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Feminism and Marxism

Thinking and acting from Marxism today - Feminist proposals for a theoretical and strategic rearmament

- Features - Feminism -

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The characteristics of the current crisis, as well as the practical and theoretical course of recent years, have allowed a fruitful dialogue between two of the central theoretical currents of the last two centuries, feminism and Marxism. With a past history of marriages and divorces it seems that in recent years we are witnessing their reconciliation. In the past decade, the literature that is indebted to both currents has been rediscovering, as well as overcoming, some of the historical debates that have marked their relationship. Undoubtedly, the mass growth of the feminist movement has contributed to this. And, on the other hand, it is not surprising that during recent years there has been a renewal of academic and activist interest in Marxism: university seminars proliferate, the works of classical thinkers have been reissued and so on.

The global disorder and the experiences of the systemic crisis we have experienced for more than a decade (economic crisis, crisis of political legitimacy, crisis of social reproduction and crisis of the limits of the planet) have generated a need to understand that cannot be covered by partial analyses but requires a theory of totality. Marxism then appears as that old great truth that makes its way through the proclaimed death of grand narratives to demonstrate, once again, its contemporary relevance and precision as an analytical tool.

Rather than adopting an exhaustive approach, which of course would exceed the possibilities of this article, we have decided to focus on some of the nodes that we consider central and strategic to theoretically and politically rearming right now: debates about reproduction, work and class, as well as taking on how we understand the role of the feminist movement, together with environmental struggles, in rebuilding a new emancipatory horizon amid capitalist chaos.

The debates about reproduction

In the 1970s, feminists of the second wave, raised with the maxim that the personal is political, began to focus on the issue of reproduction. It was a complex moment, marked by the oil crisis and fierce attacks against the conquests won by the working class in the post-war period. In this framework of development and subsequent consolidation of a new type of capitalism (neoliberalism) there was a substantial transformation of the labour market, the role of the state and the distribution of time and work, with a consequent impact on the mechanisms of gender identity construction. If we put the focus on the countries of the global North, where the feminists of the second wave were acting and writing, we find the following cross-linked phenomena:

- The destruction of employment in sectors traditionally occupied by men, such as mining or heavy industry.
- An increase in the rate of exploitation and a generalized reduction of wages, the so-called family wage which allowed certain sectors of the class to cover the vital needs of the male worker and his family, keeping the wife in the role of housewife, disappearing almost completely.
- The large-scale entry of women into the labour market, seeking to complement the reduced income of the husband with an auxiliary and supplementary salary or access their own life and economic independence.
- The rejection, by non-negligible sectors of women, of the burden imposed by domestic tasks, seeking to develop personally through formulas traditionally more linked to male identity construction: professional career, economic success and so on.

With the path opened by all the theoretical production already carried out by the second wave around the

politicization and social problematization of gender roles, personal relationships and the sexual issue, a series of debates occurred that we can place between the debate about domestic work and the problematization of reproduction. These debates were based on several findings that have now become part of feminist common sense, but fifty years ago they were only beginning to be sketched: that unpaid work done by women in homes is essential for social survival, that the equalization of work and employment prevents the politicizing of domestic work, and that the articulation of the political struggle solely through wage-labour conflict leaves out important parts of the class, mainly women. Broadly speaking, two concerns motivated these reflections.

On the one hand, trying to discern who was the beneficiary of the unpaid work performed by women and who, therefore, was the main enemy. For Christine Delphy and the so-called materialist feminists, it was men who economically exploited women through the marriage contract, thus configuring a mode of autonomous domestic production of the capitalist mode of production (Delphy, 1976). However, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and other Marxist-trained feminists originating from autonomist currents argued that the real beneficiaries of domestic work were employers and the state (Dalla Costa, 2009: 21-52). Although both positions advocated the construction of an autonomous feminist movement, the political difference was fundamental: the materialists conceptualized women as a class, they pointed out patriarchal exploitation as an experience that unified their lives and understood the struggle against patriarchy and against the exploiting class (men) as the first task; Marxists recognized the differential factor of the social class in the concrete experience of gender oppression and, in addition to defending the autonomy of the feminist movement, they also opted for the participation of women in the class struggle (Pérez Orozco, 2014: 49 -73).

The second concern, fundamentally for those feminists who defined themselves as Marxists and who agreed to articulate domestic work within the capitalist system as a whole, had to do with the characterization of such work: was it or was it not productive of commodity labour power? Or, does domestic work produce (surplus) value? We are not going to go into the details of this debate, which eventually became entangled in somewhat unsuccessful theoretical disquisitions, but it is useful to refer to it because it allows us to understand how Marxist feminists were trying to expand Marx's analysis to include the domestic sphere, conceiving the work of women in the home as an object of specific critical study.

The most interesting and theoretically sound contribution would come a few years later, with the publication of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women. Toward a Unitary Theory* by Lise Vogel in 1983. Vogel based herself on the considerations that Iris Young had made a couple of years earlier in pointing out how the study of patriarchal relations as a different system, although deeply interconnected with capitalism, allowed Marxism to keep intact its analysis of production relations while treating women's oppression as a simple addition. Against this, Young defended the need to conceptualize gender differentiation as a nuclear element of capitalist formation, making an effort to develop a unitary theory of capitalist production and reproduction (Young, 1981). This was the task taken on by Lise Vogel, with two fundamental contributions that are at the base of two theoretical developments of current feminism.

In the first place, Vogel breaks with functionalist explanations that conceive domestic work as strictly necessary for the reproduction of capitalism and argues that the origin of gender oppression under capital is not the sexual division of labour, but the necessity of ensuring social reproduction. This theory of social reproduction is currently being developed with great insight by Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) among others. Secondly, responding to the debate of previous years, Vogel argues that domestic or reproductive work is not a generator of (surplus) value since it does not produce exchange values, but use values. This does not detract from its social importance, but allows us to understand that, in some way, reproductive work is a special type of work with its own characteristics. And in this evolution of the term (domestic work/reproductive work) we arrive at one of the fundamental concepts of the current known as feminist economics: care work.

Feminist economics takes up, consciously or unconsciously, Vogel's finding that domestic work is a different type of work from that which, performing apparently the same activities and tasks, produces exchange values that are

offered in the market. What differentiates the work of a cook in a restaurant from what that same woman can do at home? The answer given by feminist economics is the following: although both are reproductive work, the second is also care work. Care work is understood as an activity that is defined precisely from the relationship and the emotional implication that it entails; when this same activity is carried out in the market, it loses this implication and goes on to incorporate a different type of human relationship (the commodity one). Feminist economics redefines the capital-life conflict and points to carers as the guarantors of social reproduction. Its political commitment, as we will see later, is to push towards a reorganization of work and time that breaks with the dynamics of accumulation and puts life at the centre.

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Almost five decades of debates about reproduction have established some ideas, albeit simplified and devoid of theoretical complexity, in feminist common sense: the social importance of women's unpaid work, the recourse to it in times of crisis, its connection with female precariousness and with the specific poverty of women and so on. All this is what has come to the fore with feminist strikes: the vindication of the importance of the social role and the awareness of the political power it grants us. It is not a question of simple sectoral mobilizations, but of processes that, in their development, are transforming and updating the specific conceptions of work and class.

Updating the concept of work

As we have seen, under neoliberalism, work has undergone a great transformation on a world scale that of course is not homogeneous on an international or regional scale. In the global North, however, that transformation has been marked in recent decades by the phenomenon of the so-called feminization of the workforce, commonly used to explain two different phenomena but often occur simultaneously. On the one hand, it has been used to explain the massive entry of women into the labour market, with the consequences already mentioned and their effect on the debates of the feminism of the 1970s. But, on the other hand, the concept of the feminization of the labour force has also been used to explain the process by which the conditions that working class women have historically experienced are generalized to broad layers of the wage mass beyond them. Temporality, high turnover, lack of stability, complementary wages, sectors with a practical absence of formal employment rights, informal work and

much more are the conditions that today shape the organization of employment in our society. Of course, this large-scale process, in addition to configuring the forms of exploitation, is also reconfiguring the conditions of reproductive work and, in general, living conditions and their sustainability.

These considerations have both theoretical and strategic implications. These forms of work, far from being a pre-capitalist by-product or a by-product of previous capitalist forms, are constitutive forms of a capitalism that always generates margins. Temporary work, formal or informal, among other formulas, constitutes an area of exploitation that some will consider to be in the margins of the labour market which today however has become the rule that dismantles the exception. At the same time, there has been a process of commodification of activities that were previously in non-labour spheres, although they always constituted work in a broad sense, such as the care of the elderly or procreation itself. Whether the margins are already the rule or because the reproductive is in the commodification phase, we can verify that the artificial separation between the productive and the reproductive, as well as the border between employment and care work, is diluted. Perhaps this is what has allowed a theoretical expansion in contemporary Marxism of the concept of work that for a long time was dominated by the most economist biases.

In addition to the theoretical implications, these considerations may also have strategic consequences. Thus, we argue that feminist strikes and women's strikes can be considered a central experience for thinking about the organization, not only of women, but of the bulk of the working class. Judith Carreras (2018) referred in a recent article to a relevant quote from Mariana Montanelli: "Feminist perspectives constitute a privileged point of view for analysing the conditions of contemporary exploitation." We could add that they also constitute a privileged point of view for experiencing new forms of organization and struggle.

After decades of pact and concertation trades unionism, the feminist movement is allowing a process of democratization of the strike tool that is likely to have long-term consequences. The last two 8 March have allowed a not insignificant layer of workers to make and organize a strike, in many cases, for the first time in their life. Self-confidence, empowerment, accumulated experience and networks established by thousands of women can be a qualitative leap for the whole class that can only be evaluated over time. The other element of democratization is the organization of the strike in jobs traditionally forgotten by reformist unionism, such as care or consumption, which however did have importance in the workers' movement of the beginning of the 20th century: the strikes around the high cost of living or rents are a good example. In this sense, the democratization of the strike allows us to experience this tool in the margins of the labour market that we mentioned earlier and reinforces the idea that these activities are also and above all work.

Updating the concept of class

The return of the class question links to everything we have been saying, however, contains ghosts that must be tackled by incorporating appreciations of the concept from critical Marxism, but also from anti-racist thinking and feminism. If not, we will find ourselves reproducing sterile debates about the mythical, absolute and unquestionable subject of the class struggle, of doubtful material or historical existence, that prove to be much more aesthetic fetish than an understanding of social dynamics and which inevitably end up confronting real struggles. But if we understand, on the contrary, that the class is always the result of the process of struggles and that it does not exist in isolation but in terms of its relationship of antagonism with the other class (or that the class struggle precedes the class and that class and class consciousness are always the last and not the first phases of the real historical process –Thompson, 1984) the possibilities that open up are multiple and fruitful.

The historical or heuristic class formulation proposed by Thompson, in addition to differentiating itself from a tremendously problematic vision which is static in its political application, fits with the ideas developed by social

reproduction theorists and allows us to understand one of the fundamental aspects of Marxist feminism with which we identify: the view that class is articulated in specific ways in concrete reality, that the accumulation processes are deployed through mechanisms of gender, race and so on, and that these phenomena cannot be separated from the experience of dispossession because they constitute their own nucleus. There is no capitalism blind to gender or race, just as there is no degendered or deracialized class. The material perspective contributed by feminism thus allows us to understand the way in which the different class experiences (exploited or exploitative) are embodied in concrete and historically situated bodies, providing us with a global vision of the development of the class struggle.

It is evident that this interpretation separates us from those theories that, also proclaiming themselves Marxist, start from a static conception of class, given a priori of historical experience, where the addition of gender or race distorts or modifies the original mythical subject. But on the other hand, what we propose here also delimits us from postmodern readings of intersectionality that are limited to “adding oppressions”, keeping them as distinct systems that intersect or intermingle in space (Ferguson and McNally, 2017). Integrating phenomena such as racism or hetero-sexism into a unitary analytical framework allows us not only to affirm, following Himani Bannerji (2005), that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, but also to focus on the influence that this has in the historical construction of class.

The enormous expansion of the feminist movement experienced in recent years around the world and the discussion about the emergence or not of a third wave have put debates around the class at the centre. How does this mass movement relate to the class struggle, some voices ask? We argue that this question is poorly posed, as part of the static notion of class and is not able to understand feminism as more than an external additive. The use of the strike tool, the centrality of the struggles for social reproduction, the aspiration to understand the processes of production and reproduction as an integrated whole, and its functioning as a vector of politicization and mass radicalization, make this third feminist wave itself a process of class subjectivation. And this is so because worldwide the feminist movement is redefining antagonisms and becoming a feminist class struggle (Arruzza, 2018). The potential of women to fulfil this role in the current historical moment does not depend on any essential identity but is part of our role in the process of social reproduction, which makes our interests coincide with the interests of humanity (Facet, 2017).

To those who question this evidence based on the supposed partiality or unusualness of the phenomenon, we feminists say that “no model can provide what the true class formation should be at a certain stage of the process. No actual class formation in history is more true or more real than another, and class defines itself in its actual occurrence” (Thompson, 1984: 38-39).

Notes for an emancipatory rearmament

It is still true that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, which is nothing more than a very graphic way of expressing the collapse of an emancipatory horizon after the defeat of the twentieth century. However, eco-socialist reflections, together with feminist experiences and reflections, begin to reconstruct an emancipatory horizon. A distant horizon that maintains continuities and discontinuities with the revolutionary and emancipatory experiences of the twentieth century and also constitutes a terrain of dispute with fractions of the ruling classes that seek to build their own agenda in feminist and environmentalist keys in an attempt to suture the crisis of neoliberal governance.

Aware of the dangers of neoliberal attempts, it is necessary to trace which elements have more potential in the new cycle of mobilizations of recent years. To reflect on how feminism is recuperating slogans such as the division of labours - this time in the plural - the drastic reduction of the workday linked to the socialization of reproductive work, rethinking what are the socially necessary jobs, but also what economic activities should cease to be destructive to

people or the planet and so on. Given capitalist irrationality and the waste of resources and human energy that this generates, we must rely on a reorganization of the work in an eco-social and feminist key. This is a fundamental task in the phase we are in. The processes of accumulation and the crisis of neoliberal governance have opened a new, virulent and in many cases violent cycle that seeks to redefine the mechanisms of exploitation, domination and oppression. Disputing that redefinition will be key to its outcome.

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