Notes on Essential Labor

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The pandemic exposes (and leaves us exposed to) the totality of capital; its most intricate and subterranean links come to light. The extractivist push and its relation to Indigenous genocide in the Amazon, as well as its direct effect on the financialization of land in cities' poorest neighborhoods becomes apparent. It also becomes clear how the precarization of labor manages to extend working days in a way that relaunches the silent war that Marx saw condensed in its duration. At the same time, it highlights how tasks of reproduction are directly assembled with the so-called platform economy. From August 2019 to now, the Amazon experienced its largest fire in its history, and today clearcutting continues at full pace, while the e-commerce platform with the same name is one of the companies that has most profited from the pandemic, in what continues to be a literal catastrophe.

Capitalism, through the pandemic, is thus shown as a *diagram*. It demonstrates, as a map of routes and paths, the multilateral and vital connection between everything and everything else. We could say that it is the *methodological* effect of the crisis, that this time has the particular feature of taking place at the planetary level and in a shared time. That dimension of global simultaneity deploys questions of scale and temporality that are more than minor details for illuminating the aspirations of an economy of violence that, once again, attacks certain bodies and territories.

But, of course, we are on the plane of capital. What happens with the workers, with the proletarian lives understood on the basis of their heterogeneous existence and beyond the failed accounting—of informality, the surplus, from the excluded to the underdeveloped—of laboring populations, largely from the Global South? With this concern, I want to discuss some points about the notion of "essential labor," which has emerged as a concept during the pandemic (also simultaneously at the global level), starting with the Argentinean situation that is, however, immediately regional.[1]

The jobs that were most quickly and dramatically shown to be *essential* were the labor forms that historically were not visible or counted as such. It includes that world of work generally associated with images of the "submerged," on the border between the legal and the criminalized, that ranges from informal markets to self-managed enterprises, as well as jobs that are sometimes recognized with the euphemism of "volunteer work," because they involve an intensive care component, or because they are perceived as only being intermittent and spontaneous community solidarity, with a largely feminized and migrant composition. This is the area I want to focus on, because it

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is a type of work that structures popular economies, which, in recent years, thanks to the organizational force of the feminist movement, have become strategic spatialities for the re-elaboration and valorization of reproductive work.

These popular economies involve a key reproductive dimension. Therefore, the work of organizing everyday life is already inscribed as a productive dimension, giving rise to a practical indistinction between the categories of the street and the household for thinking about labor. *From community health clinics to trash pick-up, from soup kitchens to daycares, community labor, performed by social movements and grassroots organizations, has come to substitute for that which has been successively privatized, looted, and defunded. Today these tasks are so irreplaceable that in many neighborhoods it is impossible to conceptualize quarantine as confinement in individual homes, leading to the slogan "Stay in your neighborhood." This collective infrastructure is the true fabric of interdependence, to which reproduction is delegated at the same time as it continues to be devalued.*

It is these popular economies, then, as a reproductive and productive fabric, that put the specific forms of precarization of existence on all planes up for debate and show the level of dispossession in urban and suburban territories, which is what enables new forms of exploitation. In turn, this implies the deployment of a concrete form of conflict over ways of understanding the territory as a new social factory.

Essential labor then is inscribed in a particular labor spatiality: in those areas that have built a *historic affinity between feminist economics and the popular economy in order to make visible productive dynamics linked to the politicization of social reproduction based on political practice in successive crises.* In this sense, politicization implies that social reproduction of life repairs and replaces, and at the same time, critiques the dispossession of public infrastructure. Today, popular economies construct the common infrastructure for provision and access to services that are called "basic," even though they are not: from health care to urban development, from electricity to education, from security to food. In their feminist register, that politicization shows that reproductive labor is directly a common *infrastructure* that must be produced, that requires continuous work.

But with the crisis sparked by the pandemic, the boundaries of those feminized popular economies have become even more diffuse. The index was marked by the "appearance" of eleven million people who requested the aid offered by the Argentine government under the name "Emergency Family Income." The state had calculated that they would receive a request for three million subsidies, but the demand came from a quarter of the country's total population. It is a subsidy that is "separate" from already existing benefits, and thus reveals the forms of precarity that are generally not counted as "poverty" by the standard indexes, and that, however, mark a profound restructuring of the population's everyday capacity to obtain an income. The simultaneous delinking and interconnection between that increasingly widespread lived

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reality and the ideology of "job creation"[2] as a public and a business discussion is ever more complex.

In this scenario, today, we must ask ourselves how capital seeks to take advantage of the crisis situation to reconfigure forms of labor, modes of consumption, income parameters, and gender relations. We could consider that a primary characteristic of this period, as Silvia Federici[3] and Maria Mies[4] have argued in analyzing the most abrupt moments of crisis in the capitalist order, is that violence becomes a productive force of the first order. Thus, the violence exercised over certain bodies and territories reaches extreme levels. We can then ask the following question: Are we facing a restructuring of class relations that takes the sphere of reproduction as its principle scene?[5] Based on the uses of the category of essential labor, can we not map a paradoxical reclassification of the crisis of waged labor and a tendency toward the hyper-exploitation of the jobs least recognized as such?

This series of questions can be raised in a two parts movement. On one side, we show that when we speak of reproductive labor we are referring to work carried out in *domestic territories*, which are not only homes but that have become spaces of collective, territorial, and neighborhood reproduction in the face of the systematic looting that has deprived those places of their basic sustenance. Today, in the middle of an emergency situation, it is that work, deployed in those expanded domestic territories, that responds, as I said earlier, to everyday emergencies: from food and health emergencies to gender-based violence and the housing emergency.

Reproduction's "overflowing" of household confinement has structured the landscape of extensive feminized popular economies for years. That is what I mean by the *political* dimension of popular economies, which has managed to politicize reproduction, to reject the miserabilist management of their activities, which would reduce them to mere survival, and to construct a capacity to negotiate with the state for resources. Undoubtedly, the expansion of feminism on a mass level has radicalized that debate. I am referring to a workforce that has shifted the frontiers of what is understood by the working class thanks to struggles that have redefined who is considered a productive subject through conflict. Today, they are the ones who have taken on the role of "front line" in the crisis. At the same time, this emphasizes the fact that the class never ceases to be a partiality: that is, a division of society between those, following Marx, that depend on their labor power to relate to themselves and the world and those who do not.

Then, *an enormous mass of free, subsidized, "non-registered," precarious, generally unwaged and highly feminized labor becomes the most powerful image of "essential labor."* It was precisely that labor, condensed in the tasks carried out by women, lesbians, and trans persons, by small farmers, migrants, historically not recognized as workers and disregarded in their productive capacity that has now moved onto center stage. Thus, essential labor has been used to refer to unlimited working days, characterized by availability in the face of an emergency, the invention of resources in the midst of scarcity,

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putting into play knowledge that has accumulated as a way of confronting everyday dispossession.

It is a complex twist that leads to the recognition of these tasks through their baptism as "essential." To a large degree, it has been done by codifying them in a register of self-sacrifice, heroism, and gender mandates. Thus, this forecloses the feminist recognition of that work, which was achieved through these years of mobilization, debate, and organization, which was capable precisely of disobeying the family-based mandates associated with those tasks, of reclaiming rights and wages for doing them, and of attributing a political value of self-management to them.

A strong paradox is condensed in essential work: it names a renaturalization of those tasks and the bodies dedicated to them, who now receive applause but not sufficient remuneration; valued but re-instated in a quasi-philanthropic imaginary (with church support). This produces a strange pirouette: they speak of labor, but by classifying it as *essential*, it seems to stop being labor. Its value is recognized, but it seems to be of a fundamentally symbolic and emergency value.

We can see the historical maneuver of naturalizing reproductive labor (as a political neutralization) practiced on a large scale and over a variety of jobs linked to social reproduction, only now in broad daylight and not only as enclosure in the household sphere. Meanwhile, *at the same time*, there is a "return" to the home in the form of expanded tele-work (I'll come back to this below).

In that sense, a categorization as essential work seeks to legitimize the hyper-exploitation of certain tasks carried out in the spatiality of domestic territories—ranging from education to health care, including all types of care labor, agro-ecological production, and telephone service. However, we can also identify the inscription of an accumulation of struggles: Would it have been possible for essentialness to be explicitly linked to reproductive tasks without the prior politicization of care that feminist movements have put on the agenda at a mass scale in recent years? It is not a coincidence that two of the slogans proposed by feminist movements today find a renewed repercussion: "jobs must sustain life or they shouldn't exist" and "our lives over their profit."[6]

Labor, viewed from a feminist lens, exceeds those who receive a wage, because the wage as a common condition is replaced by different experiences of exploitation and oppression, beyond the remunerative measure, beyond and closer to home than the privileged terrain of the factory. It also shows that the subordination and exploitation of that mass of labor is necessary for the existence of waged, recognized, unionized labor. More than ever, it is not about choosing one perspective over another, but of tracing the circuits, reclaiming for us the multilateral and vital connection between everything and everything else. Approaching labor power through a feminist lens makes the body as an indeterminate power and as a necessary materiality of that power into an index of the collective capacity of cooperation.

Then, if on one side we can point to the expansion of the domestic, both its spatial expansion and the expansion of exploitation; on the other side, we see

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the inverse movement: capital redefining *domesticity* and directly inserting itself inside homes. How is this operation of capital produced over the domestic sphere itself, understood in its most restricted sense: homes? Households become increasingly assembled with 1) forms of telework, 2) platform economies, and 3) household debt. A new intensive colonization is taking place, which, returning to the initial hypothesis, seeks to *restructure class relations.*

The imperative to work from home and to home-school is maximizing the demand of productivity from that home-factory that functions behind closed doors and all days of the week without any time limits. We must think about how to reconfigure what Italian feminists, in the campaign for a domestic wage in the 1970s, argued when they said "the home is our factory," and reshape it toward a current location where the demand for productivity is fused in the home-factory, in turn revising historical forms of working from home. But, we need to also look at how this is related to the becoming factory of territories, in a broader sense.

The mediation of platforms enters into homes in a particular way: either through payment platforms used to receive state benefits or delivery workers who guarantee cheap and precarious delivery logistics. But also, as we have been researching, there is an intensification of household debt, directly colonizing social reproduction, and even generating new debts in the midst of the pandemic.[7]

Households, besides being part of the *renaturalization* of reproductive labor in general, are simultaneously invaded by financial and platform technology, so that a true financial extractivism is organized over them. That is why I argue that with the financialization's advance over the reproduction of life, the reproductive relation shows itself to be, more than ever, a space of valorization and accumulation of capital par excellence. This is due to the fact that in order for finance to be able to invade and colonize the sphere of social reproduction, first it has to have exercised and consummated a series of systematic dispossessions of the infrastructure of public services, of common resources, and of economies capable of ensuring autonomous reproduction (whether through peasant economies or self-management, through cooperative or popular-communitarian fabrics). Thus, it not sufficient to divide between the waged and the non-waged, because the wage-debt-benefits link becomes fundamental for mapping the workforce.

We are in a moment of a fundamental dispute over forms of labor. On the one hand, there is an attempt to force the constitution of a new *servile class* that provides extremely cheap and *naturalized* care labor and services, disciplining subaltern sectors that have been fighting for recognition and remuneration precisely for those historically devalued and badly paid tasks. Here the feminist key to reading this conflict is important. On the other hand, it is necessary to rethink the spatiality and conflictivity of labor (and the modes of understanding it, measuring it, rendering it visible) to also understand its dynamics of struggle, resistance, and dispute over common wealth.

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Therefore, there is an urgent need to expand initiatives that materially confront the capacity to extract rents, and that incorporate the conditions of labor's reproduction—from health care to housing, including pensions and services rates to access connectivity—into the labor struggle. It is a conception of labor that is at stake here, of who produces value and what modes of life deserve to be assisted, cared, and paid for, and also where the resources will come from if we aim for a global reorganization of the world of work.

NOTES

1. On the plane of registered wage labor, that labor traditionally defined as productive, the category of essential labor gave rise to a dispute over its definition. In Argentina, workers of certain companies, for example, those producing alcoholic beverages, snack foods, and oil pipes, claimed they were not essential in a dispute with employers who would not let them stop their work; see Victoria Basualdo and Pablo Peláez, "Conflicto laboral en la pandemia del COVID-19 en Argentina: desafíos de fuentes, metodología y conceptualización," Economía y Tecnología de FLACSO, 2020 https://www.flacso.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Procesos-de-conflictividad-laboral-COVID-19-V-Basualdo-y-P-Pelaez.pdf. In Chile and Brazil, that same battle was directly connected to the delay and reluctance of the governments to declare a quarantine. The British American Tobacco Company of Chile, to cite an illustrative case, was vindicated as essential production, even while registering a high level of infection among its workers. Which sectors were included in the category of essential became a sort of test of companies' power to lobby, to confront measures obligating them to not lay off workers, as a way of receiving state subsidies to pay wages, and even to force concessions on wage cuts in the agreements between unions and employers in a "peaceful context." A second moment is characterized by registered waged workers, categorized as essential, demanding improved safety and health conditions in their workplaces, thus translating that essentialness into terms of rights and protections. This demand was particularly notable in the unions of health care and supermarket workers.

2. Franco Barchiesi, "Liberation from work?" *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 4 (2, 2012): 230–53.

3. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York City, 2012).

4. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation On A World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London, 1998).

5. Luci Cavallero and Verónica Gago, *A feminist Reading of debt*. London: Pluto Press (2020).

6. See "Cross-border Feminist Manifesto," https://spectrejournal.com/cross-border-feminist-manifesto/.

7. Luci Cavallero and Verónica Gago, "A feminist perspective on the battle over property," dossier Confronting the Household, *Feminist review* (London, 2020). https://femrev.wordpress.com/2020/07/21/a-feminist-perspective-on-the-battle-over-property/.

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