

Life is mine

Feminism, self-determination and basic income

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In this intervention I investigate the relationships between feminist practices, basic income and the notion of 'self-determination income', focusing on the Italian feminist movement Non Una di Meno. The piece contends that self-determination income might foster a society of care and help to address the social and economic transformations occurring over the past three decades, which have been driven by neoliberal hegemony. Relatedly, it argues that the outbreak of Covid-19 has demonstrated the necessity to develop a model of welfare which matches our needs, as highlighted by feminist movements.

What is self-determination income? Non Una di Meno defines it as a 'basic income which is self-determined, universal and unconditional and which does not depend on job activity, on citizenship status or a permit to stay. This kind of basic income will be a guarantee of economic independence and, therefore, it will constitute a concrete form of support for women who are coming out from situations of violence (domestic violence or violence in the work place). More broadly, it is an instrument for everyone – both women and men – for preventing gender violence and for providing autonomy and freedom from exploitation, labour and precarity.¹ The idea of self-determination income thus does not refer only to specific social categories, as it is unconditional and universal. It claims for women and for everyone an autonomous and livable life, without being blackmailed due to escalating existential precarity. Moreover, 'self-determination' is understood by Non Una di Meno not only as the result or goal of the income but also as its means, in that self-determination and emancipation stem from the very act of claiming it. In this feminist movement, the claim for a basic income is the keystone of a new deal that puts at its core different desires and life patterns. Indeed, self-determination income is pre-

dictated upon the politicisation of care and social relationships, networks of proximity, urban spaces and the claim to a livable environment.

The society of care

Italy represents a case in point for investigating how the COVID pandemic has accelerated the implosion of welfare, and why a basic income can be a preventative tool against gender violence and against the blackmailing of exploitation, work, precarity and harassment². The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has put to the test the resistance of men and, mostly of women, who have to increasingly shoulder most of their own biological and social reproduction needs. It is not surprising that these themes and claims have been at the core of Non Una di Meno. This past 8th of March, for the fourth consecutive year, in Italy, as in many other countries, was declared women's global strike day, with the demand for self-determination income at its centre. In fact, Italy has been ranked lowest among countries in Europe regarding women's employment³. As the feminists Lidia Katia Manzo and Alessandra Minello recently argued:

the COVID-19 pandemic is teaching us an important lesson about the gendered division of labour, as mothers and fathers are facing the consequences of a new organisation of care and work time imposed by lockdown measures. It is well-known that the gendered division of care was unbalanced before the COVID-19 experience. Care work was not equally distributed between genders across all groups in society, even among highly educated couples, with women devoting significantly more time to household work than men.⁴

In Italy, care-related work (unwaged labour) is divided along traditional lines. Together with Romanian women, Italian women hold the record among Europeans for daily family work at an average of 4.5 hours per day,

compared with 1.5 hours for Italian men. Moreover, while Italian women are the most active in care-related work, men are less active than in other countries. Given the low participation of women in waged work, one might think that the difference in household work is due to the fact that women spend more time at home than men. Yet, according to the latest data from the Italian Institute of Statistics⁵, even when women contribute to income and work as much as men, they also contribute the bulk of family work.

In the Italian family model, women's ethical and social duties to take care of others prevail over their being recognised as people who might themselves be in need of care, as part of a society which resignifies relations between human beings by building a different society. The gendered definition of care⁶ has helped to conflate care with maternal care⁷, as women are deemed to perform care work for the family and for the state, particularly in critical times such as during Covid-19.⁸ This is connected with the theme of 'double presence', that is, with the fact that Italian welfare is centred on the family so that the care work of mothers and daughters integrates what is not provided by public services. In so doing, they become a constitutive component of the subsidiary processes of privatised welfare.

The notion of self-determination is able to reactivate the political imagination. In the Italian context – as in many others – it highlights subjective choice in relation to reproductive processes. Social reproduction appears to many Italian men as the natural goal of women's bodies. However, women in *Non Una di Meno* are dissident, driven by the desire to transgress nature and biology, and by the willingness to politicise care work. The analysis of socio-economic contexts today builds on the awareness that the new productive paradigms have intensified the translation of subjectivities and differences, lives and desires, into labour. The precarity of women's labour has replaced waged labour, transforming bodies into the actual matter of the reproductive paradigm.⁹

Global feminist movements have been one of the main driving forces in defence of the environment and sociality, focusing their struggles and claims on the terrain of life, time and income. The ability of feminist movements to diagnose and act is connected to the role acquired by social reproduction in the processes of valorisation at large and exploitation of unpaid labour spe-

cifically. Moreover, they are familiar with searching for practices and political outcomes which strive for a collective liberation from dynamics of dependency which are enhanced by processes of precarisation – namely through unpaid labour (care work) as part of an economy centred on the promise.

All these aspects are tightly connected to each other, because life is translated into labour and labour has become a control on life. The contemporary feminist movements play a leading role in claiming the right to self-determination and (unconditional) basic income also because of the depths of historical memory. Today, such a memory represents a strong (composite) vision in figuring out how the conflicts between people, men and women, and social power, should be translated into freedom to desire. At the same time, it is key to shed light on the interweaving of paid and unpaid labour, namely on the value of living productive activity.

Self-determination income can free the potentialities of a self-regulated and self-managed social context; by doing so, it can foster subjects' autonomy, beyond the dependency and the management imposed by the blackmail (including sexual) that stems from the imposition and institutionalisation of precarity. Building on such an understanding of basic income, it becomes possible to envisage new ways of re-imagining concepts like *labour* in terms of quality and choice.

Capitalism is not 'a way of feeling'

The possible sources of exploitation that capitalism produces today are multiple. If we look at these forms of exploitation from the point of view of the generalisation of free waged labour, we can argue that today *all* labour is apparently consumed in a non-productive manner. At the same time, *all* activities are productive and therefore generators of accumulation. We are witnessing the paradox of a generalisation of surplus value in the age of decline of waged employment, and the consequent tension of contemporary capital towards the mortification of living labour. This is, in fact, *life put to work*, in its multiple articulations.

In order to clarify this paradox, I use the lens of labour and citizenship as they have been articulated by patriarchal society. The above is also useful to shed light on how the dimension of fragility and social risk is growing

today, precisely in connection to the crisis of the waged labour framework and the citizenship tied to it – both phenomena caused by the radical shift of the productive paradigm and by the dynamics connected to globalisation. All this occurs through the paradigm of precarity. This means that the labour of precarious women and men, marked by the same fragmentation that has always defined feminine labour, ends up being considered once again as *outside of citizenship*, although this now concerns the majority of the population, and not only women.



It is not a coincidence that Guy Standing talks about the need for precarious workers to become *citizens*.¹⁰ But instead of crying on the ruins of deindustrialisation that shrinks jobs, we should think about the open possibilities of having ‘less work, more time’. From this point of view, unconditional basic income is central. With it we aim to evoke a world where desire isn’t suppressed, and a worldview that considers capitalism only as an economic force.

‘What is a good life, if not a self-determined life, free to express and develop itself?’¹¹ By asking this, we shed light on a number of problems that risk dramatically setting back societies, both from the point of view of distribution of resources and increase in inequalities,

and due to the violent contradictions produced by these dynamics – such as the rise in violence against women and all Other/Different subjectivities (gay, lesbian, trans, immigrant).¹² A reflection is taking shape around the precarious ontology of the contemporary subject faced with the erosion of waged labour and the existential dimensions (time for life and relations with the surrounding world), precisely through dynamics enabled by new technological processes and capital’s *appropriative* capacities. The problem of keeping welfare and law up to date with respect to socio-economic inequalities triggered by productive transformations is therefore one of the most urgent questions for feminist movements.¹³ If we look closely, we can trace a historical line of asymmetries and value systems in which the concept of citizenship and the right to citizenship itself constitute a controversial and unsolved element. Citizenship is, in fact, intended as the condition of the physical person – called a *citizen* – as one who is recognised by the state as having full civil and political rights. For a long time, the expression ‘income of citizenship’ has been used in Italy, precisely in connection to the aspect of inclusion in the community constituted around the right to income.

It can be argued that the main innovation brought by the introduction of social rights granted by the welfare state was simply the state’s legal validation of social benefits born in the nineteenth century with an informal and solidarity-focused approach.¹⁴ This was, in fact, a crucial shift that indicated the transformation of social benefits in ‘the universal right to a real income not measured through the market value of the subject.’¹⁵ The idea of a social contract progressively born with industrialisation – not surprisingly also called the *Fordist social compromise* – takes as its reference point only the ‘productive classes’, meaning by that waged labourers. Women (whose ‘labour’ is neither seen nor calculated) have access to welfare rights only through the mediation of the male worker. Carole Pateman has extensively written on this topic, precisely indicating how welfare was built on the production/reproduction dichotomy. In fact, welfare was intended to integrate the wage of the worker as the beneficiary of these measures. The worker’s wife could enjoy these rights only as a consequence, despite the fact that her domestic and care work, alongside her sexual, psychological and affective services, are not retributed and despite the fact that she is, in fact, the back-

bone on which ‘waged serfdom’ was built, and also the secret of the worker’s real productivity.¹⁶ As the Marxist autonomist feminism of the seventies has already pointed out, the worker’s wage could not fully cover similar care work on the market. The presence of a woman who carries out these tasks gratuitously is crucial for the balance of the entire system.¹⁷ This series of acts that form emotional labour have been called ‘deep acting’ by Arlie Hochschild,¹⁸ then Wendy Chapkis¹⁹ and Elizabeth Bernstein,²⁰ which resonates once again with what I call *the economy of interiority*.²¹

Today, starting from these frameworks, it is increasingly clear that in relational bio-cognitive capitalism, it is the concept of productive waged labour itself that has become inadequate. By this I mean that the concept of labour that we are familiar with, or that we believe we know through the shared meanings of a language mirroring hierarchies of domination, derives from the waged relationship, which is in decline – unlike profits. This familiar concept of labour also resonates with interiorised models that oppose forms of autonomy and liberation of the people.

The economic violence of the present

Although today we should be able to grasp the horizon of a *post-work* society, in the past years the Left has unfortunately lacked both imagination and strategy, as it has continued to promote a world of full-time employees, structured around traditional sexist organisations. This world overlooks forms of labour that could potentially be non-alienated (including reproductive labour and other activities that are autonomously chosen). This has also pushed aside the concept of *freedom from work*, previously central to the analyses and claims of the socialist, communist and labour parties.²²

Italy is the only European country, alongside Greece, where a measure of income support is missing, although the European Union had already suggested the introduction of a minimum income in 1992 (94/441 CEE). The centre-Left, which had been in power until May 2018, has only introduced the inclusion income (*Reddito di inclusione* or REI), basically a measure of poverty management. In fact, the government hasn’t taken that extra step towards alternative forms of welfare and social inclusion, rendered imperative by the country’s labour transform-

ations. By drawing attention to the current context, in which different forms of poverty are undoubtedly increasing even at the heart of Europe,²³ we can restore a sense of interdependence between subjects, which has been dissolved precisely by the domination of uncertainty imposed by neoliberalism through the generalisation of precarity stretched way beyond the boundaries of traditional waged labour.

Contemporary capitalism occupies spaces of life by multiplying differentiations and progressively disintegrating, for an increasing part of the population, the possibility of caring for one’s health, of studying, of having a home, and a ‘good life’, as Judith Butler aptly puts it.²⁴ It is not a coincidence that global environmental and feminist movements are making claims about life, social reproduction and the conditions of existence. These movements can be considered as an ‘emerging continent’, where feminist struggles play a paramount role in articulating claims that oppose the historical and ‘naturalised’ destiny of discrimination and exploitation of women in heterosexual patriarchal society.²⁵

What we are talking about are struggles against the violence of an economic, social and development model that is currently attempting to take ownership of people as a whole (regardless of their gender and/or sexual orientation). Today, the machine-body from which profit is extracted is the social human being, namely the singularity which is immersed in an interconnected environment through new technologies.

This bio-economic model incorporates in increasingly pervasive ways not only the labour power of individuals, but also their vital, intellectual, sexual, emotional, affective and imaginative energies. Emotional production (hopes, plans, individual choices) is translated into an emotional surplus intended as an economic element directly produced by the individual. Since subjects are faced with a constantly dramatic nature of everyday life increasingly marked by anxiety, fear, insecurity and impending wars, they tend to act in a polarised, thus predictable, manner. The more predictable the behaviour, the more it can be exploited economically by those who financially speculate on the prediction of social behaviour, something platform capitalism is highly capable of doing.

To use Shoshana Zuboff’s eloquent description, the *surveillance entrepreneurs* (Google and Facebook among



others) have taken ownership of us for our lives, not just for our labour.²⁶ In other words, it is life that has become directly profitable, precisely as waged labour is going through a crisis that appears to be irreversible. New technologies allow for the most immediate and direct socialisation of labour that has ever been seen and for profit that doesn't require any mediation, especially in terms of formal wages. The twentieth-century framework based on the connection between the worker's performance and the employer's obligation to retribute it has disappeared. Thus, the system of collective bargaining, the recognition of the social stakeholders involved, the public space connected to it and its representation, have disappeared as well.

The crucial point lies in the shift produced by the different devices that we use in our everyday life, and in the transformation of linguistic-relational products into *commodities*, alongside the modification of relationships themselves into commodities. Therein lies the historic change of the productive paradigm that has so far unfolded in the sense that reproduction has become production, and the labour theory of value has touched

upon new fields.²⁷ This has been accompanied by a curious overturning of perspectives, thanks to the role of the above-mentioned social networks, processes of financialisation and privatisation of the welfare state.

The value fixed in this linguistic/semiotic/relational commodity that has been subtracted by contemporary biocapitalism is time or, in other words, *life*. Life is surplus value, as formulated in Melinda Cooper's analysis.²⁸ In other words, the social reproduction chain – formed by relationships, exchanges, care, people's dependency on each other, relations with the environment – acquires a leading role within the new productive system. The content and form of social, cultural and biological reproduction represent more than ever before the raw material that is processed by bio-capitalism, inextricably correlated to, added to, overlaid onto life and its becoming, made of affects and needs. In this manner, life becomes the very synonym of raw material.

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Notes

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