CRISIS OF CAPITAL ACCUMULATION AND GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

A conceptual note

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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. 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 these gendered roles within the capital 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 larger numbers into the industrial labor force—a process labeled as feminization of labor. In the 1970s and 1980s, 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 labor. They were believed to have nimble fingers and dexterous 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 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. There 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 played 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 grassroot 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 Khat 1990; Smith 2002; Kutz 2001). They argue that the state withdrawal or redefinition of its role in the provision of social care, and city and state support for social reproduction, has diminished and precipitated a crisis of social reproduction (see contributions in Denier and Feldhaus 1992; Mirafzal 2010; Charr 2010). Capitalism, feminists argue, seeks to resolve the crisis by reorganizing social reproduction into the domestic realm of unpaid women’s activities (Bakker and Gill 2003; Kutz 2001; Kutz 2010). It is the free labor of care workers who provide not only to their own 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 (Mirafzal 2004; Mitchell et al. 2004). For a working class that is already 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 men nurses who, deprived of their own offspring and families, cared for and raised the children of colonizers and slave
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2009). 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 also, 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 the process that we know as social reproduction are outsourced to extended families, to non-functioning or functioning schools, governments, churches, NGOs and a whole industry of so-called 'development programs' back home. These smooth the accumulation of 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 homely country to which they will return with their savings and 'prize' for life is an important part of the keeping of the labor force's social reproduction. The promise of a place in their industry 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 unavailable for one worker viable for another. Imaginations 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 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 subsidies of the industry in places of production. The practices, processes and imaginaries that compensate for the low-wage and hazardous work are outsourced, to be performed by families, neighbors and institutions abroad.

The important point here is to recognize that the global restructuring of social reproduction matches 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 a migrant labor force by devaluing their prior forms of livelihood. Mexican farmers who no more needful policies of g/naa privatization that promote the sale of their land and other forms of wealth offers. Like outsourcing of production, I argue, social reproduction also is fragmented and outsourced, to be performed by families, neighbors and institutions abroad.

In closing, I would like to stress the significance of conceptualizing interconnected social reproduction and restructuring of production and reproduction. This is important in many ways for gender and gender 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. 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 substituting urban workers by wage they made home to their families, and food and care item they benefited from in the rural areas.

2 Epida in an Ancient system of communal landownership reintroduced and institutionalized as a component of the Mexican land reform programs of the revolutionary governments, 1911-1934. Epida were by and large dismantled by the neoliberal privatization policies of President Schmi in the 1990s that amended Article 27 of the Constitution in ways to allow privatization of communally owned epidas.

3 Exceptions include the work of Klooster (2005) on how Mexican families substitute the cheap reproduction of laborers in cities and commercial agriculture in both Mexico and the US.

References


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