
Research note: Re-thinking feminist engagements with the state and wage labour

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This note draws on previously published work which has reflected on the (dis)continuities between two different types of feminist engagement with the state and the wage society (Alessandrini, 2011, 2013). The aim is to raise questions the network, with its focus on gendering labour law, might consider worth pursuing as part of its future research agenda. Even though I am not a labour lawyer, I have an interest in labour theory and this comes from a particular tradition, that of feminist autonomists who have critically interrogated Marx's labour theory of value, that is, the theory according to which labour is the source of value in capitalist economies, by paying specific attention to the role of social reproduction.¹ I draw on this tradition for two interconnected reasons: first because I think it offers important resources for thinking about the links between gender, labour and value in today's post-Fordist economies, exactly at a time when these links appear to have become more tenuous; secondly because it provides the opportunity to think about the sort of arrangements that might be able to affect these links, thereby shifting current value-making processes.

What I would like to do is to reflect on the potential of one particular (and seemingly anachronistic) arrangement to do just this. Recently, some feminist economists have started to engage with a proposal put forward by post-Keynesian scholars which demands that the government acts at once as the Employer of Last Resort (ELR) and a social provider, particularly of care. I will briefly illustrate how such a proposal appeals to feminist economists who have long argued for the inclusion of social reproduction within the general

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¹ Although there are different understandings of the concept of 'social reproduction', for a comprehensive definition encompassing biological reproduction, including sexual, affective and emotional services; unpaid production of goods and services in the home and within the community; and the reproduction of culture and ideology which can both stabilise and challenge dominant social relations, see Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas (2010). In this paper I use it to refer more broadly to the way we collectively organise our living, including but not limited to the unpaid domestic labour and caring that goes into producing and reproducing life's conditions and which is currently organised through households, the market and the state, with the crucial role played by immigration policies (see Fudge, 2011). This comes very close to the social provisioning approach adopted by feminist economists, see section 1 below.

analytical framework of political economy. My focus however will be on exploring what I think is a crucial concern, that is, that by participating in programs such as this one we might end up sustaining, rather than undoing, the very relations we seek to challenge. It is in this respect that I will draw on the work of Italian feminist autonomists who since the 1970s have argued not only against the wage society but also against the welfare state; and ask how we can make sense of a project such as the ELR in light of this tradition of feminist work. Rather than setting these two very different moments in opposition to one another, my intention is to explore what is at stake for both, which has to do with the promotion of arrangements able to ‘provoke’ alternative valorisation processes.

ELR and the social provisioning approach of feminist economists

I will start with a snapshot of the ELR program. Although the idea goes back to the seventeenth century, its revival within the framework advocated by Keynes for the socialisation of investment occurred in the 1960s (Kaboub, 2007). The central tenet is that the government becomes a *permanent* guarantor of jobs for anyone able and willing to work for a socially established wage and benefits. The program is permanent in time but is meant to change in size so that it expands in periods of recession such as the current one to absorb workers who have been made redundant and contracts as the economy recovers and the private sector is able to re-employ workers. Economists have pointed to four essential features of the program: firstly it operates as a buffer stock employment mechanism (Minsky, 1986; Wray, 1998). They point to the fact that when jobs are guaranteed, uncertainty and precariousness are reduced for people and at the same time firms’ expectations of consumers’ demand become more stable (so they can plan production and so on). Secondly, it sets the ‘floor’ price of labour and thus ensures price stability since private sector jobs are provided at a mark-up over the ELR fixed wage (Kaboub, 2007: 11). Thirdly, by providing continuous training to displaced workers, it contributes to the appreciation of skills that unemployment drastically interrupts, thereby also furnishing the private sector with a constant pool of skilled workers. This leads to the fourth feature, the relationship with the private sector is one of cooperation rather than competition: the program is supposed to focus on activities that are either undersupplied or not supplied at all by the private sector. Usually this happens when they are not profitable because pecuniary considerations are the major determining factor.

It is important to emphasise that unlike post-war Keynesian policies which aimed to guarantee full employment at times of crisis by promoting government spending in some activities, and which often resulted in the strengthening of the military establishment, this is a permanent program according to which the state invests in sectors where private companies do not because they find it unprofitable. We know there are currently many sectors left out because pecuniary considerations are the determining factor in investment decisions; one needs only to think about low-income households.² Post-Keynesian economists have also responded to arguments about the rise of inflation the program might cause as well as its costs. However, rather than focusing on its sustainability, my interest lies in exploring the question of why and how this program appeals to feminist economists. One of the reasons is that it moves the debate about how to organise provisioning in our society away from both attempts to allocate unemployed workers among scarcely available jobs and also welfare programs based on the punitive mean-tested approach to securing income (Todorova, 2009: 13). In this respect the program comes close to the so-called social provisioning approach to the study of economics which has been the methodological standing point of feminist economists.

Although there are a variety of traditions that inform feminist economics (Tong, 1998), a point of agreement is the understanding of economic activities as interdependent social processes. As Power puts it: ‘to define economics as the study of social provisioning is to emphasize that at its root, economic activity involves the ways people organize themselves collectively to get a living’ and manifestations of such an approach have included unpaid and caring labour. However, social provisioning does not only concern ‘unpaid’ and ‘caring labour’; nor is it a distinctive ‘woman’s issue’. At a methodological level, Power continues, ‘starting economic analysis from this standpoint illuminates the ways a society organizes itself to produce and reproduce material life...and the outcome of such a process is social

² This is not to say that social reproductive activities are not profitable. Indeed, services such as advanced health care and higher education have been, and are being, privatised for profit. Access to these services remains, however, dependent on income. At the same time, sectors which do not require high capital investment, mainly because labour cannot be easily replaced with capital and its productivity improved through technological development, will experience a different degree of privatisation. I thank Judy Fudge for raising this issue and pointing me in the direction of Himmelweit’s work which has shown how, in relation to these sectors, an increase in wages will comport an increase in the cost of care, with the likely result of ‘inequality in access to affordable care becoming a major issue in many high income countries’ (2013: 12).

production and reproduction' (Power, 2004: 7). Thus the specificity of the social provisioning approach is that it is not an adjunct to economic analysis but its very starting point. It is an approach that emphasises the interconnectedness and mutual constitution of the productive and reproductive spheres contra current economic understandings that foster an ever growing disconnect between the two. From this standpoint, then, we can understand the fascination of feminist economists with the ELR program because it has the potential of putting at the centre of economic activity the 'planning and implementation of life-supporting and life-enhancing projects' (Todorova, 2009: 9).

But how is this potential to be realised? The answer given by feminist economists is by intervening in the job 'design' of the program. The assumption is that applying such an approach to the job design will contribute to making a whole range of valuable non-performed, underperformed or unremunerated activities emerge as remunerated 'jobs'. And this process would not only mean incorporating caring labour within the creation of new jobs, however important this aspect is for challenging the distinction between productive (paid) and unproductive (unpaid) care labour. It would also mean including the whole spectrum of activities encompassing the broad terrain on which the re-production of life is made possible and on which we need to invest, from child care to health care, from care for the elderly to environmental care, from restoration to engineering, from transport to housing, from manufacture to finance.

In other words, applying a social provisioning approach would allow the myriad of activities that sustain our life process to come to light and be 'valued'; and this is clearly the potential that engaging with such a project offers. But here also lies the problem: making a whole range of 'hidden vacancies' become visible seems akin to preparing them for marketisation. Indeed, the fact that the whole program remains an institution of wage labour requires us to consider the consequences of supporting such a comprehensive macroeconomic policy (Antonopoulos, 2007). This is a crucial point and one which resonates with the argument feminist autonomists made in the 1970s not only against the wage society, which has made people dependent on wages for their survival while simultaneously denying access to work, but also against the welfare state, which they saw as the protector and guarantor of a social division of labour that promotes cooperation at the point of production and atomisation and separation at the point of reproduction (see Dalla Costa, 1972, 2002; Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Fortunati, 1981; Federici, 2004, 2008). For these reasons, rather than engaging with the

state and taking up wage labour, they thought it important to think of arrangements able to promote (non-capitalist) processes of valorisation. For instance, whilst they strategically supported the wages for housework initiative, they insisted on the collectivisation of social reproduction through the creation of self-managed and alternative social services, for instance in the areas of health, birth control, abortion and the prevention of domestic violence.

Labour, value and alternative valorisations

What I want to emphasise is the fact that this praxis derived from a profound reconceptualisation of political economy which feminist autonomists saw as the nexus between economy and society, two realms which had been kept separate by a belief in an economic order governed by natural laws that exist ‘out there’ and that society had to discover and implement, for instance, the law of demand and offer, the law of equilibrium, and even certain interpretations of the Marxist law of value.³ In particular, through their work on reproductive labour they showed how value is actively made and measured, rather than being objectively determined, under capitalism. Recognising that the way in which capitalist value (i.e. exchange value) is produced and determined is a process rather than an imperative meant confronting its contingency and contestability, thereby beginning to explore the possibility of alternative processes of valorisation. These insights led them to re-work the category of self valorisation: whereas for Marx it denoted all that which is involved in the expanded reproduction of capital, they used it to indicate those labour activities which do not simply react to capital but are able to exceed it through creativity and invention (Dalla Costa, 1972). They for instance engaged with Gabriel Tarde (1902) whose work on value had

³ This is the theory according to which labour is the source of all value and socially necessary labour time its measure. Now, while Marx saw the domestic sphere as unproductive (that is, from the point of view of commodity production), autonomists like Fortunati showed how the production of goods and services, including prostitution, was a crucial stage in the production of surplus value. Thus, the separation of the process of production of commodities from that of reproduction, even though the two are indissolubly connected in producing value, is what allows capital to make huge money savings (Fortunati, 1981: 82). The work of feminist autonomists therefore aimed to demonstrate the inadequacy of socially necessary labour time to provide the measure of value of a commodity. Their point however was never to get at a more precise calculation of such value but to focus the attention on how labour was divided/organised and expose the political consequences deriving from such an organisation (see also Elson, 1979: 23).

argued that classical political economy ‘was at fault for the omission of affections, and especially of desire, in analyses of valorization’ (Fortunati, 2007: 142).

Picchio’s work in this respect has been crucial. She has shown how after Smith and Ricardo, the vast spectrum of desires, passions and interests that animate social interaction, and which were the subject of classical political economy, has been reduced to only one, that is the maximisation of material wealth through exchange and competition. Once these had been posited as the principal means and objective of our economic system, a specific division of labour between production and reproduction was established that serves this purpose (1992, 2009). It is worth reflecting a little bit more on how such division of labour takes places, excluding from social analysis other modes of existence and introducing the wage as a central mechanism for regulating social interaction. Picchio’s interest in classical political economy derives from the latter’s meticulous study of the transformations which by the eighteenth century had radically reshaped the economy-society nexus in England. Classical political economists pointed to the fact that whereas previously the household produced for the reproduction of its members, the new system used ‘the reproduction of the labouring population for the accumulation of capital’. Smith and Ricardo, however, understood capital not only ‘physically, as tools or goods, but as a specific historical relationship between the labouring population and its means of reproduction’ (1992: 8).⁴ They took for granted that this relationship was regulated by certain constraints, such as the imperative for capital to make savings and expand, and acknowledged this process happened chiefly by reducing the costs of reproduction. However, they saw these constraints, as well as the consequences deriving from them, as historic rather than natural. Thus, the tendency to reduce the costs of reproduction made this relationship a conflictual one and that is why the wage was so central to Smith and Ricardo’s analyses. For both it was ‘the outcome of a complex series of social and political forces, embodied in a variety of institutions and expressed through a variety of social norms’; thus, although wages had to be kept ‘within the bounds necessary for a viable relationship between social production and accumulation’, it was clear to them they were contingent and the product of struggle (1992: 29).

⁴ ‘The share of output distributed to the labouring population as a whole cannot exceed the limits consistent with capitalist accumulation. The lower limit of that share is defined by the need to reproduce the labouring population, and the upper limit is defined by the needs of accumulation. In this double constraint lies the problem of the classical political economists’ (Picchio, 1992: 17-18).

Crucially, Picchio argues, this notion of the wage as the cost of social reproduction is what gets displaced through the work of subsequent thinkers such as Mill, Torrens and McCulloch, who introduce the concept of the ‘Wage Fund’, the idea that wages are determined in the market by the supply and demand of labour. This conception creates an inversion of analytical focus: wages are no longer ‘taken as a reflection of the exogenous modes of reproduction, but reproduction – in quantity and standards – [is] seen as depending on wages determined by the allocation of quantities of capital and population’ (1992: 56). This inversion provides the foundation of the modern approach to economics and we see it at work when notions of scarcity and economic imperatives or laws are used to justify unemployment and the need to freeze or cut wages. This loss of analytical focus has also had political consequences as the conflict is no longer between wage and profit within the total value produced but between sections of the labouring population within a given fund. In this context, competition emerges as the chief mechanism regulating social interaction, the latter reconceptualised as exchange, whilst other actually existing desires, passions and interests are removed from the terrain of legitimate economic enquiry. As Picchio points out:

while the concept of social reproduction and subsistence could easily embody an idea of equality, solidarity and collective cooperation for survival...competition of large numbers of workers for access to a limited wage fund implies destructive struggles within the labouring population... This new analytical method expressed a new view of the world. A broad historical and social analysis was replaced by a simplistic mechanical framework in which specific historical processes were homogenised by universal laws, and social conflicts were mystified by theories of technical and natural constraints (1992: 53).

By making the historical relationship between production and reproduction explicit, Picchio’s work has aimed to show how the functional link between waged work and housework becomes a general concern rather than being a woman’s issue. She acknowledges that women ‘are deeply divided by differences of class, nationality, and race as well as by their own individual histories’ (1992: 114). This is a point that feminists who consider race as a constitutive aspect of their gender analysis have made and continue to make, pointing for instance to the radically different experiences of Black women with both paid and unpaid labour (see Hill Collins, 2000; Bhandar, 2013).⁵ Picchio’s work is cognisant of the fact that

⁵ As Bhandar has recently put it, ‘The word “woman” is used as though it applies to all women when it actually represents and signifies the experiences and histories of white women. This means that the experiences of Black

the socio-economic system classical political economists took for granted was based and is still based on racial, gender and class divisions. However, and this has been her project for quite some time, she believes that ‘a focus on the specific question of reproduction might well facilitate new alliances...’ (1992: 114). This is still, I think, a question worth asking: can a focus on reproduction, the wage and alternative valorisation processes be of any analytical import today as well as facilitate new political alliances that do not end up universalising the category of ‘woman’?

Now, it is certainly the case that the both the sexual division of labour and the centrality of wage labour can no longer be presumed; and that we need to carefully trace the various gender, racial and class articulations that make up the social reproductive sphere as well as those that generate value, some of which may present novel analytical and political challenges (see Adkins, 2009; Arvidsson, 2012). However, this does not mean that the separation between production and reproduction under capitalism has become redundant. On the contrary, I think the task of recombining or bringing together the two acquires particular relevance today given the attack on social reproduction that is taking place through its further privatisation. To be sure, the constant attempt to re-draw the boundaries between the two spheres takes places differently in different parts of the world. In Europe, the trend towards privatisation had certainly started before austerity, with social reproductive activities increasingly provided in the market by profit-making entities alongside unpaid labourers in the household or the community. This trend is, however, exacerbated under conditions of austerity that see some parts of the population (those whose wages have been withdrawn or squeezed) having to provide more unpaid labour while others (those whose wealth is increasing) can afford to purchase more social reproductive labour.

The feminist political economic work I have been referring to can help us think of this separation as historical rather than natural; of current value-making processes (that is, how we produce, what we produce, how we distribute) as contingent and therefore contestable; and of alternative valorisations as processes which have always existed and continue to exist

women, Asian women (and, in other contexts, indigenous women) are erased or suppressed by the theories and politics of left feminisms. It means that the analyses of political problems that are being presented are partial and incorrect – because (as we know), capitalism has been forged through colonial dispossession, the Atlantic slave-trade, and now, a globalised form of capitalism that depends on third world labour whose value remains fixed – to some degree – by racism and a persistent belief in white superiority’ (2013: 4).

alongside those privileged by a certain social enquiry (for instance competition) and which can be brought to bear on the ways we organise our living together (see in particular the work of Gibson-Graham, 1996). The question is how we start this process of rendering visible and/or engendering alternative valorisations and in this respect I wonder whether we should read this body of feminist autonomists' work as warning us against current attempts to engage the state through macroeconomic proposals such the ELR.

As Wendy Brown put it a while ago, there is a tension between acknowledging on the one hand that the state is not a monolithic entity but a web of social powers and on the other thinking we can shape it through our intentions and actions (Brown, 1995). Brown was critical of positions which maintained the radical potential inherent in women's involvement with the state because these presuppose a transcendental subject who simply moves from isolated to collectivised conditions as opposed to a subject who is produced by these respective conditions: as she puts it '[t]his is because the state does not simply address private needs or issues but also configures, administers and actively produces them' (1995: 195). Now she was writing at a particular point in time in the history of the feminist movement in the US, when the faith in engaging with the state was at its highest. However her argument takes me back to the question of how to view such a macroeconomic program. The fact that it remains an institution of wage labour is perhaps enough to guard us against engaging with such an intervention. Yet, I wonder whether thinking that the effect of an engagement at this level can only be the production of more disciplined workers does not assume the same transcendental subject Brown identifies in uncritical discourses supportive of women's engagement with the state. My point is that unless we assume we exist outside the capitalist relations that make us, then we need to take seriously the complexity of a process which, although initially based on wage labour, also presents the opportunity to affect the concept of 'work' and productive activity. How so?

Back to the wage?

I think the potential for transformation has to be considered in relation to the changes in the system of (capitalist) valuation the program might instil over time. This is because whereas the profit motive is behind most economic activities, and it is certainly the force behind private investment, the design of ELR jobs allows in principle for considerations other than

the pursuit of profit. This process therefore introduces a system of remuneration other than pecuniary evaluation, which is particularly important in, but not limited to, the context of care activities, many of which (certainly not all) are not subject to the profit motive and often remain performed in individual households as firms do not find investing in such activities profitable. The most evident instance is the provision of childcare services affordable to all income groups but this is by no means the only case. The point is that, as a result of including them under the ELR program, these investment decisions are lifted from the exclusive realm of pecuniary valuation that currently limits employment and output. Now, it is true that this relocation concerns jobs which would have not been otherwise offered by the private sector. The reason for this requirement is that the nature of the program is one of cooperation rather than competition with the private sector, and, therefore, ELR jobs are not supposed to displace private sector employment. However, as feminist economists have pointed out, jobs could be designed in a way that applies to a vast and crucial array of activities that are now performed in an individualised manner or to new activities worth investing in, where worth is assessed in terms of their contribution to the sustenance and enhancement of life. And if private firms wished to provide them, they would need to offer more affordable services and/or better pay conditions, introducing values other than profit maximisation.

Thus, despite the fact that the program is based on a very contested premise, it opens up the possibility for other forms of valuation of economic activity, and thus for other meanings of work, to emerge. This possibility is I think the program's radical potential: without the threat of exclusion from subsistence on which the wage society has relied for so long and with meaningful and effective participation in the job design of the program, which is one of its crucial challenges, the way in which we conceive of 'work', which includes caring labour, can be radically affected. In place of the old 'work as worth' ideology which has permeated both the welfare state and neo-liberal welfare-to-work initiatives, we can start a discussion on how to organise the activities we value in life, which is the most valuable contribution that the social provisioning approach to economics has made so far. In this discussion the meaning of care and caring labour can be re-articulated, delinked from the house, the family, the mother and possibly the woman.

This I believe is one of the crucial differences with the citizenship income movement, for which income needs to be de-coupled from wage labour. Gorz, one of its major proponents, argued that efforts should concentrate on 'distributing all the socially necessary work and

[also] socially produced wealth' so that 'people will be able to divide their lives between a wide range of activities which will have neither payment nor profitability as their necessary condition or goal' (1999: 46). A similar argument has been made more recently by Kathi Weeks (2011) who also draws on the Wages for Housework campaign and presents citizenship income as its successor. The latter has for her the advantage of doing away with the productivist logic Wages for Housework unintentionally produced by focusing too much on 'work'. However, although they both point to the need for a political break, it is not really clear how this is to come about besides demanding that the state grants a citizenship income for the productive labour we are all engaged with. Although I sympathise with their attempt to move beyond the work ideology, I think their position leaves a whole set of important questions about this process unanswered, for instance about the nature of our interaction with the state on which we place the demand for a citizenship income; the parameters informing the (re)valuation of the different forms of labour we engage with and/or wish to foster; and the means through which the massive indigent population can effectively participate in redefining 'work'. The ELR, on the other hand, does not introduce a political break overnight. However, its potential lies in providing the opportunity to get a socially desirable wage immediately that enables participation in exactly such a complex process.

To conclude, rather than seeing these two modes of feminist engagement in opposition to one another, I want to suggest it makes more sense to focus on what is at stake for both, that is on the attempt to think of alternative processes of (non-capitalist) valorisation as well as the arrangements, institutional and otherwise, which might be able to sustain them. Now one obvious objection to the ELR program in particular is that insisting on the wage at a time when the role wage labour plays in productive processes is declining is anachronistic. I take this argument seriously. The first point I would like to make is that wage labour has only ever been a crucial form of labour in some parts of the world and even in Fordist economies it has not been the only one. However the powerful role the wage played in disciplining Fordist societies by making people's own sense of worth and subsistence conditions dependant on whether they had access to work cannot be underestimated. Has this role ceased to exist? This is my second point and one which I think is worth including in our future research agenda. The role of the wage in providing access to the means of subsistence has certainly declined in post-Fordist economies (and even here we need to do serious empirical and conceptual work on how im/material production is being re-organised around the world). But what about its

disciplinary role? Can we dismiss it at a time when ever more individual and societal ‘worth’ is produced through the narrative/ideology of work? Can we dismiss its political charge? I would like to suggest that at a time when the work ideology is so powerful, forms of engagement with the wage such as the ELR program can have power as a provocation.

To be sure, I do not consider such a program as a solution, permanent or otherwise, by any means. Rather, borrowing from Weeks’ work on the Wages for Housework campaign, I consider it as both a perspective and a provocation. As a perspective, she points out, ‘Wages for Housework served to create critical distance from the dominant discourse of work and family; it was an attempt to demystify domestic labour, while simultaneously insisting on its necessity; and its potential lay [exactly] in the ability to open up the wage relation to a new kind of scrutiny by politicising estimations of skills and determination of value’ (2011: 129) and such scrutiny I think is what programs like the ELR might enable. Unlike a description (à la Smith and Ricardo), a perspective focuses on the wage to demystify its role, that is, to show how it operates by making people dependent on it for their survival whilst simultaneously denying access to it; and to re-open the conflict between the labouring population and its means of reproduction which the wage is supposed to mediate. As a provocation, Weeks continues, Wages for Housework:

served to elicit the subversive commitments, collective formations and political hopes that it appeared only to reflect...[As such, a provocation] should be understood as an attempted claim and incitement of antagonism, collective power and desire. Indeed, neither the policy proposal, with its aura of neutrality, nor the plea, with its solicitousness, manages to capture the...belligerence with which the demand is presented’ (2011: 131-132).

In its performative dimension, therefore, the ELR might enable us to demand of the current system what the system promises and very likely cannot deliver. In the process it might even allow us to re-open the conflict which we have kept hidden through notions of scarcity and economic imperatives as well as to call into question the way we collectively organise our social provisioning, this time beyond mediation and calculation. Here is how Cox and Federici talked about the power of provocations in the 1970s:

As for the financial aspects of Wages for Housework, they are ‘highly problematical’... only if we take the viewpoint of capital – the view point of the Treasury Department – which

always claims poverty when it is replying to the working class. Since we are not the Treasury Department *and have no aspiration to be*, we cannot see with their eyes, and we did not even conceive of planning for them systems of payment, wage differentials, productivity deals. It is not for us to put limits on our power, it is not for us to measure our value. It is only for us to organise a struggle to get all we want, for us all, and on our terms. For our aim is to be priceless, to price ourselves out of the market... (Cox and Federici, 1976: 14 in Weeks, 2011: 132)

Can we think of the state and the wage provocatively again?

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