

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

AUSTERITY, GENDER INEQUALITY AND FEMINISM

From Austerity and the Social Reproduction Crisis to Women Workers' Struggles in the United States

Cinzia Arruzza



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This study offers a critical assessment of women's position in the economy of the United States 25 years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It discusses the inherent limitations of the Beijing Declaration's framework and addresses the failure in its implementation due to the persistence of austerity policies. The study uses the notion of social reproduction, and of its crisis, to analyze the effects of austerity on women's lives and working conditions, and to contextualize recent social and labor struggles led by women.

On paper, the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 marked a paradigm shift in the United Nations' approach to women's equality. The Declaration of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) employed language that drew heavily from liberal feminist theory: It emphasized legal equality between men and women and the legal protection of rights, such as the rights to vote, to education, to employment, and to hold public office. By contrast, the Beijing Declaration and Platform adopted a more expansive notion of male dominance over women that shifted the focus from legal equality and protection to the social, material, and cultural conditions necessary for women's empowerment (Prestons and Ahrens 2001).

The Beijing Platform required governments, the private sector, financial institutions, donors, and civil society to advance 50 strategic objectives covering twelve critical areas of concern, which included poverty, health, education, violence, armed conflict, the economy, power and decision-making, the environment, the media, and women's rights institutions. In addition to stressing the centrality of women's control over their own health and reproductive rights, the Declaration's main goals included the "eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection and social justice [which] requires the involvement of women in economic and social development, equal opportunities and the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centred sustainable development." (Beijing Declaration 1995: 9)

Moreover, the Platform for Action identified women's domestic reproductive duties as a significant barrier both to the elimination of gender discrimination and to equal employment, and for this reason

recommended the provision of free childcare to alleviate this burden. The Beijing Declaration and Platform had evident limitations too: While it did address xenophobia and racial discrimination as major obstacles to women's empowerment, it did not address the specific needs and concerns of trans and non-binary women and made no mention of sexual orientation and homophobia.

25 Years of Criticisms

The 25 years since Beijing have not been without controversies surrounding the failures to implement the goals triumphally announced at the conference. The perceived watering down of the radical platform of the Beijing Declaration in subsequent UN documents also led to criticism. For example, on the occasion of the 2015 session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, around 1000 participating organizations signed a statement denouncing the proposed wording of the UN declaration (Statement on the Political Declaration 2015):

At a time when urgent action is needed to fully realize gender equality [and] the human rights and empowerment of women and girls, we need renewed commitment, a heightened level of ambition, real resources, and accountability. This political declaration, instead, represents a bland reaffirmation of existing commitments that fails to match the level of ambition in the Beijing declaration and platform for action and in fact threatens a major step backward.

A similar critique has been waged against the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which stands accused of overshadowing the much more ambitious global agenda articulated in the Beijing declaration and platform (Khan and Lappin 2015). Further criticisms have targeted the strategy of “gender mainstreaming” globally adopted in Beijing as a form of neoliberal governance. Critics who adopted the latter perspective pointed to the document’s simplification of the different

experiences and living conditions of women across the globe and the creation of a specific gendered subject—the poor third world woman, whose needs and rights are dictated by experts of international development (Milward, Mukhopadhyay, and Wong 2015).

A further strand of critique has argued that the Beijing conference marked the global hegemony of an approach to gender equality first developed within a heavily institutionalized and funded mainstream US feminism. As Susan Watkins (2018:43) recently put it: “Once the verbiage was peeled away, the operative clauses of the Platform for Action followed a familiar anti-discrimination logic: women’s integration into the existing global-capitalist order, underpinned by coercion.” In Watkin’s reconstruction of the shifting dynamic of UN conferences within the rapidly changing international landscape from the mid-seventies to mid-eighties, despite its radical appearance, Beijing marked the victory of a social-liberal agenda.

Its anti-discrimination approach was perfectly compatible with the new international order and marked the defeat of “proposals for women’s emancipation through a more egalitarian socio-economic order.” (Watkins 2018:43) For example, the Platform stated the importance of trade liberalization and dynamic open markets, emphasized the necessity of strengthening the family as the basic unit of society, proposed micro-credit and self-employment schemes as a key way of helping poor women, and took a mild position on the funding for social provisions. From this viewpoint, the commonly accepted association between the Beijing conference and the speech given by Hillary Clinton on this occasion belies the affinity between the Beijing Platform and mainstream neoliberal feminism.

Beijing's Unfulfilled Promises and the Austerity Myth Debunked

Despite some improvements—for example, increases in women's participation in public office and in young women's participation in tertiary education, a significant advance in knowledge, and a greater acceptance of the principle of gender equality—the 25 years since the Beijing Conference have clearly illustrated that neoliberal globalization and debt-driven austerity policies are an insurmountable obstacle to the achievement of the Declaration's stated goals. Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky, the UN Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights, states as much in his 2018 report concerning the worldwide impact of austerity policies on women's economic, social, and cultural rights. He concluded that austerity-driven fiscal consolidation measures and economic reforms—such as labor market flexibilization, the privatization of services, and cuts to both social provision and to public-sector jobs—provoke negative cumulative effects for women. Emphasizing how the burden of unpaid care labor—significantly increased by austerity measures—represents a major structural obstacle to women's access to rights, Bohoslavsky (2018:20) also criticized the international financial institutions' "instrumentalist gender agenda," with its narrow focus on economic growth and women's labor force participation.

In the remainder of this study, I reconstruct the trajectory of austerity in the United States and diagnose its continued grip on US bipartisan electoral politics. Using the notion of social reproduction to address the impact of austerity measures and welfare reforms on women's conditions of life and work, I also discuss recent women-led

struggles, which are better understood as social reproduction struggles against the backdrop of the gendered effects of austerity.

The year of 2013 produced numerous reconsiderations of the political economy of austerity: In a blogpost, Nobel laureate Paul Krugman (2013) characterized austerity as a “terrible mistake” and reminded readers that all predictions by austerity supporters had been proven wrong. In the same year, a report from the International Monetary Fund estimated that the austerity measures in place in the US would cost between 1.25% and 1.75% of the GDP in 2013 (Blanchard and Leigh 2013). Economist Robert Pollin (2013) even wrote that “the ascendancy of austerity economics, both in the United States and Europe, is the most harmful intellectual and political development of our time.”

In the same year, a group of Harvard professors debunked an infamous paper by economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff (2010), who had argued that gross debt exceeding 90% of the economy has significant negative consequences for economic growth. Reinhart and Rogoff’s findings were hailed by Republican representatives as a scientific vindication for their policy of spending cuts. But the paper’s conclusion, it turned out, was based on muddy reasoning and faulty calculations that had not been peer reviewed (Dolgon 2017). Yet, the overwhelming evidence that austerity had failed to deliver what it promised did not manage to displace the mainstream economic narrative about the virtues of austerity in contrast to Keynesian political economy, and the paper remained a point of reference for Republican politicians.

The Trajectory of Austerity in the United States

Austerity can be defined as a policy aiming at the reduction in the government's structural deficit, based on cutting certain types of public spending (primarily collective public services) but not others (military), while cutting taxes to encourage growth. In the United States, the beginning of austerity's predominance can be located during Ronald Reagan's presidency, which marked the end of the welfare state and the beginning of a stream of privatization, deregulation, cuts to public spending, and enormous tax breaks for the wealthy (Dolgon 2017). The idea, however, can be traced back to Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign against President Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Goldwater campaigned for the government's withdrawal from social programs, such as welfare, education, and public housing, and against both unions and mandatory social security participation (McGahey 2013). Despite Goldwater's defeat in 1964, these ideas deeply influenced the Republican Party in the following years and found practical application following Reagan's victory in 1980. The years of the Reagan administration marked the emergence of a specific strategy—summarized through the twin goals of deficit reduction and decreasing taxation—which became the Republican party's main strategy during its opposition to Clinton's presidency.

In Republican plans, the spending cuts necessary for reducing the deficit without raising taxes would be applied to public services and entitlements (in particular Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security).

ty), but not defense spending. As social spending represented only a minority of government debt the Republican strategy ultimately led to increasing debt, due to the combination of big tax cuts to the wealthy and significant intensification of military spending. Debt increased under Reagan as well as under the first and second George Bush presidencies, which blew up the surplus generated under Bill Clinton (Dolgon 2017).

While the twin goals of deficit reduction and decreased taxation represent the heart of the Republican strategy, which in the last instance aims at social spending cuts, the policies pursued by Democratic administrations over the past decades are no radical alternative to the austerity framework. Clinton's presidency also aimed at deficit reduction, which it managed to achieve in the context of rapid economic growth through a combination of higher taxes and lower government spending. Moreover, Clinton enacted the "single most dramatic overhaul of the federal welfare system since the New Deal" which sought to replace public responsibility for poor women with a system of private family responsibility enforced by the state.

In an entirely different economic context, marked by increased debt and financial global crisis and recession, Obama's administration, like its Republican counterparts, also endorsed the goal of deficit and debt reduction. The difference between the Republicans and Obama's administration merely concerned the means through which this shared goal should be achieved: Obama accepted most of the Bush-era spending cuts and, indeed, pursued continued budget cuts, but refused to cut into social programs as deep as the Republicans wished. Moreover, Obama's strategy entailed some tax increases over the medium and long term, which went against the Republican's proposed tax decreases (McGahey 2013).

For all his promises to end austerity and break with the political and financial establishment, Trump's budget policies have thus far been the fulfilment of the Republican dream. His 2017 budget proposal called for slashing \$1.7 trillion from domestic programs controlled by Congress over the course of ten years. \$1 trillion of these cuts concerned social programs: federal student aid, farm subsidies, Medicaid, the federal food stamp program, and the social security disability insurance, among others. His 2019 budget plan followed the same lines,

including a 42.3% cut to all non-military discretionary spending and, at the same time, a \$777 billion boost to defense spending over ten years.

The price of austerity has been hefty, but not for everyone. In fact, austerity has continued to be a hegemonic idea among electoral parties—both “left” and “right”—not because it aids economic growth, but because it is a form of class struggle from above. Under the pretext of debt crisis, it redistributes money to the wealthy and dismantles the public sector. As Dolgon (2017:219) argues:

In essence, those who pushed austerity – not just post-2008 crisis, but really from the 1980s onward – did so either based on bad analyses and bad ideas, or knowing full well that continued financial crises would benefit those who controlled financial markets and political power, but not the majority of its citizens. The perpetual economic disaster for middle- and working-class families meant incredible profit for the top 1%, who were not beyond killing the very economy they controlled in order to create even more for themselves.

The persistence of the austerity myth, even after an increasing number of economists started arguing that austerity is bad for the economy, should not be taken as a symptom of political irrationality. The truth of the matter is that corporations are not interested in economic growth, the well-being of the economy, or creating jobs; they are interested in maximizing their profits (David McNally 2015). From this viewpoint their agenda is perfectly rational: Between 2008 and 2012, US corporate profits rose by 20% a year, while US workers grew increasingly impoverished.

Austerity and the Social Reproduction Lens

Bohoslavsky's UN report stressed the need for the lens of social reproduction for assessing the impact of austerity on women's rights. Social reproduction comprises the work and activities that are essential to the reproduction, socialization, and care of human beings. The Marxist understanding of this concept emphasizes the role of social reproduction in reproducing labor power, that is, our capacity to work within the capitalist labor market (Bhattacharya 2018; Ferguson 2019).

The labor of social reproduction takes an unwaged form within the household and a waged form within the public and private sector (childcare services, schools, hospitals, assistance services, etc.). Crucially, it is highly gendered: Women tend to be responsible for most of this work within the family and they constitute the majority of the workforce in the social reproduction sector, both public and private. The concept of social reproduction frames an array of austerity-inspired policies and their effects on women's lives as part of a unified process that reorganizes the relation between social reproduction and production for profit. In doing so, it subordinates social reproduction to production for profit and reduces reproductive costs by placing the burden on women's shoulders (Fraser 2016). This process is also heavily racialized, as women of color tend to be most exposed to the effects of social spending cuts and are also disproportionately employed as paid caregivers.

For all the criticisms that can be legitimately waged against the redistributive welfare programs of the New Deal—which channeled re-

distribution through a Fordist family wage while reinforcing traditional family structures and privileging white workers—from 1935 to 1970 the burden of care work placed on women was reduced by an expanding public sector. Moreover, the expansion of public services favored a significant increase in women's participation in the formal workforce: The share of women government workers rose by 70% between 1964 and 1974, and by an additional 28% by 1981 (Abramovitz 2012). Today, women represent the majority of government workers and almost half of federal workers and, as the public sector has been historically more open to employing racialized workers, Black women tend to be over-represented in these kinds of jobs.

However, Reagan's presidential victory in 1980 marked the end of this redistribution and the beginning of four decades of austerity, in which women's living and working conditions were attacked from various fronts. This led to the lack of basic reproductive services provided by the social welfare net: paid family and medical leave, affordable housing, quality free or affordable childcare, good schools, and affordable abortion and reproductive health clinics. These developments coincided with the increase of home-based care arrangements for the disabled and the elderly, and the growing practice of discharging hospital patients when still in need of nursing.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that these decades of austerity were characterized solely by the dismantling of public and social services and welfare. Reagan's presidency also marked the shift from a view of welfare based on public responsibility to one based on private family responsibility, which ultimately reinforced traditional family values and gender roles. Reagan's Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 cut \$1 billion of federal costs from the New Deal era Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, in addition to cutting AFDC rolls by 400,000 individuals. This aspect of welfare reform had a direct impact on women's lives and contributed to the social oppression of trans and non-binary women in particular.

However, Reagan did not manage to implement a comprehensive federal reform of welfare. Instead, it was Bill Clinton who "ended welfare as we know it" (Cooper 2019:65). In 1996, Clinton abolished AFDC altogether and replaced it with a time limited welfare program

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This program entailed a number of policies aimed at promoting family responsibility: police efforts to track down and enforce paternity obligations, sanctions on mothers who failed to cooperate with welfare agencies to track down biological fathers, marriage promotion programs, reduction of illegitimate births without increase in abortions, responsible fatherhood initiatives, etc.

These policies were underpinned by a traditionalist view of paternal authority and men's natural role within the family. Thus, the welfare state was not merely dismantled as libertarian theorists of austerity advocated. It was also reorganized as an apparatus for the enforcement of family values. Within this framework, personal responsibility was reinterpreted as family responsibility. Moreover, Clinton's welfare reform introduced a five-year limit to welfare eligibility, and it required that welfare recipients participate in mandated work programs, mostly in the low wage service sector. This workfare policy contributed to worsening labor conditions in a sector that was already dominated by Black, Latina, and migrant women and "brutally reinstate[d] the historically racialized obligations of domestic servitude." (Cooper 2019:102)

The New Democrats' new welfare framework was further expanded under Bush's and Obama's presidencies. George W. Bush more than tripled the funding for marriage promotion, responsible fatherhood, and abstinence education programs, while cutting deep into other welfare programs, whereas Obama doubled the funding for responsible fatherhood programs, targeting especially the Black family. Both Bush and Obama also enormously expanded the number of religious organizations engaged in providing social services.

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Women During and After the Crisis

Social reproduction theory is a useful lens for appraising the combined effects of economic policies during the great recession on women, both as public sector and private service sector workers and as the main beneficiaries of public services. While a significant loss of traditionally male jobs in industry and construction was an immediate effect of the 2007/2008 financial crisis, the recovery period is characterized by a different pattern.

Beginning in 2012, men's unemployment decreased faster than women's unemployment and, by the end of the year, it was just below women's (Milkman 2016). This is directly related to the fact that the majority of job losses that occurred between 2009 and 2011 in either the public or the private sector concerned jobs traditionally held by women. Women represented 63.8% of the 578,000 jobs cut in the public sector in this period and gained only one seventh of the new jobs created in the private sector (Abramovitz 2012; Enloe 2013).

What is more, job cuts in the public and private service sectors usually corresponded to loss of services, which shunted the burden onto women's unpaid care labor. The budget cuts during the years of the Great Recession hit the education system hard, with dire consequences for women, who in 2015 represented 76% of teachers. In 2016, nearly half the states spent less on schools than they spent in 2007. The cuts especially targeted low-income districts and caused teacher layoffs, wage erosion, increased class sizes, and reduced services (such as counseling and after-school programs).

However, this picture does not tell the whole story, for the role played by crisis and recovery in increasing inequalities between women along class and racial lines must be taken into account. As argued by Ruth Milkman (2016), while occupational segregation by sex has significantly decreased in professional and managerial jobs over the past decades, it has remained fundamentally the same in lower-level jobs. Occupational integration has benefitted college-educated women while poorer women have remained stuck in low-paid sex-segregated jobs (domestic labor, nursing, childcare, etc.).

This kind of job segregation played a key role in determining whom the Great Recession affected. White women with college degrees were less likely to be unemployed than women without a degree. In 2010, for example, the rate of unemployment for white women with a college degree was 4.2%, but it was 13% for white women without a high-school degree and 20% for Black women with no high-school degree (Milkman 2016). Moreover, working class Black, Latina, and migrant women, who tended to be employed in positions with no benefits attached (such as healthcare, paid maternity, or sick leave), were more exposed to the cuts to public services than women employed in managerial or professional positions. The situation is even worse for racialized trans people. According to an investigation by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 43% of Latinx, 41% of Native American, 40% of multiracial, and 38% of Black transgender respondents lived in poverty in 2015. The US average poverty rate is 12% (James et al. 2016).

Women's Strikes Against Austerity in the United States

Between 2018 and 2019, US teachers went on strike in Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago. The strike wave of 2018 made it one of the biggest years for workers' mobilization in a generation. The strikers' demands included not only pay increases and benefits, but also better-quality education for their students, as teachers protested increases in class sizes and the defunding of state education (Kelly 2019).

The Chicago teachers' strike in the fall of 2019 added access to affordable housing to its contractual demands, linking the protest for better working conditions with the struggle for affordable education for students, particularly Black students and families who had been hit particularly hard by gentrification, disinvestment in non-white communities, and the affordable-housing crisis. Moreover, in many instances teachers included demands concerning other public-school employees, such as support staff like cooks and drivers. As Tithi Bhattacharya (2018) argues, this strike dynamic related to the role that these women play as caregivers: "Women, whether in paid employment or not, do the majority of the actual caregiving at home and in the community. This is reflected in how teachers are conceiving the strikes. A common theme among the strikers is that they are striking for their students."

A similar pattern applies to strikes and mobilizations of nurses during the same period. It should be considered that 91% of nurses in the United States are women. When National Nurses United organized a 24-hour strike in September 2019, thousands of registered nurs-

es walked out demanding better care for their patients in addition to wage increases and better working conditions.

These strikes are best understood as instances of women's responses to the crisis of social reproduction induced by austerity policies. While not having an explicit feminist agenda, these strikes are connected to the recent wave of feminist mobilization around the globe, particularly the feminist strike movement of the past three years. This movement has insisted on the connection between production and reproduction by organizing three transnational productive and reproductive feminist strikes between 2017 and 2019. The initiative aimed at making visible the connection between women's unpaid care work at home and women's waged work in the public as well as private service sectors. But it also emphasized the centrality of the social reproduction lens for identifying the economic and social dynamics that create a fertile soil for various facets of women's oppression: the gender wage gap, the burden of unpaid care work, gender violence, and sex segregation in the job market.

Moreover, the movement targeted neoliberal austerity as one of the major obstacles to women's liberation. While they did not explicitly adopt feminist slogans or a social reproduction frame, the teachers' and nurses' strikes in the United States have reproduced several features characterizing the feminist strikes movement. This should not come as a surprise given that they are organizing in a context of growing attacks against women's reproductive freedom in the United States, where social conservatives galvanized by the Trump presidency are actively campaigning for the overhaul of *Roe vs. Wade* and the federal criminalization of abortion. In the coming period, a key task for leftist activists and organizers will be to create bridges between the new militancy of women workers and the feminist movement, and to work toward a mass strike that combines the defense of women's reproductive freedom with an opposition to neoliberal austerity.

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Biography

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**AUSTERITY, GENDER INEQUALITY AND FEMINISM
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REPRODUCTION CRISIS TO WOMEN WORKERS'
STRUGGLES IN THE UNITED STATES**

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