

Women and/as Commodities

A Brief Meditation

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La condition féminine dans un contexte mondial et contemporain est le propos de cet article. L'auteure nous ouvre des pistes importantes pour faciliter la compréhension du fonctionnement et des visées du capitalisme mondial. De plus elle suggère que la condition des femmes dans l'économie mondiale, surtout celle des femmes du Tiers-monde et les immigrantes détiennent la clé pour comprendre les dynamiques du capital/travail. En bout de ligne, cet article appréhende la féminisation du travail mondial et ses conséquences politiques et idéologiques: la perte de pouvoir et de la valeur de l'action chez les travailleuses.

I would like to begin this paper with a brief feminist mythic story derived from the Ancient Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*:

One day, towards the end of his rather miserable life, the old blind hero of the tragedy sensed the presence of the Sphinx. He asked her why things had turned out so badly for him. Well, the sphinx explained, "Your answer to the riddle was only partially correct." "Wait a minute," he said. "You asked me, 'what walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?' I answered Man—who crawls as a child, walks upright as an adult, but upon reaching old age must use a cane. That's a perfectly good answer." "Well," said the Sphinx, "What about Woman?" "Come on," said Oedipus, "when you say Man, of course that implies Woman too. Everyone knows that." The Sphinx smiled as she replied, "That's what you think." (Rukeyan qtd. in Folbre 1992: xxiii)

I want to suggest here that attention to the question, "What about women?" can provide important insights for understanding the operation and trajectories of global capitalism. Even more than that, I want to suggest that the situation of women in the new global economy—espe-

cially third world and migrant women—may hold the key to understanding political economy and capital/labour dynamics—but only insofar as we begin theorizing from women's lives.

Women have been both included and excluded in different ways in different locations. To the extent that they have been drawn into wage labour the conditions and structure of their work has been systematically different from that of men. In the new global economy, however, these conditions are being generalized to more and more workers. That is, the global labour force is being feminized in several ways. First, more women are working for wages. Second, more men are being subjected to the kinds of labour discipline initially practiced on women. Third, there are changes in the structure of labour itself—i.e., many work processes are becoming more like the work women have done in the past./

This strategy and argument runs counter to most of the literature on globalization and the new economy. The literature on globalization, whether influenced by Marxism or not, has failed to make central considerations of the roles of women and how women are both included and excluded. Thus, Michael Hardt and Anthony Negri's book *Empire* includes no index entry for women. This is not an isolated instance. Overall, at the macro or grand theory level, economic discourse on globalization erases gender as integral to the social and economic dimensions of globalization. Thus, in asking the question, "what about women?" I want to raise broader questions about how feminist analyses which begin from attention to women's lives can clarify and contribute to an understanding of the processes involved in global political economy and I want to make the implicit suggestion that beginning from women's lives can contribute to making feminist change.

In *Capital*, as Karl Marx develops his account of commodity production and his theory of surplus value, he focuses solely on the male worker who buys commodities

in the market to reproduce himself for labour the next day. The work that goes into preparing these commodities for consumption and the non-waged labour which is essential to reproducing the worker is not attended to. In this he appears to follow Adam Smith on the *Wealth of Nations*, who in writing about the importance of self-interest stated, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from regard to their self-interest" (9). But Nancy Folbre is clear to say "just a minute. It is not usually the butcher, the brewer, or the baker who fixes dinner, but his wife or mother" (Folbre 2001: 11).

I propose to begin an account of women's structural roles in globalized capitalism by looking specifically at how women's lives interact with the production and circulation of commodities.¹

Marx begins Volume I of *Capital* with an account of commodities and their circulation, at the end of which he concludes that while commodities may seem to be simple things an analysis demonstrates that they abound in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. I want to suggest that the story is in fact more complicated than his account allows for—because he begins with men and not women.

The story he tells goes like this:

1. The market appears to be the fundamental institution of social life—the exchange of commodities. (Note that in recent years, after the fall of communism, we have seen the growth of the faith that the introduction of markets will bring prosperity, democracy, and all the good things of life.)
2. Social relations both appear to be and are about the exchange of commodities.
3. Commodities have both use values and exchange values.

Marx argues that this story is in error because commodities have to be recognized as, or are really in fact, labour in its crystallized or congealed form.

Once we recognize that commodities are really labour and the status of the object as commodity is a purely social construct (not an atom of matter goes into its construction as commodity), we are in a position to understand the ways in which this story is at once fictional, distorting, and foundational. But since we now know the story should really be about labour we are in a position to tell a different story—the story Marx tells about the importance of producing subsistence, and the consequences of alienated labour. This shift of focus from commodities to labour enables Marx to demonstrate both how misleading and harmful commodity production and exchange in capitalism is and to envision more human social relations.

So here I want to return to the epigraph with which I began and ask again, "what about women?" What happens when we start from commodity production and

circulation by beginning with women? There is way too much to do here, so I will start with a meditation on the concept of the commodity—beginning with women's lives (an overly universalist project, but at this very general level, hopefully it can be more useful than distorting (because it *will* distort.)

Women's relations to commodities and women's entanglement with commodities is more complicated than men's since women are both more and less involved in the production and exchange of commodities. Women are involved in a number of distinctive ways:

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1. Women's formal waged work has the same—or at least similar—dynamics to men's. They produce commodities with both use values and exchange values.

2. Women's production work in the informal economy and especially household economies are such that they produce use values directly and these are consumed *as* use values, for example, food, clothes, services, etc. Women are less involved in the capitalist market than men. They have less access to money, and therefore less involvement in the market and less involvement with commodity production and exchange. In the informal sectors, their products are often appropriated by the men in the household who take them to market, exchange them, and often keep the proceeds.

3. Women contribute to the reproduction of labour power on a daily and (and long-term) basis—i.e., working up the commodities necessary to sustain the male worker—or engaging in such activities as subsistence farming.

4. Women *are* commodities in ways that few men are. They possess, like other commodities, use values and exchange values. Men, and women as wage workers, possess a commodity, labour power—with a use value and an exchange value. But men are not themselves commodities. The labourer is not himself a commodity. He exists to at least some extent as a man with at least potential access to species being, that is carrying possibilities or exercising all his human faculties.

Women are commodities in obvious ways: most of the women in the world are disposed of and controlled by others. But women, like other commodities have both exchange values and use values. There is, of course, the worldwide trafficking in women and girls, now said to be the second most important source of income for organized crime. And there are practices such as bride prices, and also dowries. Lest we are tempted to dismiss these as practices

of “primitive” societies, we should remember the figure of the executive’s trophy wife in advanced capitalism, a woman whose exchange value depends on the fact that she is beautiful, blond, thin, and 20.

But women also have use values and are consumed, used up like other commodities. Women are consumed physically by enforced childbearing. The leading cause of death for women around the world is still pregnancy and the complications of childbearing. Women are also consumed emotionally in the form of the caring labour they do.²

Women also work for wages—wages which for the

labour power for money with which to buy the commodities necessary for life into the following four circuits:

First, women, like men can be possessors of labour power. In this circuit, they are involved in the circuit, C-M-C, or perhaps better, C-M minus-C in recognition of the fact that the wages they receive exchange for the labour power they possess are lower than those men receive. Thus, they have a commodity, their potential for work, which they sell for money in order to buy other commodities which will allow them to return to the market to sell their capacity to labour yet again.

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majority of women are controlled by men. Those involved in various development strategies (e.g., micro-lending) have long recognized that a woman’s income is a source of income for the household as a whole while a man’s wage is often his alone.

What are the consequences of existence as a commodity rather than as the possessor of at least one commodity? Commodities do not control their own destinies, do not decide (yet) when to come to market. As exchange values they have no past and no future. Most fundamentally agency, subjectivity, and history disappear from view. Thus, women are often not thought to have (and in many cases don’t experience themselves as having) goals and purposes and interests other than those dictated by custom and assumed to be unchanging. Or rather, there is no place in this story for women to recognize their own species being or potentials.

A second consequence is that women’s labour becomes invisible and devalued. Housework appears to many not as work but as an expression of love. Moreover, women’s caring labour both disappears as work and, when done for wages, can be paid at very low rates. One reason for these outcomes is that when looked at in a formal sense, commodities as such don’t labour, they are exchanged and used/consumed.

In sum, then, unlike male workers and male capitalists, who are involved in only one circuit—and that one not involving every minute of every day, women are involved in four. These circuits in traditional Marxist political economy involve commodities such as labour power, food, housing (C), money, (M), use values (UV) and labour power (LP); but these categories are not sufficient to understand women’s relationships to the circuits of commodities. I propose to rewrite the original account of the labourer’s involvement—C-M-C—the exchange of

Second, women are more involved in the production of use values which are directly consumed rather than being first exchanged. This circuit could be described as UV-Consumption-UV, or in words the production and consumption of use values directly rather than through the intervention of the market.

Third, women are the major producers of the unique commodity, labour power. Here the circuit might be described as LP-LP'-LP" " to indicate that women’s labour produces the commodity labour power, which has the capacity to produce more than its cost (value) of reproduction. At the same time LP needs the continuous and ongoing work of women to sustain it. This circuit has been broadly conceptualized under the heading of social reproduction which includes the biological reproduction of the species, the reproduction of the labour force—which involves education and training, and the reproduction of provisioning and caring needs (see Bakker and Gill 11).

Fourth, women *are* commodities— therefore both are and are not people/human subjects with potentials for expansion of their subjectivities and the possibilities for creating more humane communities. This circuit might be described as WC-M (where M can stand for either money or marriage)—MPP (male pleasure and power). Thus women as commodities are exchanged for marriage and/or money and this in turn produces and reproduces male pleasure and power.

The structures of circuits two, three, and four depend on forms of domination outside the circuits of commodities. Thus, marginalization is important—it leads to women’s invisibility as actors. The invisibility also contributes to the ability of societies to maintain a series of fictions by means of which women’s activities can be devalued. Women’s lack of power is also at work in structuring

women's participation in these circuits. Women are kept in all these circuits by being forced to see themselves through the eyes of others: consider for example the ideal of thinness and its devastating physical consequences for many young women in the West. Finally, women as a group are kept in "their place" by the threat and actuality of systematic violence.

I think that for feminist scholars there are several things central to a critical understanding that begins from examining women's places in the circulation of commodities. In this task we can get some guidance from Marx, but only some. Thus, Marx found his subject matter in labour, which allowed him to focus on agency, activity, processes, history. Feminist scholars however, have been clear that labour as a category comes from attention to men's lives, includes a labour/leisure distinction, and is too narrow. It doesn't map well onto the activities women engage in. Perhaps we would be better off to start with the term life activity.

A second and related question is that of what dynamics allow for women to become commodities. Or, put differently, what is it about women's life activities that allows them to be distorted in these particular ways? Part of this understanding will be an account of how women's dynamic life activity can be distorted so that women become commodities, and how the four circuits with which women are involved both reinforce and contradict each other. For example, women's household work—caring labour, production of specific use values, is replicated in their waged work—the jobs they have, the segregated labour market, and the specific industries that disproportionately employ them.

Moreover, it is important to ask what contradictions grow out of both being a commodity and producing them. What openings for change can be seen? And also what new possibilities for abuse/domination/exploitation emerge as women move from producing for domestic "markets" within the family and producing for international and "public" markets.

This is all very partial and incomplete—but hopefully several implications for theorizing women's lives become visible. Just thinking about commodities from a feminist standpoint a number of categories become evident as inadequate. To begin with just three:

1. The terms labour/labour power a) fail to capture what women actually do; b) fails to provide account of processes of reproduction and also for possibilities for change; and c) raises questions about whether there really is abstract human labour. Perhaps all human activity must be re-understood as carrying marks of gender, race, and/or sexuality.

2. The concept of alienation has enabled a powerful account of the consequences of the separation of the worker from his labour power in both its form as activity and its form as product. Women are separated from their humanity in different and perhaps more thoroughgoing

ways. Yet for women this is a contradictory situation, since at the same time as they are treated as commodities themselves, they are also involved in the direct provisioning of human needs outside the market. This situation could allow for a much more complex understanding of the concept of alienation.

3. Attention to women's several relations to the production and circulation of commodities might be the basis for a different understanding of the fetishism of commodities—i.e. the arguments that what should be relations between people become (and are conducted in the market) as relations between their things—their commodities. But what if some people are themselves commodities? How exactly does this distort human relations?

By beginning with the circuit of commodities in an account that begins from women's lives we can see the need to tell a much more complicated story than political economists have given us. Beginning from women's lives, we might be able to develop a more complex account of the processes of globalization at work in the world.

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¹Here I take some inspiration from the beginning of Marx's Volume I of *Capital*.

²This is Nancy Folbre's central argument in her book, *The Invisible Heart*.

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