

"LECTURE THREE The Body in Today's Reproductive Crisis" is part of *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, published by PM Press, www.pmpress.org, Oakland 2020.

Changing our body, regaining control over our sexuality and reproductive capacity, is to change the material conditions of our lives. To what extent this principle must guide our individual and collective activities is shown by the crisis that we are currently experiencing in the US despite the intense feminist activism of the last half of the century. It is a crisis that has many dimensions: sexual, procreative, ecological, medical, cognitive, all rooted however in economic and social developments that have drastically reduced the time and resources at our disposal and increased our anxiety about the future and the violence to which we are exposed. Capitalism's old dream to lengthen the workday, reduce wages, and maximize the unpaid labor accumulated is fully realized today in the United States. Indeed, what Marx described as the "general law of capital accumulation"¹—the relative impoverishment of workers, the constant creation of surplus/disposable populations, the deskilling of most available jobs, overwork in the presence of a massive number of unemployed "compe[lling] those who are employed to furnish more labor" (Marx 1990, 793)—is the tendency governing economic and social life, and so are the attendant problems of mass indigence, homelessness, and the deepening of inequalities and institutional violence.

Life, indeed, for the majority of people, and women above all, approximates today the Hobbesian description of the state of nature: it is nasty, brutish, and short. Well-to-do Americans may now live into their nineties, but for the rest of us life expectancy is declining, with suicides and deaths from drug overdose also at a record high.² Suicides are growing among all sectors of the population, women included. There were over forty-seven thousand recorded suicides in 2017 in the United States, and we will never know how many—among older people—have let themselves die, unrecorded, because a life spent battling with poverty and isolation had no meaning for them. Added to the thousands of deaths from drug overdose, gun violence, police killing, and untreated diseases, they form a worrisome landscape that we cannot ignore in our political work.

In this context, I want to highlight those aspects of this crisis that are particularly relevant for rethinking a feminist agenda. The first are overwork, debt, lack of security, life as constant tension and exhaustion, always thinking of the next task, resulting in health problems, depression, and, as we have seen, an increase in the number of suicides.

Contrasting with the congratulatory, celebratory appraisals, by the United Nations and liberal feminist organizations, of the great steps toward emancipation women have presumably made, the situation today of the majority of the female population could not be bleaker. Undoubtedly, today we are much less tied to the family and to men than in the past. The traditional family is no longer the norm: marriage is at a record low, and most women today have a waged job or even two, even when they have young children. But we are paying a high price for the relative autonomy we have gained. Nothing has changed in the workplace. As we know, most jobs assume that workers are free from family commitments or have someone at home taking care of housework. But as 40 percent of women are the sole providers for their families and the rest have partners who are also employed, domestic work does not disappear when we work outside the home. It is done at night, on weekends, at times that should be devoted to resting and other activities. This means that for many women the workweek averages from sixty to ninety hours, like at the peak of the Industrial Revolution,

starting at six in the morning and ending at nine in the evening. Reports abound of women saying that they have hardly any time for themselves and live on the verge of a nervous breakdown, constantly worrying, constantly feeling rushed, anxious, or guilty, especially for not having enough time with the children, or having stress-related health problems starting with depression. Even so, most women have had to reduce the amount of housework they do, which means that essential tasks go unattended, as no services have replaced the work once done by them. Meanwhile programs that could address these problems are being cut.

One would hope that the crisis on the domestic front may be compensated by the satisfactions women may gain from employment. But for most women, working outside the home means to be imprisoned in jobs that destroy their bodies and minds—jobs where you stand up, all day, in shops, airports, and supermarkets, often alone waiting for clients, selling goods that salaries cannot buy, or being chained to a computer screen in box-like, windowless offices. It means paying for daycare and transport and having to depend on fast food at a time when we should be vigilant, given the spread of pesticides and transgenic products and the growth of obesity all around us, including among children. Add that many jobs do not provide paid sick leave or paid maternity leave and that the cost of daycare averages \$10,000 a year.

This is not to say that we should not take jobs outside the home. But it is to recognize that "choice" and control over our bodies cannot be achieved only by reducing the number of the children we have or gaining the right not to have children and working for a wage. It is building the power to force the state to relinquish the resources that we need for our families and communities, so that we do not have to take two jobs, spend all our time worrying about money, or give up our children in surrogacy or adoption because we cannot support them. "Going out of the home" and "fighting for equality" is not enough. We must reappropriate resources, work less, regain control of our lives, and take responsibility for the well-being of a broader world than that of our families.

Adding to economic poverty is the poverty of living in a world in which, wherever we turn, we see signs of death. The birds are leaving our skies, rivers are turning into chemical dumps, we have no time for love, friendship, and learning. Capitalism has made us lose sight of the magic of life. In a meeting I met a woman who works as a doula.³ This is a practice that comes from the reproductive justice movement. It is the idea that women who have a history of mistreatment by the medical profession should not go to the hospital to give birth alone but should go with an advocate. It is a step toward reconstituting the community of women that was once present at the time of birth. This woman was asked, "What is magic?" And her answer was: "Go to see a woman giving birth. There's nothing more magical: the way the rhythms of the mother coordinate with the rhythms of the child is simply magical." But today we give birth on an assembly line. As Meg Fox (1989, 125–29) described it in her article on subjective and objective time in childbirth, today "the time of labor is counted." Labor has become "mere production." The emphasis is on efficiency, as in a time-motion study. Births are not felt. Children are pulled out of sensationless bodies. Giving birth is reduced to a mechanical process.

Nature too is magical. One day the soil is brown and next flowers are generated from it of all colors. How these colors or the forms of the flowers were produced by this same soil no science

has yet explained. Magic is the world seen in all its creativity and self-movement. It is around us, but we do not recognize it. We have lost the capacity to relate to it. Attraction among people is also magical. Renaissance scholars spoke of the “harmony of the spheres.” They believed that the universe was kept together by an amorous force—similar in its effects to the force of gravity. They believed that the power of “attraction” kept everything in its place and this was as present among humans as it was among the stars. This view of the universe as something living, where everything is interconnected gives power to our struggle. It is an antidote against the cynical view that it is worthless to strive to change the world because “it is too late,” “things are too far gone,” and we should not get too close to others because we cannot trust them and should think of ourselves first.

Efforts to recuperate our relation with others and with nature are not missing. Women, especially those from indigenous communities, are forming urban gardens, seed banks, they bury their placentas in the earth to remind their children of their ties with the soil. In the US as well, in urban settings, gardens as well as time banks are spreading and other forms of “commoning” once limited to radical groups. We are becoming aware that when we lose our relation to the land we lose much more than an economic resource. As Native Americans have always known, in losing the land we lose our knowledge, our history, our culture. As Marx (1988, 75–76) recognized, nature is our inorganic body, an extension of ourselves. Thus, the death of the earth is our death. When a forest is cut, when the seas are polluted and thousands of whales come to the shore, we too die. Thus, there are now many women’s organizations that are working to recuperate older forms of knowledge about herbs and plants.

There is also a growing awareness of the barbaric suffering that is inflicted on animals in almost every branch of industry. Animals too are being turned into machines. In barns across the country that now resemble industrial plants or, more appropriately, animal concentration camps, the lights are kept on day and night so that chickens will produce greater volumes of eggs. It is the same with female pigs. Millions of animals are raised solely to be eaten. They are not seen as living beings but meat producing machines, engineered in such a way that some will never get up on their feet before being driven to a slaughterhouse because the flesh in their bodies is heavier than their legs can support.⁴ No wonder we have so many cancers. We live in a poisoned earth and feed on animals that since their birth have been horribly tortured—taking into our own bodies all the poison that their agony has produced.

As I said, we are beginning to develop a revulsion against the Nazi-like cruelty that is inflicted on millions of living beings in the name of satisfying our desires. The rise of Animal Liberation has been an important contribution to revolutionary politics, and so is the silent revolution taking place among many young people across the world who are turning vegetarian or vegan, some perhaps out of concern for their well-being but many out of revulsion against the suffering that the satisfaction of our desire for meat requires.

Yet much remains to be done. Despite so many social movements, social struggles, and so much celebration of human rights, we have not been able to address the main crisis on which American society has been built—the consequences of centuries of slavery and genocide, which like an ocean of blood affects and distorts everything that is done on this continent. What would a feminist movement be like that placed not just the struggle against racism, but also against the institutions that generate it, at the top of its agenda as an intolerable social crime?

Racism in all its forms is so deeply ingrained in white American and European society that extirpating it will require a long revolutionary process. But a feminist movement can mobilize against the policies and institutions that support racial discrimination and the new forms of enslavement to which not only black people but also Latino and immigrant communities are subjected. We also need a movement fighting for the abolition of the death penalty as well as the carceral system and the militarism permeating every aspect of our lives. A feminist objective must be also the liberation of the thousands of women incarcerated in the US—the largest percentage of female prisoners in any country, who are imprisoned mostly for “survival crimes,” such as selling sex or forging checks, and because pregnancy, in the case of low-income women and black women, has been increasingly criminalized.

We need a feminist movement that mobilizes in solidarity with our children, whose lives are also daily threatened. There is now some concern for the senseless shootings of kids of all ages in schools and kindergartens, though not enough clearly to change policies relating to gun control. Also, the abuses perpetrated for decades by priests in churches and sacristies are receiving some attention. But feminists have yet to mobilize against the violence to which children are routinely subjected by state institutions, often under the guise of protecting children from their parents, and in the home.

If we refuse the violence done to us, with more reasons we must refuse the violence done to our children. We need to valorize our children, looking at them as companions rather than inferior beings. Children have not yet interiorized the defeats and conventions that shape our relations with others as we become adults and can spot immediately what is false, artificial. Only through years of conditioning do we learn to hide and simulate. Thus, there is much we can learn from them.

Putting an end to all forms of violence done to children is an urgent matter, as childhood is in a state of emergency in the US schools are becoming prisons, with metal detectors and guards at the door. Creative programs are eliminated from their curricula, at least in the public schools. And at home there is less and less time for children. We should not be surprised, then, if they are unhappy and rebel. Instead this rebellion is described as mental illness and medicalized. This is easier and more profitable than recognizing the reasons for children’s discontent. It would be a revolution indeed if, instead of spending a trillion dollars to refurbish the nuclear system, the US government spent a trillion dollars to make sure that our schools stimulate the creativity of our children. This is a good feminist project and a good feminist demand!

Notes:

1) Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, pt. 7, chap. 25.

2) As reported by Shehab Khan, in the *Independent* (November 29, 2018) “Suicides in the US hit a record level in years, prompting a decline in life expectancy.” Deaths due to overdose also climbed, surpassing seventy thousand in 2017. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, up to seven hundred thousand people in the United States died from a drug overdose between 1999 and 2017, involving opioids. Every day an average of 130 people die of overdose.

3) On the significance of the role of doulas as advocated for women giving birth, see Alana Apfel, *Birth Work as Care Work* (2016).

4) A powerful, poignant denunciation of the cruelties inflicted on animals in the industrial farms where they are raised by the thousands before being brought to the slaughterhouse is in Sunaura Taylor’s *Beasts of Burden* (2017), which, while exposing the living hell on which the food industry is built, shows that the degradation of animals “has contributed to unspeakable violence against humans” (107).