

QUERYING DEVELOPMENT IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

SAFRI, MALIHA

CLASS AS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Recently, feminists such as Nancy Folbre (1987), Marilyn Waring (1988), Ironmonger (1996), and J.K. Gibson—Graham (1996) have produced a powerful critique of economic representation, and created the opening for a re—visioning of the economy. On the basis of an accounting of unpaid labor in households and neighborhoods (including childcare, housework, and healthcare) feminists argue that as much as 50—70 percent of all economic activity in both rich and poor countries is excluded from labor force statistics and national income accounts. See figure 2 from the popular economics textbook *Understanding Capitalism* by Sam Bowles and Rick Edwards.

2. Even if we think all market commodity production is capitalist, it occupies no more than half the economic space. But as Gibson—Graham (1996), Resnick and Wolff (1997) amongst others have pointed out— not even all commodity production can be considered capitalist. Commodities can be produced under a variety of production relations. Slaves (unfree and unpaid) produced cotton for a market in the pre—war South. Self—employed people (cab drivers, nannies, tortilla and samosa producers) also create commodities for a market, but are not capitalist wage—workers. Collectives too, produce commodities for a market.

3. Developing a new political economy analysis, Resnick and Wolff (1987) distinguish between a variety of economic class processes. In a household for example, when a woman cooks and cleans not only for herself but for children and her husband, she is expending more value than what is necessary to sustain herself. This extra, or surplus labor, can be distributed in a variety of ways. If a non—producer (let us say a woman’s husband) makes all the distributive decisions about surplus that she produces — Marx defined this as an exploitative class process. If she alone were to make those decisions, then we could characterize this as an independent or self—employed class process— and if they produced and made decisions together, we could demonstrate the existence of a collective class process.

4. Theorizing class as a process of producing and distributing surplus in this simple but pragmatic way, means that the whole world stops being a nail to bang a capitalist hammer. First off, as we see below, it allows us to better represent the full diversity of economic activities in which immigrants participate (most of which are not directly taking place within capitalist relations), and secondly—we can theorize noncapitalist activities that people desire and want to see expanded as already existing, and we can engage in a vision of a more socially and economically just community here and now by expanding those noncapitalist activities or proliferating them where they can possibly exist and flourish. It is with this theoretical framework that I read the economic activities of poor immigrants in Chicago.

IMMIGRANTS AND CLASS

EXTENDED FAMILIES AND COLLECTIVE PRODUCTION PRACTICES

5. Consider an example from my field work. Rashida has a big family in the Chicago area, some of her older sisters are grandmothers themselves. One older sister has considerable difficulty walking, so Rashida, her sisters, and sisters—in—law take turns cooking and cleaning for her at her elder sister's house. One of her sisters (Mariam) also watches Rashida's daughter after school when Rashida is at the factory.

6. In this example, we can see that Rashida creates a fair amount of surplus labor in her extended family, more than what she needs to sustain herself, as do many of the other women in the extended family. Along with other women, she makes decisions about how to distribute this surplus—for example to her older invalid sister. They make a schedule of who will take care of her, they share in the production of surplus, and they make all the distributive decisions about who will be the recipient of surplus in a given period of time.

7. Especially in immigrant extended families that settle closely, there is a significant 'gift' economy connecting discrete households (Rouse 1991; Schiller et al. 1992). In poor communities, purchasing commodities such as childcare and health care for the elderly are prohibitively expensive to purchase in the formal market. Instead, extended families come up with various arrangements of collectivizing and producing childcare, healthcare, and large dinners together (Uberoi, 1993). For example, women in extended families share and alternate childcare duties between each other, extending these processes beyond the narrow spatial boundaries of distinct households. In interviews (see Safri, 2003), women producing child—care in an extended family setting noted that they made all the decisions about child—care in concert with each other. Even if men were irritatingly absent from performing childcare duties, every woman who did perform surplus labor had a right to determine how, when, and to whom her surplus would go. This is a collective economic production process with equal decision—making dynamics fundamentally different than the patriarchal nuclear family in which only some people produced, and others (men) had all rights to receive and distribute.

8. Health—care and dinners for the extended family follow a similar economic arrangement as the collectivization of child—care. For example, in one case, a woman undergoing chemotherapy for cancer was visited weekly by sisters—in—law who cooked and cleaned for her. On important religious, cultural, and personal occasions all the women of an extended family cook dishes in potluck style to feed the entire extended family. In Muslim communities for example, who observe Ramadan, this could mean collectivization of meals for thirty days in a row. Some families reported sharing about two—to three months of dinners during the course of a regular year—that amounts to a quarter of a family's daily dinners. On each occasion, women are constructing a domain in the extended family where they make all decisions about how to produce (child—care, health—care, or pot—luck dinners), and to whom they will distribute their surplus.

INDEPENDENT CLASS POSITIONS

9. Let's switch our focus from the non—commodity, non—capitalist production going on in extended families to address the self—employed commodity producers in immigrant communities. In all my conversations, it seemed obvious that most low—income families

don't make ends meet off of full—time jobs. Instead, they engage in a variety of income generating activities outside the household for pay:

MEN DRIVE CABS PART—TIME, SOME DO UNDER THE TABLE CONSTRUCTION JOBS.

10. Women do a mind—boggling array of jobs, most of which are at least initially under the table. They are part—time baby—sitters who care for children in their own homes. They cook and sell labor—intensive South Asian food to other families who don't have the time or skill to produce that cuisine. They sew, especially traditional South Asian clothes such as sari blouses, burquas, hijabs, and shalwar kameezes.

11. In each of these cases, these activities are organized under an independent class process in which the producer creates the surplus, and then distributes it. Let's go back to our example of Rashida, the woman who worked in a factory. She also did catering jobs on the side for other people in the South Asian community. We can understand that Rashida is both a fulltime worker in a capitalist firm, and a self—employed worker who engages in a non—capitalist market economy. Like many other self—employed producers, she uses some part of that surplus she creates to pay her rent since it also doubles as both her place of work and place of residence. She devoted some portion of surplus to advertising in other communities— posting flyers in grocery stores in Little India. She also started investing in nicer pots and pans. She has to make decisions about what to do with that surplus, just like any other independent self—employed producer does. She has to secure her various institutional supports. In fact, her catering business became so successful, that she quit her factory job and does catering work full—time as of 2001. She feels like it also grants her more flexibility, and allows her to participate in more of her daughter's childcare.

12. Elsewhere, I have examined how labor market discrimination and a changing notion of what constitutes an acceptable living standard can push people into making these part—time independent class positions into full—time income earning occupations. For our purposes, it is enough to note here that many immigrants (such as Rashida) slowly come to replace their wage work in capitalist firms with a self—employed class position. This seems at least to me, to address a most crucial point. In the minds of some professional planners, what poor communities in cities need are tax breaks and other financial incentives for big capitalist businesses to relocate and expand in the area. The idea is to create more jobs and build an economy where none currently functions, or where there are informal and illegal economies. However, with a different knowledge based on not seeing independent, collective, and neighborhood based economies as the marginal ones that need to be displaced by bringing in more factories or more capitalism, we can think about ways to strengthen these noncapitalist activities in which people are already participating. Women like Rashida, and countless other cab drivers I spoke to, want to enrich and make flourish the self—employed class positions they hold. These are the choices they are making in their lives when it is possible, so why don't we focus local economic development in this noncapitalist sector? This leads us straight into the final section of today's talk.

DEVELOPMENT WHEN COMMUNITIES DON'T JUST MATTER, BUT EVEN—GASP— PARTICIPATE

13. First, I present an example of how when non—capitalist activities (such as self—employed class processes) are not recognized and valued, economic policies actually harm and make difficult the lives of poor self—employed such as immigrant cab drivers. In the remainder of the talk, we examine various projects related to community development which I see as possible, as being ‘incubators’ as Herbert Rubin puts it, for both self—employed class processes that people assume outside the household, and collective class processes in immigrant extended families. So for poor immigrants who are self—employed, I envision a range of possibilities for organizing them in groups such that they could together create a site of security and growth. These strategies are unimaginable when all forms of work are assumed as so many different forms of capitalist employment. And for families who produce goods and services but in a non—market, non—capitalist economy— I envision strategies such as the one pursued by Nestras Raizes, a Puertoriqueno community gardens project that is ‘blossoming.’

14. In Chicago and New York, amongst other major cities, there are licenses, or medallions, required in order to operate a taxi cab. Although it is nothing more than a simple permit, the medallions on the open market cost \$150,000 in Chicago, and \$275,000 in New York— completely out of the range of the majority immigrant cab drivers who operate cabs and do not have the capital to purchase such an expensive means of production. As a result, they are forced to lease the cab medallion for about \$120 to \$150 per 12 hour shift— which means that they end up working sometimes ten hours to just make the lease. Most of the medallions are concentrated in the hands of large capitalist firms who are brokers. Chicago even enacted legislation in 1998 which further concentrated medallions into the hands of brokers by allowing them access to any new created medallions by the city.

15. For the city, though, all that matters is that taxi cabs provide a smoothly running system for both transportation and tourism purposes. They also want the revenue and tax generation coming from such a large industry. I argue that they could accomplish those tasks easily, but also by recognizing that the majority of Chicago cabbies are 1) poor, recently arrived immigrants and 2) are self—employed. I have argued that the medallion system itself should be abolished since it makes the life of the self—employed unnecessarily difficult, and a real permit system put in its place in order to regulate cabs on the street. With this change, a major cost for cabbies for their means of production would be eliminated, since the cost for leasing the car is a fraction of the cost of leasing the medallion.

16. This is also a stance taken by the Taxi Workers Alliance in New York, an amazing group that stands out as an example of how to organize and support cab drivers but with the continuous recognition that they are self—employed workers. The group came into existence out of another organization, Cabbies Against Anti—Asian Violence, which began in the mid—90’s after a series of assaults against immigrant cabbies perpetrated by both police and clients. (talk about Saleem Osman— founder) The Taxi Workers Alliance has since expanded to 24,000 members, the vast majority of whom are immigrants, and is a group that negotiates with the city over issues of workplace safety, pay rates, and anti—discrimination policies.

17. The Taxi Workers Alliance started out as a small, community—based advocacy group taking on amazing battles that both directly and indirectly affect independent producers' work lives. For example, they have recently started plans to form a sister organization in Punjab (Pakistan) and Doab in India where many of the drivers have left behind entire households who are dependent on remittances. Cabbies in New York were so worried about issues concerning their families in India and Pakistan, that NYTWA decided that the household also need to be included in the domain of issues they should deal with— even if those households were located on another continent. This is a collective organization for the self—employed focusing on specific issues that independent producers face— such as worker safety, health insurance, pay rates, relations to the city bureaucratic apparatuses, and the household lives of producers. They are thinking about the institutional supports that these producers require, and buttressing those so that independent producers can thrive.

18. It is also a collective organization that may have started out in one specific community, but has also evolved into a collective that has an expansive understanding of what it means to be a community. After 9/11, the group's organizational leaders were caught off—guard by how much cabbies did identify with a larger community, and wanted to engage with issues related to immigrants in this very anti—immigrant climate. In mass meetings held in all five boroughs, the organization presented a very carefully worded statement about the war and legislative changes, for fear that cabbies would be targets on the streets. Cabbies unanimously voted to make the statement much stronger, and to adopt an explicitly anti—war stance in addition to a harsh condemnation of the Bush administration's immigrant policy. The NYTWA explodes the boundaries of what a community means, what its concerns should be, and have gone much beyond the confines of what initially brought them together as self—employed producers.

19. This is an example of development projects that celebrate noncapitalist activities, and seek to make them flourish— instead of replacing them with large—scale capitalist development projects. The agendas for these groups are evolving directly inside their constituencies. Alternatives to wage labor suddenly seem to us as viable and important, rather than futile, or marginal. Capitalist wage labor ceases to be the only place where 'workers can join together in collective action, and allows room for alternative forms of employment which may be economically, socially, or emotionally more satisfying' (Hotch 2002).

20. Going back to collective production in extended families, we also see an entire economy that is not valued, supported, or 'developed' by mainstream economic development practices (Community Economies Collective, 2001). Economic development is supposed to increase people's well—being by providing them with jobs, but paid work alone does not lead to economic well—being. If the household—based economy produces goods and services (remember our first figure), that directly contribute to a fullness in people's lives, shouldn't this be a practice we strengthen? What if we imagined a type of development in which community members participate, and one that takes into account the skills and assets useful to reach goals communities agree upon? Perhaps they would want to develop more effective systems of neighborhood support, building on what already exists— aftercare for school children, care for elders, food production by those who stay at home for those who go out to work. Perhaps they will

want to create urban community gardens, which has been the project of Nuestras Raizes in Holyoke MA.

21. Nuestraz Raizes is an organization in the Puertoriqueno immigrant community of Holyoke. It involves about 150 families, who cultivate gardens on abandoned plots in a town plagued by high crime and high unemployment. These families produce about \$1000 of produce, produce which by the way is in some cases unavailable or of much better quality than that which is for sale in supermarkets. For some families, the market—value equivalent of that produce is 1/12th of their yearly monetary income. There is so much produce, that they also hold farmer’s markets in the summer, making available high—quality, healthy produce (such as tomatillos— an important ingredient for Puertoriqueno cuisine) to the rest of the community. They are also now in the planning stages of building a coop restaurant.

22. The city is however, now also aggressively courting capitalist firms to come in— and hence, are trying to create “industrial parks,” which might take away some of the land used in the gardens project. This is a smack in your face example of when community development means ‘let’s bring in capitalism,’ it can displace an already—flourishing noncapitalist economy that serves the needs of the community much better than the new plan. If there is money for economic development, it might go towards enhancing collective class processes in families and neighborhoods, rather than to businesses that create jobs that will not benefit residents and may contribute to their displacement through gentrification. As others have also theorized, this blindness to an ‘ethnic economy’ is not neutral and can have detrimental effects on that ethnic economy.

23. In conversations with poor immigrants, I did not find empty, or depleted objects of development. Where the mainstream found absence or negativity, I found presence and fullness. I found people engaged in diverse survival tactics, many of which take place in the non—capitalist sector. And those activities that people *do* value, *do* want to see expanded, are the ones that I see as worthy of community development practices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Community Economies Collective (2001) “Imagining and Enacting Noncapitalist Futures” in *Socialist Review*.

Folbre, Nancy. (1987) “A Patriarchal Mode of Production,” in *Alternatives to Economic Orthodoxy: A Reader in Political Economy*, eds. R. Albeda, C. Gunn, and W. Waller. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Fraad, Harriet, Steve Resnick, and Rick Wolff. (1994) *Bringing it All Back Home: Class, Gender and Power in the Modern Household*. London: Pluto Press

Gibson—Graham, J.K. (1996) *The End of Capitalism as we knew it*. New York: Blackwell Publishers.

Hotch, Janet (2000) “classing the Self—Employed: New Possibilities of Power and Collectivity,” in *Class and Its Others* ed. By J.K. Gibson—Graham, R.D. Wolff, and S.A. Resnick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ironmonger, D. (1996) “Counting Outputs, Capital Inputs and Caring Labor: Estimating Gross Household Output,” *Feminist Economics* 2 (3).

Resnick, Stephen and Rick Wolff. (1987) *Knowledge and class : a Marxian critique of political economy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rouse, Roger (1991), "Mexican Migration and the social space of postmodernism." *Diaspora* Vol. 1 No.1 p 8—23.

Safri, Maliha. (2003) *The Economics of Immigration: Household and Employment Dynamics*. PhD Dissertation. Amherst: University of Massachusetts.

Schiller, Nina Glick, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc—Szanton. (eds) (1992), *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity and Nationalism Reconsidered*. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* Vol 645 New York.

Uberoi, Patricia. 1993. *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Waring, Marilyn. (1988) *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*. New Zealand: Allen and Unwin.