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Brief Notes towards a Non-Nihilistic Theory of Non-Reproduction

What does it mean to not reproduce? The multiple resonances of the term ‘reproduction’ are an invitation to reflect on the micro (an individual’s decision to have a child, for example) and the macro (what does it mean to reproduce capitalism and the existing order of things?). To refuse to reproduce at either, or both, of these levels invokes the question of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Questions of whether to have children or not are fraught with political and historical significance, as well as deep personal feelings: but we should note that the more childbirth becomes a ‘private’ issue in a particular culture, the less the state steps in to help, financially or with legislation around maternity/paternity leave. On the other hand, the idea that the state could intervene to demand its citizens to produce more offspring, say, in the name of nationalist growth, awarding mothers medals for larger families, for example, is a historical grotesquery that is (thankfully) unimaginable today. When queer theorists, such as Lee Edelman and others, describe the contemporary obsession with ‘futurity’ and the child, it is not hard to understand the critique as both a condemnation of historical nationalism and today’s often religiously-inflected worship of the ‘innocence’ of the child in the name of a time to come (whether ecologically or religiously inflected). The cultural role of the symbolism of the child is not of course the actuality of reproduction understood in the narrow sense: and there is a worry that criticising the cult of the child is at the same time a critique of those who have them. Halberstam in particular worries about a queer-theory that endorsed ‘nihilism which always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction.’

In order to escape the threat of this nihilism, that would perpetuate the political and material neglect of and antipathy towards women and children, it is crucial to understand reproduction in a broader, collective sense. Marxists and Marxist-feminists in particular make it clear that ‘social reproduction’ refers not simply to childbirth but to ‘the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis’. This includes everything needed to keep human life going: mental, manual and emotional labour –from care and socialisation to providing food,

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clothing and shelter. Social reproduction is thus historical, social *and* culturally specific, which is where the question of ideology comes in: what does it mean to live in a culture where the image and symbolism of childhood and youth is celebrated, but the provision for caring for children and for those who care for them is so limited? Similarly, what does it mean to ‘keep human life going’ when to do so also entails keeping capitalism going? When to have children is to also to generate workers, and to generate work? What would it mean to refuse to perpetuate the ongoing processes that constitute and maintain capitalism while refusing to give up on care and other human relations that sustain us? Is it possible to separate the two adequately or at all?

There is an enormous question of scale here, and of consequences. How do we know on what level to refuse to perpetuate things as they are? A strike is one thing but to refuse to care, to refuse to bring up children that already exist is quite another. There comes a breaking point where the cost of making demands is outweighed by the cost of refusing them. And how can we be sure that the way in which we refuse – individually, collectively – is making any difference, is actually halting the reproduction of the social world in the way we would like to see? To drop out, to live differently, to live off-grid makes little difference to the whole if it is only a few people engaging in such behaviour. We do not always get to decide the impact our refusal will make – we might see refusing to work as a radical gesture, where a government might see surplus populations to be removed from housing lists and benefits. There are those – such as the ‘Voluntary Human Extinction Movement’ – who see things from the most macro of perspectives: ‘the hopeful alternative to the extinction of millions of species of plants and animals is the voluntary extinction of one species: Homo sapiens... us.’ The VHEMT are interesting in that their call for the immediate cessation of reproduction is couched not in terms of nihilism or antihumanism, but as an often humorous plea for there to be no more humans: ‘We’re not just a bunch of misanthropes and anti-social, Malthusian misfits, taking morbid delight whenever disaster strikes humans.’ They regard their project as altruistic and rational, and seek to avoid moralising; ‘We don’t carry on about how the human race has shown itself to be a greedy, amoral parasite on the once-healthy face of this planet. That type of negativity offers no solution to the inexorable horrors which human activity is causing.’

But politically we are on empty ground here with such projects, as speculatively interesting as they might be. VHEMT argues that the supposed desire to reproduce is a question of culture and not of nature but neglects to examine the reality of who today is

forced *not* to reproduce: see cases of state-enforced sterilisation among indigenous communities in Australia, or even in recent decades in North Carolina where thousands of men, women and children were sterilised without their knowledge between 1929-1974. There are clearly serious implications regarding race, colonial control and economic exploitation for any theory of non-reproduction that would seek to announce itself in the present: we cannot talk hypothetically about non-reproduction without invoking not only the spectre of a grandiose nihilism that would see humanity (rather than capitalism, say) as something to be exterminated, but also the very real experience of people who have had their capacity to reproduce taken from them under duress and often unknowingly.

If we want to protect certain forms of labour – love, care, sustainability – but refuse others – those that generate profits for others, that cause un/intentional harm, we must decide on this question of scale. On what level can we say ‘no more of this’ and ‘we refuse to carry on’ and it make the right kind of difference? In what way can we stop contributing to the perpetuation of capitalism’s destruction of lives and living spaces? To refuse to reproduce must not mean that we reduce reproduction to a mere function but we should understand it as a collective process that understands where the real enemy lies – not in humanity ‘as such’ (or at the level of the ‘species’, as VHEMT put it), but in the ruling class that treats the continued existence of everyone else as mere fodder for its own self-perpetuation. Only a collective, non-nihilistic non-reproduction of certain aspects of the status quo can ensure that we are thinking and acting according to the right scale: the trick is to work out what we can and cannot say no to, together.

References

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