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When the domestic is also political: redistribution by women from the South. A feminist approach

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When the domestic is also political: redistribution by women from the South. A feminist approach.¹

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Abstract:

The possibilities of dialogue between Feminist Economics and Polanyi's thought are already well-known. Feminist scholars have not solely recognised that Polanyi's ideas could be compliant with feminist concerns (Waller and Jennings 1991; Hillenkamp 2013; Fraser 2005) but also some of his works explicitly refer to the domestic as an important domain to be considered (Hillenkamp 2013). Even so, Polanyi's theory and his concept of disembeddedness were not lacking of critiques for having ignored, to a certain extent, the role of non-market institutions in the shaping of market economies. Despite these critiques from a feminist standpoint, Polanyi's work provides a suitable and friendly framework for analysing the diversified ways through which different women, in different contexts, may play a pivotal role concerning the shaping of reciprocity, redistribution, householding and exchange - as can be seen in indigenous communities and some popular economic arrangements. In this paper, I come back to the feminist critique to discuss the domestic domain and its potential of fostering women subaltern arenas (Fraser 2005). I particularly focus on women from the South, from whom passiveness is a condition mistakenly expected. Departing from the Epistemologies of the South (Santos 2014) and a postcolonial feminist approach, I argue that the redistribution performed by women themselves should be better framed. The flawed academic debate on the role played by different women from the South in the very redistribution of the community resources and in the building-up of their communities' material life demonstrates that women's capacity to foster different compositions of economic principles has been underrepresented in Feminist Economics literature.

Keywords: redistribution | | Feminist Economics | | Epistemologies of the South

Introduction

This paper continues a previous discussion I presented in the 2nd Polanyi-EMES International Seminar concerning the pertinence and limits of the feminist rereading of Polanyi's work proposed by William Waller and Ann Jennings (1991). The article previously presented aimed to discuss the pertinence of Waller and Jennings' critique, considering the epistemological perspective inherent to the Polanyian notion of disembeddedness. It also sought to explore the extent to which the separation of the domestic domain from the economic domain could be taken as an universal characteristic, also influencing non-western and non-market societies.

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To begin with, it is worth stressing the fertile dialogue between Feminist Economics and Polanyi's thought, particularly regarding the perception of householding as a relevant aspect of the economy, here understood as provisioning. Feminist scholars have not only recognised that Polanyi's ideas could be compliant with feminist concerns (Waller and Jennings 1991; Hillenkamp 2013; Fraser 2005) but also some of Polanyi's works explicitly refer to the domestic as an important domain to be considered (Hillenkamp 2013). Notwithstanding his faltering appraisal of domestic space - to which was not given the same sort of attention (Hillenkamp 2013) of that devoted to the three other principles -, his calling for re-embeddedness has made room for debating women's political role in at least two circumstances: (1) when they disrupt the market logic through alien domestic concerns in market environments and (2) when they forge alliances to defend their own community way of producing and living (Lucas dos Santos 2016).

Even so, Polanyi's theory and his concept of disembeddedness were not lacking of critiques for having ignored, to a certain extent, the role of non-market institutions in the shaping of market economies. Despite these critiques from a feminist standpoint, Polanyi's work provides a suitable and friendly framework for analysing the diversified ways through which different women, in different contexts, may play a pivotal role concerning the shaping of reciprocity, redistribution, householding and exchange - as can be seen in indigenous communities and some popular economic arrangements. A plural economy perspective, as emphasised by Laville (2003), also help us notice how women from the South have put these principles to interact in solidarity economy initiatives - market exchanges being reshaped by householding logic in popular economy initiatives; redistribution being provided not by the State but by women themselves in community provision; reciprocity being a community implicit rule on behalf of guaranteeing a safety network for all its members.

In this paper, I come back to the feminist critique to discuss the domestic domain and its potential of fostering women subaltern arenas (Fraser 2005). I particularly focus on women from the South, from whom passiveness is a condition mistakenly expected. Departing from the Epistemologies of the South, proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) and a postcolonial feminist approach, grounded on the perspective of a situated analysis, I aim to discuss three main issues: (1) the deluding universality of a split between economic and domestic domains, (2) the political role the domestic may assume in the Global South and, most importantly, (3) the women prominence concerning other economic principles, such as reciprocity and redistribution. Given that redistribution is usually considered a role played by the State, I argue that the redistribution performed by women themselves in solidarity economy initiatives should be better framed. Feminist Economics, I also argue, should go beyond the debate on the invisibility of domestic work and care taking (Ferber and Nelson 2003; Fraad 2000), and women position in labour market and economic exchanges. The flawed academic debate on the role played by different women from the South - indigenous, peripheral, migrant ones - in the very redistribution of the community resources and in the building-up of their communities' material life demonstrates that women's capacity to foster different compositions of economic principles has been underrepresented in Feminist Economics literature. This political role played by women of the South has also been hardly discussed in theoretical Solidarity Economy framework.

The political role of the domestic dimension

As remarked by different feminist authors - such as Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004), Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (1997, 2002), Aída Castillo (2008), and María Lugones (2008) -, concepts and categories, even when they apparently fit to diverse realities, should not be assumed at first as universal since they cannot be uncoupled from a situated knowledge and specific circumstances that forged them. Pointing out the eurocentric roots of some feminist theories, Oyěwùmí (1997, 2002) provocatively questions the universality of the very concept of patriarchy as well as the adequacy of the western concept of nuclear family system to account for African realities. What is on the table, indeed, is that the Otherness has been built in a global imagery as particular whereas western categories have been assumed as the standards for all. Arguing the absence of gender in Yoruba culture, Oyěwùmí (2002: 1) not only reminds us that “the architecture and furnishings of gender research have been by and large distilled from Europe and American experiences” but also claims that, for an African epistemology to be taken seriously, it should be informed by a careful analysis of its own non-western social dynamics. Lugones (2008), in turn, stresses the fact that gender should not be considered as an universal category that fits to women worldwide and on which key concepts are attached. She argues that the colonial/modern gender system - in which we can find recurring problems such as the invisibility of domestic labour or gender pay gap, to name but a few - is not enough to explain the different ways gender may be experienced in different societies. Moreover, women bodies, afflicted by “simultaneously interlocking oppressions” (Brah and Phoenix 2004: 78), are supposed to experiencing gender differently, influenced by other social markers such as class, race and sexuality. As a consequence of these inseparable markers in everyday life, some women will experience in their bodies the deepening of inequality - while others will have the endorsement of the privilege.

For the above reasons, I would like to share five main ideas which aim at evincing the political dimension domestic domain may assume, in contrast to some western feminist arguments which still debate the social invisibility of women as historically connected with the split between the domestic and the economic². These five ideas I aim to propose are primarily concerned with 1) the women from the South - considering they have been my subject of research - and their political role in solidarity and popular economy initiatives, despite the usual absence of a feminist framework in the Solidarity Economy literature; 2) the subaltern arenas (Fraser 2005) these women constitute by promoting different logics of producing, exchanging and distributing values (and here I remember the idea of economy as an iceberg discussed by Gibson-Graham, according to whom we have been highly focused on the triad capitalist

² Feminist debates on the issue of domesticity do not have recent roots. Nevertheless, I would like to stress that the domestic domain to which I refer here does not follow the discussion on western domestic feminism, maternal feminism or social feminism. These are perspectives of thought which, by intertwining ideas once in a while, represented, respectively, the following ideas: (1) domestic feminism, according to Smith (1973: 52) could be understood as the “women’s increasing autonomy within the family”; (2) maternal feminism, in turn, is usually connected with the women’s contribution to pacifism and other issues related to the public sphere; (3) social feminism is primarily concerned with these women’s contribution to guaranteeing better women’s and children’s labor conditions. To follow in more detail these theoretical perspectives please see: Ferguson, Hennessy and Nagel (2018), as well as Landes (1984), and DiCenzo and Motuz (2017). It is worth mentioning that there is no consensus on these concepts. It is not, otherwise, the perspective on which I have grounded my argument. The concepts of householding and domestic domain, in this paper, go beyond any idea of “female values”, referring to the different ways through which economy (as provisioning) can be outlined by women in a community. Regarding this perspective, see Hillenkamp (2013) and Lucas dos Santos (2016).

enterprise - wage labour - market); 3) the way these subaltern women have fostered - through reciprocity and redistribution - symbolic autonomy, political articulation and the constitution of a safety network.

The first aspect I would like to stress is the need for broadening the scope of the theoretical framework in which we are used to formulating our assertions, particularly the ones concerned with subaltern women's role in the economy or the presumably uncontested outside-modelled development guidelines for them to face extreme poverty in previously colonised countries. An eurocentred perspective regarding gender in feminism might misrepresent indigenous, peasant, peripheral, immigrant, muslim women - in the South or in the South of the North - and their ways of fighting against asymmetries within and outside their communities. Western feminisms may also fade or undervalue the resistance inherent to the way these women organise their material life, not necessarily grounded on the development agenda proposed by multilateral agencies or funding programmes. Autonomy both achieved by shared-management and the organisation of a safety network capable of guaranteeing reciprocity and redistribution of scant resources is as important as - if not more important than - the effective performance of popular economic initiatives. Hence, first of all, the idea I would like to stress here is the risk of veiling the epistemological diversity of the world (Santos 2006) on behalf of presumably universalised categories which refer, in the end, to specific realities. As demonstrated by Gurminder Bhambra (2009: 69), Chakrabarty's idea of provincializing Europe, which can also be understood as a needed attempt to strive for effective epistemological acuteness, "is not only about bringing to the fore other histories and experiences, but also about recognizing and deconstructing – and then reconstructing – the scholarly positions that privilege particular narratives without any recognition of the other histories and experiences that have similarly contributed to the constitution of those narratives". So, the first idea is related to the need for questioning the universals.

In the wake of this discussion on the acuteness of the usage categories, the second idea I would like to share is concerned with the very concept of "the political". Here I draw on Subaltern Studies, particularly on Partha Chatterjee (1983) and Ranajit Guha (1982), whose writings have demonstrated that the political, when referring to subaltern groups, might require "new theoretical categories" to make them more comprehensible as such, since subaltern resistance history has been fragmented, episodic, and not linear as the elite's narratives (Guha 1982; Góes 2013). That is why Guha argued that "it was needed to extend the imagined limits of the political as a category, by going far beyond the well-know territory bounded by the European political thought" (Góes 2013: 11, my translation). It means that some subaltern practices of insurgency may not be recognised as such since they are out of the reach and sight of the public sphere. Subaltern people are not expected to have the same condition of voicing and negotiation. It is thus recommended to pay attention to informal contexts in which dissenting voices echo different narratives. Harbemasian concept of public sphere has not been capable of welcoming and coping with the set of claims brought by different marginalised groups - particularly the ones who are part of the "uncivilised civil society" (Santos 2006). You may ask: what does it have to do with the argument supported here that the domestic can play a political role?

It follows that we need to broaden the scope of 'the political' if we are really interested in perceiving the multifaceted ways through which worldwide subaltern women have resisted and fought against different and intertwined asymmetries. The same applies to their efforts for re-embedding the economy. As a matter of fact, women's insurgency, since it differs from what is expected in terms of formal procedure to demonstrate disagreement, has forged subaltern

arenas (or subaltern counterpublics, as proposed by Nancy Fraser). Fraser, indeed, has pointed out the need to recognize insurgent social groups as parallel discursive arenas which, excluded from the so called bourgeois public sphere, bring new interpretations of the current context and reality. These informal and autonomous arenas, in turn, are alternative spaces of expression, and are marked by the emergence of other productivities, temporalities and knowledges, as well as different logics of production, consumption, and circulation of goods. It leads us to a third idea, that is, the capacity of women from the South to constitute subaltern (and alternative political) arenas by fostering solidarity and popular economic initiatives to face their social and economic vulnerability. In the absence of a welfare state, and being surrounded by precariousness, the achievement of autonomy has been a remarkable feat.

And thus we get to the point. Many of these community economies in which women play a pivotal role, running counter the narratives of efficiency or performance, are primarily domestic. And what I argue here is that the domestic - that is, the concept of householding in Polanyi's work - should be recognised in its political sense. Whether it be for bringing different logics, procedures, and concerns to the space of women-led popular markets, whether it be for having allowed different subaltern women to create spaces for dialogue, confidence, social cohesion, and political articulation. Although Western feminisms have debated the problems concerned with a historical split between the domestic and the economic domains (Waller and Jennings 1991; Nicholson 1986) - namely the deepening of the women's invisibility in economic terms for being associated with the household -, the fact is: it is not possible to turn this split into an universal rule since there are many community economies, legitimate and contemporary community economies in which this split never happened (for instance, indigenous economies). Notwithstanding some feminists' efforts to debate the relevance and even to calculate the contribution of domestic work for the production and reproduction of life, it is not imperceptible that there has been an inherent minus sign attached to householding for not being paid and appreciated when compared to the labour market. It happens regardless of the vast feminist literature on the issue of domestic work and care taking (Mitchell 1968; Benston 1969; Nelson 2005; Waring 1988).

Domestic domain may be otherwise the prevailing principle in certain contemporary community economies. Moreover, it may play a political role in terms of meeting point as well as space of mutual recognition and struggle for subaltern women. This is the case, for instance, of *quilombola* and peasant women from Vale do Ribeira, in the city of São Paulo (Brazil), who have gathered around feminist and agroecological agendas and promoted rounds of conversation on economic autonomy and food sovereignty through their experiences towards householding concerns³. Exchange fairs of kernels and seedlings among quilombola communities and between them and other communities⁴ - indigenous groups, riverine peoples and family farmers - foster the possibility of articulation, encouraging knowledge sharing and mutual recognition.

In fact, there is a large set of women-led initiatives which have connected domestic concerns and the possibility of material and symbolic autonomy for peripheral women. Another good example is the group of 78 female bricklayers who, living at risk areas, decided to build their

³ To better understand the connection between agroecology, feminism and political resistance, please see: <http://www.sof.org.br/2016/06/24/as-feiras-sao-uma-chance-de-mostrarmos-nossa-resistencia/>

⁴ About this experience, see: <http://fflorestal.sp.gov.br/troca-de-sementes-fortalece-vinculo-entre-quilombolas-garante-renda-e-alimentos/>

own houses through collective work in Recife (a city in the northeast region of Brazil). Recognised by UN as a creative solution for housing problem worldwide, this village, created by women in 1994, is an example of articulation among peripheral women in their fight for their right to housing⁵.

It is worth highlighting that these examples bring forms of reciprocity and redistribution to stage. These initiatives cannot, under any circumstances, be disregarded as economy, since they provide these women with some of the material conditions needed. In the face of scant resources, including labour force, women have been capable of overcoming the precariousness, on one hand, and exercising their right of choice, on the other. To guarantee this right, they routinely meet either for exchanging their surpluses or for building their own houses. Gathering different technical skills - as blacksmiths, tilers, painters, and bricklayers - these women work together to assure each one what is needed for getting the house project on its feet.

It leads us to the crucial point I would really like to stress here, which is the need for us to be more attentive to the different ways subaltern women are able to reshape Polanyian principles of economic integration in everyday life, trying to take more advantage from them. They do it by combining these principles in different ways and intensities, and fostering different forms of redistributing surpluses whether it be through exchange fairs, seed fairs or reallocating the resources among the members of an extended family. This aspect was already remarked by Hillenkamp, Lepeyre and Lemaître (2013: 6) when they argued that a “closer observation of the way popular actors secure their livelihoods shows multiple patterns of petty accumulation based on a diversity of resources and types of interdependencies within families, communities, and professional, religious and other types of groups”⁶. What I aim to emphasise, in addition to that, is that subaltern women, by their economic practices, can challenge (1) the very specific meaning each principle of economic integration may assume in different contexts, and (2) the Feminist Economics’ assumptions of what is worth being considered as economic. I argue that this field could be widened by means of different women’s economic experience. And redistribution for some of them may not fit into the standards valued by the western feminist economics.

Therefore, we should be attentive not only to the means by which these women criticise and range themselves against the phenomenon of economy disembeddedness but also, and primarily, to the different practices through which subaltern women have creatively re-embedded economies.

The domestic comes back to the debate: final remarks

⁵ To know more details about this experience, see: <http://www.leijaja.com/noticias/2018/03/08/pedreiras-uma-vila-inteira-construida-so-por-mulheres/> e <http://www.revistanabuco.com.br/colunas/marcia-a-pedreira-de-peixinhos/>

⁶ Regarding to this issue, Hillenkamp, Lapeyre, and Lemaître (2013: 5) state: “The principles of economic integration therefore generate different types of institutional structures, which can be combined in multiple configurations. They form a conceptual framework that takes into account the diversity of socio-economic practices of popular actors, without assuming them to be evolving towards a model of a “modern” capitalist enterprise”.

Domestic domain has been addressed in different ways both by feminists and economists over time. In any case, it has always been a subject immersed in controversy. Among the economists, institutionalists are the ones who have recognised the economy as provisioning in its broadest sense. Nevertheless, despite being a relevant aspect of the material life, domestic sphere has not been a particular issue of concern but for feminist institutionalist economists. Even in Polanyi's work, householding appears as an unstable presence.

Among the feminist scholars and activists, in turn, domestic sphere has always been an issue which splits opinions. In previous times, some activists considered important to bring a supposedly womanhood to the public sphere in order to contribute to social reform and other issues whereas others had already thought, at that time, that unpaid domestic work and mothering brought about gender asymmetries (Ferguson, Hennessy and Nagel 2018). Further on, some second wave feminists argued that, since domestic work was unpaid and domestic domain was separated from the production, housework was expected to contribute to women invisibility. To solve this asymmetry, some feminist economists emphasised the need to raise the presence of women in labour market. Conversely, others have argued that housework, to be properly valued, should be paid (Federici 1975; Folbre 2006) or, at least, calculated in economic terms, for society to be aware of its relevance for the household provisioning and the very production of material life. Some marxist feminists, in turn, such as Silvia Federici (1975) and others, have argued that unpaid housework helps capitalist system guarantee the reproduction of the working class⁷.

All of these critiques undoubtedly contributed to think more wisely about the domestic domain and the way it has been connected to women's life and to the recognition (or the devaluation) of their role in the economy. But it is worth bearing in mind that these relevant theoretical frameworks and critiques cannot be uncoupled from cultural, historical, and social contexts in which different women have lived. Likewise, these critiques and conceptual perspectives should not be set apart from an intersectional approach capable of considering different identity aspects which will certainly affect these women's priorities. Some arguments applied to western white women may not simply make sense to different women in the South, whether they be in the Global South or even in the South of the Global North. It does not at all mean that domestic work, caretaking or emotional work do not affect non-western women; but that, through intersectional lenses, other usually unseen gender asymmetries may be deepened because of their race, class, sexuality or national identity. Indigenous women, for instance, are likely to have other concepts of householding, family, labour and the role played by the domestic in shaping their economy. Some peripheral women, in turn, may prefer to have small stores in the neighbourhood instead of a regular job in order to feed their children or take them to school during the workday. Black peripheral women, to whom low paid jobs as domestic servants, cleaning ladies, nannies and home-based caregivers are usually offered, are likely to be more concerned with the way they are exploited - and sometimes humiliated - by white female employers rather than with their own double working day. This issue is masterfully discussed by Cecilia Rio and Pascuale Molinier - this latter addressing the case of immigrant women⁸.

⁷ To follow these different perspectives, please see Ferguson, Hennessy and Nagel (2018).

⁸ About this issue, see also Federici (2016). Differently from the perspective proposed by Rio, Federici has been interested in knowing better how the discussion on the migrant domestic work has revitalised the very feminist

What I intend to stress here is that, being different and affected by social markers such as class and race, women may have non-matching perspectives on householding. Domestic domain may play a political role towards a fruitful alliance among subaltern women to face powerful common enemies. Likewise, there might not be a split between domestic and economic domains in their community economies. It does not at all mean that these communities should be seen as outdated or residual. Conversely, they should help us question the supposed universality of theoretical models and concepts. Secondly, I would like to highlight that we should stimulate fresh thinking and new theoretical frameworks on how women - particularly women from the South -, have contributed to: (1) setting non-state forms of redistribution and social regulation, (2) reshaping economic exchanges by means of domestic logics and concerns and (3) politicising the householding by intertwining it with decolonial and anti-capitalist struggles against transnational businesses and projects, such as major dams, mining and logging companies.

These aspects do not have anything to do with reviving domestic or motherhood feminisms. It does not mean either romanticising the domestic work or attributing specific features or qualities to women. It is about broadening the scope of our discussions on the domestic domain, having in mind that if we are concerned with economy epistemological widening, we should also be watchful to the ways different women have contributed to reframe the economy, by going beyond the western dichotomy 'market-household'.

debate on domestic work. According to Federici (2016: 10), "migrant domestic workers' organizing has not only changed their relations with the institutions but affected feminist activism and its research agenda".

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