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Response to Petchesky

Mary Robison
Macalester College

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Response

Mary Robison

Thank you to everyone for dedicating a Saturday morning to the Roundtable, and especially to Dr. Rosalind Petchesky, for coming all the way from New York City to be with us during this chaotic time. I am grateful to the International Studies program, and Dean Ahmed Samatar in particular, for inviting me to partake of these discussions. Thanks, also, to everyone who helped me formulate my response. This really became a communal effort. Some of those people are as follows: my colleagues, Inés Tófaló, Hannah Clark, and Nell Hirshmann-Levy; and Dr. Brett Smith and his entire Globalization and the Environment class for taking the time to discuss this with me. You were all very helpful. Finally, I note especially Dr. Sarah West, for her help and support in this response, and throughout my time at Macalester College.

Dr. Petchesky's article is informative and full of resonating points concerning the world that we live in. I think the gendered lens that she uses for her argument is crucial in assessing the merits of the capitalist system. I found myself nodding at many of Petchesky's arguments and ideas about the nature of capitalism: the effects of the private sector, its gendered realities, and so on. You will find that most of my critiques of this work surround 1) the limits of a policy approach itself, and 2) the assumptions behind arguments that are so often my own.

In my response, I will be pointing out many elements of which I know Dr. Petchesky is well aware. I do not mean to imply otherwise. It is just that I am responding only to this particular essay. If I had to respond to Petchesky's vast amount of knowledge and understanding as a whole, I would be running for the hills right now. I hope my critiques will be constructive.

In a recent class, Professor Brett Smith pointed out to us that "Every work is a story: it has its villains, its victims, and its heroes." If we look at Petchesky's essay as a story, the villain is capitalism, and specifically the World Bank (as an expression of capitalist ideology and policy); women are the victims (the damsels in distress); and NGOs and/or social movements are the heroes. But, of course, the assignment of these roles is complex.

I am not going to address the ways in which capitalism and the World Bank are or are not the villains. I could not address such a thing adequately within any allotted timeframe, whether fifteen minutes or fifteen months. (Plus, I do not feel like defending the World Bank.) Instead, I am going to be so presumptuous as to discuss “women as victims” and “NGOs and social movements as heroes.” There is no doubt in my mind that the capitalist system is gender biased, but women also participate in and uphold that biased system. To romanticize women as anti-structure, or the embodiment of good, is to wrongly characterize and limit them. I would also like to point out that, although I do it all the time, talking about universal women’s issues is inherently problematic, because it ignores the great diversity of women’s interests globally. (It is amazing what we Westerners think we are entitled to talk about.)

One of the ways to indirectly address this problem, that Petchesky does and that I like, is to look at women as the traditional maintainers of the household, a role that brings some common burdens. Another way to further escape only looking at women as victims, and homogenizing them, is to look at the uses of non-Western medicine, and/or social organizing surrounding health issues.

The inherent flaw with the policy approach is that it ignores everything outside of Western health care. Indeed, global health care is not global Western health care.

Further, it automatically views people as victims, by looking solely at how capitalism and/or the World Bank are acting upon communities. In reality, this is a complex, two-way interaction between these institutions and diverse groups of people. Local cultural practices inside and outside of medicine influence the spread and control of disease. People are active participants in their own health. One of the contradictions of Petchesky’s essay is that it argues for not looking at people solely as beneficiaries of market structures, yet it only views them in this role. I realize that one essay cannot possibly recognize every aspect of global health, but I think her essay would be strengthened by looking at some examples of resistance to capitalist policies and/or local organizing around health.

One of my questions, then, is this: Could non-Western local health practices be utilized and supported by policy to address health con-

cerns? I think such an idea could be attractive to economists because: 1) it could be more cost-effective to use local practices rather than technology-heavy Western methods, i.e., cheaper to utilize home remedies than manufactured pills; and 2) it could be more effective and thus more efficient because it is culturally sensitive. There may be culture clashes that make the implementation of Western medicine difficult, if not impossible. One well-known example of this is within the Hmong population. The Hmong do not believe in the Western practice of blood transfusions or donations because they believe that the soul lies in the blood and, therefore, to change someone's blood is to steal their soul. This has become a very pertinent issue here in the United States, as there have been many clashes between doctors and Hmong families in hospital emergency rooms.

The argument for using global cultures could lead to an argument for the World Bank to use local inputs and governments, because their cultural knowledge is necessary (*if you consider it possible for the World Bank to facilitate such a project*¹).

NGOs and social movements are often considered to be the same thing and I think this confusion is reflected in Petchesky's essay in that she does not really make a clear distinction between the two. Let me explain the distinction I want to make. Social movements work what we might call "outside the system." They are a group of people united under a common identity to demand change from the state, regardless of the feasibility of that change. In contrast, NGOs work inside the system. They are legal institutions that have to abide by laws, and are bound to the will of financial contributors. They work on day-to-day problems, fill immediate needs, and, as Petchesky explains, fill the gap in public services left by the state. And being a part of the economic system, they use the economic tools that Petchesky criticizes — efficiency, cost-effectiveness, etc. — in distributing resources to clients.

Sofia Montenegro, a Nicaraguan journalist who played a large part in the Sandinista Revolution and the country's women's movement, explained the distinction to me during an interview in May, 2001. She stated:

Social movements are movements of collective identity that have a utopian vision. NGOs don't have a utopia—they have homework, and a mission of development to complete. They function for projects.... There are thousands of hit women in Nicaragua—their husbands hit them. My job as an NGO is to put a band-aid on each woman that is hit by a man.

This can be a legitimate mission of an NGO, but it is not the mission of the feminist movement to walk around putting band-aids on all the hit women in the country. The goal of the feminist movement is that there are no more structures that allow men to hit women.

(The translation is mine.)

But poverty distorts this distinction because social movement groups gain legal status and become NGOs in order to provide much needed services in their own communities. A good example of this is the Nicaraguan women's movement, which largely converted itself into NGOs in the early 1990s, when poverty in the country increased and their economy opened up to structural adjustment (those two occurrences being very much related). Today, approximately seventy women's NGOs and collectives work across Nicaragua to serve a population of about 2.5 million women.² This transition depoliticized the movement to some extent, because their larger political goals were overshadowed by the immediate concerns of women. One of the women who works with these NGOs, Maria Teresa Blandon, explained in her interview with me in May, 2001, in Nicaragua:

In the Nicaraguan women's movement there are many organizations dedicated to solving concrete problems: law problems, health problems, and the problem of sexual diseases.... The main problem is that poverty keeps increasing, affecting particularly women. And because of this, a variety of women's organizations have to continue the turning of the majority of their strength towards understanding the immediate needs of poor women.

Not only are NGOs not necessarily part of the solution, but they are sometimes part of the problem, especially international NGOs that do not consider local inputs or elements. Indeed, charity is its own special kind of imperialism that often upholds power structures despite good intentions. This is analyzed extensively in Michael Moron's bluntly titled book, *The Road to Hell*. In this book, he talks about the actions of Save the Children in Africa, and how much damage they do. For example, Save the Children built wells in Central Africa that either did not fill up with water or disrupted nomadic people's patterns of travel. Despite all these things, NGOs are often perceived as a doorway to social movements, representing the people that they are supposed to be working for. This raises the question: how much, if at all, can you implement ideas of structural change through economic reforms? I

think that Petchesky struggles with this idea throughout her essay. I am going to use the example of cost-effectiveness to explain this.

Petchesky asserts that because they reflect market values, economic tools and/or ideas, such as efficiency and cost-effectiveness, must be shed in order to look at health as a human right. Market values see people only as consumers. I struggled with this concept for a long time, because I do not think it is a good idea to rid ourselves of the efficiency and cost-effectiveness principle. The opposite of efficient is inefficient, not equitable. The opposite of cost-effective is wasteful, not equitable. As Petchesky herself states:

In theory, there is no reason why the goals of efficiency and cost-effectiveness should be incompatible with either better health outcomes or gender/race/class equality and human rights; inefficient and wasteful health systems can hardly be socially just.

If you cannot live with or without cost-effectiveness in terms of human rights, then where do we stand? And since we do have ecological limits on this planet, must we always worry about using those resources “efficiently,” regardless of how they are distributed? Again, it comes down to the question of how much can you separate economic tools from the current values shaping their use?

Petchesky’s whole essay leads up to the idea of alternatives, and I would like to highlight the four policy reforms that she suggests for starting to redistribute the world’s wealth. They are debt forgiveness, an international transaction tax (or Tobin tax), demilitarization, and the use of democratic institutions. I would like to pose some questions about them. In the event that debtor countries need a loan, would institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank be hesitant to give it to them, considering that they just lost so much money on debt relief? With regard to a Tobin tax, how is that revenue collected and where does it go? The United Nations? Can they be or should they be in that role? Again, these questions are intended to stimulate discussion.

Notes

1. I am aware that supporting local health practices may then be used as an excuse not to provide access to more effective medical treatments that may be “Western.”
2. Sofia Montenegro, *Un Movimiento de mujeres en auge*.