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Book Review Essay: Feminist International. How to Change Everything¹

Ángela Martín Pérez²

A woman dies in Argentina every 30 hours. If we think of Ciudad Juarez or other parts of the world, the number of deaths exceed this already significant number. Violence against women and feminized bodies can be attributed to a need to neutralize and politically annul the feminine voice, which is why the inverse response is necessary: the call to action by a new political language that is able to accommodate and name new realities of the present while granting women autonomy, overcoming categorization as victims or infantilization.

In *Feminist International. How to Change Everything*, political scientist, activist, and leader of the #NiUnaMenos (Not One More!) movement Veronica Gago traces the ways in which violence is visible through the machinery of exploitation and value extraction that has a differential and strategic impact on feminized bodies. Gago provides concrete data from Argentinian history to reflect on a global phenomenon of insubordination that begins with the gestation of the *Paro Internacional de Mujeres (PIM)* (International Women's Strike) in 2016 and continues with the International Strike of 8M. She also analyzes the women's work stoppage as the catalyst from which to read a process that is at once political, subjective, economic, cultural, artistic, libidinal, and epistemic. From there she questions: what kind of bodies, territories and conflicts fit in the strike when it becomes feminist? What kind of generality is it committed to? Why is there an organic relationship between accumulation and violence?

The book was previously published in Spanish in 2019 under the imprint of Traficantes de Sueños and Tinta Timón, two publishing houses with a strong political interest, and was also made available in an open access format. In 2020 it was published with a translation by Liz Mason-Deese by Verso, the largest, independent, radical publishing house in the English-speaking world founded in the late 1970s.

In her book *La razón neoliberal. Economías barrocas y pragmática popular* (2014), translated into English as *Neoliberalism from Below. Popular Pragmatics & Baroque Economics* (2017), Gago had already described the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism by showing how alternative economic practices, such as the sale of counterfeit goods produced in illegal textile factories, resist neoliberalism while simultaneously succumbing to its models of exploitative labor and production. Last year has seen the publication of *A Feminist Reading of Debt* (Gago, 2021), an exhaustive analysis of the connections between debt and reproduction. In this book Gago developed, in partnership with Luci Cavellero, an economic theory from a feminist perspective that included the LGTB+ movement. Adopting the same position in the confrontation with the neoliberal rule and the conservative counter-offensive, *Feminist International. How to Change Everything* recovers different ongoing debates on feminism and Marxist theory. The book is divided into eight chapters, matching the number of points in which the collective document for the First International Women's Strike that took place on March 8, 2017

¹ Gago, V. (2020). *Feminist International. How to Change Everything*. New York, New York: Verso Books.

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was organized. The final chapter is composed of eight theses - again using the same formula - where Gago breaks down the validity, usefulness, and significance of the feminist revolution.

Over the course of the text, Gago deploys a broad theoretical apparatus that starts from Spinoza's concept of *potencia* (*Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata, 1661-1675*) filtered by Deleuze and Guattari (1986) and *Mil mesetas. Capitalismo y esquizofrenia* (1988) to recover great feminist voices such as Simone de Beauvoir, Silvia Federici, and Angela Davis, whom she recognizes as essential to understanding the new revolutionary feminism for which she advocates. Her theoretical cartography also includes Rita Segato, Nancy Fraser, Wendy Brown, Dora Barrancos and, of course, Marx, Engels, and Rosa Luxemburg, thus rescuing key concepts that she does not set as inalienable, but that allow her to create new readings on the current mode of accumulation with a clearly anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial, and an anti-victimization lens.

Gago finds in Spinoza an understanding of feminist power as an expansion and reinvention of the body. Without obviating Deleuze's conception of subjectivity as a bodily and affective entity, I would like to suggest a connection with Rosi Braidotti's study in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*: the corporeality of the subject also implies a process of forces and affects that are interrelated and "characterized by their mobility, their modifiable character and their transitory nature" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 133). Gago also subscribes individuality, collectivity, and possibility of variation. *Potencia*, therefore, defines a desiring capacity that opposes any form of power that homogenizes bodies and actions, especially under the guidelines imposed by patriarchy and capitalism. From this point of view, feminist *potencia* counteracts this limited and coercive vision by expanding the body through the ways in which it is reinvented by women's struggles, feminist oppositions, and the battles of sexual dissidences. In this new theorization of power there is also room for desire as an individual force that pushes for collective action and that subscribes to and promotes change. But more importantly, in this specific scenario, it is women who lead this revolution from below.

We live in an era in which spatio-temporal boundaries are being crossed over and even destroyed. New technologies have led us to a deterritorialization of space, and rather than placing us in a specific time, they have installed us in a timeless moment. Against this abstraction, Gago reclaims a concrete place outside the domestic setting where alliances can be forged that will later serve for the reclamation and conquest of public space, in a clear reference to the materialization of this resistance through the visible union of feminized bodies. In fact, Gago understands the strike not from the opposition to the binomial private vs. public space, but as an exercise of sabotage and massive subtraction that allows to make visible feminist work inside and outside the domestic sphere in the same coordinates of time and place. On the other hand, the strike forces the paralysis of capital production, reconfiguring the inherited perception of the system. The blockade does not only arise from the stoppage in factories or the suspension of services, but also from the interruption of a whole network of work territories that include domestic, community, precarious, care, and migrant labor. In this sense, it is redefined as a new form of practical cartography of feminist politics where each individual adopts the role of political subject, rejecting its victimization or infantilization.

But in order for this strike to take place and form a universe of political significance that manages to transcend national borders, it is necessary for there to exist a prior organization. This is where the assemblies described by Gago as "situated apparatus of collective intelligence" (167) come into play. It was thanks to them that the 2018 international strike and the consequent mobilization of the unions was possible. In contrast to the online space, assemblies bring together corporealities that outside the constraints of domestic space raise their voices to condemn situations of oppression. It is recognized as a space where unusual alliances, debates, and disagreements thrive. In it, the heterogeneity of the revolution, the different open fronts in which the feminist struggle must convene and the commitment to produce exclusively political time become evident. Gago encourages her audience to overcome the Marxist opposition of production and reproduction in favor of a feminist economy that she encompasses within the policy-model of "neo-materialism," following Federica Giardini approach in "Dominio e sfruttamento. Un ritorno neomaterialista sull'economia politica" (2017), and "Reproduction as Paradigm. Elements Toward a Feminist Political Economy," written along with Anna Simone, and included in *Former West. Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (2017).

Lastly, Gago's research focuses on the opposition to capital from the return to the body as a battlefield, which she emphasizes in the text through the concept of the body-territory. In opposition to the abstract characterization in which the neoliberal owner is defined, the body stands as an individual, autonomous, and desiring domain. However, in the case of the female body, a history of colonization, conquest, and domination is observed as Maria Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia Von Werlhof studied in *Women: The Last Colony* (1988). On the other hand, Gago observes the value that emanates from the constant criminalization of common actions that are protagonized by women, to the point of presenting a correspondence between feminist mobilization and the increase in crimes that occur immediately afterwards. Gago reverses the connection to show it as a punitive measure that, given the impossibility of stopping the revolution, tries to silence it through violence. Cases such as that of Lucía Pérez in Argentina (2016) permeate the book to verify the media manipulation that still prevails in societies when it comes to aggressions against women. We can also mention the resounding *La Manada* case, which occurred in 2016 during the national festivities of San Fermin in Pamplona (Spain), and whose sentence came out on June 21, 2019. Contrary to the case of Lucía Pérez, those involved were sentenced to several years in prison.

In Veronica Gago's analysis, there is a direct relationship between domestic violence, ecclesiastical domination, and the increasingly evident loss of income in a society condemned to precariousness. While patriarchal domination was previously measured by wages, the global crisis and the consequent indebtedness have dislocated the field of power, fostering new forms of authority that, together with drug use and alcoholism, are impregnated with violence. For this reason, popular economies are a privileged prism for reading the crisis of the patriarchy of salary. Latin America witnesses the way in which capital exploits as a "free resource" domestic labor, peasant labor and the labor of slum dwellers in the cities. Exploitation, mainly colonial and heteropatriarchal, domesticates the popular classes while indebting them for access to basic goods. Thus, as the Gago stresses, decolonization is also a form of depatriarchalization. In the face of this, feminized labor must emerge from its subordination and discredit in order, to borrow the words of J.K. Gibson Graham, "to make a room of their own for new economic representations" (Gibson Graham, 2006, p. 150).

In conclusion, Gago's sketch allows us to evidence the rationality of the assemblages that link exploitation in the labor spheres with the implosion of domestic violence in the domestic sphere. Much has been written in recent years on the sexual division of labor and the inseparable relationship between patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. The novelty of this work lies in the topicality of the debate from the practicality of the strike, defending a space of insubordination to the mandate of austerity, debt, and precariousness. It is in this key that we can begin to weave the conflicts, demands, and struggles raised by indigenous groups, the trans community, precarious workers, students, caregivers, or land workers. Here also resides feminist transversality, the union of completely different bodies, conflicts, and territories in the same space of subversion. The assembly of concrete political decision as a machine that installs listenership in a common tangible space. It is a body-to-body encounter of diverse femininities turned into organized political subjects. Finally, the international mobilization of the 8M movement also shows us the transnational character of the struggle: ubiquity is pursued without homogeneity, just as there is condemnation without falling into the hackneyed form of victimization.

Gago was a founding member of the *Colectivo Situaciones* (Situations Collective), a group of intellectuals and activists formed in the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires in the late 1990s. Karen Benezra's article "Neoliberalism in crisis" (2021, p. 461-467), described Gago's knowledge of the events narrated in the book as reliable data that emerges from a "military research." That is why this book may attract the attention of different collectives involved in social mobilizations, especially for women's rights, that are organized through assemblies and strikes. This study is also of great interest to those investigating exploitation of feminine labor and the subordination of non-capitalist forms of property, work, and socialization under capital. Specially for those students and scholars who are conducting research on the recent feminist movement in Argentina, this book is an essential reading. More broadly, it is a book that may appeal to people with an interest in political education.

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