

Reproduction as Paradigm

Elements for a Feminist Political Economy

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Contents

On reproduction	3
Regarding ongoing debates	4
On value	4
On relations and their forms	6

This text is not a public announcement, but rather a means of signifying the times of injustice inscribed in our bodies, experiences, and relations, that is the anthropology produced by neoliberalism into our daily lives. We are convinced that feminism can offer tools for everyone, opening new perspectives, starting from ourselves but moving towards a grand scale. Feminism as only women thinking about and for women is no longer powerful. We are considering the world as it is arranged in the reality of our lives and experiences in order to launch a common itinerary, to articulate the present materiality, for repositioning our desires and needs, for a new measure of the world, a new political economy.

On reproduction

1. We assume the activity of reproduction as the paradigm for contemporary times. By reproduction we do not intend the merely heterosexual, biological regeneration of the species, but rather the entire cycle of activity generating and regenerating the human for the market and the social world. We therefore consider closed the opposition between Marxist or materialist feminism and symbolic feminism. The reproductive paradigm may concern all the subjects falling outside of the heterosexual framework or that do not take on a gendered perspective. *The queer subject, as all of us, lives depending on the relations and necessities of material conditions and on the means for affirming a dignified life, whenever she cares to recognize the materiality of her experience .*
2. The reproductive paradigm takes place in post-patriarchal times, in the subversion of the modern categories that have regulated human life: nature/culture, domestic activity/work, private/public, economic/social, inclusion/exclusion. By reproduction we mean therefore the physical and mental generation and regeneration of the human in her primary relational dimension, between family and society, between individual and collective conducts, between necessarily irrepressible activities and relationally free activities. *From bioethics committees to informational work, from the return of voluntary work up to the service industry – everything speaks to the end of these borders.*
3. The reproductive paradigm is neither an alternative nor a complement to production; it registers the metamorphoses of production and is its essential polarity. We consider reproduction the blind spot of the economic and political tradition of western modernity. It is on this blind spot that the conquest of capitalism, i.e. inequality, exploitation, and injustice, reconstitutes itself. Feminist thought has well-tested tools to position itself on this terrain, developing a conflict capable of living up to the transformations of the present. The reproductive paradigm unveils how, from epoch to epoch, the border between the production of goods and the reproduction of the human displaces itself and redefines which activities are unskilled (simple labor), which activities are necessary for survival (necessary labor), which activities are skilled and valorized accordingly, relocating in this way the areas used by exploitation and oppression. *How is it possible that today an hour of English translation pays less than an hour of housework in another person's house?*

Regarding ongoing debates

1. The reproductive paradigm stresses how debates in the global North and West about care do not confront the economic effects neoliberalism produces on a grand scale, nor do they confront the criteria of valorization and depreciation of such activity. “Taking care of the world” must be taken literally. It means taking on the harsh materiality of the maintenance of living; positioning oneself on the grand scale in which we live; reappropriating measures against self-commodification or commodification of the other, “the cleaning lady and the caregiver”; it means therefore generating and orienting the conflictual practices aimed at reappropriating the means of the quality of living. *Is the appreciation enough for me – an eventual gratitude, the recognition and the fantasy of a promise for the near future in return for what I have done – when nobody cares how I pay the rent?*
2. The reproductive paradigm does not coincide with the diagnoses of the feminization of society, the market, or work. It is a paradigm that – besides indicating the extension of the responsibility [*carico*] for the continuous, active regeneration of the relational bodies that we are and in which we consist to all subjects – intends to identify, between production and reproduction, the shifting line of value which from time to time redefines what is unskilled labor, necessary labor, and valorized labor. The rhetoric around the feminization of work and society is only the “operational,” anthropological form of neoliberalism, which has already established the general framework of policies, priorities, and objectives in other places – whether by those who build statistical indicators or elaborate valuation criteria in ratings, or in the distribution of EU and national funds... *For whose desire am I performing free or underpaid work?*
3. The reproductive paradigm increases the descriptive capacity of what has been put under the title of “cognitive labor” or “immaterial labor.” We welcome the common ground created by the diagnoses of the “hegemony of immaterial labor” and the diffusion of the biopolitical paradigm, but we want a better grasp on the materiality of lives. In addition to the formula “valuation [*messa a valore*] of linguistic, relational, and affective capacities,” we equip ourselves with sharper tools for describing the activities not yet seen as necessary and therefore left to the other, to others. The reproductive paradigm, maintaining a tension with the activities productive of goods, allows the distinction between material and immaterial labor to be dropped and to find it again as a distinction between renaturalized activities (those made invisible and unspeakable), and valorized, waged, and devalued activities. How do we perceive and analyze complex but renaturalized work: does it remain invisible because it is taken to be as obvious as breathing, is it considered as the uncounted surplus in immaterial labor service, or is it already political?

On value

1. In welcoming the disappearance of the partition between domestic activity and productive activity, the reproductive paradigm redefines everything that went under the title “labor.” Measure, value, salary, lifetime, productive time, needs and consumers, public and private virtue – these were arranged in a precise social organization which no longer exists. We

consider the critical paradigm of “commodification” – the extension of value to all social relations, understood as monetary value attributed to an exchange – insufficient for describing the present transformations. The application of value and non-value is not limited to monetary measure, prices or wages, but implies a wide array of techniques of communication and techniques of the self that shape our same perception of what a thing is worth. *From trepidation to incredulity faced with the procedures of selection (competitions, contests, job interviews, permanent assessment).*

2. Against the subjective excess in conceiving exploitation and the objective-scientific excess of the economy, against the subsumption of monetary exchange into the social or vice versa, the reproductive paradigm requires a new theory of value that is able to describe both the effects of domination, which distribute the worthy and unworthy, deserving and undeserving, and the translation of social activities into prices and wages. The values of our activities do not only concern our sense of self and what we do, but are identified through a retroactive dynamic between supply and demand and the wider discursive and virtual trend that reconstitutes it. Difference, in the reproductive paradigm, is the name of the field on which valuation is exercised, as well as its reproduction. *The grades, the ratings are not only numbers, but rather their effects on subjects.*
3. What is the difference between a woman who cooks and a chef? In this difference the reproductive paradigm identifies the activities that are naturalized and therefore without value, and the activities offered to the market, including the symbolic and communicative dimensions, which are therefore endowed with value. What is the difference between a woman who cooks and a woman who visits others’ homes in order to provide services? In this difference, the reproductive paradigm identifies how valorization and depreciation, discursive and monetary – and therefore symbolic – are interwoven. *A woman cooking at home is depreciated like a precarious worker (low or no wages), whereas a chef is valorized like a newspaper columnist (monetary and social value).*
4. We prefer restitution to wages and gratitude. A guaranteed income provides for a monetary means that is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Restitution – giving back – is a material-symbolic circuit, a reproductive circuit of a worthy life, which cannot be exhausted in the possibility of paying for what is necessary to survive. Being part of a circuit of restitution means accessing, using, and multiplying the conditions of living. *Do I want a wage or everything that is necessary for a joyful existence?*
5. Gramsci once suggested that the housewife resembles the artisan and therefore is less susceptible to revolting against her condition. Assuming the reproductive paradigm allows us to see the subjects who make the body with their activity and are therefore more susceptible to adhering to the criteria of hetero-directed valorization; it permits us to identify the ridge between valorization or the profit of others and the practices and institutions of self-valorization. From financial “ethics” to the unconditional income, the stakes are a reappropriation not of value, but of the criteria, and the measures in the attribution of value. *Who decides what constitutes feeling good?*

On relations and their forms

1. The reproductive paradigm calls freedom itself into question. Neoliberalism makes use of but hides necessary and essential interdependence, relationality, and cooperation. It makes visible only the freedom that generates and regenerates independent “individuals,” endowed with free will, the freedom to choose. The concealment is carried out on at least two levels: the free choice is exercised inside a field of options established somewhere else, where in turn they are not a matter of choice; the freedom to compete is exercised in extreme dependence on the market, through only the supply/demand dynamic. Individual consumers of the final segment of production and competitive individuals blackmailed by the fear of dropping out, in the abyssal status of destitution. The reproductive paradigm points to the reappropriation of dependence, interdependence, and relations which are the conditions for freedom. *From mutual dependence to self-determined solidarity.*
2. We consider the growth of the “expelled” and the “needy” as the effect of the valorization/devaluation dynamic of fundamental human activities. The effects of this return in the quasi-political sphere, in the natural shifting of needs, can be contained and/or governed only with violence. In the reproductive paradigm, which does not separate the physical and mental, epistemological violence and police violence are two aspects of one and the same process of the redefinition and re(de)legitimation of what can be considered human, endowed with rights, political. *The eighty-year old evicted at the end of a lease: is she a contemptible, dangerous subject or the subject of a new political economy?*
3. If the reproductive activities of relations are the atmosphere in which we breathe and have come to be subtracted, why is the “end of society” debated? Reproductive activities, when brought to coincide with the activities of monetization and subjected to exchange value, reformulate the social bond into contractualized individual relationships and reformulate rights into insurance contracts against risk. We consider the strategic relevance attributed to the liberalization of services expected by the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) and the TISA (Trade in Services Agreement) as a confirmation. *Tomorrow, healthcare would consist in: the recognition of health centers as opened or closed following the evaluation of their financial virtuosity, cost-benefit analysis, and the assessment of the quality/price calculation.*
4. The reproductive paradigm interrogates citizenship and its institutions in the European welfare state tradition, as they are no longer founded on the constitutional pact and the sexual and national division of labor. In this sense we read the theories of governmentality: the generation and regeneration of relations and the necessary resources for it, in a framework that is not in the hands of the agents of reproductive activities. The transition from the citizen/worker model to the citizen/consumer/customer one means the transition from a welfare regime, based on the enforcement of social and fundamental rights, to social policies intended as the “management” of social problems. As subaltern “customers” and/or “needy,” we are deprived of full subjectivity and self-determination. *Not the relations that provide for the beauty and use of the place in which we live together, but the criteria of security and the stipulations of an insurance contract in case of accident.*

5. In assuming the disappearance of the partition between public and private, the reproductive paradigm analyzes the expansion of the administrative system in which our lives are inscribed, and to which they are subjected. The progressive reforms of public administration are to be understood as the extension of reproductive activities to everyone. In the administrative-reproductive paradigm, social rights are transformed into services, characteristics, and products of activity that should be constantly repeated, individually and beyond public-state institutions: from social services and support to instruction, to primary social resources. *The choice of rates for water, gas, communication, as well as for research, analysis, and access to home, school...*
6. Among the main activities of reproduction we include the system of instruction, training, and education, i.e. the newly strategic context for the construction and orientation of “human capital.” We find confirmation of this in the priority and effectuality of reform at the European and national level of the different educational cycles, which are fed by new devices of evaluation and selectivity and which invest the “market” of labor as much as training. *A return to the Last Judgment, and moreover without justice.*
7. Among the symptoms of the establishment of a reproductive-managerial-administrative regime, we register the expressions “human capital,” “human resources,” “social capital,” “knowledge economy,” “knowledge society,” but also “smart city” and “green economy.” In the era of “urban regeneration,” the reproductive paradigm identifies the human in its cycle of vital activities. These activities have to be considered already political but, differently from the notion of “biopolitics,” the non-human dimension, nature or environment are not considered inert material offered to production— whether material, immaterial, or both. *We have seen a politics capable of giving meaning to the expression “democracy of water.”*

Taking the word feminist in this context means therefore rethinking the economic, cultural, natural-material, social, juridical, political. These are not separate fields, but are interwoven inside a comprehensive and complex valorization process for which responsibility must be taken. Thinking about liberation from the measures that institute oppression is not enough; we need to identify new measures, new regulative forms capable of returning value to our lives, here and now.

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