

A Universal Right to Motherhood

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Derecho universal a la maternidad

ABSTRACT: The idea of a universal right to motherhood is the result of the reflections carried out within the Italian feminist collective *Diversamente Occupate* (Differently employed), who started an analysis about motherhood. 'Motherhood' is here to be intended not just as being mothers but, in a broader sense, as a time out of the boundaries of production: a time for regeneration, for creativity, for politics. This paper aims to contribute to the large debate about changes in the labor market in Italy and in Europe. It is a political proposal which tries to act within the interstices of the labor market to basically refuse its organization, which is marked by fragmentation of work places, times and conditions and by the increasingly use of information technologies. As a political posture, it also refuses the common narrative around labor market, that is, the work-at-all-cost and the rhetoric of self-employment, which aims to compensate the inadequacy of a dismantled welfare.

RESUMEN: La idea de un derecho universal a la maternidad es el resultado del trabajo de reflexión y análisis político que hemos llevado a cabo dentro del colectivo feminista italiano *Diversamente Occupate* sobre el concepto de maternidad. 'Maternidad' no está entendida aquí solo como ser madres sino con un sentido más amplio, que incorpora un tiempo fuera de los límites de la producción, un tiempo para la regeneración, para la creatividad y para la política. Este trabajo pretende contribuir al amplio debate sobre los cambios producidos en el mercado de trabajo en Italia y en Europa. Es una propuesta política que trata de actuar dentro de los intersticios del mercado de trabajo. Rechaza la organización de este mercado –caracterizada por la fragmentación de los lugares de trabajo, de los tiempos y de las condiciones, y por el uso aumentado de tecnologías de la información–, y rechaza también su narrativa –la idea de un trabajo a cualquier precio y la retórica del autoempleo que tienen como objetivo compensar las insuficiencias del desmantelado estado de bienestar.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Italy, labor market, politics, time out of production, welfare, universal right to motherhood

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Feminismo, Italia, mercado de trabajo, política, tiempo fuera de la producción, estado de bienestar, derecho universal a la maternidad

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1. Setting the scene

The idea of a universal right to motherhood is the result of the reflections carried out within the feminist collective *Diversamente Occupate* (Differently employed). In our thirties, working in the field of journalism or in the academic environment, with short term contracts and uncertain job perspectives, we originally began to wonder about motherhood not being ourselves mothers.

Since the 80's in Italy there has been a debate on job insecurity and on how women live this work condition. Some studies have dealt with the feminization of work to indicate the extension to men of working conditions generally reserved to women – such as precarious, underpaid and unprotected jobs –, but also the request that men should have skills generally associated with women, i.e., capacity of relationship, care, and empathy. The feminization of work “means not only the quantitative expansion of women on the labor



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market, but also the productive use of the attitude of relationship and care, historically more pronounced among women, trained for centuries in the reproductive role” (Morini, 2010, 13). Several scholars have also reflected on the ability of capitalism to subsume the ‘difference’ that women bring to the labor market in a mechanism that enhances the ‘otherness’ to better exploit it.

These reflections have not, however, been originated from the economic crisis which begun in 2008, but have been developed in the light of the changes occurring in the labor market in the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism, with the explosion of cognitive work and the proliferation of atypical contracts. In some cases the crisis has brought the transformations already underway to full evidence; in others it has given them new twists and accelerations.

The changes we are talking about concern both the organization of work – now characterized by a fragmentation of places and conditions and the growing use of information technologies – and the discourses that justify the willingness to work despite insufficient social protections and wages. We will mention here just a few of these discourses:

- The rhetoric of self-employment, which masks behind attractive keywords – such as ‘startup’, ‘creativity’, ‘social innovation’ – the pressure to provide the creation of one’s own work in the absence of public and private investment for employment, and the pressure to compensate for deficiencies of a dismantled welfare through innovative services.
- The rhetoric in the business environment which promotes the identification between oneself and one’s work, between the self-identity and the company identity; in some cases the project or brand, of which one is responsible.
- The uncertainty of the contracts and wages, which makes the possibility to express oneself in the favorite field the only reward for an effort that would otherwise find no sense, neither in the little money earned nor in the poor economic stability.

All together, the conditions related to work organization and resulting from the speeches about work make work activity as continuous as invisible. It thus becomes an activity that overflows the traditional working times and spaces, without being

recognized as what indeed it is: hard work, effort, and continuum. To this respect, you can say that everything is work but it is difficult to identify what aims at production.

2. *Diversamente Occupate* - Differently employed

Some of us met during the writing of two issues of the Journal of feminist political practice *DWF – Donna Woman Femme*, on the topic of work (DWF, 2010a, 2010b). In both publications, we reflected on the meaning of work in our lives through a multiple voices dialogue. Once we finished working on the two issues, we founded in 2010 in Rome the collective *Diversamente Occupate* (Differently employed) as a young women space of thought and action. Later, in 2011, other women coming from a political movement against the university reform proposed by Minister Gelmini of the Berlusconi Government, joined also to our collective.

The name *Diversamente Occupate* was chosen to point out a bipolar condition: on the one hand, the name aims to reflect that we are 'atypical workers' in the sense that we have fixed-term contracts and thus do not have access to the rights and protections related to open-ended contracts; on the other, the name indicates a political shift from this kind of work, which, thus conceived, does not satisfy our desires and our needs.

In the following years, the collective continued to work on the theme of job insecurity. We thought on the relationship among identity, social status and work. In parallel with these reflections, we discussed how to face the gradual elimination of protections in favor of the workers as well as of trade unions mediation between employers and workers. We also reflected on how in our individual negotiations with employers, we live experiences of isolation and blackmail and we are constantly lowering our demands just to have the opportunity to work.

We have tried to address this dual challenge – the first relating to interference between work and identity, the second directed to imagine rights and social protections for a labor market that has irrevocably been changing – starting from a feminist perspective and based on the experience of women. Women have often not been fully included in the labor market in a formal way, despite of the fact that they have often worked. Historically, they have not built their identity on the basis of the

role covered in the work environment. This fact puts women today in a privileged and authoritative condition to think of a new system of work, for men and for women, which does not represent the only condition of access to the inalienable rights that must be guaranteed to all. A way to approach to the issue of the access to those rights is the claim for a basic income, a measure already provided in most European countries. In the last twenty years, in Italy there have been several discussions and debates in order to obtain the approval of this instrument. Other way to approach the demand for those inalienable rights is what we call a 'universal right to motherhood'.

In the following, we would like to draw the path that has taken us from our reflections about the experience of working in a context of crisis and insecurity, with their inherent consequences on the ground of citizenship, to the proposal of a universal right to motherhood. Here we think of 'motherhood' not only as having children within a couple, since motherhood interests us here also:

- as a time outside the boundaries of production, since maternity does not respect the temporalities and rules imposed by labor market organization;
- as an example of those hidden and repressed mechanisms, that we can summarize with the concept of "reproductive labor", that allow capitalism to reproduce itself. We are not referring here just to the generation of new lives but also to all those parental cares and activities that introduce and guide the newborns in the social context;
- as an opportunity to open a discussion about the need to unhook citizenship from independence, i.e., citizenship from work.

In the following, we would like to expand especially in the third aspect. To unhook the link between citizenship, independence and work seems, in our opinion, essential in order to think of rights no longer built on a supposed neutral citizen, actually a male, white, heterosexual, full-time worker. Rights must be conceived starting from the bodies, from what I, a human being, can – but don't necessarily want and must – experience.

3. Basic Income

One of the ways identified to face the blackmail of job insecurity and to ensure protection to so-called 'atypical workers', is the debate on the introduction of a form of basic income. Italy is, in fact, together with Greece, the only European Country without the legal resource of minimum income. Also, and as pointed out by the Basic Income Network Italy, "in front of changes in the labor market, the dichotomies that clearly divided the state of unemployment from the employment have become less and less adequate to describe the reality of the flexible worker" (BIN Italia, 2012, p. 35). In the new millennium having a work may not be sufficient to ensure a decent life.

In this context, in the last years in Italy we have started to talk about the need to unhook the access to rights from work and the type of job contract one has. There is also debate about the need for a form of basic income that ensures participation in society regardless of whether one holds, or not, a job. As Carole Pateman wrote in an Italian book called *Come un paesaggio*: "A basic income is crucial to establish and maintain individual autonomy because it provides the material base for the participation to society" (Pateman, 2013, 31). We see the basis income as a reformist measure, not really a revolutionary one. It is a tool against social inclusion, but also a means to "favor the development of forms of resistance and conflict as a possible element of social re-composition of the different subjectivities today scattered and unable to translate in struggle and social conflict their frustrations and working alienations" (A. Fumagalli, M. Lazzarato, 1999).

Being in the labor market, having a job, is no longer sufficient to ensure access to rights, social welfare and services: when jobs are intermittent and poorly paid, when we alternate paid activities, unpaid work and periods of unemployment, when there are dozens of contract forms which do not provide any protection for those who work, we can't say anymore, as we used to say in the past, that working is enough to be a citizen.

In the context of the various proposals discussed in recent years in this direction, our idea is that releasing access to social security by the possession of an employment contract would help us to free ourselves from any form of blackmail and from the pressure for a continuous availability typical of precarious jobs. In this context, we support the proposal of basic income since it would also be a form of restitution for

all the unpaid or not recognized work that we provide, starting with the cost-free welfare guaranteed by women once again. From our point of view this basic income should be a universal provision, a measure thought to meet the needs of social rights of those who are excluded by traditional security tools.

On the other hand, we are aware that it could be dangerous to bring in the sphere of the economic exchange all of the forms of relationships that allow the social reproduction. In our view, it is true that the tools of social security tailored on stable and full-time workers exclude from access to rights an increasingly significant portion of men and women who work now in precarious conditions. But it is also true that a basic income without welfare could create a condition of isolation, because the income could totally replace a series of activities and relationships which grant the reproduction of the community.

Monetizing time of social reproduction has its risks but there must be also other ways to enhance caregiving. We think of basic income as a technical tool in a political and cultural path that reinvents a new paradigm of citizenship. Along this path, we can rethink a new concept of citizenship, starting from practices of participation and self-government.

The above can well be considered as a first level of analysis. The second step faces the same discussion from the experience of women. If we look at the history of women it becomes visible that a citizenship built on the labor participation is not problematic only because it excludes those who do not have a steady job.

The problem is represented by what Carol Pateman has defined the main criterion of citizenship: the independence. She identifies what she calls the "patriarchal welfare state" (Pateman, 1989) as the product of a model of citizenship in which the main criterion for inclusion/exclusion is the independence. The citizen is the person who is independent and this independence is built on masculine skills and attributes. The women represent the dependency because of the opportunity she gives to host and create other bodies. To this respect, women performance at work represents a "minus" compared to male performance because his is, by definition, intended as always available, reliable, continuous and productive.

4. Conciliating maternity and work

Considering the strong link between work and citizenship within the current welfare model, motherhood becomes a factor of social exclusion, not negligible and somehow irreversible. Very often, the alternative for women is between becoming like men, thus erasing the experience of motherhood, or being underrated as not fully fitting to the request of performativity from the labor market. Indeed, conciliating maternity and work too frequently implies being ready to fill a lack in order to be competitive for the labor market as well as male colleagues are, while quitting work forces from our being women in the mother's role.

Therefore, the 'choice' can be perceived as between being or not being a mother at all. On top of this, it is true that it is still possible for women to be mothers and workers, at least for those who benefit the access to services and conciliation policies or those who can count on their families for help. Nevertheless we must still highlight that this conciliation always implies to suppress the reproductive labor that is essential for human communities. By reducing the time devoted to the maternity experience, in order to come back to work as soon as possible and by delegating to others the care-giving and up-keeping of the domestic sphere, we are all just confirming that the ideal towards which we move is still that one of independence.

The reproductive labor has always been the hidden experience making social life and health possible. Carla Lonzi, Italian feminist, clearly claims that: "We all recognize in the unpaid domestic work the service that allows both individual and State capitalism to exist" (Rivolta Femminile, 1974, p. 14). To use Jules Falquet's words, both the world of work and the domestic sphere put the woman in the position of an undeserved dispossession of her labor power (through a both individual and collective mechanism) (Falquet, 2013). Falquet claims that in domestic systems the dynamics of individual dispossession that is implied in the man/woman relationship has never been really broken. Instead, through the communicating vessels of social relationships, this dispossession has shifted and included the migrant women as well. Sex and race have truly become the cornerstone of this appropriation mechanism.

According to the above, on one hand, the paradigm of productivity at all costs is not called into question and its conditions of possibility are kept in the background. In other words, the work of other women allowing us to cast off the mother clothes to

be workers is kept hidden; the fact that, without someone else filling the domestic role, the asexuated independent citizen could not even exist, is hidden too. On the other hand, the potentialities of the maternity experience as a fertile time, free from the rules of productive labor, are lost and erased. In this sense, maternity is not just a feminine or private matter, although it affects differently men and women. The pressure to be permanently available at work, the logic of productivity at all costs and the erasure of the social reproduction's sphere do concern both women and men.

5. A universal right to motherhood

Maternity gives life to a time which is in conflict with market rules and rhythms. It follows logics and priorities which are very different from the ones in the labor market. For example, a body that sets its own rhythms or a child blowing up the daily schemes are in conflict with the working time management. At the same time, the erasure of the maternity experience is a model for the effacement of bodies and of all those life experiences that are out of the production system and that we have recognized as vital and essential: the care of the self or the relationship with others and politics. They are all experiences which are now hindered for all, both women and men.

The rhetoric of the conciliation between living and working time, as the myth of the super flexible and multitasking woman, the gender pay gap, etc, are all variations of the same culture that tends to exploit bodies and minds of women, loading on women all the responsibility of reproduction. A longer step would bring us towards a culture of sharing, which thinks motherhood as a right uncoupled from work, an enhanced and valued experience, not only for women, but for the whole society. It would be a step that requires the transition to another paradigm, not only in the cultural and symbolic, but also in the economic. In this sense, it would be possible to escape from a forced choice. The power of the generation of another self would no longer be silenced by the cancellation of the woman in favor of the mother. It would be possible to overcome the alternative between the guilt of being an absent mother and the frustration in being a full time mother.

The fact that motherhood is not a desire of all women does not imply that it is only a matter of some, as long as you make concrete what we still see latent: motherhood is not only a matter of who wants it, but of all women and, by extension, of the

whole society. In these terms, even if the experience of motherhood is not the desire of all, it can still be supported, recognized and valued by everyone.

That is where the idea of a universal right to maternity came from. We do not intend this right only as a guarantee for motherhood through safeguard options for those women and workers who do not benefit from any right linked to maternity. In Italy, for instance, several categories of women workers, from the temporary ones to the freelance workers, cannot benefit from the same rights of the women who have an open-ended contract, such as: safeguard options in case of termination, maternity leave or remunerated prenatal check-ups. We rather intend this right as a right to an “unproductive” time in the capitalistic sense of the term. A time that is fully generative, devoted to the care of ourselves and the care of others; a time for a regeneration of bodies and for a regeneration of ideas, plans, spaces and experiences which are not in the circuit of the economic exchange and which are enriching and that should be recognized by the entire society.

We think it as a right because we believe that starting from a gendered perspective on the world and on the world of work, and starting from an embodied experience, the powerful voice of women can speak of citizenship and rights of citizenship avoiding the risk of pure abstractions.

We think it as a universal right since we believe that a right that takes into account bodies could open relevant political spaces for everybody. Maternity intended not only as the experience of giving life to a child, but also as a way to change, think over and take care of the world, means to unlace the link between work and citizenship. To this extent, ‘maternity’ is a way to rebuild a new kind of citizenship rooted in material urges and in the daily life experiences.

Recognizing this as a right means to recognize a non-productive time and space in the capitalistic sense of the word: it is recognizing a reproductive and generative time, dedicated to the care of oneself and of others. It also means accepting that the political paradigm of productivity at all costs has failed.

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