waged, contractual work, arguing that, in essence, it is unfree labor, and revealing the umbilical connection between the devaluation of reproductive work and the devaluation of women's social position.

This paradigm shift also had political consequences. The most immediate was the refusal of the slogans of the Marxist Left such as the ideas of the “general strike” or “refusal of work,” both of which were never inclusive of house-workers. Over time, the realization has grown that Marxism, filtered through Leninism and social-democracy, has expressed the interests of a limited sector of the world proletariat, that of white, adult, male workers, largely drawing their power from the fact that they worked in the leading sectors of capital industrial production at the highest levels of technological development.

On the positive side, the discovery of reproductive work has made it possible to understand that capitalist production relies on the production of a particular type of worker—and therefore a particular type of family, sexuality, procreation—and thus to redefine the private sphere as a sphere of relations of production and a terrain of anticapitalist struggle. In this context, policies forbidding abortion could be decoded as devices for the regulation of the labor supply, the collapse of the birth rate and increase in the number of divorces could be read as instances of resistance to the capitalist discipline of work. The personal became political and capital and the state were found to have subsumed our lives and reproduction down to the bedroom.

On the basis of this analysis, by the mid 1970s—a crucial time in capitalist policy making, during which the first steps were taken toward a neoliberal restructuring of the world economy—many feminists could see that the unfolding capitalist crisis was a response not only to factory struggles but to women's refusal of housework, as well as to the increasing resistance of new generations of Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Caribbeans to the legacy of colonialism. Key contributors to this perspective were activists in the Wages for Housework Movement, like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati, who showed that women's invisible struggles against domestic discipline were subverting the model of reproduction that had been the pillar of the Fordist deal. Dalla Costa, for instance, in “Emigrazione e Riproduzione” (1974) pointed out that, since the end of World War II, women in Europe had been engaged in a silent strike against procreation, as evinced by the collapse of the birth rate and governments' promotion of immigration. Fortunati in Brutto Ciao (1976) examined the motivations behind Italian women's post–World War II exodus from the rural areas, their reorientation of the family wage toward the reproduction of the new generations,
and the connections between women's postwar quest for independence, their increased investment in their children, and the increased combativeness of the new generations of workers. Selma James in “Sex, Race and Class” (1975) showed that women’s “cultural” behavior and social “roles” should be read as a “response and rebellion against” the totality of their capitalist lives.

By the mid 1970s women's struggle were no longer “invisible,” but had become an open repudiation of the sexual division of labor, with all its corollaries: economic dependence on men, social subordination, confinement to an unpaid, naturalized form of labor, a state-controlled sexuality and procreation. Contrary to a widespread misconception, the crisis was not confined to white middle class women. Rather, the first women's liberation movement in the United States was arguably a movement formed primarily by black women. It was the Welfare Mothers Movement that, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, led the first campaign for state-funded “wages for housework” (under the guise of Aid to Dependent Children) that women have fought for in the country, asserting the economic value of women's reproductive work and declaring “welfare” a women's right.¹⁹

Women were on the move also across Africa, Asia, Latin America, as the decision by the United Nations to intervene in the field of feminist politics as the sponsor of women's rights, starting with the Global Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975, demonstrated. Elsewhere I have suggested that the United Nations played the same role, with respect to the spreading international women movements, that it had already played, in the 1960s, in relation to the anticolonial struggle.¹⁰ As in the case of its (selective) sponsorship of “decolonization,” its self-appointment as the agency in charge of promoting women's rights enabled it to channel the politics of women's liberation within a frame compatible with the needs and plans of international capital and the developing neoliberal agenda. Indeed, the Mexico City conference and those that followed stemmed in part from a realization that women's struggles over reproduction were redirecting postcolonial economies toward increased investment in the domestic workforce and were the most important factor in the failure of the World Bank's development plans for the commercialization of agriculture. In Africa, women had consistently refused being recruited to work on their husbands' cash crops, and instead had defended subsistence oriented agriculture, turning their villages from sites for the reproduction of cheap labor—as in the image of it proposed by Meillassous¹¹—into sites of resistance to exploitation. By the 1980s, this resistance was recognized as the main factor in the crisis of the World Bank's agricultural development projects, prompting a flood of articles on "women's contribution to development," and later, initiatives aimed at integrating them into the money economy such as NGO-sponsored "income generating projects" and microcredit lending schemes. Given these events, it is not surprising that the restructuring produced by the globalization of the world economy has led to a major reorganization of reproduction, as well as a campaign against women in the name of "population control."

In what follows, I outline the modalities of this restructuring, identify the main trends, its social consequences, and its impact on class relations. First, however, I should explain why I continue to use the concept of labor power, even though some feminists have criticized it as reductive, pointing out that women produce living individuals—children, relatives, friends—not labor power. The critique is well taken. Labor power is an abstraction. As Marx tells us, echoing Sismondi, labor power "is nothing unless it is sold" and utilized.¹² I maintain this concept, however, for various reasons. First, in order to highlight the fact that in capitalist society reproductive work is not the free reproduction of ourselves or others according to our and their desires. To the extent that, directly or indirectly, it is exchanged for a wage, reproduction work is, at all points, subject to the conditions imposed on it by the capitalist organization of work and relations of production. In other words, housework is not a free activity. It is "the production and reproduction of the capitalist most indispensable means of production: the worker."¹³ As such, it is subject to all the constraints that derive from the fact that its product must satisfy the requirements of the labor market.

Second, highlighting the reproduction of “labor power” reveals the dual character and the contradiction inherent in reproductive labor and, therefore, the unstable, potentially disruptive character of this work. To the extent that labor power can only exist in the living individual, its reproduction must be simultaneously a production and valorization of desired human qualities and capacities, and an accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labor market. As impossible as it is, then, to draw a line between the living individual and its labor power, it is equally impossible to draw a line between the two corresponding aspects of reproductive work. Nevertheless, maintaining the concept brings out the tension, the potential separation, and it suggests a world of conflicts, resistances, contradictions that have political significance. Among other things (an understanding that was crucial for the women's liberation movement) it tells us that we can struggle against housework without having to fear that we will ruin our
communities, for this work imprisons the producers as well as those reproduced by it.

I also want to defend my continuing to maintain, against postmodern trends, the separation between production and reproduction. There is certainly one important sense in which the difference between the two has become blurred. The struggles of the 1960s in Europe and United States, especially the student and feminist movements, have taught the capitalist class that investing in the reproduction of the future generation of workers “does not pay.” It is not a guarantee of an increase in the productivity of labor. Thus, not only has state investment in the workforce drastically declined, but reproductive activities have been reorganized as value-producing services that workers must purchase and pay for. In this way, the value that reproductive activities produce is immediately realized, rather than being made conditional on the performance of the workers they reproduce. But the expansion of the service sector has by no means eliminated home-based, unpaid reproductive work, nor has it abolished the sexual division of labor in which it is embedded, which still divides production and reproduction in terms of the subjects of these activities and the discriminating function of the wage and lack of it.

Lastly, I speak of “reproductive,” rather than “affective” labor because in its dominant characterization, the latter describes only a limited part of the work that the reproduction of human beings requires and erases the subversive potential of the feminist concept of reproductive work. By highlighting its function in the production of labor power, and thus unveiling the contradictions inherent in this work, the concept of “reproductive labor” recognizes the possibility of crucial alliances and forms of cooperation between producers and the reproduced: mothers and children, teachers and students, nurses and patients.

Keeping this particular character of reproductive work in mind, let us ask then: how has economic globalization restructured the reproduction of the workforce? And what have been the effects of this restructuring on workers and especially on women, traditionally the main subjects of reproductive work? Finally, what do we learn from this restructuring concerning capitalist development and the place of Marxist theory in the anticapitalist struggles of our time? My answer to these questions is in two parts. First, I will discuss briefly the main changes that globalization has produced in the general process of social reproduction and the class relation, and then I will discuss more extensively the restructuring of reproductive work.

Naming of the Intolerable:
Primitve Accumulation and the Restructuring of Reproduction

There are five major ways in which the restructuring of the world economy has responded to the cycle of struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and transformed the organization of reproduction and class relations. First, there has been the expansion of the labor market. Globalization has produced a historic leap in the size of the world proletariat, both through a global process of “enclosures” that has separated millions form their lands, their jobs, their “customary rights,” and through the increased employment of women. Not surprisingly, globalization has presented itself as a process of primitive accumulation, which has taken many forms. In the North, globalization has taken the form of industrial de-concentration and relocation, as well as the flexibilization and precarization of work, and just-in-time production. In the former socialist countries, there has been the de-statalization of industry, the de-collectivization of agriculture and privatization social wealth. In the South, we have witnessed the maquilization of production, import liberalization, and land privatization. The objective, however, has everywhere been the same.

By destroying subsistence economies, by separating producers from the means of subsistence and making millions dependent on monetary incomes, even when unable to access waged employment, the capitalist class has relaunched the accumulation process and cut the cost of labor-production. Two billion people have been added to the world labor market demonstrating the fallacy of theories arguing that capitalism no longer requires massive amounts of living labor, because it presumably relies on the increasing automation of work.

Second, the de-territorialization of capital and financialization of economic activities, which the “computer revolution” has made possible, have created the conditions whereby primitive accumulation has become a permanent process, through the almost instantaneous movement of capital across the world, breaking over and over the constraints placed on capital by workers’ resistance to exploitation.

Third, we have witnessed the systematic disinvestment by the state in the reproduction of the workforce, implemented through structural adjustment programs and the dismantling of the “welfare state.” As already mentioned, the struggles of the 1960s have taught the capitalist class that investing in the reproduction of labor power does not necessarily translate into a higher productivity of work. As a result, a policy and an ideology have emerged that recast workers as microentrepreneurs, responsible for their self-investment, being presumably the exclusive beneficiaries of the reproductive activities expended on them. Accordingly
a shift has occurred in the temporal fix between reproduction and accumulation. As subsidies to healthcare, education, pensions, and public transport have all been cut, as high fees have been placed upon them, and workers have been forced to take on the cost of their reproduction, every articulation of the reproduction of labor power has been turned into an immediate point of accumulation.

Fourth, the corporate appropriation and destruction of forests, oceans, waters, fisheries, coral reefs, animal and vegetable species has reached an historic peak. In country after country, from Africa to the Pacific Islands, immense tracts of crop lands, and coastal waters—home and sources of livelihood for large populations—have been privatized and made available for agribusiness, mineral extraction, or industrial fishing. Globalization has so unmistakably revealed the cost of capitalist production and technology that it has become unconceivable to speak, as Marx did in the *Grundrisse*, of the “civilizing influence of capital,” issuing from its “universal appropriation of nature” and “its production of a stage of society [where] nature becomes simply an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility, [where] it ceases to be recognized as a power in its own right; and the theoretical acknowledgement of its independent laws appears only as a stratagem designed to subdue it to human requirements, either as an object of consumption or a means of production.”

In 2011, after the BP spill and Fukushima—among other corporate made disasters—as the oceans are dying, imprisoned by islands of trash, as space is becoming a junkyard as well as an army depot, such words can have for us only ominous reverberations.

In different degrees, these development have affected all populations across the planet. Yet, the New World Order is best described as a process of recolonization. Far from flattening the world into a network of interdependent circuits, it has reconstructed it as a pyramidal structure, increasing inequalities and social/economic polarization, and deepening the hierarchies that have historically characterized the sexual and international division of labor, which the anticolonial and the women's liberation movements had undermined.

The strategic center of primitive accumulation has been the former colonial world, historically the underbelly of the capitalist system, the place of slavery and plantations. I call it the “strategic center” because its restructuring has been the foundation and precondition for the global reorganization of production and the world labor market. It is here, in fact, that we have witnessed the first and most radical processes of expropriation and pauperization and the most radical disinvestment by the state in the reproduction of the labor force. These processes are well documented. Starting in the early 1980s, as a consequence of structural adjustment, unemployment in most “Third World” countries has soared so high that USAID could recruit workers offering nothing more than “Food for Work.” Wages have fallen so low that women maquila workers have been reported buying milk by the glass and eggs or tomatoes one at a time. Entire populations have been demonized, while their lands has been taken away for government projects or given to foreign investors. Currently, half the African continent is on emergency food aid. In West Africa, from Niger, to Nigeria, to Ghana, the electricity has been turned off, national grids have been disabled, forcing those who can afford them to buy individual generators whose buzzing sound fills the nights, making it difficult for people to sleep. Governmental health and education budgets, subsidies to farmers, support for basic necessities, all have been gutted, slashed, and axed. As a consequence, life expectancy is falling and phenomena have reappeared that capitalism’s civilizing influence was supposed to have erased from the face of the earth long ago: famines, starvation, recurrent epidemics, even witch-hunts. Where “austerity” programs and land grabbing could not reach, war has completed the task, opening new grounds for oil drilling and the harvesting of diamonds or coltan. As for the targets of these clearances, they have become the subjects of a new diaspora, siphoning millions of people from the land to the towns, which more and more resemble encampments. Mike Davis has used the phrase “Planet of Slums” in referring to this situation, but a more correct and vivid description would speak of a planet of ghettos and a regime of global apartheid.

If we further consider that, through the debt crisis and structural adjustment, Third World countries have been forced to divert food production from the domestic to the export market, to turn arable land from cultivation of edible crops to mineral extraction and biofuel production, to clear-cut their forests, and become dumping grounds for all kinds of waste as well as grounds of predation for corporate gene hunters, then, we must conclude that, in international capital’s plans there are now world regions destined to “near-zero-reproduction.” Indeed, the destruction of life in all its forms is today as important as the productive force of biopower in the shaping of capitalist relations, as a means to acquire raw materials, dis-accumulate unwanted workers, blunt resistances, and cut the cost of labor production.

It is a measure of the degree to which the reproduction of the workforce has been underdeveloped that worldwide, millions are facing untold hardships and the prospect of death and incarceration in order to migrate. Certainly migration is not just a necessity, but an exodus toward
higher levels of struggle, a means to reappropriate the stolen wealth, as argued by Yann Moulïer-Boutang and Dimitris Papadopoulos, among others. 17 This is why migration has acquired an autonomous character that makes it difficult to use as a regulatory mechanism for the structuring of the labor market. But there is no doubt that, if millions of people leave their countries for an uncertain destiny, thousands of miles away from their homes, it is because they cannot reproduce themselves, not at least under adequate living conditions. This is especially evident when we consider that half of the migrants are women, many married with children they must leave behind. From a historical viewpoint this practice is highly unusual. Women are usually those who stay, not due to lack of initiative or traditional restraints, but because they are those who have been made to feel most responsible for the reproduction of their families. They are the ones who have to make sure that the children have food, often themselves going without it, and who make sure that the elderly or the sick are cared for. Thus, when hundreds of thousands leave their homes to face years of humiliation and isolation, living with the anguish of not being able to give to the people they love the same care they give to strangers across the world, we know that something quite dramatic is happening in the organization of world reproduction.

We must reject, however, the conclusion that the indifference of the international capitalist class to the loss of life which globalization is producing is a proof that capital no longer needs living labor. In reality, the destruction of human life on a large scale has been a structural component of capitalism from its inception, as the necessary counterpart of the accumulation of labor power, which is inevitably a violent process. The recurrent “reproduction crises” that we have witnessed in Africa over the last decades are rooted in this dialectic of labor accumulation and destruction. Also the expansion of noncontractual labor and of other phenomena that may seem like abominations in a “modern world”—such as mass incarceration, the traffic in blood, organs and other human parts—should be understood in this context.

Capitalism fosters a permanent reproduction crisis. If this has not been more apparent in our lifetimes, at least in many parts of the Global North, it is because the human catastrophes it has caused have been most often externalized, confined to the colonies, and rationalized as an effect of cultural backwardness or attachment to misguided traditions and “tribalism.” For most of the ‘80s and ‘90s, moreover, the effects of the global restructuring in the North were hardly felt except in communities of color, or could appear in some cases (e.g., the flexibilization and precarization of work) as liberating alternatives to the segmentation of the 9-to-5 routine, if not anticipations of a workerless society.

But seen from the viewpoint of the totality of worker-capital relations, these developments demonstrate capital’s continuing power to de-concentrate workers and undermine workers’ organizational efforts in the waged workplace. Combined, these trends have abrogated social contracts, deregulated labor relations, reintroduced noncontractual forms of labor not only destroying the pockets of communism a century of workers’ struggle had won but threatening the production of new “commons.”

In the North as well, real incomes and employment have fallen, access to land and urban spaces has been reduced, and impoverishment and even hunger have become widespread. Thirty-seven million are going hungry in the United States, according to a recent report, while 50 percent of the population, by estimates conducted in 2011, is considered “low income.” Add that the introduction of labor-saving technologies far from reducing the length of the working day has greatly extended it, to the point that (in Japan) we have seen people dying from work, while “leisure time” and retirement have become a luxury. Moonlighting is now a necessity for many workers in the United States while, stripped of their pensions, many sixty-to-seventy years old are returning to the labor market. Most significantly, we are witnessing the development of a homeless, itinerant workforce, compelled to nomadism, always on the move, on trucks, trailers, buses, looking for work wherever an opportunity appears, a destiny once reserved in the United States to seasonal agricultural workers chasing crops, like birds of passage, across the country.

Along with impoverishment, unemployment, overwork, homelessness, and debt has gone the increasing criminalization of the working class, through a mass incarceration policy recalling the seventeenth century Grand Confinement, and the formation of an ex-âge proletariat made of undocumented immigrant workers, students defaulting on their loans, producers or sellers of illicit goods, sex workers. It is a multitude of proletarians, existing and laboring in the shadow, reminding us that the production of populations without rights—slaves, indentured servants, peons, convicts, sans papiers—remains a structural necessity of capital accumulation.

Especially harsh has been the attack on youth, particularly working class youth, the potential heir of the politics of Black Power, to whom nothing has been conceded, neither the possibility of secure employment nor access to education. But for many middle class youth as well the future is in question. Studying comes at a high cost, causing indebtedness and the likely default on student loans repayment.
Competition for employment is stiff, and social relations are increasingly sterile as instability prevents community building. Not surprisingly, among the social consequences of the restructuring of reproduction, there has been an increase in youth suicide, as well as an increase in violence against women and children including infanticide. It is impossible, then, to share the optimism of those like Negri and Hardt, who in recent years have argued that the new forms of production the global restructuring of the economy has created already provide for the possibility of more autonomous, more cooperative forms of work.

The assault on our reproduction has not gone unchallenged, however. Resistance has taken many forms, some remaining invisible until they are recognized as mass phenomena. The financialization of everyday reproduction through the use of credit cards, loans, indebtedness, especially in the United States, should be also seen in this perspective, as a response to the decline in wages and a refusal of the austerity imposed by it, rather than simply a product of financial manipulation. Across the world, a movement of movements has also grown that, since the '90s, has challenged every aspect of globalization—through mass demonstrations, land occupations, the construction of solidarity economies and other forms of commons building. Most important, the recent spread of prolonged mass uprisings and “Occupy” movements that over the last year has swept much of the world, from Tunisia, to Egypt, through most of the Middle East, to Spain, and the United States have opened a space where the vision of a major social transformation again becomes possible. After years of apparent closure, where nothing seemed capable of stopping the destructive powers of a declining capitalist order, the “Arab Spring” and the sprawling of tents across the American landscape, joining the many already set in place by the growing population of homeless, show the bottom is once again rising, and a new generation is walking the squares determined to reclaim their future, and choosing forms of struggle that potentially can begin to build a bridge across some of the main social divides.

Reproductive Labor, Women's Work, and Gender Relations in the Global Economy

Against this background, we must now ask how reproductive work has fared in the global economy, and how the changes it has undergone have shaped the sexual division of labor and the relations between women and men. Here as well, the substantive difference between production and reproduction stands out. The first difference to be noticed is that while production has been restructured through a technological leap in key areas of the world economy, no technological leap has occurred in the sphere of domestic work, significantly reducing the labor socially necessary for the reproduction of the workforce, despite the massive increase in the number of women employed outside the home. In the North, the personal computer has entered the reproduction of a large part of the population, so that shopping, socializing, acquiring information, and even some forms of sex—work can now be done online. Japanese companies are promoting the robotization of companionship and mating. Among their inventions are “nursebots” that give baths to the elderly and the interactive lover to be assembled by the customer, crafted according to his fantasies and desires. But even in the most technologically developed countries, housework has not been significantly reduced. Instead, it has been marketized, redistributed mostly on the shoulders of immigrant women from the South and the former socialist countries. And women continue to perform the bulk of it. Unlike other forms of production, the production of human beings is to a great extent irreducible to mechanization, requiring a high degree of human interaction and the satisfaction of complex needs in which physical and affective elements are inextricably combined. That reproductive work is a labor-intensive process is most evident in the care of children and the elderly that, even in its most physical components, involves providing a sense of security, consoling, anticipating fears and desires. None of these activities is purely “material” or “immaterial,” nor can be broken down in ways making it possible for it to be mechanized or replaced by the virtual flow of online communication.

This is why, rather than being technologized, housework and care work have been redistributed on the shoulders of different subjects through its commercialization and globalization. As the participation of women in waged work has immensely increased, especially in the North, large quotas of housework have been taken out of the home and reorganized on a market basis through the virtual boom of the service industry, which now constitutes the dominant economic sector from the viewpoint of wage employment. This means that more meals are now eaten out of the home, more clothes are washed in laundromats or by dry-cleaners, and more food is bought already prepared for consumption.

There has also been a reduction of reproductive activities as a result of women’s refusal of the discipline involved in marriage and child-raising. In the United States, the number of births has fallen from 118 per 1,000 women in 1960 to 66.7 in 2006, resulting in an increase in the median age of first time mothers from 30 in 1980 to 36.4 in 2006. The drop in the demographic growth has been especially high in Western and Eastern Europe, where in some countries (e.g., Italy and Greece), women’s “strike” against procreation continues, resulting in a zero growth demographic regime that is raising much concern among policy makers, and is the main
factor behind the growing call for an expansion of immigration. There has also been a decline in the number of marriages and married couples, in the United States from 56 percent of all households in 1990 to 51 percent in 2006, and a simultaneous increase in the number of people living alone—in the United States by seven and a half million, from twenty-three to thirty and a half million—amounting to a 30 percent increase.

Most important, in the aftermath of structural adjustment and economic reconversion, a restructuring of reproductive work has taken place internationally, whereby much of the reproduction of the metropolitan workforce is now performed by immigrant women coming from the Global South, especially providing care to children and the elderly and for the sexual reproduction of male workers. This has been an extremely important development from many viewpoints. Nevertheless its political implications are not yet sufficiently understood among feminists from the viewpoint of the power relations it has produced among women, and the limits of the commercialization of reproduction it has exposed. While governments celebrate the “globalization of care,” which enables them to reduce investment in reproduction, it is clear that this “solution” has a tremendous social cost, not only for the individual immigrant women but for the communities from which they originate.

Neither the reorganization of reproductive work on a market basis, nor the “globalization of care,” much less the technologization of reproductive work, have “liberated women” or eliminated the exploitation inherent to reproductive work in its present form. If we take a global perspective we see that not only do women still do most of the unpaid domestic work in every country, but due to cuts in social services and the decentralization of industrial production, the amount of domestic work, paid and unpaid, that women perform may have actually increased, even when they have had a extradomestic job.

Three factors have lengthened women’s workday and returned work to the home. First, women have been the shock absorbers of economic globalization, having had to compensate with their work for the deteriorating economic conditions produced by the liberalization of the world economy and the states’ increasing disinvestment in the reproduction of the workforce. This has been especially true in the countries subject to structural adjustment programs where the state has completely cut spending for healthcare, education, infrastructure and basic necessities. As a consequence of these cuts, in most of Africa and South America, women must now spend more time fetching water, obtaining and preparing food, and dealing with illnesses that are far more frequent at a time when the privatization of healthcare has made visits to clinics unaffordable for most, while malnutrition and environmental destruction have increased people’s vulnerability to disease.

In the United States, too, due to budget cuts, much of the work that hospitals and other public agencies have traditionally done has been privatized and transferred to the home, tapping women’s unpaid labor. Currently, for instance, patients are dismissed almost immediately after surgery and the home must absorb a variety of postoperative and other therapeutic medical tasks (e.g., for the chronically ill) that in the past would have been done by doctors and professional nurses. Public assistance to the elderly (with housekeeping, personal care) has also been cut, house visits have been much shortened, and the services provided reduced.

The second factor that has recentered reproductive labor in the home has been the expansion of “homework,” partly due to the deconcentration of industrial production, partly to the spread of informal work. As David Staples writes in No Place Like Home (2006), far from being an anachronistic form of work, home-based labor has demonstrated to be a long-term capitalist strategy, which today occupies millions of women and children worldwide, in towns, villages, and suburbs. Staples correctly points out that work is inexorably drawn to the home by the pull of unpaid domestic labor, in the sense that by organizing work on a home basis, employers can make it invisible, can undermine workers’ effort to unionize, and drive wages down to a minimum. Many women choose this work in the attempt to reconcile earning an income with caring for their families; but the result is enslavement to a work that earns wages “far below the median wage it would pay if performed in a formal setting, and reproduces a sexual division of labor that fixes women more deeply to housework.”

Lastly, the growth of female employment and restructuring of reproduction has not eliminated gender labor hierarchies. Despite growing male unemployment, women still earn a fraction of male wages. We have also witnessed an increase in male violence against women, triggered in part by fear of economic competition, in part by the frustration men experience in not being able to fulfill their role as family providers, and most important, triggered by the fact that men now have less control over women’s bodies and work, as more women have some money of their own and spend more time outside the home. In a context of falling wages and widespread unemployment that makes it difficult for them to have a family, many men also use women’s bodies as a means of exchange and access to the world market, through the organization of pornography or prostitution.
This rise of violence against women is hard to quantify and its significance is better appreciated when considered in qualitative terms, from the viewpoint of the new forms it has taken. In several countries, under the impact of structural adjustment, the family has all but disintegrated. Often this occurs out of mutual consent—as one or both partners migrate(s) or both separate in search of some form of income. But many times, it is a more traumatic event, when husbands desert their wives and children, for instance, in the face of pauperization. In parts of Africa and India, there have also been attacks on older women, who have been expelled from their homes and even murdered after being charged with witchcraft or possession by the devil. This phenomenon likely reflects a larger crisis in family support for members who are seen as no longer productive in the face of rapidly diminishing resources. Significantly, it has also been associated with the ongoing dismantling of communal land systems. But it is also a manifestation of the devaluation that reproductive work and the subjects of this work have undergone in the face of the expansion of monetary relations.

Other examples of violence traceable to the globalization process have been the rise of dowry murder in India, the increase in trafficking and other forms of coerced sex work, and the sheer increase in the number of women murdered or disappeared. Hundreds of young women, mostly maquila workers, have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez and other Mexican towns in the borderlands with the United States, apparently victims of rape or criminal networks producing pornography and “snuff.” A ghastly increase in the number of women murder victims has also been registered in Mexico and Guatemala. But it is above all institutional violence that has escalated. This is the violence of absolute pauperization, of inhuman work conditions, of migration in clandestine conditions. That migration can also be viewed as a struggle for increased autonomy and self-determination through flight, as a search for more favorable power relations, cannot obliterarte this fact.

Several conclusions are to be drawn from this analysis. First, fighting for waged work or fighting to “join the working class in the workplace,” as some Marxist feminist liked to put it, cannot be a path to liberation. Wage employment may be a necessity but it cannot be a coherent political strategy. As long as reproductive work is devalued, as long it is considered a private matter and women’s responsibility, women will always confront capital and the state with less power than men, and in conditions of extreme social and economic vulnerability. It is also important to recognize that there are serious limits to the extent to which reproductive work can be reduced or reorganized on a market basis. How far, for example, can we reduce or commercialize the care for children, the elderly, the sick, without imposing a great cost on those in need of care? The degree to which the marketization of food production has contributed to the deterioration of our health (leading, for example, to the rise of obesity even among children) is instructive. As for the commercialization of reproductive work through its redistribution on the shoulders of other women, as currently organized this “solution” only extends the housework crisis, now displaced to the families of the paid care providers, and creates new inequalities among women.

What is needed is the reopening of a collective struggle over reproduction, reclaiming control over the material conditions of our reproduction and creating new forms of cooperation around this work outside of the logic of capital and the market. This is not a utopia, but a process already under way in many parts of the world and likely to expand in the face of a collapse of the world financial system. Governments are now attempting to use the crisis to impose staff austerity regimes on us for years to come. But through land takeovers, urban farming, community-supported agriculture, through squats, the creation of various forms of barter, mutual aid, alternative forms of healthcare—to name some of the terrains on which this reorganization of reproduction is more developed—a new economy is beginning to emerge that may turn reproductive work from a stalling, discriminating activity into the most liberating and creative ground of experimentation in human relations.

As I stated, this is not a utopia. The consequences of the globalized world economy would certainly have been far more nefarious except for the efforts that millions of women have made to ensure that their families would be supported, regardless of their value on the capitalist labor market. Through their subsistence activities, as well as various forms of direct action (from squatting on public land to urban farming) women have helped their communities to avoid total dispossession, to extend budgets and add food to the kitchen pots. Amid wars, economic crises, and devaluations, as the world around them was falling apart, they have planted corn on abandoned town plots, cooked food to sell on the side of the streets, created communal kitchens—ola communes, as in Chile and Peru—thus standing in the way of a total commodification of life and beginning a process of reappropriation and recollectivization of reproduction that is indispensable if we are to regain control over our lives. The festive squares and “occupy” movements of 2011 are in a way a continuation of this process as the “multitudes” have understood that no movement is sustainable that does not place at its center the reproduction of those participating in it, thus also transforming the protest demonstrations into moments of collective reproduction and cooperation.