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A feminist perspective on the battle over property

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A reinvigorated battle over property is taking place in the midst of the pandemic. Without making hasty grandiose pronouncements about what comes next, we want to think about what is already happening, how the future is being manufactured. Our hypothesis is that feminism provides us with fundamental elements for intervening in the current debate about property, among which we propose three ideas. First, that we are witnessing a new intensification of *property violence*, precisely because property becomes visible as the border that each conflict must cross in the pandemic. Second, this debate is focused on the territories of social reproduction and over the command of future labour that household debt seeks to control. Third, that in this crisis the division between property owners and the property-less is widened through the logic of the family, which has been strongly challenged by the construction of feminist spatialities.

Property violence

In Argentina, there have been two recent important conflicts: on one hand, the approval of a rent control law and, on the other, the debate over the state's expropriation of one of the country's largest grain exporters.

The rent control law was approved in the midst of a parliamentary debate about whether or not this issue constituted part of the health emergency. The call to 'Stay at Home' demonstrated how the housing crisis overlaps with an increase in gender-based violence. In response, the Ni Una Menos collective, along with the tenants' union Inquilinxs Agrupdxs, began organising around the slogan 'the home is no place for sexist violence or real estate speculation'. The economic violence manifest in housing access and its close connection with gender-based violence has only accelerated with the pandemic, shining the spotlight on the domestic space understood as 'the home'. This violence materialises in the abuse exercised by property owners and real estate agents who threaten and harass renters, don't renew contracts, and directly evict people, despite a decree prohibiting evictions. The question that must be asked today is who are those owners of homes and hotels, those who are primarily evicting women, lesbians, travestis, and trans persons.[1]

In several places around the world, financial valorisation of housing moves to the rhythm of the voracity of investment funds that are taking advantage of the crisis to buy up houses. It is thanks to the work of the PAH (Plataforma de Afectadxs por la Hipoteca—Platform of People Affected by Mortgages) that we know how this functions in Spain. It is also being discussed by organisations that are seeking to prolong the eviction moratorium for a million households in New York, which mostly affects the Latinx and African American population, that same population that has fuelled the historic revolt currently taking place. In countries such as Argentina, it is the extraordinary agribusiness rent that 'trickles down', among other things, as a real estate bubble and construction boom in cities (with the consequent increase in housing rents), making apparent the intersecting geographies of real estate and extractivist dynamics (particularly agribusiness). The home, that supposed space of private refuge that feminist movements have denounced as the epicentre of violence, is the terminal for flows that are a central part of the global political and economic scene in the crisis.

In Argentina, it is no coincidence that along with the real estate lobby against rent control, the grain lobby has also mobilised against the government's intention to expropriate one of the largest grain exporters, at a moment when the food crisis is one of the gravest problems in countries of the Global South. We are referring to the family-owned company Vicentín, a large agro-industrial conglomerate for the export of raw materials, which is in bankruptcy proceedings. Real estate agents were the first to raise their voices, followed by a mobilisation baptised as the 'property owners' rebellion' that took to the streets across the country demanding that the state not intervene in the grain market and, above all, in defence of private property. Despite the fact that it is already public knowledge that the family owning the business hid their money abroad, avoiding taxes and defrauding the public bank and hundreds of producers, the protests demanded that management of the company be returned to the owners in the name of respect for 'family property'.

Property violence is a reaction precisely expressing the power of property that interprets emergency demands driven from below (food and housing emergencies) as threats to their 'natural right' of possession. Therefore, the demand for food sovereignty (a vocabulary of struggle of the campesino movements of the Global South) starts in every household and in every *olla popular,*[2] to then question the whole circuit of valorisation of export commodities.

Socialisation of the means of reproduction

This battle over property plays out in the specific demand for common and public use of the goods and services that make the reproduction of personal and collective life possible. In most countries, the financialisation of social rights (meaning that rights can only be accessed through debt and to the benefit of banks and corporations) has been the second phase after the privatisation of public infrastructure and the strangling of self-managed economies. Since reproduction has been shown to be a strategic sphere, from which neoliberal dispossession and household debt extract value, the socialisation of its means and resources has emerged as one of the common elements of struggle around the world.

This is what is targeted today: there is currently a public debate over who owns public services, food and medicine production, housing, education, and large fortunes, over what debts are being created, and what tax reforms are necessary due to the crisis. The feminist movement was already discussing how sexual order corresponds to private ownership of bodies and territories, and this is not abstract. It touches down in strategic terrains of social reproduction (housing, food, medication, education) and is directly connected to the modes of labour that sustain them and the gendered debates that they require.

Today, in homes jammed full of domestic labour, psychological exhaustion, and tele-work, new debts are being generated despite emergency income measures enacted by the government. In Argentina, for example, along with rent, people are increasingly going into debt to access connectivity. This is due to the intensification of the use of telephones as an obligatory communication channel, especially for mothers with school-age children who do not have computers and/or wi-fi at home. Cell phone bills reach record levels at a moment characterised by income loss. Many beneficiaries of the emergency subsidies find themselves forced to use a large part of that income to pay off telephone companies (the new private mediation for access to public education).

New collections of debt are formed, to the extent that if some sociological analyses speak of contemporary workers as 'income collectors' (since they can no longer guarantee their reproduction through a single and stable wage), we could also speak of a 'collector of debts', a figure that becomes even more pronounced in the crisis. The new debts that invade the terrain of social

reproduction embody a dispute over ownership of future time, impeding any type of transition to something *else*.

Thus, there is an urgent need to connect social movements' demand for incomes, welfare benefits, and wages with the provision of free public services (from water to electricity to health care) and debt relief policies so that those incomes are not ultimately absorbed by the same corporations as always: banks, supermarkets, telecommunication companies, and platform companies. Debating debt, both household and foreign debt (including the spatial division that it supposes), means debating the violent way in which ownership of our labour is securitised over the long term and therefore, asserting ownership over our future time. In other words, it means rejecting the 'obligation' imposed by debt as free, cheap, and precarious labour in the future, while making everyday reproduction an individual, costly, and private responsibility today.

Rent, family, and quarantine: for a feminist spatiality

The current crisis intensifies the division between property owners and non-owners along the lines of the heteronormative family. How so? When you can't pay rent because of income restrictions, inherited or conjugal housing become the only way to secure housing, excluding much of the LGBTQI+ population that is less likely to inherit property and other forms of cohabitation beyond heterosexual conjugality. When welfare benefits and wages are not enough, family property becomes the only available housing, confirming that the right to housing is almost impossible to exercise outside of the jurisdiction of the family. The home, in this way, once again becomes the place to 're-order' what was being challenged, namely gendered mandates associated with reproductive tasks, included but not limited to invisibilised work.

The feminist movement, through the force of its mobilisation on the street and its political organisation in domestic territories, challenged both the romanticisation of the home and its definition in terms of the family. In diverse and transversal ways, access to housing was put up for debate, delinking it from the mandate of the heterosexual family. At the same time as the family home was denounced as an unsafe space for women, lesbians, gays, travestis, and trans people (increasingly so today due to the obligation to cohabit with abusers), another experience of occupying space was constructed, creating other uses of the street and the city.

If all property regimes have a corresponding sexual order and division of labour, they also have particular ways of demarcating environments, movements, and fixations in space. Today property is at the centre of the debate because it maps and signals the battle over the limits, and because it attempts, time and again, to relaunch capital in its most brutal forms. The way that access to property means falling back on the family also guarantees the free domestic labour of people who don't own property.

In this sense, problematising the private assumption of responsibility for the crisis also means questioning what we call the 'home'. Hence, the importance of the confrontation with real estate, financial, and agribusiness rents at the same time as we construct other 'insides', inventing forms of refuge, care, and accompaniment that raise the question about how we want to live here and now.