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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

Sexual and Economic Justice Preparatory Questions
Radhika Balakrishnan

I would like to answer some of these questions by drawing from an article I wrote some years ago called “Capitalism and Sexuality: Free to Choose?” in Good Sex Feminist Perspectives from World Religions edited by Jung, Hunt and Balakrishnan. Rutgers University Press. I find the questions that were provided to prepare this brief note were in many ways the ones I was trying to address in the article.

As capitalism increasingly penetrates all areas of life and livelihood, becoming a more firmly integrated global economy than before, what are the consequences for women’s lives? I am particularly interested in untangling the effects of capitalism on women’s agency, autonomy and sense of self. Capitalism emphasizes individual responsibility and mediates self-determinations in and autonomy through market relationships. As a consequence, capitalism undermines old scripts that assigned self-determination to some and denied to others on the bases of race, cast, gender and property. Capitalism was aptly characterized by Marx as a system that “overthrows the narrow parochialism of earlier society, destroys traditions, and disrupts personal dependence in favor of impersonal connection of the ‘cash nexus’”. Although class, race gender and ownership of assets other than one’s own labor power do continue to intersect with capitalism, affecting the nature and extent of autonomy, capitalism has engendered new forms of autonomy for some groups, including some groups of women. The expansion of market forces is transforming the structure of social relations within which many women live and is producing new structures. I am interested in exploring some of the contradictory ways changes brought about by capitalism affect women’s lives.

Capitalism has changed gender relationships in ways that have increased women’s assertion of autonomy and at the same time exploited women as sexually objectified commodities. This increase in autonomy and sexual exploitation has triggered criticisms of the Westernization of society by the religious right in a number of Third World contexts. I believe that *Westernization* is a key term in these critiques because it facilitates what appears to be an anti-imperialist and nationalist resistance to some of the advances of transnational capitalism, even as it permits the religious right to focus many of its anxieties and agendas on resisting local changes in women’s social status. I think that many of these criticisms of Westernization are influenced more by changes in women’s status, choices, and ways of life than by the growth of transnational capitalism itself. The religious right’s critique of capitalism as Westernization makes a feminist counter critique imperative, since feminists do not necessarily share the view that these changes are entirely negative. Feminists need to pay attention to the ways in which capitalism’s effect on women are simultaneously liberatory and exploitative.

Such a feminist counter critique of capitalism and its effect on women is also likely to differentiate itself from certain radical critiques of transnational capitalism. While these radical critiques do not share the religious right's explicit opposition to changes in women's social relationships, they share a certain dogmatism that includes a negative interpretation of transnational capitalism. As a result, these "radical critiques" also fail to attend to and praise some of the more "liberatory" effects of capitalism on the lives of several groups of women. A feminist counter critique can, I believe, challenge part of the radical critique by calling attentions to the mix of liberating and exploitative effects that contemporary capitalism has on the lives, choices, and agency of some groups of Third World women.

The growth of transnational capitalism has been accompanied by a religious ideology that not only shapes our world but promises secular salvations in the form of increased production and consumption. It promises increase wealth for a nation, and improvement in the standard of living of its citizens. A sense of one's own value, as well as the value of others, increasingly depends on the market's monetized valuation of one's labor and its products. In addition, people who live in the shadow of capitalist market relations find that "it is not always easy to know when decisions come from within and when they do not, when people want what they want and when they only think that they want or are interested in what actually they only believe they should want or be interested in." These seemingly contradictory notions of autonomy and self-esteem connected to market relationships are key to the ways capitalism transforms gender relations.

Women enter into capitalist relationships both producers and as consumers, and both roles affect women's agency, sense of self, and sexuality. The way in which I use the term sexuality is fairly broad. I refer by it not only to women's choices over sexual relationships and sexual activity in the narrow sense, but also to ways in which women experience them selves as constellations of desires and powers. Some of the powers I have in mind are the powers of producing within a market economy, powers connected to the control of wages and of conditions of work, and power to renegotiate roles in the family and the every day micro-pleasures they enjoy in these roles as a part of the production process. Some of the desires I have in mind are consumer desire for products, whereby women begin to experience themselves as entitled to these desires and to the products meant to satisfy them. I would also like to consider women's desire for sexual knowledge and opportunities that shape their self-identities as sexual subjects free from certain kinds of surveillance and constriction. In short, I am interested in the ways in which women's roles as both workers in the production process and as consumers can positively affect their own sense of self and relationship to others.

1. I find that the issues of economic justice and sexual justice are intrinsically intertwined. The way we need to address these questions is to be honest in our understanding of each and be able to form a nuanced approach that understands the complex relationship and contradictory ways these two and inseparable forms of justice can be achieved. The reasons why these issues are often not brought to the same place is that both in activism and in the academy we work in separate

- worlds that do not structurally come together. They are separated because of departmental issues or because of funding issues. The obstacle that stem from either institutional culture, or funding priorities need to be addressed by making clear and significant the need to engage in this work.
2. I can personally say that when I was working at a foundation some years ago in the reproductive health program it was very difficult for me to be able to work on economic justice issues sine they were seen as being in a different program area. In the academy, being an economist means working on economic issues and though there is a growing voice in the feminist economics movement most of the people are marginalized in the field. I also feel that women's studies programs have with a few exceptions focused on economic issues as central to its agenda. In terms again of the academy there are not many journals that will publish work that deal with both concerns.
 3. The growth of the religious right in the world is shaped by war militarism and a response to western hegemonic forces in the world. All over the world women's sexuality is becoming the focus of an anti imperialist movement. Women's agency as I explained earlier has become the litmus test on both sides of the war on terror. The invasion of Afghanistan was a clear example.
 4. The sale of approach has to be at the global scale that can then be analyzed at national and local levels. I don't think that unless we understand the nature of the global shaping and reshaping of ideologies can we understand the local results.
 5. My recent work on using human rights has been very much focused on the State but depending on what country you are talking about we have to understand the ability of the state to govern given the power of international financial institutions and other non state actors, such as the religious right, corporations etc.
 6. I think that that this conversation that we are to begin is a great step to being able to bring these issues to the forefront.