverty. It is an attempt to move to places where you will have more possibilities, more power to change your condition. Today, internationally domestic workers are becoming more and more organized. In the United States, for instance, there is a strong movement of domestic workers, mostly migrants, fighting for basic workers’ rights. Unfortunately, we don’t have yet a women’s movement that is capable of turning the struggle of immigrant domestic workers into a broad women’s movement against unpaid domestic work as well as paid domestic work. We need to change domestic work itself and place it on a completely new basis. In the United States, women are also at the center of the struggle for an increase of the minimum wage and for better work conditions.

The other direction in which women are moving is what I call the ‘construction of the commons.’ This can be seen particularly in many countries in Latin America. By ‘construction of the commons,’ I refer to the situation in which, faced with brutal impoverishment, women are responding by creating more communal, more cooperative forms of reproduction, like the ‘popular kitchens,’ where women and some young men, on a rotating basis, cook every day for hundreds of families, providing food for the youth, or providing childcare and spaces where people can come together and discuss what has to be done. In one community I visited in Buenos Aires, they used the ‘theatre of oppressed,’ which some have renamed the ‘theatre of resistance,’ to deal with social issues and do political education. It’s a theatre in which everybody participates, everybody can present their ideas and their solution to the problems discussed.
These experiments are extremely inspiring because a task for us all is to reconstruct the social fabric and the ties of solidarity which have been destroyed by the process of globalization, by industrial restructuring and by the gentrification of our cities. This is not an easy task, because in order to reorganize our reproductive work in a more cooperative way we need more time and space. These are increasingly diminishing in our communities.

I think that we too have to move between the wage and the commons. We need to fight over wages, because we cannot yet go beyond the monetary economy. Even the Zapatistas, to my knowledge the closest to a self-governing society, have not completely gone outside the monetary relation. They still have to sell their coffee; they still have to get some money because they are not in a position to produce everything they need. The question is how we use the wage struggle in a way that it does not become an instrument of division. The wage is a double edge sword because it can be used to create hierarchy, to hide areas of exploitation. We have to be very careful when we go near the wage. But we can’t go completely beyond it. The question is whether we can combine a struggle over waged work with the construction of commons, whether we can use the wage to give power to our commoning efforts.

In the same way that we cannot go beyond wage, we also cannot completely go beyond the state. We still need to struggle over public services because we cannot replace them, not yet at least, and we cannot create more cooperative forms of reproduction unless we reappropriate the wealth that we have produced. Which means that we have inevitably to negotiate with and confront the state.

In this case too, the question is: how do we relate to the state? Do we relate to the state expecting it to organize our life? Or do we relate to the state with power to
разговараат за тоа што било направено. Во една заедница што ја посетив во Буенос Аирес, користат театар, „театар на угнетените“, кој некои го преименуваат во „театар на отпорот“, за да се справат со општествените проблеми и за политичко образование. Тоа е театар во кој учествуваат сите, сите може да ги претстават своите идеи и своите решенија за проблемите што се дискутираат.

Овие експерименти се особено инспиративни за тоа што задача за сите нас е реконструирањето на општественото заедништво и на солидарноста кои биле уништени во процесот на глобализација, од индустриското реструктурирање и центрifikацијата на нашите градови. Ова не е едnostavна задача, оti за да се реорганизира нашата репродуктивна работа со поголема соработка ни требаат повеќе време и простор. Овие две нешта сè повеќе се намалуваат во нашите заедници.

Сметам дека и ние мора да се движивиме помеѓу плата и заедничките простори. Мора да се бориме за плати затоа што не можеме да ја надминеме монетарната економија. Дури и Запатистите, кои според мене се најблиzu до самоуправно општество, не го напуштиле целосно монетарнито однос. Сè уште мора да го продаваат своето кафе; мора да земаат пари затоа што не се во положба да произведуваат сè што им треба. Прашањето е како во борбата за платата на начин кој нема да стане инструмент на поделба. Платата е меч со две острици затоа што може да се користи за создавање хиерархија, да се криjат областите на експлоатациjа. Мора многу да внимаваме кога е платата во прашање. Но не можеме целосно да ја надминеме. Прашањето е дали можеме да ја комбинираме борбата за платената работа со создавањето на заеднички простори, дали може да ја користиме платата за ги засилиме нашите напори за создавање заеднички простори.

force it to give us the kind of resources that we need in order to organize ourselves? Here the Zapatistas are an exception. They have refused any kind of negotiation with the state. But in our situation we have to negotiate and struggle with the state because we do not have land and other resources.

In the United States as well, the desire for more communal forms of life is strong. This is what the Occupy movement has expressed in all its limitations – the need for community building. It expressed the understanding that we cannot confront the type of attack that is coming today towards us unless we create more collective forms of existence, unless we transform our communities into basis of resistance to the increasing commodification of our lives.

I am looking forward to the creation of places in our communities from which we can begin to build new forms of solidarity. These are the initiatives to which we have to dedicate our energy, our political work.
На ист начин како што не можеме да ја надминеме платата, не можеме да ја надминеме ни државата. Сè уште мора да се бориме за јавните услуги затоа што не можеме да ги замениме, барем не сега, и не можеме да создаваме покооперативни форми на репродукција, освен ако не го присвоиме повторно богатството што сме го произвеле. Тоа значи дека неизбежно мора да преговараме со државата и да се соочуваме со неа.

И во овој случај, прашањето е: каков е нашиот однос кон државата? Дали е таков што очекуваме државата да го организира нашиот живот? Или е таков што ја пристапуваме со моќ и ја принудуваме да ни ги даде ресурсите што ни се потребни за да се организира-ме? Тука, Запатистите се исключок. Тие одбија какви било преговори со државата. Но во нашата ситуација, мора да преговараме и да се бориме со државата за- тоа што немаме земја и други ресурси.

 Во САД исто така е многу силна желбата за наоѓање на покомунални форми на живеење. Затоа движењето „Окјупа“ ја изрази, колку и да е ограничено, потребата за градење заедништво. Тоа движење беше израз на разбирањето дека не може да се соочиме со таков напад каков што нисе заканува, освен ако не создадеме поколективни форми на постоене, освен ако не ги преобликуваме нашите заедници во бази на отпор на сè поголемата комодофикација на нашите животи.

Со радост го очекувам создавањето на места во нашите заедници во кои ќе можеме да градиме нови форми на солидарност. Ова се иницијативите на кои треба да им ги посветиме нашата енергија и политичка работа.

Превод од англиски: Родна Русковска