

“The reproduction of labour-power in the global economy, Marxist theory and the unfinished feminist revolution”

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Women’s work and women’s labor are buried deeply in the heart of the capitalist social and economic structure.

(David Staples, No Place Like Home, 2006)

It is clear that capitalism has led to the super-exploitation of women. This would not offer much consolation if it had only meant heightened misery and oppression, but fortunately it has also provoked resistance. And capitalism has become aware that if it completely ignores or suppresses this resistance it might become more and more radical, eventually turning into a movement for self-reliance and perhaps even the nucleus of a new social order. (Robert Biel, The New Imperialism, 2000)

The emerging liberative agent in the Third World is the unwaged force of women who are not yet disconnected from the life economy by their work. They serve life not commodity production. They are the hidden underpinning of the world economy and the wage equivalent of their life-serving work is estimate at &16 trillion.” (John McMurtry, The Cancer State of Capitalism, 1999)

The pestle has snapped because of so much pounding tomorrow I will go home.
Until tomorrow Until tomorrow... Because of so much pounding Tomorrow I will go home.

(Hausa Women’s Song, from Nigeria)

INTRODUCTION

This essay is a political reading of the restructuring of the [re]production of labor-power in the global economy, but it is also a feminist critique of Marx that, in different ways, has been developing since the 1970s, first articulated by activists in the Campaign for Wages For Housework, especially Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla

Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, among others, and later by the feminists of the Bielefeld school, Maria Mies, Claudia Von Werlhof, Veronica Benholdt-Thomsen. (1) At the center of this critique is the argument that Marx's analysis of capitalism has been hampered by its almost exclusive focus on commodity production and its blindness to the significance of women's unpaid reproductive work and the sexual division of labor in capitalist accumulation. (2) For ignoring this work has limited Marx's understanding of the mechanisms perpetuating the exploitation of labor, and led him to assume that capitalist development is both inevitable and progressive, on the assumption that scarcity is an obstacle to human selfdetermination, but capital's expansion of the forces of production, through large scale industrialization, would in time lead to its transcendence. Marx had apparently second thoughts on this matter in the later years of his life. As for us, a century and a half after the publication of *Capital*, we must challenge this view for at least three reasons.

Whether or not scarcity has ever been an obstacle to human liberation, scarcity today is the product of capitalist production. Second, while capitalist production enhances cooperation in the organization of work, it accumulates differences and divisions within the proletariat through its organization of social reproduction. Third, from the Mexican to the Chinese Revolution, the most anti-systemic struggles of the last century have not been waged by industrial workers, Marx' projected revolutionary subjects, but by campesino/ as. Today as well, they are fought by subsistence farmers, urban squatters, undocumented migrants, as well as high-tech workers in Europe and North America. Most important, they are fought by women who, against all odds, are reproducing their families regardless of the value the market places on their lives, valorizing their existence, reproducing them for their own sake, even when the capitalists declare their uselessness as labor power.

What are the prospects, then, that Marxist theory may serve as a guide to "revolution" in our time? In what follows, I ask this question, by analyzing the restructuring of reproduction in the global economy. My claim is that if Marxist theory is to speak to the 21st century anti-capitalist movements it must rethink the question of "reproduction" in a planetary perspective. Reflecting on the activities which reproduce our life dispels, in fact, the illusion that the automation of production may create the material conditions for a non-exploitative society, showing that the obstacle to "revolution" is not the lack of technological know-how, but the divisions which

capitalist development reproduces in the working class. Indeed, the danger today, is that beside devouring the earth, capitalism unleashes more wars of the kind the US has launched in Afghanistan and Iraq, sparked off by the corporate need to gain access to mineral and hydrocarbon wealth, and by proletarian competition for a wealth that cannot be generalized. (Federici 2008)

SECTION 1. MARX AND THE REPRODUCTION OF THE WORK-FORCE

Surprisingly, given his theoretical sophistication, Marx ignored the existence of women's reproductive work. He acknowledged that, no less than every other commodity, laborpower must be produced and, insofar as it has value, it represents "a definite quantity of the average social labor objectified in it." (Marx 1990, Vol. 1: 274) But while meticulously exploring the dynamics of yarn production and valorization, he was succinct when tackling reproductive work, reducing it to the workers' consumption of the commodities their wages can buy and the work the production of these commodities requires. In other words, as in the neo-liberal scheme, in Marx's account too, all that is needed to [re]produce labor-power are commodity production and the market. No other work intervenes to prepare the goods the workers consume or to restore physically and emotionally their capacity to work. No difference is made between commodity production and the production of the work-force. (Marx 1990, Vol. 1, *ibid.*) (3) One assembly-line produces both. Accordingly, the value of labor-power is measured on the value of the commodities (food, clothing, housing) that have to be supplied to the worker, to "the man, so that he can renew his life-process," that is, they are measured on the labor-time socially necessary for their production (Marx 1990, Vol. 1: 276-7). (4)

Even when he discusses the reproduction of the workers on a generational basis, Marx is extremely sparse. He tells us that wages must be sufficiently high to ensure "the worker's replacements," his children, so that labor-power may perpetuate its presence on the market. (Marx, *ibid.*: 275) But, once again, the only relevant agents he recognizes in this process are the male, self-reproducing workers, their wages and their means of subsistence. The production of workers is by means of commodities. Nothing is said about women, domestic labor, sexuality and procreation. In the few instances in which he refers to biological reproduction, he treats it as a natural phenomenon, arguing that is through the changes in the

organization of production that a surplus population is periodically created to satisfy the changing needs of the labor market. (5)

Elsewhere, I presented several hypotheses to explain why Marx so persistently ignored women's reproductive work, why (e.g.) he did not ask what transformations the raw materials implicated in the reproduction of labor-power must undergo in order for their value to be transferred into their products (as he did in the case of other commodities). I suggested that the conditions of the working class in England – Marx's and Engel's point of reference– shaped his description. (Federici 2004) Marx described the condition of the industrial proletariat of his time as he saw it, and women's domestic labor was hardly part of it. Housework, as a specific branch of capitalist production, was below Marx's historic and political horizon at least in the industrial working class. Although from the first phase of capitalist development, and especially in the mercantilist period, reproductive work was formally subsumed to capitalist accumulation, it was only in the late 19th century that domestic work emerged as the key engine for the reproduction of the industrial workforce, organized by capital for capital, according to the requirements of factory production. Until the 1870s, consistently with a policy tending to the "unlimited extension of the working day" (ibid. 346) and the utmost compression of the cost of labor-power production, reproductive work was reduced to a minimum, resulting in the situation powerfully described in Capital Vol.1, in the chapter on the Working Day, and in Engels' Conditions of the Working Class in England (1845), That is, the situation of a working class almost unable to reproduce itself, averaging a life expectancy of 20 years of age, dying in its youth of overwork. (6)

Only at the end of the 19th century did the capitalist class began to invest in the reproduction of labor, in conjunction with a shift in the form of accumulation, from light to heavy industry, requiring a more intensive labor-discipline and a less emaciated type of worker. In Marxian terms, we can say that the development of reproductive work and the consequent emergence of the full-time housewife were the products of the transition from absolute to relative surplus.(7) Not surprisingly, then, while acknowledging that "the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital," Marx could immediately add: "But capitalist may safely leaves this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and

propagation. All the capitalist cares for is to reduce the worker's individual consumption to the necessary minimum..." (Capital Vol.1, chapter 23: 718).

We can also presume that the difficulties posed by the classification of a labor not subject to monetary valuation further motivated Marx to remain silent on this matter, especially as he faced the uneasy task of illustrating the specific character of capitalist relations. But there is a further reason, more indicative of the limits of Marxism as a political theory, that we must take into account, if we are to explain why not just Marx, but generations of Marxists, raised in epochs in which housework and domesticity were triumphant, have continued to be blind to this work.

I suggest that Marx ignored women's reproductive labor because he remained wedded to a technologicistic concept of revolution, where freedom comes through the machine, where the increase in the productivity of labor— understood as increase of output in time— is assumed to be the material foundation for communism, and where the capitalist organization of work is viewed as the highest model of historical rationality, held up for every other form of production, including the reproduction of the work-force. In other words, Marx failed to recognize the importance of reproductive work because he accepted the capitalist criteria for what constitutes work and believed waged industrial work was the scenario where the destiny of humanity would be shaped.

With few exceptions, Marx's followers have reproduced the same assumptions, (witness the continuing love affair with the famous "Fragment on Machines" in the Grundrisse), demonstrating that the idealization of science and technology as liberating forces has continued to be an essential component of the Marxian view of history and revolution to our day. Even Socialist Feminists, while acknowledging the existence of women's reproductive work in capitalism, have tended to stress its presumably antiquated, backward, pre-capitalist character and imagined the socialist reconstruction of it in the form of a rationalization process, raising its productivity level to that achieved by the leading sectors of capitalist production.(8)

One consequence of this blind spot in modern times has been that Marxist theorists have been unable to grasp the historic importance of the post-World War II women's revolt against reproductive work, as expressed in the Women's Liberation Movement, and ignored its practical redefinition of what constitutes work, who is the working

class, and the nature of the class struggle. Only when women left the organizations of the Left in droves did Marxists recognize the WLM. To this day, many Marxists are pondering on the relation between class and gender; view the popularity of the latter category as a cultural indulgence, a concession to post-modernism, and either bypass the question of reproductive work, as it is the case even with an Eco-Marxist like Peter Burkett (200...) (9) or pay lip service to it, assimilating it –again– to commodity production, as in Negri's conception of "affective labor," which takes us to a pre-feminist conception of reproduction. Indeed, Marxist theorists are generally even more indifferent to the question of reproduction than Marx himself, who could devote pages to the conditions of factory children, whereas it would be a challenge today to seek for references to children in a Marxist text.

I return later to the limits of contemporary Marxism, to notice its inability to grasp the significance of the neoliberal turn and globalization process. For the moment suffice to say that already in the 1960s, under the impact of the anti-colonial struggle and the struggle against apartheid in the United States, Marx's account of capitalism and class relations was subjected to a radical critique by Third Worldist political writers (e.g., Samir Amin and Gunder Frank) who challenged its Euro-centrism, its condoning of colonial expansion, and his privileging of the wage industrial proletariat as the primary object of exploitation and revolutionary subject. However, it was the revolt of women against housework in Europe and the US, and later the rise of feminist movements across the planet, in the 1980s and 1990s that triggered the most radical rethinking of Marxism.

SECTION 2. WOMEN'S REVOLT AGAINST HOUSEWORK AND THE FEMINIST REDEFINITION OF WORK, CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE CAPITALIST CRISIS.

It seems to be a social law that the value of labor is proven and perhaps created by its refusal. This was certainly the case of housework which remained invisible and unvalued until a movement of women emerged who refused to accept reproduction work as their natural destiny. It was women's revolt against this work in the '60s and '70s that disclosed the centrality of unpaid domestic labor in capitalist economy, reconfiguring our image of society as an immense circuit of domestic plantations and assembly lines where the production of workers is articulated on a daily and generational basis.

Not only did feminists establish that the reproduction of labor-power involves a far broader range of activities than the consumption of commodities, as food must be cooked, clothes have to be washed, bodies have to be stroked and made love to. Their recognition of the importance of reproduction and women's domestic labor for capital accumulation led to a rethinking of Marx's categories, and a new understanding of the history and fundamentals of capitalist development and the class struggle. Starting in the early 1970s, a feminist theory took shape that radicalized the theoretical shift which the Third Worldist critiques of Marx had inaugurated, confirming that capitalism is not identifiable with waged, contractual work, that, in essence, it is un-free labor, and revealing the umbilical connection between the devaluation of reproductive work and the devaluation of women's social position.

This paradigm shift also had political consequences. The most immediate was the refusal of the slogans of the Marxist left, such as the ideas of the "general strike" or "refusal of work," both of which were never inclusive of house-workers. Over time, the realization has grown that Marxism, filtered through Leninism and social-democracy, has expressed the interests of a limited sector of the world proletariat, that of white, adult, male workers, largely drawing their power from the fact that they work in the leading sectors of capital industrial production, at the highest levels of technological development.

On the positive side, the discovery of reproductive work has made it possible to understand that capitalist production relies on the production of a particular type of worker, and therefore a particular type of family, sexuality, procreation, and thus to redefine the private sphere as a sphere of relations of production and a terrain of anticapitalist struggle. In this context, policies forbidding abortion could be decoded as devices for the regulation of the labor-supply, the collapse of the birth rate and increase in the number of divorces could be read as instances of resistance to the capitalist discipline of work. The personal became political and capital and the state were found to have subsumed our lives and reproduction down to the bedroom.

On the basis of this analysis, by the mid 1970s, a crucial era in capitalist policy-making—the one in which the first steps were taken towards a neo-liberal restructuring of the world economy—feminists could see that the unfolding capitalist crisis was a

response not only to factory struggles but to women's refusal of housework, as well as to the increasing resistance of new generations of African, Asians, Latin Americans, Caribbeans to the legacy of colonialism. Key contributions were the works of Dalla Costa, Fortunati, Boch, who showed that women's invisible struggles against domestic discipline were subverting the model of reproduction that had been the pillar of the Fordist deal. Dalla Costa pointed out, for instance, that, since the end of WWII, women in Europe had been engaged in a silent strike against procreation, as evinced by the collapse of the birth rate and governments' promotion of immigration. (10) Fortunati in *Brutto Ciao* (1976) examined the motivations behind Italian women's post-WWII exodus from the rural areas, their re-orientation of the family wage towards the reproduction of the new generations, and the connection between women's post-war quest for independence, their increased investment in their children, and the increased combativeness of the new generations of workers.

By the mid 1970s these struggle were no longer "invisible", but had become an open repudiation of the sexual division of labor, with all its corollaries: economic dependence on men, social subordination, confinement to an unpaid, naturalized form of labor, a state-controlled sexuality and procreation. Contrary to a widespread misconception, the crisis was not confined to white middle class women. On the contrary, the first women's liberation movement in the US was arguably a movement of Black Women. It was the Welfare Mothers Movement that, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, led the first campaign for state-funded wages for housework women have fought for in the country, (under the guise of Aid to Dependent Children) asserting the economic value of women's reproductive work, and declaring "welfare" a women's right.

Women were on the move also across Africa, Asia, Latin America, as the first United Nations Global Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975 demonstrated. The conference and those that followed proved that women's struggles over reproduction were redirecting post-colonial economies towards increased investment in the domestic workforce and were the single most important factor in the failure of the World Bank's development plans for the commercialization of agriculture. In Africa, women had consistently refused being recruited to work on their husbands' cash crops, defending, instead, subsistence oriented agriculture, in this process transforming the village from a site for the reproduction of cheap labor (Meillassoux)

to a site of resistance to exploitation. By the 1980s, this resistance was recognized as the main factor in the crisis of the World Bank's agricultural development projects, prompting a flood of articles on "women's contribution to development."

Given the events I have described, it is not surprising that the restructuring that has taken place with the globalization of the world economy has led to a major reorganization of reproduction, as well as a campaign against women in the name of "population control." In what follows, I examine the main aspects of this restructuring trying to assess the prevailing trends, its social consequences, and its impact on class relations. First, however, I want to clarify why I continue to use the concept of labor-power which some feminists have criticized, pointing out that women produce living individuals –children, relatives, friends– not labor-power. The critique is well taken. Labor-power is an abstraction. As Marx tells us, echoing Sismondi, it "is nothing unless it is sold," and utilized. (1990: 277) I maintain this concept, however, for various reasons. First in order to highlight the fact that in capitalist society reproductive work is not the free reproduction of ourselves or others according to our and their desires. To the extent that directly or indirectly it is exchanged for a wage, reproduction work is, at all points, subjected to the conditions imposed on it by the capitalist organization and relations of production. In other words, housework is not a free activity. It is "the production and reproduction of the capitalist most indispensable means of production: the worker" (ibid.) () As such, it is subject to all the constraints that derive from the fact that its product must satisfy the requirements of the labor market.

Second, highlighting the reproduction of "labor-power" reveals the duality, the contradiction inherent in reproductive labor and, therefore, the unstable, potentially disruptive character of this work. To the extent that labor-power can only exist in the living individual, its reproduction must simultaneously be a process of creation and valorization of desired attributes and capacities and an accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labor market. As impossible as it is, then, to draw a line between the living individual and its labor-power, so it is impossible to draw a line between the two corresponding aspects of reproductive work, but maintaining the concept brings out the tension, the potential separation, it suggests a world of conflicts, resistances, contradictions that have political significance. Among other things (an understanding that was crucial for the women's liberation movement) it

tells us that we can struggle against housework without having to fear that we will ruin our communities, for this work imprisons the producers as well as those reproduced.

I also want to defend my continuing to maintain, against postmodern trends, the separation between production and reproduction. There is certainly one important sense in which the difference between the two has become blurred. The struggles of the 1960s in Europe and US, especially from the student and feminist movements, have taught the capitalist class that investing in the reproduction of the future generation of workers “does not pay,” it is no a guarantee of an increase in the productivity of labor. Thus, not only has state investment in the work-force been drastically reduced, but reproductive activities have been reorganized as value-producing services that workers must purchase and pay for. In this way, the value which reproductive activities produce is immediately realized, rather than being made conditional on the performance of the workers they reproduce. But, as I show later, the expansion of the service sector has not eliminated home-based, unpaid reproductive work nor the sexual division of labor in which it is embedded, which still divides production and reproduction, in terms of the subjects of these activities and the discriminating function of the wage and lack of it.

Last, I speak of “reproductive,” rather than “affective” labor because even in its Spinozistic connotations, this term describes a limited part of the work that the reproduction of human beings requires, and it erases the subversive potential of the feminist concept of reproductive work which, by unveiling the contradictions inherent in this work, recognizes the possibility of alliances, forms of cooperation between producers and reproduced –mothers and children, teachers and students, nurses and patients.

Keeping this particular character of reproductive work in mind, let us ask then: how has economic globalization restructured the reproduction of the workforce? And what have been the effects of this restructuring on workers and especially women, traditionally the main subjects of reproductive work? Last, what do we learn from this restructuring concerning capitalist development and the place of Marxist theory in the anti-capitalist struggles of our time? My answer to these questions is in two parts. First, I will discuss briefly the main changes globalization has produced in the general

process of social reproduction and the class relation, to then discuss more extensively the restructuring of reproductive work.

SECTION 3. NAMING OF THE INTOLERABLE. PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF REPRODUCTION

There are five major ways in which the restructuring of the world economy we refer to as “globalization” has responded to the cycle of struggles that culminated in the 1960 and 1970s and transformed the organization of reproduction and class relations.

First, has been the expansion of the labor market. Globalization has produced a historic leap in the size of the world proletariat, through a global process of enclosures that has separated millions from their lands, their jobs, their “customary rights” and through the increased employment of women. Not surprisingly, globalization has presented itself as a process of Primitive Accumulation. It has taken many forms: (i) in the north industrial deconcentration and relocation, as well as flexibilization and precarization of work, just in time production; (ii) in the former socialist countries the de-statalization of industry and decollectivization of agriculture and privatization social wealth; (iii) in the South, import liberalization, currency devaluation, the maquilization of production, “structural adjustment.” However, everywhere, the objective has been the same. By destroying subsistence economies, by separating producers from the means of subsistence, by making millions dependent on monetary incomes, even when unable to access waged employment, once again, the capitalist class has through the world labor market, regained the initiative, re-launched the accumulation process, cut the cost of labor-production. Two billion people have been added to the labor market. This demonstrates the fallacy of theories [see Negri and Hardt in *Multitude and Empire*] arguing that capitalism no longer requires massive amounts of living labor, since it is moving towards an increasing automation of production.

Second, the de-territorialization of capital, and financialization of economic activities have seemingly liberated capital from the constraints imposed on it by resistance to expropriation and exploitation of labor.

Third, the disinvestment by the state in the reproduction of the work-force, [through Structural Adjustment, the dismantling of the “welfare state” and state-socialism] have

massively cut pensions, healthcare services, public transport, placed high consumer fees upon them, forced individual to take on the full cost of their reproduction. The struggles of the 1960s have taught capital that investing in the reproduction of labor-power does not pay, it does not necessarily translate into a higher productivity of work.

Fourth, there has been an immense expansion in capital's free appropriation and exploitation of "natural resources." Mostly through the mechanism of 'debt repayment' and "structural adjustment," from Africa to Asia countries have been led to sell their forests, expropriate/privatize immense tracts of lands, home to large population and make them available for mineral extraction.

Combined, these trends have produced an immense leap in capital accumulation, but caused a drastic worldwide devaluation of labor-power, and underdevelopment of social reproduction. They have abrogated any social contract and have deregulated labor relations. As a consequence, we have seen the return on a massive scale of un-free forms of labor. Through the globalization of the world economy, especially the computerization of work and de-territorialization of capital, an economic system has been created allowing for a permanent process of Primitive Accumulation (Werlhof) such as not only destroy those "pockets of communism" that more than a century of workers' struggle had won, but undermine our "production of commons." From this viewpoint, it is impossible to share the optimism of Hardt and Negri [see *Empire* and *Multitude*], who argue that with the computerization of work and the information revolution we are entering that phase of total automation anticipated by Marx in *Grundrisse*, when capitalist production no longer requires living labor, when labor-time is no longer the measure of value, and the end of work is at hand, only depending on a change in property relations.

While taken in isolation, aspects of this re-conversion—e.g. the flexibilization and precarization of work— may appear as liberating alternatives (for example to the regimentation of the 9-to-5 routine), if not anticipations of the workerless society. But from the viewpoint of the totality workers-capital relations, they are an unequivocal expressions of capital's continuing power to deconcentrate workers, and preclude effective organizational struggle in the waged work-place. Also the de-statalization of industry and investment in the work-force, whether in former socialist or capitalist

countries, while seemingly responding to the revolt against the bureaucratization of life imposed by the socialist and welfare states has been a set back. It is an expression of capital's power to refuse all social contract, to de facto abrogate all contractual relations, and return to a state of affairs where the only guarantee workers are provided is the absolute lack of any security as far as wages, benefits, employment. In sum, from the viewpoint of social reproduction we can see that the technological leap achieved through the computerization of production has been premised on an immense destruction of social, economic, ecological wealth, an immense leap in the exploitation and devaluation of labor, and the deepening of divisions within the world proletariat.

The economic and social consequences of these developments have been dramatic. Real incomes and employment have fallen across the world, access to natural means of subsistence has drastically declined, pauperization and even hunger have become widespread phenomena, also in the developed countries. Thirty-seven million are going hungry in the United States, according to a recent report. Far from being reduced by the introduction of labor saving technology, the work-day and working-life have been lengthened to a maximum, making "leisure time" and retirement seem utopias. In the US, moonlighting—up to three jobs—is now a necessity among most workers; stripped of their pensions, many 60-to-70 years old are returning to the job market. Meanwhile, the corporate destruction of forests, oceans waters, coral reefs, animal and vegetable species has reached a historic peak and so has the degree of conflict and warfare not just between capitalists and workers but among workers themselves made to battle for the diminishing resources. (McMurtry: 105-111).

As mentioned, we have also witnessed the return of unfree labor, and the increasing criminalization of the working class, through mass incarceration (recalling the 17th century Grand Confinement), and the formation of an ex-lege proletariat made of undocumented immigrants, under-the-counter workers, producers of illicit goods, sexworkers—it is a multitude of proletarians working in the shadow, reminding us that the existence of a population of rightless workers — whether slaves, colonial subjects, peons, convicts, or sans papiers— remains a structural necessity of capital accumulation.

Especially harsh has been the attack on youth, in particular black youth, the heir of the legacy of Black Power, but including, in a sort of pre-emptive strike and exorcism of 1968, a broader population of youngsters to whom nothing has been conceded, neither the certainty of employment nor access to education. Not surprisingly, but very telling, among the social consequences of the restructuring of reproduction there has been the increase in youth suicide, as well as the increase in violence against women and children including infanticide.

Certainly, this assault on workers reproduction has not gone unchallenged. The widespread use of credit money in the US should be seen as a response to the decline in wages and refusal to the austerity imposed by the wage decline. Across the world, a movement of movements has grown that has challenged every aspect of globalization. This in part explain the continuing necessity of WAR and CRISIS as pillar of accumulation.

Looking at the global economy from the viewpoint of social reproduction we must also conclude that, notwithstanding the Internet, communication and social cooperation have not expanded. Not only has globalization undermined the main material conditions for the “production of commons,” which is the communal possession of land and natural resources. Far from flattening the world-order into a network of equally interdependent circuits –as liberal economists, journalists like Thomas Friedman, as well Marxist Autonomists like Negri maintain– it has reconstructed it as a pyramidal structure, increasing inequality and polarization, and deepening the hierarchies that have historically characterized the sexual and international division of labor, which the anticolonial struggle and the women’s liberation movements had undermined.

The strategic center of Primitive Accumulation has been the former colonial world, historically the underbelly of the capitalist system, the place of slavery and plantations. It is here we have witnessed the most radical processes of expropriation and pauperization, the most radical disinvestment by the state and devaluation of labor. This process has been well documented. Starting in the 1980s, as a consequence of SAP, unemployment in most TW countries has soared so high that USAID could recruit workers offering nothing better than Food for Work. Wages have fallen so low that women maquila workers have been reported buying milk by the glass, eggs or tomatoes one at a time. Entire populations have been demonetized,

while simultaneously their lands has been taken away for government projects and given to foreign investors. Presently half of Africa is on emergency aid (Moyo and Yeros). In West Africa, from Niger to Nigeria, to Ghana, the electricity has been turn off, the national grids have been disabled forcing those who can afford them to buy individual generators, whose buzzing sound now fills the nights, making it difficult for people even to sleep. Governmental health and education budgets, subsidies to farmers, supports for basic necessities all have been slashed, axed, gutted. As a consequence, life expectancy is falling and phenomena have reappeared that capitalism was supposed to have erased from the face of the earth long ago: famines, starvation, recurrent epidemics, wars, even witch-hunts. Mike Davis has used the phrase “Planet of Slums” in referring to this situation, but it is more correct to speak of a “Planet of ghettos,” a regime of global apartheid.

If we further consider that through the debt crisis and SAP, Third World countries have been forced to divert food production from the domestic to the export-market, turn arable land from production of edible crops to mineral extraction and bio-fuel production, clearcut their forests, become dumping grounds for all types of waste, as well as grounds of predation for pharmaceutical gene hunters, then, we must conclude that, in international capital’s plans there are now world regions marked for “near-zero-reproduction.” Indeed, we can see that DEATH-POWER is as important as BIO-POWER in the shaping of capitalist relations, as a means of dis-accumulate unwanted workers, blunt resistances, cut the cost of labor production.

It is a measure of the degree to which the reproduction of the work force has been underdeveloped in the Third World that millions are facing untold hardships and the prospect of death and incarceration in order to migrate. Certainly migration is not just a “necessity” but a choice, an exodus towards higher levels of struggle, a means to reappropriate the stolen wealth (Yann Moulier Boutang, Papadopoulos, Mezzadra). It is also true that migration has acquired an autonomous character that makes it difficult to use it as a regulatory mechanism. But there is no doubt that millions leave their countries because they cannot reproduce themselves in them. This is especially evident when we consider that half of the migrants are women, many married, with children whom they must leave behind. This practice is highly unusual historically. Women are those who stay, not due to lack of initiative or traditional restraints, but because they take the responsibility for the reproduction of their families. They are

the ones who make sure children have food, often going themselves without, and the elderly or the sick are cared for. Thus, when hundreds of thousands leave, to face years of humiliation and alienation, and live with the anguish of not being able give to the people they love the care they give to others across the world, we know that something quite dramatic is happening in the organization of world reproduction.

We must reject, however, the conclusion that the obvious indifference of the international capitalist class to the loss of life globalization is producing is proof that capital no longer needs living labor. In reality the destruction of human life on a large scale has been structural component of capitalism from its inception, as the necessary counterpart of the accumulation of workers, which is inevitably a violent process. The recurrent “reproduction crises” we have witnessed in Africa over the last decades are rooted in this dialectic. Also the return of non-contractual labor and of phenomena that may appear abominations in a “modern world”—mass incarceration, the traffic in blood, organs, human parts— should be understood in this context. Capitalism fosters a permanent reproduction crisis. If it has not been more apparent, it is because the “human catastrophes” it has caused have been historically externalized, been confined to the colonies, thus made invisible or rationalized as effects of cultural backwardness, attachment to misguided traditions, tribalism. This “externalization” continues today, as does the its ideological cover up. The economic and social disintegration many TW countries are experiencing due to the effects of economic liberalization is rationalized through the revamping of a colonial ideology that blames the victims, relying on the increasing distancing of worlds, and the anxiety about others created by the apparent diminishing of resources. Last, globalization has so unmistakably revealed the cost of the technologization of production that it has become unconceivable for us to speak, as Marx does in the Grundrisse, of the “civilizing influence of capital” in reference to its “universal appropriation of nature” and “its production of a stage of society ..[where].. nature becomes simply an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility, [where] it ceases to be recognized as a power in its own right; and the theoretical acknowledgement of its independent laws appears only as a stratagem designed to subdue it to human requirements, either as an object of consumption or a means of production.” (Grundrisse, quoted by McLellan : 363-4)

Just as with steel plants, computers too –their materials, their fabrication, and their operation– have a major polluting effect on the environment. The old as well the new machines are already destroying the earth, so much so that as the recent conference in Poland demonstrates “survivability” has become a political demand. [] In this case as well, so much is daily heard on the topic, that we risk repeating the obvious. But the unwillingness/inability of policy makers to change capital’s course, in the face of accumulating evidence of global warming and other catastrophes in the make, demonstrates not only that ‘capitalism is unsustainable” (Dalla Costa) but any dream of technological exodus from it is preposterous.

SECTION 1V. REPRODUCTIVE LABOR, WOMEN WORK AND GENDER RELATIONS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

It is against this background that we must ask how has reproductive work has fared in the global economy and how have the changes it has undergone shaped the sexual division of labor and the relations between women and men. Here as well the substantive difference between production and reproduction stands out. The first difference to be noticed is that while production has been restructured through a technological leap in key areas of the world economy [], no technological leap has occurred in the sphere of “housework” significantly reducing the labor socially necessary labor for the reproduction of the workforce. In the North, the personal computer has entered the reproduction of a small part of the population, shopping, socializing, acquiring information, even some form of sex-work can now be done online. Japanese companies are promoting the robotization of companionship and mating. Among their inventions are “nursebots” that gives baths to the elderly (Folbre) and the interactive lover to be assembled by the customer, crafted according to his fantasies and desires. But even in the most technologically developed countries, housework has not been reduced, instead, it has been marketized, redistributed, mostly on the shoulders of immigrant women from the South and former socialist countries. However, women still perform the bulk of it. This is because, unlike commodity production, the reproduction of human beings is to a great extent irreducible to mechanization, being the satisfaction of complex needs, in which physical and affective elements are inextricably combined, requiring a high degree of human interaction and a most labor-intensive process. This is most evident in the reproduction of children and the elderly that even in its most physical

component involves providing a sense of security, anticipating fears and desires. None of these activities is purely “material” or “immaterial,” nor can they be broken down in ways making it possible for them to be mechanized or replaced by the virtual world of online communication.

This is why, rather than being technologized, housework has been redistributed on the shoulders of different subjects, through its commercialization and globalization. As it is well documented, owing to women’s increased participation in the wage labor force, especially in the North, large quotas of housework have been taken out of the home and reorganized on a commercial basis, leading to the virtual boom of the service industry, which now constitutes the dominant economic sector from the viewpoint of wage employment. This means that more meals eaten out of the home, more clothes are washed in laundromats or by dry-cleaners, more food is bought already prepared for consumption... There has also been a reduction of reproductive activities as a result of women’s refusal of the discipline involved in marriage and child-raising.

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 1980 to 36.4 in 2006. The drop in the demographic growth has been especially high in western and eastern Europe, where in some countries (e.g., Italy and Greece) the women’s strike against procreation continues, resulting in a zero growth demographic regime that is raising much concern among policy makers and promoted immigration. There has also been a decline in the number of marriages and married couples in the US 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].

Most important, in the age of Structural Adjustment and economic reconversion, a restructuring of reproduction work has been taken place internationally, whereby much of the reproduction of the metropolitan work-forces is now performed by immigrant women a new international division of labor has been constructed on the pauperization of the populations of the Global South whereby women from Eastern Europe or Africa, Latin America, Asia perform a large quota of the metropolitan work-force, especially providing for the care of children and the elderly and for the sexual

reproduction of male workers (see Federici 1995). This has been an extremely important development from many viewpoints, but not yet sufficiently understood by feminists in its political implications: the new power relations it has produced among women, the new forms of struggle over housework which have seen domestic workers and sex workers as the protagonists in recent years, the limits of the marketization of reproduction it has exposed. While governments celebrate the “globalization of care” which enables them to reduce the investment in reproduction, it is clear that this ‘solution’ has a tremendous social cost, at the expense of the communities from which immigrant women originate.

Neither the reorganization of reproductive work on a market basis, nor the “globalization of care,” much less the technologization of reproductive work have in any way “liberated women” and eliminated the exploitation inherent to reproductive work in its present form. 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 state’s cut of investment in social services and the decentralization of industrial production the amount of domestic work paid and unpaid they perform may have actually increased, even when they have had a extradomestic job.

Three factors have lengthened women’s workday and returned work to the home.

First, women have been the shock absorbers of economic globalization, having had to compensate with their work for the deteriorating economic conditions produced by the liberalization of the world economy and the states’ increasing dis-investment in the reproduction of the workforce. This has been especially true in the countries subjected to Structural Adjustment where the state has completely cut spending for healthcare, education, infrastructure and basic necessities. In most of Africa and South America, women now must spend more time fetching water, obtaining and preparing food, and dealing with illnesses that are far more frequent at a time when 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 that hospitals and other public agencies have traditionally done has been privatized and transferred to the home, tapping women’s unpaid labor. Presently, for instance, 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 the public assistance to the elderly (with housekeeping, personal care) has been cut. House visits have been much shortened, 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 to 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, in the sense that by organizing work on a home basis, employers can make it invisible, can undermine workers’ effort to unionize, and drive down wages to a minimum. Many women choose this work in the attempt to reconcile earning an income with 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, the growth of female employment and restructuring of reproduction has not eliminated gender labor hierarchies and inequality. Despite growing male unemployment, women still earn a fraction of male wages. We have also witnessed an increase of male violence against women, triggered in part by fear their economic competition, in part by the frustration men experience not being able to fulfill their role as their families’ providers. In a context of falling wages and widespread unemployment, making it difficult for them to have a family, many men also use women’s bodies through prostitution as a means of exchange and a path of access to the world market.

This rise of violence against women is hard to quantify and its significance is better appreciated when considered in qualitative terms, from the viewpoint of the new forms violence has taken. In several countries, under the impact of Structural Adjustment, the family has broken up. Often this occurs out of mutual consent—as

one or both partners migrate(s), or both separate in search of some form of income. But many times, it is a more traumatic event, as in the face of pauperization, husbands desert their wives and their children. In parts of Africa and India, there have also been attacks on older women, who have been expelled from their homes and even murdered after being charged with witchcraft or possession by the devil. This phenomenon most likely reflects a refusal to support family members who are seen as no longer productive, in the face of diminishing resources. Other examples of violence traceable to the globalization process have been the rise of dowry murder in India, the increase in trafficking and other forms of coercion to sex work, and the increase in the murders of women. Hundreds of young women, mostly maquila workers, have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez and other Mexican towns in the borderlands with the USA, apparently victims of rape or criminal networks producing pornography and “snuff.” But it is above all the institutional violence that has escalated. This is the violence of absolute pauperization, of inhuman work conditions, of migration, in clandestine conditions. That migration can be seen as a struggle, a refusal of pauperization, a search for higher levels of struggle, cannot obliterate this fact.

Several conclusions are to 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 it cannot be a political strategy. For 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. It is also important to recognize that there are very serious limits to the extent to which reproductive work can be reduced or reorganized on a market basis. How, for example, 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 contributed to the deterioration of our health (e.g. the rise of obesity even among children) is instructive in this context. As for the commercialization of reproductive work through its redistribution on the shoulders of other women, this “solution,” only extends the housework crisis, now displaced to the families of the paid care providers, and creates new power relations among women.

What is needed is the re-opening of a collective struggle over reproduction aiming to

regain control over the material conditions of the production of human beings and 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 that is already under way in many parts of the world, and that will certainly expand in the face of the collapse of the world financial system. Governments will attempt to use the crisis to impose stiff austerity regimes on us for many years to come. 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.

As I stated, this struggle is not a utopia. 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 capitalist 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, to extend budgets, and to 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 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-appropriation and re-collectivization of reproduction that is indispensable if we are to regain control over our lives.