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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice  
Thought Paper

### Sexual and Economic Justice Preparatory Questions

1. From your activist and/or academic position, what are the most pressing concerns surrounding the intersection of economic and sexual justice? With respect to which concrete issues does that intersection appear most relevant?
2. What are the possibilities for collaboration between and among social movements with respect to global economic and sexual justice?
3. How do we think through sexual justice in intersectional form – attentive to structurally produced differences of gender, race, class, and able to produce the political responses these differences require?
4. What are the obstacles, both in political activism and conceptual representations, to responding effectively to sexual and economic injustice? What keeps activists and scholars from approaching sexual and economic justice as co-constitutive?
5. What initiatives can we invoke that consider sex work from the interlinked perspectives of sexual and economic justice, and how can these help us re-think the broader debate between global markets and intimacies, love and sex?
6. How is the intersection between sexual and economic injustice shaped by war and militarization?
7. HIV/AIDS scholarship and activism is another privileged site within which to interrogate the connections between sexual and economic justice, structural inequality and intimate desire. What are the possibilities in this arena for forging a model of global justice in its full, sexual and economic, complexity? What are the limitations?
8. What scale is helpful to you as you approach these questions? The national? The global? The regional? The local? The North-South? Something else? To whom do you look for responses that will secure sexual and economic justice? The state? Transnational social movements? Bretton Woods institutions? Civil society organizations?
9. Finally, how do we develop effective rhetorics and practices of resistance in the present context, and how do we reimagine global justice as involving both sexual and economic components?

The condition under discussion in the west has been variedly described as reflecting a shift from politics of redistribution (quest for economic justice) to politics of recognition (quest for identity-based justice), or as “a decoupling of cultural politics from social politics.” Economic justice and sexual justice are then conceived as two types of social movements and two maybe equally worthwhile goals that need to be articulated, for the reason of expanding and radicalizing democracy (following thinkers such as Laclau and Mouff). As the eventuality of the shift or decoupling gets further

consolidated through discussions including this one, it may tend to obscure the social and historical processes in different national contexts that constitute/condition people's sense of economic justice and sexual justice, as well as produce different ramifications and configurations for the evolving intersection between movements that work for economic and sexual justice. In other words, while we mull over the possibilities of linkage, we may need to step back in the first place and take a closer look at the two sides that we are trying to link.

I would like to focus on two different points here. The first one has to do with the specificity of the contexts in which the desired articulation is to take place; the second one has to do with the realities of the late modernity that we inhabit, which has created an unusual situation for social movements and their articulation.

### *I. Economic Justice and Sexual Justice in Context*

To begin with, the concept of economic justice itself may be somewhat difficult to emerge or access in the context of many so-called "new democracies" previously recruited into and thus pervaded by the Cold-War scheme and mentality, where leftist thinking had been consistently considered dangerous and vigilantly targeted for criminalization. As a result, "justice"--as a frame of thought that involves a structural, progressive vision of an alternative social order--is rarely applied to economic matters in such national contexts. Instead, individual diligence or hard work, salvaged from agriculture-based work ethic and now advocated as proud national spirit in response to a globalizing world economy, has been augmented as the only fitting guarantee of economic gain. (In a context where heightened intensity of work has become commonplace, the image of prostitution as merely "lying down to earn profits" stands as a formidable obstacle to the decriminalization of sex work.) In recent years, policies described as realizing the welfare state or social democracy constitute the closest thing to the concept of economic justice in such states, but the measures were introduced more as ballot-winning strategies than real efforts at reaching just redistribution. The half-hearted gesture ends up impoverishing whatever liberal heritage that is still available, while making socialist thinking all the more superfluous now that the state has purportedly mitigated the impact of misfortunes with piecemeal relief plans or isolated benefit policies. The changing mode of production from large industries to outsourcing subcontractors further weakens organized labor, making it imperative to court media attention in order to publicize the plight of labor under globalization. Struggles for economic justice, as a result, often have to resort to discourses of universal claims such as "human rights" or "equal rights" (merely adding "labor" in front of them) in order to be at least presentable and palatably recognizable by the general public in such nation-states. Under such circumstances, any discussion of economic justice will have to first overcome the pervasive but limiting horizon of social welfare.

The unique formation of under-nourished progressive thought in the new democracies may make itself negligible for the state, yet the fragility of the new regimes in maintaining political legitimacy and their urgency to consolidate political rule in the meantime often leave the door wide open for conservative (mostly Christian) NGOs, ready on hand with their socially regidifying agenda to help strengthen the state's power

and rule in exchange for funding and expanded political influence. It has already been observed that Christian NGOs in such nation-states, commonly considered representing a definite minority position, have become increasingly outspoken and quite adept in mobilizing prejudice-ridden tradition and commonsense to criticize gay marriage, sex education, media reports of sex nonconformity, etc. But unlike Christian NGOs in the west that usually stand for WASP values, Christian NGOs in the new democracies skillfully present themselves as speaking for the weak and vulnerable, i.e., children and women, and have successfully claimed moral high ground. They, with the help from like-minded international organizations, vigorously demand the state to enforce laws against sex work in the name of tighter regulation against the trafficking of women. NGO/IGO initiatives have also been urging states to put up at record speed new local legislations and global protocols in regard to sex-related information and contact, while global consensus on issues such as pornography and pedophilia and human trafficking is already fairly well-constructed along conservative lines. (*No, we cannot look to the state, or Bretton Woods institutions, or the civil society organizations for responses to secure sexual and economic justice. More often than not, they are the perpetrators or at least the accessories of such injustices.*) Many such NGOs have turned themselves into part of the state apparatus in the new form of politics called “governance,” by either helping to justify new legal institutions or to monitor enforcement of state regulation. Most of such aggressive maneuver can be seen in part as an active response to the sex revolution and the sex rights movements that have been budding under the same universal claims of human rights and equal rights in many of these nations since the 1990s. While many existing sex rights movements maintain a cautious distance from those high-profiled issues marked for global extinction, it is undeniable that the fall-out of this constructed sex phobia leaves few untouched, as the new sexual deployment of moral panics fans up stigma and shame for any sexual nonconformity (easily commutable to criminality). Incidentally, the target of conservative NGOs is rarely movements for economic justice, but almost always movements for sexual justice.

Significantly, the rise of moral vigilantism in this day and age of multiculturalism embodies a conservative response to the crisis of reproduction faced by capitalism on the global scale, as increasing heterogeneity, expressed most visibly as fast-growing differences in sex- and body-related values for the young, is accelerated by globalization to the degree that traditional channels of social reproduction, the family and relations between generations, are profoundly disturbed. As recent developments in moral vigilantism rush to deal with these outgrowths in the new democracies through both legislation and litigation, and as yellow journalism and the tabloidization of media accelerate and magnify the stigma/scandal of gender/sexual non-conformity, economic buoyancy is becoming increasingly precarious for the sexually adventurous. New legislations and litigations that criminalize internet messages of sexual invitation or negotiation under the charge of dissemination of obscenity or inciting sexual transaction, for example, leave a trail of scared and silenced young internet users; while the vice police who crash gay home parties or nudist camps leave crushed and shamed many souls who could no longer lead regular lives but must live as intimidated citizens who will henceforth shy away from nonconformity, not to mention acts of civil disobedience or social activism. In such a morally charged “exclusive society,” neither economic nor sexual dissidence needs to be handled through the iron fist of the state; dissidence and

activism can be most efficiently preempted through the threat of sexual stigma and shame, deeply entrenched now as fear.

Most unfortunately, while many of the new subcultures and cultural commodities and practices being circulated by globalization are characterized by the conservative NGOs as harmful to children and women and thus constitute cause for moral crusades (marginal sexualities included), the traditional left converges in seeing such outgrowths as capitalism's latest scheme in ideological domination/exploitation and thus becomes strange bed-fellows with the moral crusaders.

## **II. Contingent/Surrogate Identities in Action**

The odd alliance between the traditional left and the religious right may be an important obstacle to the connection being envisioned in this discussion, yet the realities of social movements in the new democracies demonstrate that the linkage between movements for economic justice and those for sexual justice is already multiple and complicated, often facilitated by the same late modernity that is said to have greatly weakened social activism. Let me raise two examples here.

I have already pointed out that when it comes to social movements in the new democracies, particular interests often need to be expressed in universal claims (human rights, civil rights, citizenship) so as to win greater appeal in the ballot- or election-oriented new democracies. Universal claims may attract surrogate subjects who originally come from some particular identity but for the moment sojourn (a certain word in Chinese means surrogate and sojourn at the same time) in a movement that has either wider appeal or enjoys popular attention. Universal claims may also prove to be not enough one day as lesbians who used to work within the women's movement move on to organize their own movement when lesbian issues seem to be of more urgency. All in all, the convergence of terms forges an opportunity for various causes to be understood and imagined within the same framework, and, to a certain extent, also enriches the meaning of the terms as various subject groups (e.g. lesbians) inject their own concerns and interests into the discussion (e.g. feminism). As things stand now in the new democracies, and despite criticisms of the limitations of liberal rights discourse, "citizens," much like women in the feminist discourse and workers in the Marxist discourse, now provide the broadest inclusive term that could serve to unify varied subjects and movements in the new democracies undergoing restructuring by the ever-expanding process of globalization. In a sense, all have become surrogate citizens—from women seeking more political involvement and power, to alien labors seeking equal pay and citizenship, to imported brides seeking residency and job opportunities, to laid-off workers seeking compensation or reemployment, to gays and lesbians seeking basic civil rights, to porn-readers and S/Mers seeking freedom of information and expression, etc.—all are employing the same legitimizing discourse of human rights and equal rights, and the appropriation of similar terms offers a natural linkage through which different social movements could envision the alignment of their claims.

If sharing a common resource of progressive discourse somewhat facilitates the linkage among various struggling social movements, the overlapping formation of the

movements' constituencies effects further occasions of collaboration. For movements are always born in overlapping historical processes and it is impractical to imagine them as completely distinct from one another. Labor organizers find themselves faced with uprising illiterate lower-class prostitutes and could not help but become organizers for the new sex worker's movement; a transwoman activist now joins labor movement gatherings because her recent experience demonstrates that employment obstacles for trans are becoming blatant; an environment movement organizer now befriends the sex liberation movement because the former's recent adoption of "Rather Nude Than Nuke" skit is arousing social controversy and needs legitimating discourses from the latter. These are all true examples that have helped create a complex web of inter-penetration and mutual learning among social movements in the new democracies, and they are further accelerated by the fact that what used to be the anchors of life that dictate individual lives and form movements—identities, careers, marriages, families, religious beliefs, theories, nation-state identity—are fast becoming contingencies being reshaped and worked over by evolving late modernity. As a result, a butch lesbian may turn toward the new transgender movement and ponder chest removal surgery, but nothing more. The seeming fluidity of identity is, after all, not a concept, but the reality of historical development as everything else is changing or uncertain. As identities proliferates with the rise and fall of issues churned up by globalization, even structural contradictions are increasingly and continuously displaced or replaced by other newly emerged contradictions. Basic freedom of expression, once considered a quintessential human rights issue in the new democracies, is now championed most ardently by sexual minorities such as S/Mers as their cultural heritage is increasingly subjected to newly-legislated conservative scrutiny. These may be said to be merely functional and circumstantial connections, but I am not so sure that's all there is.

The idea of contingent/surrogate identities may be simply understood on two levels of meaning: 1. particular interest subjects locating themselves in the general category of "citizens" and use universal human rights discourse as their basis of resistance, 2. as new issues emerge, certain members of movements move from one movement to another, situating themselves in relation to new formations of resistance and thus building up new networks of relationships and alliances. This is not to downplay real difficulties in building alliances among social movements, where various relations, different values, unsettled disagreements, and petrified beliefs have sedimented into distances and indifference. The fact of matter is, differences among various women's groups or among lesbian and gay groups may be just as deep and wide as those between the quest for economic justice and that for sexual justice. But as history has it, new issues and new identities and new contradictions are always surfacing, and their development awaits nurturing. That is why when the prostitutes' rights movement rose in Taiwan in 1997, it was such a wake-up call for feminists, gay activists, and labor organizers. For in that one moment, all three movements saw how they need and must work together in order to respond to the emerging sex workers, and the continued collaboration in activism for the sex worker's cause has proven to be mutually educational and transforming for all. Globalization-induced migration of population (ranging from state-recruited construction labor to domestic help demanded by middle-class households, to women crossing borders illegally in search of better income in sex work) is now developing into another learning opportunity for existing social movements.

Perhaps, instead of looking backward toward theory or history for clues to the inherent connections between economic justice and sexual justice, we should be looking forward toward new issues and new subjects that are hard to characterize into existing categories but are there to challenge our basic conception and imagination.

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