

46

CRISIS OF CAPITAL ACCUMULATION AND GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

A conceptual note

Faranak Miraftab

Feminist scholarship has helped us understand the intricacies and intimately interconnected nature of production and social reproduction for the accumulation of capital. With the crisis of capitalism, production and social reproduction processes are restructured to facilitate accumulation. In this chapter I outline the processes I call the global restructuring of social reproduction. Global restructuring of social reproduction refers to processes that socially, temporally and spatially reorganize workers' biophysical, social and cultural reproduction responsibilities, and create new sources of expectation and obligation for the provision of collective social reproduction. I articulate how, in this current crisis of capitalism, social reproduction is yet again restructured, now in its global scope. Parts of the social reproduction activities are outsourced to women, families and communities across the world to be performed at low social, economic and political cost to employers. In these processes of restructuring, not only production but also aspects of social reproduction are fragmented and outsourced. Women are at the center of this transnationally performed social reproduction work. This new articulation of their gendered roles within the capitalist accumulation processes requires closer examination.

The literature on gender and development in relation to processes of globalization has chiefly focused on the restructuring of production processes and how this taps into women's cheap labor to advance the accumulation of capital—a process of exploitation concealed by terms such as 'economic development.' This literature brought to light how the global restructuring of production, which fragments the work to be performed in different parts of the world, has brought women in large numbers to the industrial labor force—a process labeled as feminization of labor. In the 1970s and 1980s women, many of whom had never participated in the labor market, became targeted for manufacturing jobs that were now performed in a global assembly line. Feminization of the manufacturing labor force in particular presented an intense trend in the Global South. The footloose industries that had relocated to the Global South in search of the cheapest production costs were in particular attracted to the recruitment of women for

they were believed to have nimble fingers and docile attitudes. Female workers were more likely to accept lower wages than their male counterparts, based on the ideological conviction within patriarchal societies that women's labor is worth less, and they were less likely than male workers to organize or protest their working conditions. Feminist political economic analysis of globalization highlighted the massive and hierarchically positioned integration of women into the global labor market, a process that was lubricating capital's abilities for accumulation and lucrative surplus creation. These are processes that Mies and colleagues eloquently saw as global capital exploring and exploiting its last colony: the female labor force (see Mies et al. 1991).

In the context of globally restructured production processes, there is another aspect to this 'last colony' that needs further attention. That is the realm of social reproduction, Marxist critics have long analyzed and discussed the important role the capitalist state and patriarchal family play in the social reproduction of the labor force and in sustaining capitalism and its ability to accumulate. For capitalism to sustain processes of accumulation, the laborers' class needs to be biophysically and ideologically reproduced. The former concerns laborers and their families' cost of living, housing, food, shelter—the resources and processes needed to biophysically regenerate the labor force (Engels 1972 [1884]). The latter concerns the role played by the education system through schools and curriculum to ideologically socialize laborers to social relations that sustain or perpetuate capitalist production (Bowles and Gintis 1977; Willis 1982). Beyond items provisioned within the family, there are also items key to the social reproduction of the working class that need to be provisioned for collective use by the state—Castells (1983) calls these collective consumption items. These are basic services and resources such as roads, water and sewage that are consumed collectively by the working class in the city. The failure of the state to provide these items intensifies the class struggle in the city and catalyzes the grassroots movements around access to neighborhood and urban services (Castells 1983). Feminist scholarship contributes to this debate by articulating how specifically the patriarchal gender ideologies facilitate the work of social reproduction within the family and at large in the city and neighborhoods.

Since the 1980s, this order of relationships between the state, capital and social reproduction has undergone significant stress and reconfiguration, what feminist scholars recognize as a crisis of social reproduction most heavily weighing on women. They credit the crisis to two related processes: structural adjustment policies and neo-liberal reforms (Lawson and Klak 1990; Smith 2002; Katz 2001). They argue that the state withdrawal or redefinition of its role in the provisioning of social care, and city and state support for social reproduction, has diminished and precipitated a crisis of social reproduction (see contributions in Benería and Feldman 1992; Miraftab 2010; Chant 2010). Capitalism, feminists argue, seeks to resolve the crisis by privatizing social reproduction into the domestic realm of unpaid women's activities (Bakker and Gill 2003; Katz 2001; Kunz 2010). It is the free labor of care women provide not only to their families in the domestic realm but also to their un-serviced neighborhoods and towns in the public realm (referred to as municipal housekeeping) that makes social reproduction of low-income populations possible (Miraftab 2004; Mitchell et al. 2004). For a working class that is healthy and able to return to work each day, an army of women invest their free labor not only in domestic chores to care for their family but also in collective chores for the sake of the municipality and to care for their neighborhoods.

Feminist sociologists further articulate the transnational dimensions of such reorganization of social reproduction. They highlight the contemporary version of an old and dirty system of care that was performed by enslaved and domesticized women and wet nurses who, deprived of their own offspring and families, cared for and raised the children of colonizers and slave

masters (Hontagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Hontagneu-Sotelo 2001; Arat-Koc 2006). In its contemporary provisioning, care is structured hierarchically and displaced along a global chain, from service provided to less affluent families to those who work for the more wealthy (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Parreñas 2001; Benería 2008). This chain of care could take place within national boundaries—for example, rural–urban trans-local care—or across national boundaries through transnational care.

The literature that explores the transnational dimensions of social reproduction in capitalism, however, has paid less attention to how the global provisioning of care integrates with the global restructuring of production. I argue that the restructuring of production processes has involved certain restructuring of social reproduction that is precisely connected to the ability of global capital to deal with its crisis of accumulation. To accumulate, capitalism has had to rely on restructuring social reproduction processes and practices of households, some within and others across national borders. This process, I argue, involves fragmenting the lifecycle and outsourcing segments of social reproduction work to the communities of immigrants' origin—to communities elsewhere, where the cost of social reproduction is cheaper and can be performed at a lower cost or for free by families and women. I conceptualize this as a closely interlinked global restructuring of production and social reproduction. In this analytic framework, we notice that not only production but also aspects of social reproduction are fragmented and outsourced. Let me explain.

The globalization literature has comprehensively documented instances where firms outsource part or all of their production offshore in order to reduce costs. For some industries such as food and agriculture, or jobs like commercial or domestic services and care work, outsourcing or relocation offshore is not a viable option. For these place-based jobs, it is the laborers who relocate and temporally and spatially reorganize their biophysical, social and cultural reproduction. I argue that industries and services that did not cross the border to tap into the cheap labor of female and male workers and their families in the Global South, by hiring migrant laborers they are still tapping into the unpaid or underpaid labor of women and families back in migrant workers' communities of origin. Migrant workers' families, with women at their center, contribute to this accumulation process through strategies that fragment the worker's lifecycle and allow certain segments of their social reproduction to be performed in distinct geographic locations. For that, they temporally and spatially reorganize social reproduction work.

For instance, let's take meat processing, an industry known for its reliance on a migrant and minority labor force. These jobs are at the same time more hazardous and lower paid than other manufacturing jobs in the US—conditions that explain the industry's high labor turnover rates and high incentive to recruit among immigrants. My ethnographic study of a meat packing town in Illinois, for example, reveals that, while production is performed in the meat processing plant in the Midwest of the US, the social reproduction for segments of the migrant laborers' life cycle is performed in remote communities by their trans-local or transnational families. Namely for many of these workers, the care at the beginning and the end of their lifecycle takes place in their communities of origin. For many of the Mexican migrant workers, for example, it is the Mexican state, as dysfunctional, corrupt and autocratic as it might be, that takes care of childbirth, plus the limited health care or education before the Mexican children reach an age to journey away to sell their labor to US employers at the most productive moments of their lifecycle. Since many of these workers have no access to social security or health care in the US, they return to Mexico when no longer able to work. In other words, the beginning and the end of the lifecycle rely on practices and processes that take place abroad.

An army of people, with women at their center, are involved in and contribute to the trans-local social reproduction processes of the immigrant worker (Parreñas 2001; Hochschild

2000). These range from family members nursing children and caring for family and elderly immigrants, to neighbors caring for the property immigrants left behind. Women involved in these processes include not only female spouses of male immigrants but aunts, grandmothers, sisters and daughters of female and male immigrants that act as the protagonists of immigrants' transnational and trans-local families. For migrant workers to remain in these high-risk, low-paid jobs, parts of processes we know as social reproduction are outsourced to extended families, to malfunctioning or disfunctioning schools, governments, churches, NGOs and a whole industry of so-called 'development programs' back home. These smooth the accumulation of capital and insure the supply of workers 'willing' and able to sell their labor power to do hazardous work at low cost.

Biophysical reproduction of immigrant workers and the free work that their transnational families invest in the care of their children or their injured, old or tired bodies is only one part of the cheapening of the labor force's social reproduction. The promise of a place in their home country to which they will return with their savings and be secure for life is an important force in this story. The imagination of an 'elsewhere' where a person would 'be set for life' has a material power and exchange value that needs to be taken into account. This imagination can make a wage that is unviable for one worker viable for another. Imagination and/or reproduction of an alternative place, a place for retreat or, ultimately, retirement, is an important aspect of this process. 'Home' here as a 'physical and social infrastructure' to go back to hence becomes an important asset for the immigrant worker. Imagined or real, home community as an alternative place that workers create or dream of creating becomes an asset that distinguishes the viability of wages across workers' groups.

In this process, family members who take care of the migrant workers' children or elderly back home need to be recognized as subsidizers of the industry in places of production.¹ The trans-locally and transnationally restructured families of migrant workers engage in complex practices, processes and imaginations that compensate for the low-wage and hazardous work the industry offers. Like outsourcing of production, I argue, social reproduction also is fragmented and outsourced, to be performed by families, neighbors and institutions abroad.

The important point here is to recognize that the global restructuring for social reproduction meshes intimately with the restructuring taking place in the realm of production. In other words, dispossession and displacement are two processes that work together in the new global order of labor. Take the case example above. Policies such as NAFTA and free trade produce a migrant labor force by devastating their prior forms of livelihood. Mexican farmers who no longer could compete in the 'free' market for sale of their products, be it milk, corn or beans, face neoliberal policies of *ejido*² privatization that promote the sale of their previously communally-owned land. Through this transaction, the former *ejidatario* earns a small amount of cash upon sale of the *ejido* share but before long joins the army of surplus labor willing to take jobs anywhere, be it a footloose industry within Mexico or across the border in the meat processing plants of the Midwestern US. The dispossession of this migrant labor force is a precondition of their displacement as is the forming of transnational or trans-local families that restructure their social reproduction work. The two processes that restructure production and social reproduction are interconnected. They join forces to address the crisis of accumulation that the meat industry began facing three decades ago.

In closing, I would like to stress the significance of conceptualizing interconnected restructurings of production and reproduction. This is important in many ways for gender and development scholarship. First, it brings to light that as women are increasingly incorporated into the labor force it is still other women within their familial and social network who take over the work of social reproduction for them, whether trans-locally in villages or other towns

of origin or transnationally across the border. Second, it brings to light the multidirectional flow of resources between communities of origin and destination as places where the activities associated with social reproduction and production are performed respectively. It allows us to recognize that, unlike the narratives of globalization where workforce migration facilitates unidirectional resource flows from north to south as in remittances, the contributed resources flow from south to north. Existing literature, however, predominantly explores the social reproduction-immigration nexus in terms of the role immigration plays in the development of immigrants' communities of origin, and not the other way around.³ Gillian Hart's (2006) notion of understanding the world relationally and Harvey's (2005) articulation of accumulation by dispossession are helpful here in understanding the multi-directionality of resource flows—not only remittances immigrants send home but also subsidies their trans-local and transnational families provide to migrant wage earners in the Global North.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, we can expect the restructuring of social reproduction to become more complex over time. We need a more sophisticated analytic optic to see the connections (in this case between production and social reproduction) and multidirectionalities (in this case in respect to the flow of resources across communities of origin and destination). This chapter is a humble effort towards that goal.

Notes

- 1 In classic rural urban studies De Janvry (1981) wrote about rural families subsidizing urban workers by visits they made home to their families, and food and care items they benefited from in the rural areas.
- 2 *Ejido* is an Aztec system of communal landownership reintroduced and institutionalized as a component of the Mexican land reform programs of the revolutionary governments, 1911–1934. *Ejidors* were by and large dismantled by the neoliberal privatization policies of President Salinas in the 1990s that amended Article 27 of the Constitution in ways to allow privatization of communally owned *ejidos*.
- 3 Exceptions include the work of Klooster (2005) on how Mexican families subsidize the cheap reproduction of laborers in cities and commercial agriculture in both Mexico and the US.

References

- Arat-Koc, S. (2006) 'Whose social reproduction? Transnational motherhood and challenges to feminist political economy,' in M. Luxton and K. Bezanson (eds.), *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism*, McGill: Queens University Press.
- Bakker, I. and Gill, S. (2003) 'Global political economy and social reproduction,' in I. Bakker and S. Gill (eds.), *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benería, L. (2008) 'The crisis of care, international migration, and public policy,' *Feminist Economics* 14(3): 1–21.
- Benería, L. and Feldman, S. (eds.) (1992) *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty and Women's Work*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1977) *Schooling Capitalist America: Education Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*, New York: Basic Books.
- Chant, S. (2010) 'Gendered poverty across space and time: introduction and overview,' in S. Chant (ed.), *The International Handbook on Gender and Poverty: Concepts, Research and Policy*, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, pp. 1–28.
- Castells, M. (1983) *The City and the Grassroots*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Janvry, A. (1981) *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. and Hochschild, A. (2003) 'Introduction,' in B. Ehrenreich and A. Hochschild (eds.) *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers*, New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Engels, F. (1972 [1884]) *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, New York: Pathfinder Press.

- Hart, G. (2006) 'Denaturalizing dispossession: critical ethnography in the age of resurgent imperialism,' *Antipode* 38(5): 977–1004.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hochschild, A.R. (2000) 'Global care chains and emotional surplus value,' in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds.), *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, London: Jonathon Cape.
- Hontagneu-Sotelo, P. (2001) *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadow of Affluence*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hontagneu-Sotelo, P. and Avila, E. (1997) "'I'm here, but I'm there": the meanings of Latina transnational motherhood,' *Gender and Society* 11: 548–571.
- Katz, C. (2001) 'Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction,' *Antipode* 33: 709–728.
- Klooster, D.J. (2005) 'Producing social nature in the Mexican countryside,' *Cultural Geographies* 12(3): 321–344.
- Kunz, R. (2010) 'The crisis of social reproduction in rural Mexico: challenging the re-privatization of social reproduction,' *Review of International Political Economy* 17(5): 913–945.
- Lawson, V. and Klak, T. (1990) 'Conceptual linkages in the study of production and reproduction in Latin America,' *Economic Geography* 66: 310–327.
- Mies, M., Bennholdt-Thomsen, V. and Von Werlhof Mies, C. (1991) *Women: The Last Colony*, London: Zed Books.
- Mitchell, K., Marston, S.A. and Katz, C. (2004) 'Life's work: an introduction, review and critique,' in K. Mitchell, S.A. Marston and C. Katz (eds.), *Life Works: Geographies of Social Reproduction*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 1–26.
- Mirafshar, F. (2004) 'Neoliberalism and casualization of public sector services: the case of waste collection services in Cape Town, South Africa,' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28(4): 874–892.
- (2010) 'Contradictions in the gender-poverty nexus: reflections on the privatisation of social reproduction and urban informality in South African townships,' in S. Chant (ed.), *The International Handbook on Gender and Poverty: Concepts, Research and Policy*, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Parreñas, R.S. (2001) *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Smith, N. (2002) 'New globalism, new urbanism: gentrification as global urban strategy,' *Antipode* 34(3): 427–450.
- Willis, P. (1982) *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, New York: Columbia University Press.