Grupo 12 – Sociologia del género

Domestic work: reflections by Polanyi and Arendt.

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Abstract: The exclusion of rural women from land inheritance and the significance attributed to marriage are based on the notion of "labor". Despite Marxism's criticism of the market economy, the expressions "productive/unproductive labor" were coined on the basis of its principals. This dichotomy reinforced the depreciation of domestic work that already existed in Antiquity, which viewed it as unproductive and hierarchically inferior to productive labor. Polanyi´s and Arendt's criticism has not significantly altered this classification in modern Marxism, hence the notion of women's work in the field as nothing but an "aid" to men's work. Since land inheritance is a way of rewarding the maintenance of the family patrimony, it is through marriage that most rural women become agriculturists. With the emergence of feminist rural movements, the submission implied in the husband/wife relationship is now being questioned.

Article:

Discussions regarding "women and work" which go beyond the issue of waged employment are important at this point in time since Brazilian women working in farm have been organizing themselves into movements of great political importance, such as the Peasant Women's Movement *(Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas - MMC*) – former Rural Working Women's Movement (*MMTR - Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais)*, and another two related to the Labor Union Movement (*Movimento Sindical*) and the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – MST*). We shall now discuss briefly the information raised by recent research on the subject.

The three issues at the center of the gender equality debate in rural areas, namely inheritance, marriage and access to land, are tied to a foundational element: "labor". Anthropologist Woortmann (1987:87/88), when studying poor families in Salvador, Bahia/Brazil, arrived at conclusions applicable to most poor families, including those of family agriculturists. He states that the family, or the domestic unit, is productive when

selling goods and services. In Brazilian society, he adds, the domestic group sets up a social division of work which ascribes to the husband-father, and the men in general, the role of income providers, whereas the wife-mother is responsible for service rendering. However, feminine activities are no less economic than the males' as they use certain "means of production" (pots, pans, frying-pans, ovens, etc.) and "raw materials" (food) to produce goods and services to be consumed by the members of the unit. These chores are not remunerated, although they indirectly generate income. Therefore, he concludes, the role of the woman is as economic as that of the man, for the family could not raise its children without the work of both.

This affirmation, which at first may seem but a mere description of reality, contains in fact a criticism of the general conception of "economic activity". Typically framed in terms of market economy, labor is taken as falling into the category of "goods" like any other. An activity that cannot be "sold" is considered "unproductive", domestic chores thus fitting into such a category. Feminist economist Nancy Folbre (2001) draws attention to the absence of the word "family" in most basic economics textbooks, which she deems a great injustice.

Despite all Marxist criticism of the market economy, the distinction between productive (which produces surplus value) and unproductive labor (which doesn't) is one of the marks of the subsequent lines of thought. For Marxist feminists this has always been a painful subject. How can domestic work be categorized? The 1970s witnessed intense discussions. For some thinkers, domestic activities were thought of as being productive because, insofar as the wife would "stretch out" her husband's low wage through her work, the surplus value he provided would increase. For others, the solution lay in accepting the idea of a "domestic means of production", subordinate to the dominant capitalist type.

In view of the harsh reality endured by women who, with no means of supporting themselves, found themselves confined to the fate of wives and mothers, often deprived of any freedom and subjected to mistreatment by their spouses, the feminist movement focused intensely on the participation of women in the labor market as a path to

independence. Such participation has only increased in the last decades. As for domestic work, there persists the idea (never put into practice), that chores should be shared between spouses. Statistics are not too encouraging. Data published by the UN (United Nations) reveal that around two thirds to three quarters of the housework in developed countries is done by women. The most time-consuming activities are cleaning and cooking, in the case of childless wives, and baby-care in the case of mothers. From 1961 to 1992, the amount of time spent by women preparing meals fell from 90 to 60 minutes. The time men spent increased a little, from 15 to 20 minutes. Of all domestic chores, men take the biggest part in caring for the younger children – less than an hour a day on average. This is in developed countries, where most of the female population is not entrusted with duties like fetching water and wood far away from the house, grinding corn, working on the farm and so on.

The classification of work as 'productive' and 'unproductive' was maintained in most Marxist and feminist textbooks even after Karl Polanyi's (1980) and Hannah Arendt's (1998) criticisms. It has become an obstacle to the advance of the feminist discussion of matters related to income redistribution and property rights. Furthermore, the works of these authors are all the more interesting in that they show great respect for Marx's contributions, which we do not wish to forfeit. Any passing reference to such dense reasonings is inadvisable, but the urgent need to rethink the notion of "labor", without which our research seems not to progress, has prompted us to take a risk. A risk that is increased by this being a primary study of the non-explicit contributions of both authors to feminist thought.

Polanyi, in "The Great Transformation" (1980; 1st ed. 1944), seeks to explain what he considers the failure of the market economy and its counterpart, liberalism. While mercantilism had unified existing conditions, he explains, the market system called for new conditions, the most important being the transformation of labor, land and money into commodities. However, a commodity is an item which is designed for sale, and since none of those are, they represented "fictitious commodities" which could never behave like real ones. This fact was not given emphasis in Marxist economics due to his strict adherence to Ricardo´s theories and the traditions of liberal economy. Folbre (2001) criticizes the

recurrence of Ricardian arguments in the works of modern economists still focusing on the production of commodities rather than people. Not incidentally, her text is entitled "The Production of People by Means of People and the Distribution of the Costs of Children".

For Polanyi, "labor" is only another name for the human activity that goes with life itself, which is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons; it cannot be disembedded from the rest of life, nor can it be stored or mobilized. "Earth" is another name for nature, also not produced by man. And "money" is a symbol of purchasing power which also is not produced but comes into existence through the mechanism of banking and state finance. None are produced for sale, so taking land, labor and money for commodities is a fiction (Polanyi, 1980:85).

Also according to this author, the 19th century was marked by an impasse: while the development of the market demanded that land, labor and money be turned into commodities, society would extinguish itself should that happen. The double movement of real commodities' market expansion on one side, and protectionism restraining fictitious commodities on the other, in trying to harmonize irreconcilable tendencies, led to the collapse of 19th century civilization. Around 1920, the failure of the international system was well acknowledged. Countries, in the hope of shunning such a collapse, had two alternatives: to insist upon liberalism, maintaining the gold standard, or to try a socialist-based organization. In the countries which adopted the first solution, democracy weakened and occasionally resulted in the fascist catastrophe. The US and England abandoned the gold standard in time to avoid such danger.

Hannah Arendt (1998: 124 and 101), when discussing the public and private spheres, retrieves the distinction between "labor" and "work". She states that "the industrial revolution has replaced all workmanship with labor, and the result has been that the things of the modern world have become labor products whose natural fate is to be consumed, instead of work products which are there to be used", simultaneously showing how "labor" was despised previous to the modern era. Moreover, "the sudden, spectacular rise of labor

from the lowest, most despised position to highest rank, as the most esteemed of all human activities", began in Locke, continued in Adam Smith, and reached its peak in Marx.

In its former usage, the term "labor" referred to activities pertaining to man's struggle against necessity, a repetitive daily endeavor set within the family and unproductive of any lasting value. Among the Greeks, no activity designed for the individual's livelihood was deserving of the noble sphere of politics. In the privacy of the family, man did not exist as a truly human being, but as part of the "animal species man-kind" (Id. Ibid: 45/46). Not surprisingly this kind of activity was performed by the slave, the *animal laborans* rather than the *homo faber*.

Arendt argues that the distinction between "labor" and "work" was unknown in Classical Antiquity. It only began when productivity surpassed domestic needs to encompass more than physical maintenance. During the modern era, nevertheless, no theory was created that clearly distinguished both notions. There were attempts though, the "productive/unproductive" distinction being the most significant. It is curious that

> (…) the modern age (…) with its glorification of labor as the source of all values (…) should not have brought forth a single theory in which *animal laborans* and *homo faber* (…) are clearly distinguished. Instead, we find first the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, then somewhat later the differentiation between skilled and unskilled work, and, finally, outranking both (…), the division of all activities into manual and intellectual labor. Of the three, however, only the distinction between productive and unproductive labor goes to the heart of the matter, and it is no accident that the two greatest theorists in the field, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, based the whole structure of their argument upon it. . (…) Moreover, both Smith and Marx were in agreement with modern public opinion when they despised unproductive labor as parasitical, actually a kind of perversion of labor, as though nothing were worthy of this name which did not enrich the world. (…) the distinction between productive and unproductive labor contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinction between work and labor." (ARENDT, 1998: 85/87)

From this tradition emerged the idea that domestic work is “unproductive” and hierarchically inferior to “productive” labor; thus the rural woman’s activity was relegated to the role of “aid” to her husband’s - a form of non-work practically. Because only activities that can be sold are considered “labor”, the activities of those with more value on the market (men’s) are more important - even when the logic of individually remunerated effort is not involved, such as in family agriculture. Jerzy Tepicht (1976) analyzes the importance of what he calls “marginal forces” – women, children and the elderly – in the maintenance and competitiveness of peasant agriculture. To the heavy chain of tangled prejudices underlying the very core of women’s position in society, inheritance, marriage and access to land only add further links.

The fact that women all over the world do not have as much access to ownership and use of the land as men has been repeatedly confirmed by Rural Sociology and Anthropology. Studies show that Brazil is no different. In fact, scholars assume that women are so accustomed to this reality, which dates back to early colonization, that the possibility of discontentment on the part of wives and daughters is not evoked. The idea that it is “taboo” further restrains any approach to the subject. However, from the moment I heard, years ago and for the first time, the heartfelt account by an elderly female farmer who, on the spur of an unguarded moment, told me about the indignation she felt from having “toiled as hard as her brothers on their parents’ land” and received only a “dowry” instead of land in return, I chose to focus on the issue of exclusion which, because of its centrality, demands a progressive “out-in” approach.

The dowry is given to a woman on occasion of marriage and can contain more or fewer items according to her parents’ possessions, though it never corresponds to the value of the piece of land she would be entitled to if equal partible inheritance as prescribed by the Civil Code was abided by. Bed and table linen, a sewing machine, a dairy cow or a pig and the wedding party, usually compose the dowry. Ineke van Haselma’s (1991) considerations on the wrongful usage of the term “dowry” called our attention to the meaning of the sentence

“I toiled as hard as my brothers and did not receive any land”. For Haselma, a “dowry” traditionally means a form of *pre- mortem* inheritance for women intended to guarantee them greater security, status and independence in the marital relationship. In the agricultural community studied by her in Rio Grande do Sul, the dowry had a completely different meaning: it represented a payment for the services rendered by the bride to her parents, so that if she had worked outside the property for a salary, she would customarily be able to afford her own trousseau.

But the dowry is not the sole payment for previously rendered services: so is inheritance. Sons who leave home early to study or work, for instance, do not receive any land by occasion of their parents’ death. So the partition of property can be viewed less as an inheritance in its traditional sense than as a payment for the effort spent in maintaining and perhaps increasing the family’s patrimony. Haselma mentions the expression “*to earn their share*” which denotes doing something to deserve it. Hence the resentment contained in “I toiled as hard as my brothers”. Only the males’ activities are considered to be real labor; women “help out” on the farm and perform the least noble of all activities, domestic work. And for that the dowry is good enough a payment. Women’s access to land is achieved mainly through marriage. Equal inheritance only occurs in uncommon cases where there is so much or so little to be shared that none of the siblings will actually depend on it, lack of male descendants, the descendent is an only child, and so on.

The unmarried woman is excluded twice over: no land, no dowry! She lives with her parents, takes care of them in their old age, and when bereaved, she is added to a brother’s or sister’s household where she performs numerous tasks as a form of payment and has virtually no access to income of any kind. Not even scholars who study rural areas give such women much attention. Leila L. Rodrigues’ article (1993), suggestively entitled “The reverse of marriage: an anthropological reading of peasant women’s celibacy*”,* is worth a read.

Despite the importance of marriage in women’s access to land, Bourdieu (1962) already pointed to the masculine celibacy in French rural areas back in the 60s. Women were no

longer willing to accept the subordination that came along with marriage. This was not limited to France; Abramovay (1997) speaks of marriage agencies specialized in "arranging for brides" in places far from the groom's reach. Anita Brumer (2004) mentions the substantially greater emigration of girls rather than young men from rural districts of Rio Grande do Sul. Women have decided to "vote with their feet" as Sarah Whatmore puts it (quoted by Rosário Sampedro Gallego – 1996) by leaving the field.

Valmir Stropasolas (2004), in his article *The value of marriage in family agriculture,* shows that girls and boys have conflicting views over the place for marriage in their life projects. For the boys, marrying plays an important part in keeping the status of family agriculturist, whereas the girls do not always feel attracted to it on account of the traditional dependency and subordination it entails. For them, the dream of hearing a "yes" in their wedding ceremony is preceded by much inquiry and thought on the part, particularly, of those girls who are used to hearing "no's" in their day-to-day experience as a counterpart of the role and place they occupy or aspire to in the family, the community and society.

When I ask the women involved in today's rural social movements if it is true that modern boys have difficulty finding a bride, their usual reply is "not the way they want one". A relevant point of such movements is the progress already accomplished, such as changes in social welfare law allowing the women who want to stay and work on the farms to do so without much sacrifice. Access to land, nonetheless, remains as tough a barrier as the deeply rooted taboo it represents in traditional culture; so much so that even female militants have difficulty talking about it. The women of the *MST* (Landless Movement) can claim the right to land from the State, but not from their families.

Finally, I would like to insist upon the need to think about rural women whom I feel have been somewhat overlooked by feminism.

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