

8. The Unfinished Feminist Revolution

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One of the main political developments of the last decades across the planet has been women's revolt against confinement to domestic labor, leading to a redefinition of this work and women's relation to capital and the state. The Women's Liberation Movement of the '70s was the political expression of this revolt. It was a movement against 'housework' and its corollaries: economic and social dependence on men, social discrimination, and the naturalization of reproductive activities as attributes of femininity. Women took to the streets, the schools, the courts, demanding that the state cease to control their bodies, that abortion be decriminalized, that wife beating and rape within marriage no longer be tolerated, that school programs be revised to acknowledge women's presence in history. Their revolt also took less visible forms that only women in the movement could recognize as instances of 'refusal of housework,' like the fall of the birth rate, stiff in post WWII Europe (Dalla Costa 1977), and the increase in number of divorces and women-headed families.

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The central role that housework and reproduction have played in the feminist theories of the '70s was rooted in these struggles. Women's refusal to define themselves as housewives made it possible to conceive the unpaid domestic work done by women as a specifically capitalist form of labor-production and a terrain of exploitation: the social factory where the workforce is daily reproduced. It also made it possible to rethink Marx's concept of productive labor, through a critique that represents one of the most significant contributions to Marxist theory and practice in our time.

It was on the basis of this analysis that many feminists called for 'wages for housework,' as a strategic demand to subvert not only 'domestic slavery,' but the labor hierarchies created through the wage relation. The campaign for Wages For Housework spread in the mid '70s in several countries of Europe as well as in the US and Canada, but it never became a mass movement and its political potential was never tested. Among North American and European feminists, the dominant strategy was to fight against discrimination in the waged workplace, to ensure women's access to occupations formerly considered male domains, and to demand publicly supported day-care so that women could gain employment outside the home. In the US in particular, by the late '70s, the questions of housework and reproduction had practically vanished from the feminist agenda, so much so that, by 1976, the Supreme Court could defeat a proposal to make paid maternity leave compulsory for employers. It was assumed, especially among liberal feminists, that 'sameness' had to be the condition for equality; thus any gender specific demand—as e.g. maternity leave—was rejected as a call

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for ‘special treatment,’ presumably undermining women’s demand for political equality with men.

Since then, much has changed in the global political economy forcing a rethinking of feminist strategies worldwide. The neo-liberal restructuring of the world economy has redefined the political terrain, exposing the unreliability of wage labor as a means of sustenance and social reproduction. Most important, the worldwide emergence of grassroots women’s movements, organizing against the privatizations and corporate plunder of common resources, has demonstrated how urgent it is to create more cooperative forms of life and re-appropriate the basic means of our subsistence. At the same time, institutionalization of feminism by the United Nations have harnessed women’s struggle to the development of the neo-liberal agenda and market relations. Coming from a different quarter, the academic feminists’ refusal of a feminist standpoint – accused of authorizing partial accounts of the female experience and engendering stifling identity politics – has also destabilized feminism as a political movement.

These contradictory trends make it difficult to predict what role feminist movements will play in the future, particularly in the context of the unfolding global economic crisis. However, the last three decades have taught us important lessons about the limits of the wage struggle as a basis for ‘women’s liberation.’

In the ’70, North American feminists assumed that by obtaining extra-domestic employment women would free themselves from a paralyzing isolation, join the class struggle, and leave the home and housework behind. Four decades later, we see that these assumptions were misplaced, underestimating international capital’s capacity

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to disarticulate the composition of the workforce that had produced the feminist movement and recuperate its radical potential. Women thus entered the ‘workplace’ at the time of a historic, worldwide attack on workers’ wages and employment levels, resulting in the de-industrialization of large parts of the United States, the dismantling of local industries in the global South, and the precarization of work. Not surprisingly, the jobs awaiting them have been at the bottom of the work-scale, among the most monotonous, hazardous, least secure and lowest paid. In the countries of the OECD, the boom of women’s employment – reaching 60% of the female population in the 1990s – has been in the service sectors, which means that women have exchanged housework in the home with housework in restaurants, hospitals, cafeterias, in addition to providing the work-force for call centers and data entry firms.

The situation has been bleaker in the Global South. Here the increase in women’s employment has been in the ‘informal sector,’ a euphemism for low paid homework, or in the Free Export Zones – the global sweatshops in which the manufacturing industries shut down in the North have been relocated. Periodically we are told, by leftists as well, of beneficial effects that laboring in these modern workhouses has for women, of the skills they learn, the independence they gain through this kind of employment. But generations of young women have wasted their bodies and minds in them, earning a pittance while subject to prison-like regimes.

Temporary jobs, below the minimum wage, mostly without any contract, have also been the norm in the former socialist countries from China to Bulgaria. The transition from socialism to capitalism has devalued women’s labor.

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How little women can expect from employment in the marketized economies of Eastern Europe can be measured from the high number of female migrants from this region to every country of Western Europe and the US, where the jobs they can find (domestic workers, sex workers, eldercarers, nurses) generally involve a loss of social status and years of social isolation.

In sum, entrance in the waged workplace has contributed to feminize poverty and lengthened women's workday, while enabling employers to create new type of plantations, in which consumer commodities and services are cheaply produced, serving to minimize the cost of labor-power production.

We must also dispel the myth that, due to increased women's employment, unpaid domestic work and gender-based hierarchies have vanished. True, many housework tasks have left the home, being reorganized on a commercial basis, leading to the boom of the service sector. In the US, in the period from 1990 to 2006, employment in food services and drinking places has increased by three million. In the same period, the number of fast-food workers has gone from 2 million seven hundred thousands to four million. However, these are the lowest paid workers in America, according to official statistics and categories, earning \$7,77 cents an hour. [See Table 614, p. 406 of Statistical Abstract of the United States 2008].

Women have refused some housework by deciding not to have children or by reducing the number of children they have and the services they provide to their partners. In the US, the number of births has fallen from 118 per 1000 women in 1960s to 66.7 in 2006, resulting in an increase in the median age of the population from 30 in

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1980 to 36.4 in 2006. This procreation strike has been most dramatic in Europe where in some countries (Italy e.g.) birth rates have been for years below replacement. There has also been a decline in the number of marriages and married couples - in the U.S. from 56% of all households in 1990 to 51% in 2006, and a simultaneous increase in the number of people living alone, in the US by seven and a half million -from twenty three to thirty and a half million-amounting to a 30% increase. But these developments have not significantly affected the amount of domestic work the majority of women are expected to perform, nor eliminated the gender-based inequalities built upon it.

If we take a global perspective we see that not only do women still do most of the housework in every country, but due to the states' cuts of investment in social services and the decentralization of industrial production the amount of domestic work paid and unpaid that they now perform has actually increased, even when they have had a extra-domestic job. Indeed, across the planet, most working class women are carrying on two jobs, saddled with a tremendously lengthened workweek that leaves them no time for anything but work.

Three factors in particular have contributed to the lengthening of women's workday and the return of reproductive work to the home.

Women have been the shock absorbers of the economic crisis originally triggered by the globalization process but now destined to become a permanent feature of the world economy. Their extra work has compensates for lay-offs, skyrocketing food prices, the cutting and privatization of social services, and generally the vanishing family income. This has been especially true in the countries subjected

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to Structural Adjustment where the state has practically stopped investing in healthcare, education, public transports and other basic necessities. As a result across the globe they now must spend more time fetching water, obtaining and preparing food, and dealing with illnesses which are far more frequent and damaging now, for the marketization of healthcare has made visits to clinics unaffordable and malnutrition and environmental destruction have increased people vulnerability to disease.

In the US too, due to budget cuts, much of the work hospitals and other public agencies have traditionally done has been privatized and transferred to the home, tapping women's unpaid labor. Presently patients are dismissed almost immediately after surgery and the home must absorb a variety of post-operative and other therapeutic medical tasks (e.g. for the chronically ill) that in the past would have been done by doctors and professional nurses. Also public assistance to the elderly (with housekeeping, personal care) has been cut. Home visits have been shortened and the services provided reduced.

The second factor that has re-centered reproductive labor in the home, has been the expansion of "homework," partly due to the de-concentration of industrial production, partly the spread of 'informal work.' As David Staples, writes, in his *No Place Like Home* (2006), far from being an anachronistic form of work, homework has demonstrated to be a long-term capitalist strategy, which today occupies millions of women and children worldwide, in towns, villages, suburbs. Staples correctly points out that work is "inexorably" drawn to the home by the pull of unpaid domestic labor, because by organizing work on a home basis employers can make it invisible, can undermine workers'

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effort to unionize, and can drive wages down to a minimum. Many women opt for this work to earn an income while caring for their families, but the result is enslavement to a work that earns wages "far below the median the work would pay if performed in a formal setting, and it reproduces a sexual division of labor that fixes women more deeply to housework." (Staples: 1-5)

Last, working for a wage has not eliminated sexual discrimination, though it has given women more economic independence from men. Despite growing male unemployment, women still earn a fraction of male wages. We have also witnessed an increase of male violence against women, partly triggered by fear of their economic competition, in part by the frustration men experience not being able to fulfill their role as their families' providers and, above all, not being able to receive the same services women used to provide.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, fighting for waged work or fighting to "join the working class in the workplace," as some Marxist feminist liked to put it, cannot be a path to liberation. Wage employment may be a necessity but cannot be a political strategy. Second, as long as reproductive work is devalued, as long it is considered a private matter and a women's responsibility, women will always confront capital and the state with less power than men and in condition of extreme social and economic vulnerability. There are also serious limits to the extent to which reproductive work can be reduced or reorganized on a market basis. How can we reduce or commercialize the care for children, the elderly, the sick, except at a great cost for those to be cared for? The degree to which the marketization of food production has

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contributed to the deterioration of our health (e.g. the rise of obesity even among children) is instructive in this context. As for the globalization of reproductive work, this 'solution' only extends the housework crisis, now displaced to the families of the paid care providers.

What we need is the re-opening of a collective struggle over reproduction aiming to create new forms of cooperation around this work that are outside of the logic of capital and the market. This is not a utopia, but a process already under way in many parts of the world, that will certainly expand in the face of the continuing institutional assault on our means of subsistence. Through land takeovers, urban farming, community-supported agriculture, through squats, the creation of various forms of barter, mutual aid, alternative forms of healthcare -to name some of the terrains on which the reorganization of reproduction is more advanced- a new economy is beginning to emerge that may turn reproductive work from a stifling, discriminating activity into the most liberating and creative ground of experimentation in human relations.

Meanwhile we should not ignore that the consequences of the globalization of the world economy would certainly have been far more nefarious except for the efforts that millions of women have made to ensure that their families would be supported, regardless of their value on the market. Through their subsistence activities, as well as various forms of direct action (from squatting on public land to urban farming) women have helped their communities to avoid total dispossession, extend budgets, add food to the kitchen pots. Amidst wars, economic crises, devaluations, as the world around them was falling apart, they have planted corn on abandoned town plots, cooked

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food to sell on the side of the streets, created communal kitchens -ola communes- as in the case of Chile and Peru, thus standing in the way of a total commodification of life and beginning a process of re-collectivization of reproduction that is indispensable if we are to regain control over our lives.

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