

“Precarious Labor and Reproductive Work”

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Another criticism I have against the precarious labor theory is that it presents itself as gender neutral. It assumes that the reorganization of production is doing away with the power relations and hierarchies that exist within the working class on the basis of race, gender and age, and therefore it is not concerned with addressing these power relations; it does not have the theoretical and political tools to think about how to tackle them. There is no discussion in Negri, Virno and Hardt of how the wage has been and continues to be used to organize these divisions and how therefore we must approach the wage struggle so that it does not become an instrument of further divisions, but instead can help us undermined them. To me this is one of the main issues we must address in the movement.

The concept of the “Multitude” suggests that all divisions within the working class are gone or are no longer politically relevant. But this is obviously an illusion. Some feminists have pointed out that precarious labor is not a new phenomenon. Women always had a precarious relation to waged labor. But this critique goes far enough.

My concern is that the Negrian theory of precarious labor ignores, bypasses, one of the most important contributions of feminist theory and struggle, which is the redefinition of work, and the recognition of women’s unpaid reproductive labor as a key source of capitalist accumulation. In redefining housework as WORK, as not a personal service but the work that produces and reproduces labor power, feminists have uncovered a new crucial ground of exploitation that Marx and Marxist theory completely ignored. All of the important political insights contained in those analysis are now brushed aside as if they were of no relevance to an understanding of the present organization of production.

There is a faint echo of the feminist analysis –a lip service paid to it– in the inclusion of so called “affective labor” in the range of work activities qualifying as “immaterial labor.” However, the best Negri and Hardt can come up with is the case of women who work as flight attendants or in the food service industry, whom they call “affective laborers,” because they are expected to smile at their customers.

But what is “affective labor?” And why is it included in the theory of immaterial labor? I imagine it is included because –presumably– it does not produce tangible products but “states of being,” that is, it produces feelings. Again, to put it crudely, I think this is a bone thrown to feminism, which now is a perspective that has some social backing and can no longer be ignored.

But the concept of “affective labor” strips the feminist analysis of housework of all its demystifying power. In fact, it brings reproductive work back into the world of mystification, suggesting that reproducing people is just a matter of making producing “emotions,” “feelings,” It used to be called a “labor of love;” Negri and Hardt instead have discovered “affection.”

The feminist analysis of the function of the sexual division of labor, the function of gender hierarchies, the analysis of the way capitalism has used the wage to mobilize women's work in the reproduction of the labor force—all of this is lost under the label of “affective labor.”

That this feminist analysis is ignored in the work of Negri and Hardt confirms my suspicions that this theory expresses the interests of a select group of workers, even though it presumes to speak to all workers, all merged in the great caldron of the Multitude. In reality, the theory of precarious and immaterial labor speaks to the situation and interests of workers working at the highest level of capitalistic technology. Its disinterest in reproductive labor and its presumption that all labor forms a common hides the fact that it is concerned with the most privileged section of the working class. This means it is not a theory we can use to build a truly self-reproducing movement.

For this task the lesson of the feminist movement is still crucial today. Feminists in the seventies tried to understand the roots of women's oppression, of women's exploitation and gender hierarchies. They describe them as stemming from a unequal division of labor forcing women to work for the reproduction of the working class. This analysis was basis of a radical social critique, the implications of which still have to be understood and developed to their full potential.

When we said that housework is actually work for capital, that although it is unpaid work it contributes to the accumulation of capital, we established something extremely important about the nature of capitalism as a system of production. *We established that capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor, that it not built exclusively or primarily on contractual relations; that the wage relation hides the unpaid, slave -like nature of so much of the work upon which capital accumulation is premised.*

Also, when we said that housework is the work that reproduces not just “life,” but “labor-power,” we began to separate two different spheres of our lives and work that seemed inextricably connected. We became able to conceive of a fight against housework now understood as the reproduction of labor-power, the reproduction of the most important commodity capital has: the worker's “capacity to work,” the worker's capacity to be exploited. In other words, by recognizing that what we call “reproductive labor” is a terrain of accumulation and therefore a terrain of exploitation, we were able to also see reproduction as a terrain of struggle, and, very important, *conceive of an anti-capitalist struggle against reproductive labor that would not destroy ourselves or our communities.*

How do you struggle over/against reproductive work? It is not the same as struggling in the traditional factory setting, against for instance the speed of an assembly line, because at the other end of your struggle there are people not things. Once we say that reproductive work is a terrain of struggle, we have to first immediately confront the question of how we struggle on this terrain without destroying the people you care for. This is a problem mothers as well as teachers and nurses, know very well.

This is why it is crucial to be able to make a separation between the creation of human beings and our reproduction of them as labor-power, as future workers, who therefore have to be trained, not necessarily according to their needs and desires, to be disciplined and regimented in a particular fashion.

It was important for feminists to see, for example, that much housework and child rearing is work of policing our children, so that they will conform to a particular work discipline. We thus began to see that by refusing broad areas of work, we not only could liberate ourselves but could also liberate our children. We saw that our struggle was not at the expense of the people we cared for, though we may skip preparing some meals or cleaning the floor. Actually our refusal opened the way for their refusal and the process of their liberation.

Once we saw that rather than reproducing life we were expanding capitalist accumulation and began to define reproductive labor as work for capital, we also opened the possibility of a process of re-composition among women.

Think for example of the prostitute movement, which we now call the “sex workers” movement. In Europe the origins of this movement must be traced back to 1975 when a number of sex workers in Paris occupied a church, in protest against a new zoning regulation which they saw as an attack on their safety. There was a clear connection between that struggle, which soon spread throughout Europe and the United States, and the feminist movement’s re-thinking and challenging of housework. The ability to say that sexuality for women has been work has led to a whole new way of thinking about sexual relationships, including gay relations. Because of the feminist movement and the gay movement we have begun to think about the ways in which capitalism has exploited our sexuality, and made it “productive.”

In conclusion, it was a major breakthrough that women would begin to understand unpaid labor and the production that goes on in the home as well as outside of the home as the reproduction of the work force. This has allowed a re-thinking of every aspect of everyday life — child-raising, relationships between men and women, homosexual relationships, sexuality in general— in relation to capitalist exploitation and accumulation.

Creating Self-Reproducing Movements

As every aspect of everyday life was re-understood in its potential for liberation and exploitation, we saw the many ways in which women and women’s struggles are connected. We realized the possibility of “alliances” we had not imagined and by the same token the possibility of bridging the divisions that have been created among women, also on the basis of age, race, sexual preference.

We can not build a movement that is sustainable without an understanding of these power relations. We also need to learn from the feminist analysis of reproductive work because no movement can survive unless it is concerned with the reproduction of its members. This is one of the weaknesses of the social justice movement in the US.

We go to demonstrations, we build events, and this becomes the peak of our struggle. The analysis of how we reproduce these movements, how we reproduce ourselves is not at the center of movement organizing. It has to be. We need to go back to the historical tradition of working class organizing “mutual aid” and rethink that experience, not necessarily because we want to reproduce it, but to draw inspiration from it for the present.

We need to build a movement that puts on its agenda its own reproduction. The anti-capitalist struggle has to create forms of support and has to have the ability to collectively build forms of reproduction.

We have to ensure that we do not only confront capital at the time of the demonstration, but that we confront it collectively at every moment of our lives. What is happening internationally proves that only when you have these forms of collective reproduction, when you have communities that reproduce themselves collectively, you have struggles that are moving in a very radical way against the established order, as for example the struggle of indigenous people in Bolivia against water privatization or in Ecuador against the oil companies' destruction of indigenous land.

I want to close by saying if we look at the example of the struggles in Oaxaca, Bolivia, and Ecuador, we see that the most radical confrontations are not created by the intellectual or cognitive workers or by virtue of the internet's common. What gave strength to the people of Oaxaca was the profound solidarity that tied them with each other—a solidarity for instance that made indigenous people from every part of the state to come to the support of the “maestros,” whom they saw as members of their communities. In Bolivia too, the people who reversed the privatization of water had a long tradition of communal struggle. Building this solidarity, understanding how we can overcome the divisions between us, is a task that must be placed on the agenda. In conclusion then, the main problem of precarious labor theory is that it does not give us the tools to overcome the way we are being divided. But these divisions, which are continuously recreated, are our fundamental weakness with regard to our capacity to resist exploitation and create an equitable society.