

Commoning Against Debt

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Debt, as David Graeber reminds us, has a long history. Debtors' revolts dotted the ancient world forcing the introduction of Jubilees. In modern times, debt has become a key means of capital accumulation. Ubiquitous, it has taken on a new function, as the most general category through which exploitation is organized. This pervasive use of debt is an attempt to change the architecture of capital accumulation by eliminating its most conflictual aspects and allowing for self-managed exploitation. This is one of the objectives of the "financialization of reproduction." In the place of the capital-labor relation mediated by the wage, banks and NGOs are dishing out to would-be micro-entrepreneurs the capital that presumably will lift them out of poverty. They then recede, only to reappear at the point of collection. Users of credit cards, student loans and micro-loans appear as possessors of "capital," even if just a few hundred dollars, presumably free to invest it as they please and prosper or fail as their industriousness allows. In this scenario, as wages and jobs vanish and the lending/debt machine becomes the dominant work relation, exploitation is more individualized and guilt producing.

The functioning of this machine is best seen in the organization of micro-credit, which the policy international agencies have promoted since the 1980's as the favored means to capture the work, energies, and inventiveness of the "poor" across the world.

Loans are generally lent to women's groups. While each member is responsible for repayment, the group polices anyone who defaults. This has proven to be such an effective mechanism that even though the recipients are the poorest, the rates of repayment have been the highest.

Equally important have been the strategies used in case of default. Banks and NGOs have engaged in an ethnography of shame, studying how communities enforce their mores, which they then apply with a good dose of intimidation. Home visits and vilifying methods are used to scare people into repayment. This further explains why rates are so high, despite the fact that few can claim any success with the capital borrowed. In fact, most loan recipients simply move from a smaller to a bigger debt, in a sequence often ending in suicide.

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That micro-credit is producing misery is becoming common knowledge. Nevertheless, the program is expanding, projected to reach 30 million people in Africa alone. "Good returns" on the money invested is only one of the motivations. A further reason is the desire to bring under the control of the banks forms of subsistence that populations of women have created at the margins of the money economy. Debt sucks an immense amount of surplus labor expended outside the wage relation, while providing a means of experimentation with different social relations. Surveillance and policing are 'internalized' by the community, and failure is more burning since it is experienced as an individual problem and disgrace.

On this terrain the women of Egypt, Bangladesh or Bolivia share the same experience as indebted university students in the U.S.. In both cases the state and employers are eliminated as beneficiaries of the labor extracted, and as targets of demands and conflict. In both cases we have the ideology of micro-entrepreneurship, the individualization of the reasons for success and failure, the breakdown of collective support and, not last, the politics of guilt: hiding, self-imposed silence, avoidance of disclosure.

However, this curtain of fear and guilt is beginning to be lifted. Debt resistance movements are growing in different parts of the world. While in the United States students and those fighting foreclosures have taken the lead, in the South resistance has come from grassroots women,

like the hundreds who in the summer of 2002 converged in La Paz and besieged the banks demanding a cancellation of their debts. But the struggle against micro-credits is not waged only through demonstrations. The main obstacle to the spread of micro-credits are the commoning activities women in rural areas and shanty towns are creating, as they are pooling resources, setting up communal kitchens, occupying public spaces where to conduct various forms of micro-trade and urban farming, and forming community organizations to address the problems of everyday reproduction. Through these activities and the solidarity networks they generate—which parallel the solidarity economies developing across the United States—the new debt economy is being resisted, while a new society, based on the communalization of our reproduction, is being created. ■