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Social reproduction and racialized surplus populations

SARA R. FARRIS

In this essay I draw on my recent book on the exploitation of feminist themes by right-wing nationalist parties within Islamophobic and anti-immigration campaigns, or what I call 'femonationalism'.[1] In the last ten years or so right-wing nationalist parties across the Western world have increasingly demonized Muslim, migrant and racialized males more generally for being misogynist, and have depicted Muslim women in particular as 'victims to be rescued'. It is obvious how hypocritical and opportunistic this move is, considering the very poor record these parties have when it comes to women's rights.

The mobilization of gender-equality themes by right-wing parties within Islamophobic and racist campaigns has been analysed by many scholars, mostly addressing the political implications of such manoeuvres. I am thinking here of Jasbir Puar's notion of homonationalism and Eric Fassin's use of the concept of sexual democracy to describe the centrality of themes of sexuality for contemporary anti-Islam campaigns.[2] However, as a

1. Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017.
2. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007; Éric Fassin, 'Sexual Democracy and the New Racialization of Europe', *Journal of Civil Society*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2012), pp. 285–8.

Marxist feminist, I am interested to see whether we can identify a political-economic logic behind these ideas that Muslim and non-Western migrant women (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) need rescue. In particular, I have wanted to explore whether the sudden stigmatization of Muslim and non-Western migrant men in the name of women's rights has also something to do with the position of Muslim and migrant women in the economic arena, particularly within what is called social reproduction.

Here, then, I will explain in what ways I think social-reproduction feminism is central for understanding the reasons contemporary nationalist/racist formations seem to apply a double standard to racialized men and women. According to such a double standard, non-Western men (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) are oppressors of women, but also job stealers, whereas non-Western women are usually depicted as victims of their misogynist and backward cultures, to be saved and emancipated. But they are hardly depicted as those taking jobs from 'native' workers. Why is this the case? To understand this gendered and racialized double standard in terms of the way in which it foregrounds the economic threat when it comes to non-Western men, while entirely omitting the economic realm when it comes to women, I have recourse to Marx's concept of reserve army of labour.

The essay is divided into two parts. In the first part I briefly summarize Marx's theory of the reserve army of labour, or surplus population, and see if and how it can help us to understand the position of migrant labour in the contemporary European economy. In the second part I discuss in what ways a combined reading of social-reproduction feminism and the Marxian theory of surplus populations can enable us to answer the questions raised at the outset. Is there an economic logic behind the femonationalist ideological formation? And in what ways can social-reproduction feminism help us to decode why

nationalists' racist narratives address racialized men as oppressors and women as victims to be rescued?

On Marx's theory of the reserve army of labour

In Marx's analysis, (a) the increase in the magnitude of social capital (that is, the ensemble of individual capitals), (b) the enlargement of the scale of production and (c) the growth of the productivity of an increasing number of workers brought about by capital accumulation create a situation in which the greater 'attraction of labourers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion'.[3] These three interrelated processes, for Marx, set the conditions according to which the labouring population gives rise, 'along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, [also to] the means by which it itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent'). Marx describes this as a law of population, which is peculiar to the capitalist mode of production just as other modes of production have their own corresponding population laws. The paradox of the creation of the surplus labouring population under the capitalist mode of production is that while it is 'a necessary product of accumulation', this surplus population is also the lever of such accumulation; namely, it is that which 'forms a disposable industrial reserve army, that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost'.[4]) The discussion on the creation of the reserve army of labour is strictly related to Marx's analysis of the organic composition of capital and the tendency of capitalist accumulation to encourage the increase 'of its constant, at the expense of its variable constituent'.[5]

3. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 35, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, p. 625.
4. Ibid., pp. 625–6.
5. Ibid., p. 323.

In other words, the creation of a pool of unemployed and underemployed is due to capital's need to increase the mass and value of the means of production (i.e. machines), at the cost of the decrease of the mass and value of living labour (i.e. wages and workers). Indeed, a crucial element in the reduction of wages and workers, or variable capital, is technical development and mechanization, which alongside other factors leads to the expulsion of a number of labourers from the productive process, and therefore to the creation of a surplus of workers who are no longer needed. This notwithstanding, Marx saw an inescapable limit to mechanization, for labour-power is the main source of surplus-value, and therefore is that component of the labour process that cannot be entirely replaced by machines. This is one of the reasons why, in order to guarantee and increase capital's accumulation, the history of capitalism has seen the development of a number of strategies all aimed at decreasing the mass and value of variable capital, but also at limiting the pitfalls of complete mechanization. Some of these strategies have been: (a) relocation of production in areas with cheap labour, instead of investments in costly technological innovation to maintain productive sites in areas with 'pricey' labour power; and (b) resorting to the supply of cheap labour usually provided by migrant workers, particularly in the case of non-relocatable productive sectors (construction and the service industry, for instance), thereby giving rise to forms of competition between 'native' and 'non-native' workers for the jobs available. For this set of reasons, already in Marx's time migrants and racialized minorities occupied a special place within the capitalist reproduction of surplus labouring populations, a situation that enabled capitalists to maintain wage discipline and to inhibit working-class solidarity by means of the application of a logic of divide and rule.

Social-reproduction feminism and migrant/racialized women

The Marxian notion of the reserve army of labour, together with those theories that highlight the operations of the state in helping to produce and reproduce the reserve armies of labour, is an essential tool for describing the conditions of migrant and racialized labour in the present conjuncture.[6] In particular it enables us to decipher both the economic and the political process of the construction of migrant and racialized workers as a new global class of dispossessed. This notwithstanding, we should note that migrant and racialized women in contemporary Western Europe are neither presented nor perceived in the same way as men. Moreover, the role these women play within the contemporary capitalist economy, as a fraction of labour segregated in a newly commodified sector such as care and domestic work, is arguably also different. How can we explain this gender double standard?

Women comprise slightly less than half of all international migrants worldwide.[7] In Europe, for instance, estimates reveal that women make up slightly more than half of the migrant stock in the EU27. A large number of migrant but also racialized women (who are not necessarily migrant as in the case of many Muslim women or second-generation immigrant women) who actively participate in the Western labour market are employed in one single branch of the economy, namely the care and domestic or socially reproductive sector. The increasing participation of 'native' women in the 'productive' economy since the 1980s, the decline of the birth rate and the increasing number of elderly people, coupled with the erosion, insufficiency or simply non-existence of public or affordable care services, has resulted

6. See, for instance, Jon May, Jane Wills, Yara Datta, Evans Kavita, Joanna Herbert and Cathy McIlwaine, 'Keeping London Working: Global cities, the British state and London's New Migrant Division of Labour', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007), pp. 151–67.

7. United Nations, *International Migration Report*, 2017, www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf; accessed 20 February 2018.

in the marketization of so-called 'reproductive' labour, which is now done mainly by migrant and racialized women. The demand for labour in this sector has grown so much over the past twenty years that it is now regarded as the main reason for the feminization of international migration).[8]

In order to understand the 'exception' constituted by migrant and racialized women in contemporary Europe as a workforce and segment of the population that seems to be spared from accusations of economic and social – as well as cultural –threat, and even victimised and offered rescue, I suggest that we need to look more closely at the reorganization of social reproduction. What distinguishes the care and domestic sector, or socially reproductive sector, where migrant and racialized women are mostly employed, from other sectors that employ mostly migrant and racialized men?

First, as many scholars have emphasized, 'affectivity' is a fundamental – albeit not exclusive – component of 'socially reproductive' labour. This is important because the 'affective' component of social reproduction poses core difficulties for attempts to mechanize and automate it. As Silvia Federici argues,

> Unlike commodity production, the reproduction of human beings is to a great extent irreducible to mechanization, being the satisfaction of complex needs, in which physical and affective elements are inextricably combined, requiring a high degree of human interaction and a most labor-intensive process.[9]

8. See Rachel Salazar Parreñass, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001; James A. Tyner, *Made in the Philippines: Gendered Discourses and the Making of Migrants*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004; Nana Oishi, *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies and Labor Migration in Asia*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2005; Maurice Schiff, Andrew R. Morrison and Mirja Sjoeblom, *The International Migration of Women*, New York: World Bank Publications and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Jennifer Rubin, Michael S. Rendall, Lila Rabinovich, Flavia Tsang, Constantijn van Oranje-Nassau and Barbara Janta, *Migrant Women in the European Labour Force: Current Situation and Future Prospects*, European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity, RAND Europe, 2008; International Labour Office, *Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection*, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2013.

9. Silvia Federici, 'The Reproduction of Labor-Power in the Global Economy: Marxist

Second, the need for proximity between the producer and consumer of socially reproductive labour such as care and domestic work, the impossibility of suspending it, as well as the fact that such work must be consumed immediately after, or during, its production, make the interruption and 'the physical relocation of production away from the site of final consumption (as in commodity production) (practically) impossible'.[10]

One of the consequences of socially reproductive labour's resistance to mechanization and relocation is not only that this work has been re-privatized, redistributed onto the shoulders of migrant women, or partly commercialized, but also that it is one of those sectors where Marx's analysis of the reserve army of labour needs amending. As already indicated, the discussion of the creation of a surplus-labouring population, or reserve army, is strictly related to Marx's analysis of the organic composition of capital and the tendency of capitalist accumulation to encourage the increase of the mass and value of the means of production at the cost of the mass and value of living labour employed in the production process. A crucial element for the reduction of variable capital is indeed technical development and automation, as well as relocation, which, alongside other factors, leads to the expulsion of a number of workers from the productive process and therefore to the creation of the reserve army. However, the resistance of social reproductive labour to mechanization and relocation means that only a small amount of this labour can be replaced by technical development. Mostly, it has to be performed by living labour, whether commodified through the recruitment of care/domestic workers in private households or through the growth of commercial services (fast food, laundry

Theory and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution', in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, New York: PM Press, 2012.

10. Nicola Yeates, 'Global Care Chains', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6 (2004), pp. 369–91.

and so forth), or performed 'for free' by members of the family/household.

As a result, the demand for care/domestic work in private households – particularly in a situation in which reproductive tasks are increasingly privatized within households, outsourced and commodified, and in light of societal and demographic changes such as the ageing of the population and the growing participation of women in paid work – is destined to grow dramatically in the coming years. It is thus not by chance that recent studies on the impact of the global economic crisis on migrant workers in many Western European countries shows that the sectors where migrant women are more concentrated (namely social reproduction) 'have not been affected by the crisis'; indeed these sectors have 'even expanded in its context'.[11] As previously noted, the ageing of the population and the increasing participation of 'native' women in the labour market in the last twenty years, which was followed by neither a growth of public care services nor by changes in the gendered division of labour within the household, has certainly been one of the reasons for the growing demand of female private carers and houseworkers, and a powerful impetus for the feminization of contemporary migration flows. Yet, 'it is not simply the *lack* of public provision that shapes the demand for childcare [and elderly care], but the *very nature of state support that is available*.'[12] In the last fifteen years, across Europe, forms of cash provision or tax credit have been introduced in order to assist families, encouraging the development of the 'commodification of care'

11. Office of Economic and Cultural Development, *International Migration Outlook,* Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012; Sara R. Farris, 'Migrants' Regular Army of Labour: Gender Dimensions of the Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Migrant Labour in Western Europe', *The Sociological Review* 63 (2015), pp. 121–43; Maria Karamessini and Jill Rubery, eds, *Women and Austerity: The Economic Crisis and the Future for Gender Equality*, London: Routledge, 2013.

12. Fiona Williams and Anna Gavanas, 'The Intersection of Child Care Regimes and Migration Regimes: A Three-Country Study', in Helma Lutz, ed., *Migration and Domestic Work: A European Perspective on a Global Theme*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, p. 14.

and domestic services, which are generally sought privately in the market, where migrant and racialized women provide the lion's share of supply.

The growing demand for care and domestic workers in Europe, which has been nurtured by the set of societal and demographic phenomena I have described, is a very important factor in explaining why female migrant and racialized labour does not receive the same treatment as its male counterpart. Evidence for this can be found in the different ways in which current campaigns and policies against illegal migration impact upon men and women. The Italian case is particularly emblematic. In 2009 the Italian government granted an amnesty only for illegal migrants working as carers and domestic workers (*badanti*), who are mostly women, since that was considered the only sector where the demand for labour could not meet the national supply. On this occasion, Roberto Maroni of the Northern League (then minister of the interior) declared: 'There cannot be a regularisation for those who entered illegally, for those who rape a woman or rob a villa, but certainly we will take into account all those situations that have a strong social impact, as in the case of migrant care-givers.'[13] Thus, right-wing anti-immigration parties such as the Northern League are willing to turn a blind eye to undocumented migrants when they are women working in the care and domestic sector. The Northern League is also one of the parties deploying the femonationalist ideology described at the beginning of this paper.

Furthermore, one should note that integration policies across Europe are increasingly requiring migrant women to accept jobs in the social-reproductive sector in order to be granted the right to remain in the country. Paradoxically, these integration policies depart from the assumption that migrant women (particularly

13. Interview available at www.repubblica.it/2008/05/sezioni/cronaca/sicurezza-politica4/bossi-spagna/bossi-spagna.html; accessed 20 February 2018.

Muslim) need to be emancipated, yet these same policies channel them towards jobs such as childcare, elderly care and housekeeping which have been historically considered as the gender activities marking women's lack of emancipation.

As already mentioned, one of the consequences deriving from the peculiarities of commodified socially reproductive work performed by migrant and racialized women is that female migrant labour does not lend itself to be analysed through the Marxian category of the reserve army of labour in quite the same ways as male and racialized migrant labour in other sectors of the economy. The female migrant and racialized workforce employed in the care and domestic sector in Western Europe nowadays amounts not to a 'reserve army' that is depicted (and perceived) as an economic threat to native-born workers, constantly exposed to unemployment and used in order to maintain wage discipline. Rather, it amounts to a 'regular' army of labour. Instead of being competitors with native women in the market of low-skilled jobs, migrant women employed as care and domestic workers have both allowed a number of native-born women to work outside the household and created entirely new professional figures, such as that of the paid personal carer (*badante*), which in Italy, for instance, had not previously existed. Rather than inspiring campaigns for their exclusion from the labour market and from welfare benefits, or from Western Europe altogether, non-Western migrant and racialized women undergo exceptional processes of regularization (as in the Italian example) and even receive offers of 'salvation' from their allegedly backward cultures.

The emphasis on non-Western migrant women overall as individuals to be helped in their integration and emancipation process, including through job offers, is thus possible because they, unlike male migrant and racialized workers, currently occupy a strategic role in the socially reproductive sector of

childcare, elderly care and cleaning. Rather than 'job stealers' and 'cultural and social threats' – designations regularly used for migrant men – Muslim and non-Western migrant women seem to be those who allow Western Europeans to work in the public sphere by providing the care that neoliberal restructuring has commodified.

In conclusion, I would like thus to suggest that the double standard applied to migrant and racialized women in the public imaginary, as individuals in need of special attention, and even 'rescue', operates as an ideological tool that is strictly connected to their key role (present or future) in the *reproduction of the material conditions of social reproduction*. What I call femonationalism, or the appropriation of feminist themes by nationalists in racist campaigns, should thus be understood as part and parcel of the specifically neoliberal reorganization of welfare, labour and state immigration policies that have occurred in the context of the global financial crisis and, more generally, the Western European crisis of social reproduction. The very possibility that right-wing nationalists can exploit emancipatory ideals of gender equality within xenophobic politics springs in large part from the specifically neoliberal reconfiguration of the Western European economy in the past thirty years.

As I hope this essay has shown, a combined reading of social-reproduction theories and the Marxian theory of surplus populations is crucial for understanding the intertwining of racial and gendered oppression with class exploitation, as well as their equally cogent centrality to capitalist reproduction.