

**Amaia Pérez Orozco**, *The Feminist Subversion of the Economy: Contributions for Life Against Capital* (translated by Liz Mason-Deese), New York: Common Notions, 2022. ISBN: 9781942173199 (paper); ISBN: 9781942173670 (ebook)

As a literary scholar and mother of two, I have often felt insufficient because I was never able to do enough in either of those roles. When I was at work, I was sad and felt guilty because I could not spend as much time with my children, and when I was at home or on adventures with the kids, I felt guilty for not working or reading enough. In the end, I feel kicked out of the academic system because I was—and still am—unable and also unwilling to spend as much time and energy on the job as making “a proper career” would demand. But even before I had children, I have sensed for a long time that there is something fundamentally wrong with the concept and practices of “work” as opposed to “life” and “care”. Amaia Pérez Orozco’s *The Feminist Subversion of the Economy: Contributions for Life Against Capital*, helped me very much in understanding where this discontent and personal feelings of inadequacy come from. It explains how capitalism and patriarchy form a toxic union that systematically produces injustice and is harmful to life on many different levels. To counter that, the author proposes that “life must be the highest priority” and that “the entire socioeconomic system must be rethought in the service of life” (p.4).

In line with this proposal, the book takes “sustaining life as its analytical and political focus” (p.4) and interrogates “the conditions of possibility of *buen convivir*” (p.3). Departing from the notion of crisis that goes far beyond the recent crises of Covid-19 and the financial crash in 2008, Pérez Orozco argues for a far-reaching civilisational crisis: “From the perspective of sustaining life, we speak of a crisis when the processes that regenerate life fall apart or are put at risk. From that perspective, the crisis is multidimensional, deep and began well before 2008” (p.35). It encompasses the ecological crises of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene (Moore 2015), global inequality, neoliberalism and its social effects that have hit the Global South most severely, as well as the crisis of care prevailing in the Global North. Donna Haraway’s notion of “this scandalous Thing” (1989: 13) points to the roots of this multidimensional crisis as an “androcentric, anthropocentric, heterosexist, neocolonial (logic)” with capitalist markets at its epicentre (p.84). From a feminist degrowth perspective, Chapters 1–4 of the book retrace the reasons for the fundamental conflict between life and capital, while the final chapter envisions utopian alternatives. Challenging Thatcher’s dictum that “there is no alternative” to capitalism as the only possible mode

of fulfilling human needs, the book focuses on care to point out the irresolvable tension between capitalism and sustaining life.

Similarly, in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), Jason Moore (who also coined the term Capitalocene) argues that capitalism is at the heart of the current ecological and global equality crisis, and in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), Mark Fisher points out the correlation between capitalism and mental health problems. From a historical and anthropological perspective, James Suzman (2020) de-naturalises market-based capitalism by tracing the history of work and its processes of cultural and material value creation that have for a long time been organised differently and still are in some cultures of the world. What makes Pérez Orozco's work stand out against other critiques and de-naturalisations of capitalism is the coherent combination of a postcolonial feminist perspective with aspects of degrowth theory in her centring of sustaining life as an analytical category. While at times the author seems to distance herself from the label of "ecofeminist degrowth", stating that "we have no desire to use the notion of 'degrowth' to tie ourselves to a label that we know is polemical" (p.145), I argue that her work is very much in line with contemporary strands of feminist degrowth. For example, the FaDA Writing Collective (2023)<sup>1</sup> likewise conceptualise the contemporary crisis as "a crisis of care: the work of caring for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere". Considering the rich diversity of work on degrowth that encompasses "feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist voices from many parts of the world" (FaDA Writing Collective 2023), despite sometimes being perceived as written mainly by European men, makes me question Pérez Orozco's degradation of the label of degrowth as polemical.

Following the feminist tradition of focusing on language and its world-making capacity, *The Feminist Subversion of the Economy* uses meta-language in the form of crossed-out words. It features ~~crisis~~, ~~production~~, and the ~~real~~ economy (p.11) to point out how these terms function as distractions. For example, ~~production~~ and the ~~real~~ economy systematically disguise the privatised and feminised sphere of reproduction that is at the same time fundamental to the entire economic system. While care and especially care work is often associated with femininity and reproduction, the book stresses how "everyone decessitates<sup>2</sup> care every day of our lives" (p.131) by drawing on

<sup>1</sup> Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance: Corinna Dengler, Nadine Gerner, Taís Sonetti-González, Lina Hansen, Sourayan Mookerjee, Susan Paulson and Anna Saave.

<sup>2</sup> Pérez Orozco uses this compound made up of "necessities" and "desires", which is derived from feminist struggles in Central America, to point out that the desires of oppressed groups have never mattered and thus should also be heard and fulfilled in addition to their mere needs.

Judith Butler's (2004) concept of "precarious lives". Butler's insistence on all lives being vulnerable and in need of care opposes the notion of the independent neoliberal subject embodied by what Pérez Orozco calls the BBVAh: "a white, wealthy, urban heterosexual male adult with normative functionality" (p.5). The BBVAh is the textbook example of classical economics, the supposedly self-sufficient, rational decision-maker who partakes in labour and consumption markets. In reality, he is entirely dependent on a whole range of others: from the feminine others who have raised him and take care of his children and home, to the postcolonial others who are involved in the production of his goods, as well as myriad non-human others. The work and energy of all those actors is appropriated without (fair) compensation. Care labour as "the set of activities that, ultimately, ensure (human) life" is often the residual of market relations and takes place in the shadows of heteropatriarchy where it is veiled and naturalised through ideology (p.55).

The book thus outstandingly reveals the marriage between two systems of oppression, capitalism and heteropatriarchy, by showing how the classical economist view on the ~~real~~ economy and its flows of money and valuation systematically hide the feminised spheres of reproduction and care on which it depends. Pérez Orozco writes: "Since care is not valued, anyone who can neglects it and transfers it to other people", which produces asymmetrical care flows from certain social groups to others (from women to men, from popular classes to the middle-upper class, from migrant homes to native homes, from peripheral countries to the centre, etc.)" (p.133). This flow also partially explains the conflict I mentioned in the beginning: since care work as opposed to academic work is not valued by society, it is hard to choose it without feeling devalued myself. The only way out of the dilemma would be a fundamental reorganisation of the economy through what Pérez Orozco calls "ecofeminist degrowth for *buen convivir*" which she envisions in the fifth and final chapter of the book.

In this proposal of a common utopian horizon, Pérez Orozco first suggests that a collective good life denoted by the term *buen convivir* can only be reached via degrowth to drastically reduce "the spaces motivated by the growth logic" and "to affirm that a socioeconomic system capable of sustaining *buen convivir* cannot revolve around accumulation" (p.145). The idea of reduction engrained in degrowth (at least in the wealthy countries of the globe) goes hand-in-hand with redistribution. While first and foremost redistribution can and should address money and material wealth, the book makes a strong case for also incorporating land, time, work, knowledge, and housing in the call for redistribution. Centring the sustaining of human and nonhuman life also means a reorganisation of care in what the author calls "rebellious forms of care" (p.55), for

example care that “occurs in the community sphere ... is defeminized, and/or renders visible the capital-life conflict” (p.57). Other important proposals involve relocalisation and decomplexification of economic processes as well as a re- or de-construction of the concept of work: “We will probably be societies in which labor does not exist or in which everything is work, because creating the life of the world is work and we will have blurred the boundaries between work and leisure, making it so that it finally gives us life” (p.172). Until this utopian dream is fulfilled, people like me will have to continue the struggle between care and labour, “work” and “life”. Even though I know that I am writing from an extremely privileged position as an academic in Germany, I think it is nonetheless important to continue the book’s analyses on academia’s own home turf. By questioning the production of knowledge from a feminist angle of care we could make sure that people who are involved in care labour are not systematically “silenced”. An example of work being done in this direction is the German network “Mutterschaft und Wissenschaft” (motherhood and academia [my translation]; <https://www.mutterschaft-wissenschaft.de/>) that aims at supporting mothers in academia and has also published books on the topic (see Czerney et al. 2020, 2022). Through these publications, as well as in live and online events, the network makes the difficulties or impossibilities of being a mother in academia visible and provides a platform for mutual exchange and support. Like its international counterpart, “Mothers in Science” (<https://www.mothersinscience.com/>), it demonstrates how the academic system structurally privileges people without care responsibilities. To speak with Pérez Orozco, by means of exclusion it prevents the creation of the kind of knowledge and practice that would actually serve the goal of sustaining life.

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