

Reinventing Revolutionary Subjects in Venezuela*

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Abstract: *This article challenges orthodox Marxist conceptualisations of the revolutionary subject by building on the autonomist Marxist feminist tradition now in its fourth decade. It argues that by expanding our conceptualisation of capitalist relations to include the sphere of social reproduction, the creation of a gendered division of labour and the construction of alienated subjectivities we open a window on the multiple subjects that are at the heart of contemporary anti-capitalist struggles and render visible an increasing feminisation of resistance in Latin America. Through an analysis of the narratives of three women participants in the Urban Land Committees (CTUs) in Venezuela we see that women are at the heart of struggles to re-define the practice of politics, create new democratic subjectivities, and re-invent social transformation, processes in which woman, family and community are renegotiated and re-imagined. This analysis demonstrates the urgent need to reinvigorate a Marxist feminist praxis that can make visible, contribute to and theorise in solidarity with contemporary forms of anti-capitalist struggle.*

Key Words: *autonomous Marxist feminism, gender, subjectivity, Venezuelan women*

Reinventando los sujetos revolucionarios en Venezuela

Introduction

Entering the debate: feminist analyses of neoliberalism

There has been much analysis of the gendered impacts of neoliberalism regarding labour relations, working conditions, health, housing and education. This research has demonstrated that neoliberalism

Resumen: *Este artículo desafía las conceptualizaciones ortodoxas marxistas del sujeto revolucionario con base en la tradición Marxista feminista autónoma que se encuentra en su cuarta década. Arguye que al expandir nuestra conceptualización de las relaciones capitalistas para incluir la esfera de la reproducción social, la creación de una división del trabajo generizada y la construcción de subjetividades alienadas, abrimos una ventana sobre los sujetos múltiples que son centrales para las luchas anti-capitalistas contemporáneas y que hacen visible una feminización cada vez mayor de la resistencia en América Latina. A través de un análisis de las narrativas de tres mujeres participantes de los Comités de Tierras Urbanas (CTUs) en Venezuela, vemos que las mujeres son de importancia central en las luchas para redefinir la práctica de la política, crear nuevas subjetividades democráticas, reinvigorar y re-inventar la transformación social, así como los procesos en los cuales se renegocian y re-imaginan mujer, familia, y comunidad. Este análisis demuestra la necesidad urgente de reinvigorar la práctica feminista marxista que puede hacer visible formas contemporáneas de lucha anti-capitalista, contribuir a esas formas de lucha y teorizarlas.*

Palabras clave: *feminismo marxista autónomo, género, subjetividad, mujeres venezolanas*

has led to a feminisation of poverty, responsibility and obligation and that this has coincided with a crisis in masculinised organised labour globally (for an overview see Chant, 2008; Hite and Viterna, 2005). These conditions were caused by neoliberal economic restructuring based on the opening of national markets to international capital, remo-

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val of state subsidies and protections to national capital, reduction and elimination of subsidies in health, education and housing, and assaults on the rights and guarantees won by organised labour in the previous decades (Federici, 1999, 2006). Thus whilst we witness a surge in female participation in the workforce, working conditions and rights have deteriorated for men and women workers, with a growth in unregulated, part-time and contractual work and an increase in the informal sector (see for example Chant, 2008; Hite and Viterna, 2005; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2008; Gideon, 2007).

The removal and privatisation of services in health, housing and education that has coincided with the deterioration in working conditions and labour rights has resulted in women increasingly taking the burden of ensuring the survival and reproduction of their families (Olivera, 2006; González de la Rocha, 2001). Thus whilst increasingly working in unregulated and precarious working conditions women also continue to undertake the majority of domestic labour. The decline in the male formal proletariat has not been replaced by a more egalitarian division of labour in the home but rather an intensification of financial and emotional responsibilities and obligations upon female shoulders. Selma and Dalla Costa's argument remains salient, that:

We must refuse the development they are offering us. But the struggle of the working woman is not to return to the isolation of the home...any more than the housewife's struggle is to exchange being imprisoned in a house for being clinched to desks or machines. Women must completely discover their own possibilities. (Selma and Dalla Costa, 1975, 25-26)

Women's inclusion in the workforce, then, has been part of a political project to restructure capitalism involving the disciplining and division of proletarian struggles of the 1970s (including feminist struggles) and to break the social and political power of women (Midnight Notes, 1990, 320-1).

However, many of these same analyses also point to the contradictory consequences of neoliberalism on women's lives and possibilities of women's resistance (see particularly, Hite and Viterna, 2005; Cupples, 2005; Talcot, 2004; Tinsman, 2000).

Much of this work focuses on the realm of everyday interactions and relationships, pointing out how the increasing proportion of informalised labour combined with the breakdown of survival mechanisms of the working and informalised poor result in unintended consequences. Mothers, families and communities in these conditions of marginality have sought to find individual and collective ways to survive on the margins of the money economy, forms of resistance and resilience which are often based in their territorialised community. This has paradoxically, for capital, increased the knowledge and autonomy of the informalised proletariat (Federici, 1990; Hite and Viterna, 2005).

Extant feminist analyses therefore point to the possibilities of resistance that are created by the contradictory realities of neoliberalism. This is a resistance that challenges traditions of western political thought of liberalism and Orthodox Marxism which rests on a conceptualisation of the political that is constructed through the exclusion of women and all that is represented by femininity and women's bodies (Sargisson, 1996) Their focus on the everyday, the private and the informalised world of work suggest a stretching of traditional conceptualisations of politics and the site of political struggle away from solely focusing on the point of production and on the public script of politics to be found in political parties, unions and the state (Cupples, 2005; Talcot, 2004; Tinsman, 2000).

This intervention seeks to engage with this literature by developing an autonomist Marxist feminist analysis of women's resistance in the everyday politics of the community. By stretching our analysis of capitalism to social reproduction and to the construction of particular gendered subjectivities and social relationships we open an analytic window onto the revolutionary potentials of everyday forms of informal politics, forms of politics which have historically been marginalised from the lens of masculinised revolutionary analysis.

As much as there has been a feminisation of survival and poverty in the contemporary period, we are also witnessing the increasing feminisation of resistance which re-configures and re-defines the nature, meaning and subjects of revolutionary transformation under neoliberal capitalism. Yet such pro-

cesses of the feminisation of resistance have achieved only marginal attention. There is, therefore, a political urgency to this engagement. Our focus will be on the women of the Bolivarian process who are the heart and lungs of popular struggle in contemporary Venezuela. Without an analytic and theoretical engagement with these dynamics we run the risk of reproducing academicism which presents as much of a barrier as it does an opportunity for the development of revolutionary theory and practice.

I develop an autonomous Marxist feminist lens through which to analyse women's struggles in Venezuela. This practical theorisation came out of women's struggles in the 1970s and spoke to the increasing politicisation of social reproduction, the private and personal. These struggles reflected an increasing discomfort with and rejection of a politics of representation and praxis of revolutionary feminism that focused on the dominant script of politics. Whilst the women whose lives and struggles are shared here do not explicitly identify as feminists much of their praxis implicitly shares these problematics and perspectives. I hope therefore that such a framework can analyse in solidarity with their struggles.

Autonomist Marxist feminism

To him she was a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices were rarely considered; her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labour...her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture...her vagina used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment- the capital investment being the sex-act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus (Barbara Omalde, Heart of Darkness 1983, cited Federici, 2004)

The tradition of autonomist Marxist feminism developed by thinkers such as Federici (2004), Mies (1986) and Dalla Costa and James (1975) seeks to conceptualise and analyse the necessary linkages between patriarchy and capitalism. As Mies argues the 'goal of this system, namely the never-ending process of capital accumulation, cannot be achieved unless patriarchal man-woman relations are main-

tained or newly created. Patriarchy constitutes the invisible underground of the visible capitalist system' (Mies, 1986, 38).

Unlike other materialist feminisms (see for example Tinsman, 2000) this framework rejects an analytic and historical separation between patriarchy and capitalism as this creates a binary which casts the former to the private (feminised) sphere of oppression and the latter to the public (masculinised) sphere of exploitation. This binary relegates struggles against patriarchy as secondary to, and separate from, struggles against capitalism. Such a separation becomes a barrier to understanding and political action as it invisibilises the very relationships between the private and the public which are a necessary condition for capitalist reproduction. In so doing it misunderstands the nature of capitalism, thus limiting and devaluing women's social power.¹

Autonomist Marxist feminists seek to transcend this binary by re-conceptualising capitalist social relations and value (or the productivity of labour). As Mies (1986, 47) argues, 'We have to accept that the basic concepts we use in our analysis have already been occupied like territories or colonies- by dominant sexist ideology. Though we cannot abandon them, we can look at them from below... from the point of view of the historical experiences of the oppressed, exploited and subordinated and their struggle for emancipation.'

This involves beginning from women's diverse experiences as a means to develop a critique of capitalist political economy and a basis for revolutionary and autonomous women's struggles (James, 1975, 5). The autonomous feminists did exactly this in their struggle to visibilise and build women's social power and autonomy during the feminist struggles of the 1970s. This resulted in two strands of work: conceptual work which developed a theorisation of the productivity of labour that visibilised the work of the housewife in the private sphere; and historiography-from-below of primitive accumulation, which demonstrated how this involved constructing particular gendered subjectivities based upon a specific sexual division of

¹I am not claiming that patriarchy and capitalism are one and the same for all time, rather that they are mutually constitutive in their present iterations.

labour articulated through institutions most notably the nuclear family.

Conceptually this work proceeded through a critique of orthodox Marxist understandings which claimed that the capitalist family did not produce for capitalism and was not therefore value producing, relegating women's work to a secondary, if at all visible, site of anti-capitalist struggle. Autonomist Marxist feminists argued that the family and community was a site of value constituted by the unpaid labour of the housewife. The commodity produced was unique to capitalism as it is the labourer himself. As James (1975, 5) explains, 'This is a strange commodity for it is not a thing. The ability to labour resides only in a human being, whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained then when it works it's bed must be made, its floor swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready... This is how labour power is produced and reproduced ... to describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work'.

The traditional labour of women in the private sphere is material, affective, physiological and never-ending. As James and Della Costa (1975) argue, 'She is always on duty, for the machine doesn't exist that makes and mind children... her workday is unending not because she has no machines but because she is isolated'. Such labour is the essential hidden underside of capitalist reproduction which ensures that labour can be produced as a commodity. Yet there are divisions within the labour(er) of social reproduction. Upper class women's work in social reproduction is increasingly out-sourced which sees racialised (migrant) domestic labour replace upper class women's work in social reproduction (Choy, 2003).

The community and the family therefore become the other half of capitalist organisation - the hidden source of surplus value. Thus the different aspects of social reproduction such as health, education, housing, transport, childcare, the body, sexuality, fertility and the family are all sites of the construction of capitalist social relations. Accordingly they are also key sites of struggle that can rupture the smooth flow of capitalist reproduction. This is what

was meant by the feminist slogan that the private and the personal are political; the family, community and gendered subjectivities are not neutral, natural or transhistorical subjectivities and social relationships but rather historically concrete forms of producing capitalist social relations.

Additionally alternative historiographies-from-below of poor women's experiences and struggles were developed which showed how primitive accumulation is an on-going process of creating a particular sexual and gendered division of labour. This is constructed around binary gendered relations of man and women, with the former concentrated in production (public sphere) and the latter in social production (private sphere) (Federici 2004). Such historiographies demonstrated how over the 'last four or five centuries, women... were externalised, declared to be outside civilized society, pushed down and thus made invisible as the under-water part of an iceberg is invisible, yet constitute the basis of the whole.'

Mies (1986) and Federici (2004) demonstrate how the persecution and burning as witches of midwives, single women, deviants, healers, non-conformists and shamans was directly connected to the emergence of capitalism as a political and economic system, the professionalization and masculinisation of modern science and medicine, and with it the disciplining and control of woman's sexuality and bodies. As Mies argues, 'the torture chambers of the witch-hunters were the laboratories where the texture, the anatomy, the resistance of the human body - mainly the female body - was studied. ... torture through mechanical devices [was] a tool for the subjugation of disorder... [and] fundamental to the scientific method as power' (83).

Capitalism created the modern family and housewife by a process of the alienation of community and caring relationships resulting in the atomisation and privatisation of social reproduction. The feminised realm of community and family becomes de-valued and associated with the female of the gendered binary, which creates the alienation of the proletarian subject from her body (and womb) that becomes a machine of social reproduction. As Dalla Costa and James continue,

When we say for example that we want control of our own bodies, we are challenging the domination of capital which has transformed our reproductive organs as much as our arms and legs into instruments of accumulation of surplus labor; transformed our relations with men, with our children and our very creation of them, into work productive to this accumulation. (Dalla Costa and James, 1975, 6)

These processes also rely on the alienation of the proletarian body and mind from its creative and productive capacities in order to enable political and economic domination in the form of the state and market. In this process the products of our labour and creativity become reified as objects/structures de-linked from their human cause (Holloway 2002; Bonefeld, 2003). The transformation of the multitude into the proletariat creates divisions along a multiplicity of racial, sexual, and national lines which ensure the reproduction of exploitation and alienation. Such divisions between the mind and body, man and woman, the productive and the unproductive, production and social reproduction, the self and other ensure the separation of ourselves and our communities into disjointed fragments. It is upon this destructive and divisive series of separations, divisions and hierarchies that capitalism is premised (Federici, 2004; Dalla Costa and James, 1975, 17).

Thus autonomist feminism conceptualises a web of relations between men and women, masculine and feminine, black and white, mind and body, private and public and production and reproduction which are constitutive of capitalist social relationships. A web of inequalities is built into the body of the world proletariat that divides ourselves against ourselves and each other. As Sargisson (1996, 90) argues, citing Griffin, in relation to the separation between masculine and feminine, 'Through masculine and feminine, which we use to designate two alien and alienated poles of human behaviour, we make our sexuality a source of separation. We divide ourselves and all that we know along an invisible border'.

Yet such parched conditions of human existence are unable to erase the human subject that is the ultimate producer of these alienated forms of human labour/creativity. Resistance to these conditions

therefore occurs in and against these reified forms of social relations and subjectivities as subjects and communities seek to overcome their alienation. Despite ghettoization and marginalization in the academy, this framework of analysis (and invisibilised histories of analyses within this framework) suggests the need for concrete historicized analysis of women's struggles which look to poor women's experiences and histories of struggle as an avenue for exploring the gendered and classed social relations of domination and resistance.

The Feminisation of Resistance in Venezuela

Resistance to neoliberal capitalism will be explored through the lives of women in La Vega a shanty town in Caracas, Venezuela, to render visible not only the feminisation of poverty and survival but also an increasing feminisation of resistance. As in the tradition of autonomist Marxist feminism this analysis will begin with a historiography from below, focusing on women's invisibilised struggles prior to the election of Chavez to power in 1998 to move on to an analysis of contemporary forms of feminised resistance.

The women subjects of this analysis are all participants in the Comité de Tierra Urbana (Urban Land Committees, CTUs)² and residents of La Vega shanty town with a half-century history and population of up to 250,000. Situated on the south western hills surrounding the valley in which central Caracas stands it is emblematic of the conditions of uneven and exclusionary development that characterized the experience of 60% of Venezuelans of the Punto Fijo period (1958-1998)³. This experience was com-

²The Comités de Tierras Urbanas (Urban Land Committees, CTU) were created through a Presidential decree for land reform in 2002. Each is comprised of 100-200 shantytown families who are allowed to petition for land titles on self-built homes. After acquiring tens of thousands of titles, the CTUs – of which there are more than 6,000 – have embarked on a national project to extend their efforts to include quality of life issues, such as water and sanitation. In moving beyond the specific remit of the Presidential decree, the CTUs seem to be signaling their autonomy from the central government while at the same time transforming themselves from land acquisition organizations to a national grassroots social movement.

³The Pacto de Punto Fijo (1958-1998) was an accord between the Venezuelan political parties Democratic Action (AD), COPEI and Democratic Republican Union (URD). It created a bipartisanship between AD and COPEI which meant the political exclusion of more 'radical' political forces and the informal poor.

prised of economic informality, political de-legitimation, social exclusion, territorial illegitimacy and historical invisibility. Yet, La Vega is also a site with a rich history of subaltern struggle to transform their social conditions into social relations of dignity, liberation and democracy (Fernandez, 2010). Women were, are, and will continue to be social subjects who experience the harshest forms of exclusion, impoverishment and oppression. They are also the heart, lungs and mind of popular politics past and present.

Isaura, Elizabeth, and Cristina⁴ are three women whose lives span three generations and whose experiences embody the contradictory reality of both the exclusionary development of the Punto Fijo Period and descent into neoliberalism, and the present attempt to develop a socialism of the 21st century [6], via their involvement in the CTUs formed in 2003.

La Pobreza y Yo: 1958-1998: Historiographies from below

Isaura began her life in a middle class family but fell in love with one of her father's workers. She was forced to leave her family home and arrived in La Vega in the late 1950s where she helped found La Independencia neighborhood, where she still lives. As she recounted, "I remember when this was just rubble, old cars, shacks with no floors or bathrooms, roads that were dirt. We built our own house gradually, the first floor where we began, and now we have three floors as you can see. It was like that for all of us."

She began community work from the onset of her arrival in La Vega. Sometimes this involved providing a shoulder to cry on for a neighbor, sometimes it meant organizing the community in order to fight for health services and water. As Isaura stressed, "I have always been involved with community work, for me it is my life, of course along with my children and family. Always, thirty years of being a housewife and a community worker. We have blocked roads, taken over the bank and the offices of the municipality."

She recalls when in the late 1980s the organized

⁴ The names of the three women have been changed in order to protect their privacy and ensure their security. Isaura's narrative is based upon a number of conversations and two in-depth recorded interviews with the author.

guerilla left and student movement were forced into hiding. Community members opened their doors to these revolutionaries, giving them shelter, and offering political solidarity. Isaura would stay up all night with a hand-held printing machine, printing the pages of La Vega newspaper, risking the bullets and bulldozers of the police and army, and experiencing their intimidation and threats. 'I remember working night after night page by page putting together the journal ...and then helping to distribute it to the community, in hiding, so that the authorities would not find out and reprimand us'.

As conditions worsened following economic decline and the beginnings of neoliberal reform in the late 1980s she recounts the rise in the cost of food and the increase in unemployment, "There are always those [men] on the streets, drinking and playing billiards but there were more, so many young men and their fathers without work, with nothing to do but drink and waste their time with women, gambling".

Of el Caracazo, 27th February 1989, when popular rage erupted against an IMF sponsored package of economic reforms, she remembers the chaos and the deaths, sons of her friends shot, the army and police invasion. Yet she also recounts the continuing community unity, as families helped each other to ensure that neighbors didn't go without food, 'We cooked *sancocho* (chicken stew) in a huge pot in the middle of the street, young ones put on music, we tried to keep our community together'.

Elizabeth, born in the late 1960s, is one of the most loved and well known of the inhabitants of 19 de Abril neighborhood. As a child she was good at school and wanted to continue with her education. One of the ways to do this was to train as a nun. As she recounted, "I remember being there [convent], yes it was clean and regular food and much discussion of sin and goodness and paradise in the after-life. It made me feel bad when I'd go back to my house and all around me was poverty." She couldn't relegate her community to the next life. One day she left the convent never to return. 'I told the superior that I was very ill, that I needed time to rest and I never went back. For me god was with my people'.

She carried her Christian culture and beliefs home with her. There she began to help organize Comunidades Ecclesias de Base (CEB, Chris-

tian Base Communities) during which she came into contact with the ideas of liberation theology and the revolutionary left. ‘This was the time that I linked my Christian beliefs, not those of the organized church, with ideas about political and social change but change for and from the people not imposed by any clergy or politician’ She began, as she said, to fight for paradise on earth for all.

In the 1980s and early 1990s she became involved in the explicit political organisation of her community. This began around culture, whether that was cooking in the street, organizing festivals to celebrate the history of the neighborhood, or holding classes for the youth and children. She was at the centre of struggles for health, education and water, acting as a charismatic community leader and symbol, placing her body in the way of police and tanks. As a neighbor told me, ‘Elizabeth isn’t frightened of anyone, whoever they say they are, with whatever arms they come with. She will stand right in front of them; stand her ground to protect her community’.

As economic crisis and neoliberal restructuring intensified in the 1990s and her husband lost stable employment it became ever more difficult to feed, cloth and school her four children. Additionally, her public combativeness was not well-received in the confines of her house, especially as it became a centre of community activity and discussion. As she related, ‘Most of the time he [her husband] stays out of the way as long as food is cooked and the house is clean but then sometimes he can’t take it any longer and that’s when everything blows up’.

Cristina, the youngest of these three women was born in the early 1970s and grew up during a time of intense political activity. Joining as a young teenager *Bandera Roja*, a revolutionary left group, she left after a few years, disillusioned with the corrupt elitist practices that mirrored those of traditional politicians.

Throughout the 1990s she continued working over the struggle for water and education, and engaged in cultural activities as a way to strengthen community collective consciousness. However, her strong independent will often came into conflict with the conservative traditions and family expectations of young women. ‘I love my community, my family but it has been hard for me sometimes as I

have not followed the traditional path.’

The experiences of these three women of the *Punto Fijo* period help us to piece together the reality of the popular history of resistance and domination as lived and practised by the invisible female inhabitants of the shanty towns.

Whilst reproducing their gendered roles as mothers and housewives, providing social welfare and social reproduction of labour, these social relations were not merely a practise of passivity and subordination, nor a defence of a female identity in isolation from other elements of their gendered and classed lives. Rather, it involved these women becoming organizers and thinkers in the struggle for health, water, community and life. In the process, family, womanhood and motherhood became a terrain of resistance, potentially transforming the limitations of patriarchal capitalist gendered relationships and roles. Thus family and community simultaneously became sites of struggle that both united and divided community, and both contested and reproduced capitalist gendered relations of domination.

Religion was central to the politicisation of community and family. The contradictions of the organised Catholic Church’s rhetoric and practice, combined with the reality of impoverishment, resulted in the politicisation of everyday culture and beliefs. They were not passively received and reproduced but rather contested and became the site for the development of a particular texture of resistance: one in which the beliefs and principles of Catholicism become embedded in the struggle for liberation and paradise on earth. Yet as elements of Catholicism were contested and reclaimed other elements were reproduced and created conflicts within the politicisation of family and community. Such conflicts become visible around the gendered articulation of everyday culture and its expectations of women that contested relations of passivity and domination in public and yet were expected to reproduce these relations in their private lives.

These women’s histories also help us to understand some of the trends within the popular politics at the heart of *Chavismo*: the suspicion of representational politics of political parties and the state within the base of *Chavismo*; the traditions of direct democracy and community led change that are so

noticeable within the politics of the poor; the politicisation of the everyday, community and family; and the centrality of women as agents attempting to contest relations of domination. Unlike most characterizations of female shanty town dwellers their stories reveal fragments of a rich popular history, agency and rationality (see also Fernandes 2007 for a similar argument).

Chavismo: Ahora Sí: 1999: The feminisation of resistance: new revolutionary subjects

As Chavez toured around the country in the mid-1990s attempting to gather support for the MVR (Movimiento V [Quinta] República, Fifth Republic Movement),⁵ La Vega was caught in the discussions and debates about whether to offer their support to this new movement. Isaura became a Chavez supporter, participating in the political campaign to ensure his election in the 1998 presidential election: ‘We stayed up late into the night putting up posters, preparing the details of the campaign, talking to neighbours to convince that it was worth while voting and voting for Chavez. He came to visit us here in La Vega, and I remember that we didn’t sleep for about three days preparing everything.’

In 2003 when Chavez first authorised the Misiones (or social programmes in for example health, land and water) Isaura came into her element as a community worker. She was involved in the setting up of the Mesa Técnica de Agua (Water Committee), Mission Barrio Adentro I (Basic level Health Mission) and one of the first CTUs in the country. This process enabled her to formalise her informal activities of decades, giving her authority and recognition. However, Isaura often laments the recent decrease in organization in the Water and Health Committees, ‘There are basically only the two of us in the water committee now. Everyone has returned to their own lives. They are too selfish to think of others. I wish that things would change’.

Her energy and commitment to her community are at times superhuman. A typical day is like this: she wakes at 4am, leaves the house early to speak to neighbours about problems they have with water, goes to a meeting, talks to the engineers in a

local sewage project, travels to the centre one and half hours away to attend a workshop about popular participation, returns and makes almuerzo (lunch) for herself and extended family, rests a little then attends a meeting or two of the CTU’s, the local politicians community meeting, arrives home as late as midnight and begins again the next day. Now 70 years old, she tells me, ‘This is my life. There is a chance for change, for us all to have water, health, housing, dignity. Men and women together, children to have education, our community to not be divided, not have the youth getting lost to drugs to drink, not having our men beating our women.’

Elizabeth continued as a key organiser in her community, central to the campaign to get Chavez elected and then to defeat the attempted coup against the Chavez government in 2002:

We marched to Miraflores (presidential palace) and we refused to leave until they returned Chavez to us. We elected him and we would not let them take our elected president away from us. It was like what they always did to us, to deny us our rights... Well this time we weren’t going to let that happen. I remember when they brought him back in the early hours of the morning. I cried, we all cried.

She was involved in 2003 in the setting up of one of the first CTU committee in Venezuela. With links to those involved with popular grassroots struggle in the last twenty years she entered the land committee with a view to enabling the construction of a project of social transformation. She describes the original objectives of the land committees: ‘[They] began with the community organising around the legalization of their land ownership. During the Punto Fijo period we were invisible and criminalized. If you looked at a map of Caracas we were part of the hills surrounding Caracas, we were not on the map. Only recently have the maps been re-made to include us.’

However the community came to realise that legalisation of property rights did not solve the problems that they faced relating to housing and environment. Their project gradually deepened through a process of critical reflection and debate between and within individual CTU’s. Elizabeth, as a charismatic and symbolic community figure, was central

⁵ The MVR was a left-wing political party in Venezuela which was founded by Chavez.

to these discussions: 'We worked with our community building solidarity and attempting to encourage reflection about the problems that we faced. We developed the programme of democratising the city, built on the idea of democratic control over our environments in order to create social justice for all, with access to, and control over, education, health, employment, community.'

Her commitment to ensuring dignity and justice means that she is continually working to further the projects of the CTU's of La Vega and Venezuela, and dealing with the individual social and economic problems of neighbours and friends. This dedication and sacrifice has taken its toll on her personal life and health. She is often ill and faces mounting conflicts in her family life due to her level of commitment which takes away from her expected duties as a wife and mother. Yet as she explains, 'My fight has always been with my people, against poverty, injustice and inhumanity. To develop paradise on earth is something that we can and will do. Something that I would be prepared to die for.'

Cristina has also been at the heart of the organization of the CTU's in her community in La Vega. However, her role in the organization is more national in scope than that of Elizabeth or Isaura. 'I was involved in developing a methodology of participation. This methodology is a means of enabling communities to develop their collective knowledge... It begins with communities discussing the common problems they face, their experiences of the CTU's and of other elements of the political process, and then develops into a series of reflections amongst those same community members as to potential barriers to achieving their objectives and solutions to these problems. From this they develop plans of development and action.'

Her struggle to transform her community is intimately linked to her personal life as she is a woman who chose to be a single mother. Such a choice or enforced situation is socially widespread but not socially accepted. As she discussed with me, 'I find it so hard, not only because I'm tired but because I am often judged for leaving her to continue my social work and for choosing to bring her up as I do.'

She is thus acutely aware of the problem of individualism and beliefs that divide communities and

families against each other, 'The internalisation of domination is one of the biggest barriers that we face. This is based in a history of people thinking only of themselves in isolation from their communities. This bred individualism and competition and was a way to divide, debilitate and ultimately control us'.

Yet her ideas about a project of social transformation are highly critically of the tradition of vanguards and leadership within the politics of both the organised left and the politicians of the democratic pact (AD and COPEI). For her any change has to come from the collective understanding and knowledge of the shanty town dwellers and not from any leader- whether that be one from the community or from outside. As she explains,

Unless we begin to rebuild from below, to articulate our needs, desires and energy into a poblador (shanty-town) movement, none of these structures will ever be remade, our communities will always be dictated to, passive recipients of knowledge, resources, whatever. When we are conscious, organized, when we see our power and potential, through this process we begin to construct new structures, new relationships, a new distribution of power, a new democracy.

These women's struggles and lives testify to a qualitative jump in the development of subaltern resistance since Chavez's advent to power. They also illustrate the complexity and contradictory nature of such resistance.

In varied ways the women of the Comités de Tierra Urbana are attempting to transform and subvert capitalist social relations which subjugate them as gendered and isolated individuals that perform the role of provider of social welfare and social reproduction. Their struggle for the democratization of the city based on self-government is an attempt to reclaim a collective process of the provision, definition and organization of health, education and housing. In the process motherhood, womanhood and family are transformed as social welfare is collectivized. Women's individualized and hidden labour is valorized and organized collectively. This subverts and transgresses the gendered division of labour which to de-politicises and individualises so-

cial reproduction. Yet, the fact that the majority of those involved in this process are women re-articulates a contradictory subject of care which because it is highly feminised also reproduces this gendered division of labour. Until care and social reproduction become a politics of the community as opposed to the women of the community, there are tendencies for women organizers to continue to sacrifice themselves for others,

In differing ways, these women share the view that it is essential to connect the personal with the political. At times this becomes a moral criticism of the selfishness of others, in its richest expression it becomes a critique of the alienated subject and the internalisation of relations of domination that this produces. Yet such internal domination is often rearticulated in their private lives in which they are expected

of resistance and pride.

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to play the traditional role of wife and mother.

The politicization of community, family and self also has implications for how the body is lived and felt. The mechanization and objectification of the gendered body as a site of reproduction and production results in women's bodies being used, abused objectified and exploited. The alienation of the subject's desire and physicality that is produced (by whom?) is central for ensuring disciplined proletarian bodies. However for the gendered subjects of the shanty town the body is not merely a site of pain and exhaustion but is also an element in the articulation and valuation of the poors' ability to create life¹. Its use against the oppressive and coercive elements of the state in protests and as means to protect their community turns the body into a site

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