

IMPERIALISM, LABOR, AND GENDER

Delia D. Aguilar

*Comparative American Cultures/Women's Studies Departments
Washington State University
Pullman, Washington 99164*

Today "globalization" has become both a key concept in intellectual discourse and a media-fostered buzzword inscribed in the popular consciousness. It is commonly understood to mean the way in which the nations of the planet have been drawn together into one integrated world order through "...the contemporary process of financing, producing, and trading goods and services..." (Bruin 1996, 9-10).

This common conception notwithstanding, there are heated debates that "globalization," despite its widespread use, has generated. On the one hand optimistically viewed and lauded as a "borderless world" of transnationalism (Miyoshi 1993) that now radically decenters or displaces Western culture, on the other this apparent seamlessness is grasped in more material terms: as an international capitalist system characterized by high-tech communication, lowered transportation costs, and unfettered commerce. Generally invoked in this rendition are these powerful agencies--WTO, which seeks to remove barriers to world trade; MAI, which prohibits signatory nations from impeding the flow of money and production facilities across their borders; and IMF/WB, lending institutions known for the "structural adjustment programs" they impose on debtor countries. It is these international institutions that insure state adherence to the following policies: deregulation as against state control, privatization of public enterprises, and neo-liberalism or the opening up of national economies to foreign markets and investments.

The latter will be the perspective assumed by this presentation. Here it might be useful to bring up key points of discord among those who take this approach. For example, Ellen Meiksins Wood (1998) disputes the notion that globalization represents an epochal shift, a break from the past, satirizing its technological determinism and position of retreat:

...[new technologies] have inevitably given rise to a new kind of capitalist system, with 'global assembly lines,' an 'international bourgeoisie' and freely mobile capital which can 'walk to any part of the world where labor is cheap and captive and plentiful,' by-passing the nation-state and leaving in its wake an essentially powerless working class (if, indeed, such a working class can still be said to exist at all). (1998, 41)

Here Meiksins Wood calls attention to what she sees as a basically erroneous and, in the end, defeatist assumption: that the forces of production are determinant and that the global reach of giant corporations means a diminished nation-state and a fragmented working class. She argues that the internationalization of the market does not necessarily imply the existence of a global capitalist class unified by supranational organizations; instead, it could as easily redound to intensified competition. While pointing to the disintegrative effects that "totalization" may likely produce on capital (she rejects the use of "globalization" because it functions to hide the contradictions inherent in capitalist accumulation and suggests the withdrawal of the state from regulatory functions), she insists on both the possibility and urgency of recuperating the socialist project.

Agreeing with Meiksins Wood's exhortations to organize opposition to capital, David Harvey (2000) attributes the promotion of "globalization" as a concept to the financial press which coined it to explain the financial deregulation of the early

1970s. He laments the Western left's (himself included) concession to its adoption in place of politically charged words used previously—"colonialism," "neocolonialism," and "imperialism." Perhaps less insistent than Meiksins Wood that quantitative rather than qualitative change (i.e., a fundamental change in the mode of production) has occurred, he proposes the substitution of "uneven geographical development" for "globalization" as a framework more susceptible to locating spaces of hope within which progressives might mount opposition.

Going further than either Harvey or Meiksins Wood, James Petras proclaims globalization to be nothing more than a code word for U.S. imperialism, and proceeds to provide evidence for this assertion (2000). He demolishes the myth of an interdependent, bi-polar or tri-polar "global village"--dismissing the "Asian miracles" as a mirage--by documenting what he presents as the unquestionable economic supremacy of the United States. He cites 1998 as the year in which the dominance of the United States was established, furnishing the following information, among others: the U.S. holds 244 of the 500 biggest companies in the world, Japan 46, Germany 23; of the 25 largest firms whose capitalization exceeds \$86 billion, over 70% are U.S., 26% European, and 4% Japanese; of the top 100 companies, 61% are U.S., 33% European, 2% Japanese. Thus, control of the global economy by transnationals is, in effect, tantamount to control by the United States.

In the mid-70s, media and corporate pundits and academics began to speak of Asia as the emerging global capitalist center. With this Petras disagrees. In 1998 the number of Japanese firms among the top 500 came down from 71 to 46, while those of the U.S. went up from 222 to 244. Today Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa combined hold only 26 of the top 500 corporations, accounting for only 5%. Moreover, as a result of privatization, many of these companies are mere subsidiaries of Euro-American corporate giants. In Latin America the telecommunications and electric power companies are subsidiaries of European transnationals. In the meantime, the United States is on top in the leading economic sectors: finance, high tech (Microsoft is currently the world's largest company, followed by General Electric), pharmaceuticals, and energy.

Petras then enumerates the strategic advantages that have re-secured for the United States the status of imperial power: corporate control over the political system the extent of which is unthinkable in Europe; absence of any significant left force and low union membership (10% compared to 20% in the 70s); lowest corporate taxes compared to any industrialized country; ability of the Treasury Department to finance deficits via the use of the U.S. dollar, the major currency in the world market; U.S. controlling interest in international financial institutions, IMF/WB, giving it the ability to enforce decisions made on its behalf; the ability of the imperial state to deploy its economic institutions and military forces to keep potential rivals in check.

What are the implications of U.S. economic, political, and military dominance as sketched by James Petras for the people of the United States and for the rest of the world in an international market marked by deregulation, free trade, neoliberalism and privatization? In a meeting at the posh Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco in 1995, the world's business and intellectual elites discussed the state of future global society in a pair of numbers: 20:80 (Martin & Schumann 1997). These numbers indicated that in any given country in the world, only one-fifth would have access to production and consumption; that is all the labor power required to produce all the goods and services that global society can buy. For the 80% without employment, the choice, if any exists, would be "to have lunch or to be lunch" (4). The likely consequences of such a society (that a world market gone berserk is bound to create) have caused conservatives like Edward Luttwak to refer to the freedom of capital as "turbo-capitalism on a world scale" (quoted in Martin and Schumann, 122),

and John Gray to remark, "...the utopia of the global free market has not incurred a human cost in the way that communism did...[but] over time it may come to rival it in the suffering it inflicts" (quoted in Harvey, 68).

Indeed, inequality within and between countries today has reached a new magnitude; this, at the same time that the U.S. media daily proclaims the continued burgeoning of a robust economy. The polarity of wealth in the United States is greater than at any time since the 1930s; in this it is currently matched only by Russia among industrialized countries (Hassan 2000). In 1995 the net wealth of Bill Gates alone was greater than the combined net worth of the poorest 40% of Americans, numbering 106 million people. United Nations agencies report that in 1999 200 million more people lived in abject poverty (on less than \$1 a day) than in 1987 (Borosage 1999). According to the UN Development Report (1996): "...between 1960 and 1991 the share of the richest 20% rose from 70% of global income to 85%--while that of the poorest declined from 2.3% to 1.4%." In 1991 "more than 85% of the world's population received only 15% of its income." Finally, a total of 358 people own the combined wealth of 2.5 billion put together, almost half of the world's population! Clearly, globalization is paying off rather well for those on top whose responsibility it is to drive wages down and unions out, subjecting human labor ever more harshly to the laws of a deregulated market.

The most pronounced change in the world's work force today is probably in its composition and numbers: it has become radically feminized and it sports a literally different complexion (Harvey 2000, Hassan 2000, Sassen 1998). It doubled in size between 1966 and 1995, according to the World Bank (1995). "Globalization in its modern form is...based less on the proliferation of computers than on the proliferation of proletarians," states David Coates, and "the change in the center of gravity" defines globalization as much as the extraordinary mobility of capital (quoted in Tabb 2000, 37). Moreover, this much larger labor force is also more heterogeneous and migratory. The U.S., for instance, has the greatest proportion of foreign-born since the 1920s. Not less important, geographical and social differentials in wages and social provisions within the global proletariat are greater than they have ever been (Harvey 2000).

Examining changes in the employment trends in the U.S.--in her words, "not simply a quantitative transformation...[but] a new economic regime"--Saskia Sassen (1998) explains how economic globalization has resulted in the increasing inequality of different types of workers and their heightened insecurity due to the "casualization of employment relation." The de-industrialization of the 70s was accompanied by the rise of service-sector jobs and the recruitment of women. The service sector today is sharply polarized. At one end are labor-intensive retail trade, health, and business services, mostly low-paid and not requiring a high-school education. At the other end are finance and specialized services calling for a college degree. Sassen notes that the "valorization" of the finance industry because of the superprofits it commands has been achieved in direct contraposition to the "devalorization" of women, people of color, and immigrants in global cities like Los Angeles and New York. In both cases, however, informalization by firms of all or some of their operations has bred an insecurity in workers heretofore not experienced by professional and skilled workers. For obvious reasons, converting employees to self-employed workers is now a model favored by business (Martin & Schumann 1997).

Harvey contends that in the future assessment of the history of globalization, the "...simple shift in the cost of overcoming space may be seen as far more significant than the so-called information revolution *per se* (though both are part and parcel of each other in practice)" (2000, 63). In this connection Nike, perhaps more than any other transnational corporation, has come to signify global capital's ability to collapse

space and time via high technology and to penetrate national boundaries courtesy of international economic agreements, all in the unrelenting pursuit of profit.

Observe how Nike has come to encapsulate the quintessence of globalization through the creation of "global commodity chains" (Appelbaum 1996). The design of a specific model is sketched in Nike's headquarters and developed together by technicians in Oregon, Indonesia, and South Korea by assembling 52 separate parts made in five countries. Young Asian women and girls then manufacture the shoes in factories in Indonesia, China, or Vietnam, factories that are owned by capitalists from Hong Kong or Taiwan (La Feber 1999). Lured by cheap female labor, Phil Knight took advantage of the high-tech revolution (ushered by Intel's 1971 invention of the microchip) and proceeded to move the production of his well-known Nike shoes away from Maine and New Hampshire to more favorable Asian climes. There, his successful recruitment of subcontractors to do the dirty work of managing the actual manufacture of shoes permitted him the unctuous posture of denying knowledge of any exploitative practices. Harper Magazine first exposed Nike's Indonesian factories where young girls earned fourteen cents an hour laboring over sixty-hour workweeks, while basketball star Michael Jordan earned a \$20 million multi-year fee for endorsing Nike shoes (Appelbaum 1996). Interestingly, in the wake of student activism targeting sweatshop labor, Phil Knight retaliated by withdrawing his endowments to the University of Oregon a few months ago. Oregon is Nike's home base.

The failure of a development model shaped by the "conditionalities" of structural adjustment has made peripheral nations particularly vulnerable to the onerous labor practices of global capital, as the Nike example demonstrates. This brake on development is likewise reflected not only in the immigrant flows (legal and illegal) to core countries but in the virtual "reperipheralization of the core" (Appelbaum 1996, 309). Thus manufacturers in global cities have turned more and more to subcontractors in the garment industry to recruit immigrant women who are made to labor under sweatshop conditions. The U.S. government defines sweatshop as "a business that regularly violates both wage or child labor and safety and health laws" (Hu-Dehart 1999). News about one such sweatshop in El Monte, near Los Angeles, California broke out in 1995. State and federal enforcement officers raided an apartment complex surrounded by razor-barbed wire and released 72 Thai immigrants, 67 women and 5 men. These workers had labored for up to seven years in the guarded compound and were forced to sew garments for U.S. brand-name manufacturers for \$1.60 an hour. Officers had been alerted to their condition by two women who escaped by scaling the walls of the compound. The eight Chinese-Thai owners of this underground sweatshop were immediately arrested and charged with "peonage," "involuntary servitude," and kidnapping (Hu-Dehart 1999). One might observe that both workforce and capital, albeit small-time, have increasingly become "multicultural," to use a favorite catchword.

Recognition of the racialization of labor should not preclude recognition of gender, for to speak of globalization without centerstaging women, particular women of color, would be a grave mistake. In the era of globalized economics where a race to the bottom is critical for superprofits, it is the labor power of women--and unfortunately, of children, 70% of whom work as unpaid family members in rural areas (Tabb 2000)--that is the cheapest of all. From the *maquiladoras* set up in Mexico even prior to NAFTA, to assembly plants and export-processing zones in Central America, the Caribbean and the Pacific Rim, to subcontractors and garment sweatshops in global cities and in nations of the periphery, it is women's labor upon which maximum profitability rests. Qualities presumed to be inherently female--docility, nimble fingers, patience--spring to the lips of many a manager, no matter his race, when asked why the preference for women workers (The Global Assembly

Line 1986). When asked about his hiring policy, a Silicon Valley White male production manager disclosed his "simple formula": "small, foreign, and female" (Hossfeld 1994, 65).

While the enlistment of migrant labor has been integral to the history of capitalist development, with free trade, deregulation, and neoliberalism as globalization's guideposts, the diasporic flow of migrant women from peripheral formations to more affluent countries is today quite unprecedented. I cite now the exemplary case of Filipina overseas contract workers (OCWs) as a paradigmatic example. In this instance, our comprehension of their situation would, in my opinion, be much aided by Petras' unflinching use of "U.S. imperialism" instead of "globalization" or even of "global capitalism." Taken over from Spain and colonized for 50 years by the United States, the Philippines today maintains relations with the U.S. that can only be accurately defined as neocolonial. In this regard military arrangements bear mention, for economic domination in tandem with military might tend to dissolve fantasies of resistance and revolution. The U.S. bases, Clark and Subic, closed down in 1992 in the face of official nationalist calls for their dismantling, but a new agreement, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), was ratified in 1999 against massive public protests. Allowing the U.S. military 22 entry points in the country, the VFA gives the former more freedom than before, mocking any notions of national sovereignty. Joint military exercises commenced in February this year. Meanwhile, toxic wastes left by the bases continue to pollute the environment, causing people living in the vicinity illness and death.

An export-oriented production and the establishment of free-trade zones evolved with the dictator Ferdinand Marcos under the direction of IMF/WB, instruments of empire that impose "structural adjustment programs." This export-led model of development subsequently became linked with the exportation of human labor that, in the 1990s, began to assume a predominantly female character. In the main, this export of women has taken the form of mail-order marriage contracts, "entertainment," and domestic work. Compliance with IMF/WB dictates by Presidents Aquino, Ramos, and now Estrada have simply perpetuated, if not exacerbated, the distorted economic program inaugurated by Marcos.

Today the deployment of women overseas is a phenomenon in which the Philippines can claim "number one" status; indeed, OCWs have become a normal feature of the socioeconomic landscape. Fully 10% of the population of over 79 million is overseas; 65% of OCWs are women, large numbers serving as domestic workers for families in more affluent societies. These women have been hailed by Presidents Aquino and Ramos as "the country's new heroines," and by Ramos as "the Philippines' contribution to other countries' development." Without the remittances these workers send back home, \$7 billion last year, the government would not have managed its debt-service payments to financial lending agencies. It is a widely acknowledged fact in the Philippines that the survival of the economy has been made possible by the remittances of OCWs, which represent the largest source of foreign exchange. Even ruling out such mishaps as the execution in Singapore of Flor Contemplacion in 1995; the death sentence on 16-year-old Sarah Balabagan later that year in the Middle East; and the arrival in Manila every day of an average of four dead OCWs, the mere practice of shipping out labor in such volume is mind-boggling.

Progressives, non-governmental organizations and, of course, the revolutionary movement in the Philippines have long recognized the futility of a pattern of development prescribed and imposed by international lending institutions. The Freedom from Debt Coalition of the Philippines has been named as the best organized in the world (The Money Lenders 1993). Militant labor unions, though encountering difficulty organizing workers who are now predominantly "permanent

casuals," continue to grapple with ways of raising consciousness and mobilizing for collective action. Women's organizations under the aegis of GABRIELA contend with the OCW dilemma (employment being absent at home), and focus their work on women in production, at the same time wrestling with transformed reproductive roles that inevitably unsettle and often destroy family relationships. Church rank and file have set up migrant workers' centers practically everywhere where OCWs are situated. Assemblies and associations of students and teachers continue to study and combat ideas and practices contrary to the status of a sovereign nation. And while the revolutionary movement is not as vigorous as it was in the 70s and 80s, news last July about the Philippine Army's fatal shooting of Cherith, a Catholic-school-bred 43-year-old mother, daughter of a landed family who turned into a New People's Army combatant, prompts us to the realization that the movement in the Philippines is far from dead (Doyo 2000).

Visions of an alternative such as guided Cherith have for all intents and purposes been expunged from the thinking of progressives in the United States, primarily by the collapse of the USSR and then existing "socialism." Leftist Perry Anderson, iterating the stance Meiksins Wood parodied, recently wrote that "the only revolutionary force at present capable of disturbing its [capital's] equilibrium appears to be scientific progress itself--the forces of production, so unpopular with Marxists convinced of the primacy of relations of production when the socialist movement was still alive" (quoted by Editors, Monthly Review 2000, 8). Instead, it is the tag line TINA (there is no alternative), axiomatized by Margaret Thatcher, that hegemonic ideology has successfully harnessed to block out any possibility of fundamental social transformation. Even so, signs of the return of a social movement have been stirring, as witness the well-publicized (if derided by mainstream media) demonstration against WTO in Seattle in November last year, and that against IMF/WB in Washington, D.C. in April. Both rallies represented a broad coalition of forces--organized labor, environmentalists, women, students, church people, anarchists, etc. Also in the past couple of years, universities have been the site of rallies by students who have directed mobilizing energies against sweatshop labor. The image of globalization, in short, is getting slightly tarnished.

There are signs that these actions are evoking a bit of unease in capitalists who seem to be turning to an agenda of co-optation. While Time, Newsweek, and other mainstream publications have poked fun at demonstrators portrayed as silly "flat-earth advocates," Fortune (May 15, 2000) is taking these events and trends more seriously, advising "the world's financial and corporate elites to listen up" (Editors, Monthly Review 2000, 10). At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland last winter, the call was for a "constructive dialogue" in which AFL-CIO head John Sweeney was invited to speak, along with Amnesty International and Greenpeace (Tabb 2000). This meeting of corporate elites was quite unlike the unofficial one in The Fairmont, cited early on, where talk about the need for a much diminished labor force was unabashed, and where the 20:80 formulation was put forth. William Tabb notes that at the Forum Bill Clinton named Sweeney three times, more than he mentioned anyone else, referring to the "new voices" in organized labor that those favoring free trade must now listen to (32). Tabb additionally observes that IMF in 1999 replaced its Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility with the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, requiring countries seeking debt relief to "not only establish a solid track record of reform but also produce a 'forward-looking Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper'" (39). From this turn of events, one might deduce an attempt on the part of the capitalist class to put on global capitalism "a human face" (Yates 2000).

Although justifiably heartened by the resurgence of activism in the United States, some sectors in the left have issued warnings against precisely such safety-valve measures as global capital may propose. Moreover, they caution against an over-

optimism that misinterprets the new wave of protest as one against global capitalism, when what it is really directed at currently is corporate globalization (Editors, Monthly Review 2000, 3). The task of the left, therefore, is to redirect such a movement so that it becomes imbued with a class analysis, and its goal begins to extend beyond that of simply curbing corporations' rapacious hunger for profit. In this connection, Khalil Hassan argues for the recognition of the power of the nation-state, not its demise or decline, a notion with tremendous purchase among U.S. academics:

Each time a major or minor company threatens to move, the issue of globalization confronts the worker in its starkness...the fight against global capital is not a fight in the abstract, but must be a concrete fight within the nation-state (and in solidarity with other movements) for power. It is the capitalist state that advances the strategy of globalization; globalization is not some runaway train over which no one has control. (Hassan, 80)

Similarly, warnings are issued against reliance on the "new voices" in the labor unions, whose alliance has traditionally been with the Democratic Party. Michael Yates reminds us that the Democratic Party, after all, supports free trade, privatization, structural adjustment programs, and opposes poor nations' struggles to develop autonomously. He asserts rather bluntly: "U.S. labor leaders, with very rare exceptions, are not radicals and never will be. The twin ideologies of nationalism and imperialism cast long shadows over them..." (Yates 2000, 55).

Because he sees the development of an entirely independent U.S. labor movement to be unlikely, Yates emphasizes the need for labor to merge with other social movements. Elizabeth Martinez questions why the "great battle in Seattle" was so white; pushing for more serious efforts to work with U.S. populations of color, she argues for the comprehension that WTO policies punish the poor and the poor of color right within the United States (2000). In order to build solidarity with workers around the world, particularly those in peripheral nations, Martinez and Yates urge that labor must do so first with workers of color located within in the U.S. (2000). Even if symptoms of a disintegration in global capital that Meiksins Wood predicts have thus far not materialized, perhaps economic globalization has provided a sharpened sense that international class solidarity is an imperative.

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