

An interview on money and powerlessness with Mascha Madörin

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The World

Why do we not distribute the money of this planet evenly?

The question that poses itself is whom this 'we' refers to? You would have to ask those who have the money. That is the first problem. The second is that there are people making a lot of money, and others making less, and these very people are working together on the same projects. Here we are again faced with the question of why we do not distribute the money evenly.

Actually, purchasing power is a massive issue. If the countries of the South had more purchasing power, different things would be produced, because different items would be purchased, for instance in terms of health care. When we speak about the distribution of money, the question is always what is being done with the money in terms of consumption. Then there is the question of the distribution of wealth, of the control over raw materials, the control over technology and the control over the media. This, however, is a question of the distribution of wealth, not the distribution of money. And the question of wealth is a question of power. You could just as well ask kings: Why don't you abdicate? On the one hand we have questions of everyday life and personal possibilities. On the other the question of power, an old question that has to do not only with capitalism. Why does the ruling class not yield its power? The central form of power we experience is that of economic control.

Why do we not distribute the money? If we were to divide the money among ourselves here in Switzerland... the distribution of wealth here is one of the most biased in the world. The distribution of income is also very uneven, but even if we divided the income evenly here, this income would still be extremely uneven in relation to the rest of the world. Let me just mention one example: In the seventies I was working as an employee at the university in Mozambique. If I compare my income to that of the worst paid position at the university, *i.e.*, that of the cleaning staff, and set that income to one, I was making five. If, however, I had worked for the Swiss Aid to Development in the same position, I would have made twenty-five times what the cleaning staff was making. Today, this relation is 1:150:2000.

This relates not only to Swiss conditions, but is a question of the distribution of resources worldwide. Nowadays a professor at an African university makes about 300-400 Swiss Francs a month. This means she cannot afford travel specials, nor an Internet connection or anything of the kind. Meanwhile, there is a huge difference to the possibilities that were still available in the seventies. This drifting apart of income, of access to regional as well as national economic resources, is scary. I have lived in Mozambique and spent time in South Africa, at the time of Apartheid. I think that the sense of powerlessness, if we may at all speak of powerlessness here, is the powerlessness of a ghetto, of a society of Apartheid, where it is evident that our situation is out of proportion with anywhere else. This of course creates feelings of powerlessness, too – being part of a system without really wanting to. On the one hand, I may not have much of a chance to change my life situation. My situation may be so difficult that most opportunities are out of my reach. On the other hand, I am part of a world ruled by a reality out of proportion with the situation in Africa. We are in the situation of the white in South Africa, before the end of Apartheid and perhaps even today.

In relation to what exactly?

To the big rest of the world. To 85 percent of the world, and that goes for all of Europe. It is a fact that Europe and the United States account for about 15 percent of the world's population, while controlling about 90 percent of economic resources. This

applies also to those who do not want to be part of this world... after all, we do not decide to be part of this world. At the most, we can decide whether we will do something about it. This creates an incredible sense of powerlessness. We live in a permanent neurosis of the rich – no matter if we happen to be rich ourselves or not.

The I

Virginia Woolf wrote in her book, “A room of one’s own”¹: “Intellectual freedom depends upon material things.” This means that intellect is not possible without money. Is that still so today?

Yes, I am convinced it is. I have worked in a private research institute of the directorate of a large bank, the “department of world interpretation,” so to speak. I have worked on a survey for the State – in the finance department of the State of Basel-Land –, and then I have worked at university. I have worked on the topic Switzerland-South Africa and, until today, I am working on Swiss banks, and for many years I have been working on feminist economics. I must say that when it comes to women or alternative understandings of the “world picture,” especially knowledge and women, we are lacking the media. It is extremely difficult to publish anything. It is all unpaid work, or miserably paid work. The second thing is that there are hardly any spaces where real professional discussion can take place. There are quite interesting, ‘hot’ questions relating to feminist economics. Also in the leftist scene they are not being discussed. It is always the same, the same question, the same data, the same approaches – whether it is trade unions or the autonomous left, it is always the same. With minimal modifications and variations I seem to be reading the same things that were being said in the seventies already. Where a new generation of men is reproducing itself intellectually, is reproducing itself in terms of leftist politics, the women are not reproducing themselves. In fact, not even

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) / *Three Guineas* (1938), Oxford World's Classics (1992), p. 141.

the level of debate of the seventies is being reproduced. So the question is: Why? I think that one reason is low payment, which has something to do with economic resources. A second reason is perhaps related to changes in how the younger generation of women experiences the world. Indeed there are today other opportunities for women until the age of thirty. Only when children arrive, these opportunities are radically restricted. The most elementary economic questions that pose themselves to women are very seldom discussed.

Virginia Woolf said you need five hundred pounds a year² in order to be able to do anything at all. How do I get myself these five hundred pounds? What is the idea? Should I study law, so that I may become an attorney and make a lot of money and then become active?

When I was twenty, many worlds were barred to me because of being a woman. As a woman, when I was looking for a job, I had a much lower income from the very outset, whatever I did. Nowadays there are areas in which a woman can make good money: I just have to become an attorney. But not every woman wants to or can become a barrister. Then there are areas – anything to do with the care economy, whether paid or unpaid –, from catering and alternative psychotherapy to anything that is simply badly paid. If you are an artist, you are badly paid at any rate. But you have even lesser chances than do male artists who are also badly paid. In short, your chances are in general worse, but in certain areas they are no longer worse than they are for men.

However, the number of areas in which chances are bad is increasing. There is a segregation of labor markets, also for men, and where wages are low there is always a surplus of women. All the data show that there are two criteria according to which you will not make more money even if you have a job. One is when you get married. The guy becomes more pretentious and wants to

² *op. cit.*, pp. 47 ff. Virginia Woolf refers to her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen's (referred to as Mary Beton in the text) leaving her "five hundred pounds a year for ever," which she considers more important for her intellectual freedom than the right to vote, given to women around the same time.

be served. The second is when you have a child. A child is more than a full-time job. It's not just a forty-hour week, but a 7 × 12-hour week as long as the child is small. This simply means that you have to invest a lot of time in a child. A child also costs, and all the data point out that this is when the guys start to drop out. There are comparative studies with women with a top education at elite universities in Japan and the United States, a younger generation than the one I belong to. This is what the studies show: It is all the same, whether you are this or whether you are middle class. If you make less money, you may be forced to continue making money with an absolute double load. The end effect is that women get the worst of it. All studies, including in Scandinavian countries, show that men do not actually take over more responsibility. Rather, the state may compensate better, at the most. Or the private economy may provide household-related services to women moving out of housework. But who can afford this? How are women with low income affected?

Today in the allegedly feminist women's scene, all these debates are absent. They are waiting for someone to take care of it, but no one will. And I think that there needs to come a younger generation that learns this from its own experience and is disappointed with all the promises that have been made but not fulfilled. This is also a form of powerlessness. Polls show that young women have completely different expectations from life than my generation did, expectations that are more in accordance with what the feminists have actually demanded: compatibility of job and children, self-realization, less dishwashing. To be able to, say, combine a comfortable private life with a comfortable, interesting professional life. I think this is an illusion, and I think that now there is a new generation of younger women who are confronted with it. They are being eaten up by their work and then labeled apolitical because they are tired. The lines of conflict have been displaced. In part, these are lines of conflict between young women who have no children and women who do. In my opinion, this contradiction has intensified. The situation in Switzerland is a catastrophe. If you look at the statistics on unpaid working hours, you will see that a large part of it is spent preparing meals. There are day schools, for instance. They guarantee that children, from the age of three, are taken care of

until 5 pm. This takes care of one part, but the entire question of a full evening program for the children remains unsolved... the fact that women cannot go to the movies then, that it is difficult for them to meet in women's groups. Even if so-called family life should change, what incredible stress families get drawn into just because one income is missing. I am certainly no defender of the family – least of all the nuclear family –, but I must say that for eighty percent of the population, the entire ultra-neoliberal program has lowered the standard of living. It is the most efficient family-destroying program in the world. And that is why they keep talking of the family, because real families can be seen only on television, in the soaps so to say, because family is not attainable any longer. And what about the enormous change, also in terms of personal life, and perhaps also personal options, expectations: What opportunities do I have, what does my future look like, what can I have, what does a heterosexual relationship with children look like? What would need to change so that this is bearable at all? These are all questions that could be asked. As a social scientist I ask myself when and how women will take to the barricades again. Or perhaps they will not do it at all, and the problems will be solved by other means, perhaps through social destabilization.

To what extent is the feeling of powerlessness linked to a lack of relations? What relation could I have to money anyway?

When I lend money to a friend or a member of the family, and we have a conflict because she does not pay me back, then I can go to court and claim the money. But what cannot be claimed is the interest. The interest is a price for converting a contract to the present. If I pay interest, I have no more obligations towards the bank. But a relation is an entirely different time horizon. And I have quite precise expectations towards my friend, a contract, an invisible contract which says: if in ten or fifteen years it is me who needs money, then I can come to her. Social relationships always mean obligations in time. In my opinion, this is what characterizes capitalism: The money economy is the grip of the present on the past, on what has been accumulated, and on the future, on the stock exchange. This means that in the present I can continually modify my obligations, which in principle I only

have in the future. I think this is the great problem, including the problem of our powerlessness and insecurity. Powerlessness also means the feeling that we cannot influence the future any more. There is the problem of mobility, i.e., what we call sustainable – networks of relationships that hold... This is not about ad hoc relationships and how they work, but rather about the time horizon of relationships. I am convinced that so many women still marry because it is still a long-term contract secured by the state. And I think that is also the big misfortune of alternative projects, that there are no longer any economic obligations. In my opinion, in alternative projects the settling of accounts between generations would have to work differently. You cannot have mobility and at the same time dream of relationships. That does not work. Capitalism means to settle all accounts in the present, and the further removed the future is, the less it is worth, and the further back the past lies, the less it is worth, too. This is the factor of capitalization. And this is a huge problem for instance in the health sector as regards chronic illnesses. When the health sector today applies conventional efficiency calculations it becomes completely inadequate to the way we experience our lives unfolding. I think the old feminist problem was that a strict separation was made between two regimes of time. There was the personal, and there was the economic. The personal had its own regime of time, in which women were responsible the entire time along – first for the children, then for the parents. This regime of time, the fact that women are automatically drawn into a duty of relationships, into a duty of care and responsibility in the family domain, is one of the things the feminists have fought against. Where is the alternative? No person can live without this occasional responsibility, without this occasional dependency on other people. How this will be dealt with by society in the future without falling back on women in the traditional manner, this is a question that remains to be resolved. I think that perhaps you belong to the first generation that asks this question at all. Before, this was automatically resolved, inasmuch as women always felt responsible. It is then resolved with emotions, with motherly love, with compassion... and what all women keep saying is that they want contracts. And this entire question which always gets solved spontaneously, so to speak... Men do not want

contracts. They keep talking of spontaneity. They have long since been reckoning with the present. I am an absolute opponent of spontaneity. It thrives from the circumstance that in relation to women, contracts are constantly being spontaneously breached.

Do I lose power if laws are replaced by economic principles?

No! Every businessman makes contracts. We do not necessarily need laws. Women need contracts. Women must make contracts, and I think also that we have to make new contracts that are more adequate. What Foucault already said about neoliberalism, and he was right about it, is that firstly it is an answer to questions that the left raised without having answers to them. And secondly there is the entire question of paternalism, the question of oppression in the family. The market is attractive because it gives you an opportunity to negotiate, an opportunity that has always been legally denied especially from women. The discrimination coming from the state has been to take away from women the opportunity to negotiate. As a married woman, it is only at age 41 that I got full economic freedom to enter into contracts. The whole bourgeois revolution demanded the freedom to enter into contracts in economic questions for the oppressed people. And the WTO does nothing else but constantly restrict the freedom to enter into contracts for certain people. The law can also deny us this freedom. The bourgeois revolution means the freedom for all to enter into contracts. Property means contractual freedom.

The capitalist hegemonic response to contractual freedom is the monopoly over economic resources. Although I am free to enter into contracts, I have nothing in my hands to negotiate about. We need to consider other things. My thesis corresponds to that of Foucault: Neoliberalism is in fact a response to the diffusion of monetary economy into areas that were traditionally identified as non-economic areas. We must consider what may be the alternatives in an extremely monotonized world.

Taking action

Strategies for engaging power – are there any?

I do not know. I do not feel powerless with respect to possibilities to take action. I ask myself why, and I think that in part it is due

to the fact that I am from another generation. The consumers' society is – also in terms of how we think economy – in fact an El Dorado society, a society of opulence. Somewhere wealth is produced, and I work for money and produce wealth. Then somehow money flows into my household while I lie on my back, so to say, feeling happy that I live in the land of milk and honey. One thing is that as a woman I have always known that you get nothing for free. I never had any illusions about getting anything if I don't go out and get it, do something for it. The second thing is that I am from another generation, in which work and self-realization had something to do with each other. Not work as in disciplined work, but as in producing, putting something out there. To make a product was more important to me than to have relationships. I have entered many a relationship in order to be able to work together. This to my mind is a very important point. On the one hand we have profit centers producing in a very teamwork-oriented way. On the other, we have the entire question of the collectivity of producing, of putting things out there – which is a big problem especially among women. There are very few spaces in which women produce something together. The question is where this comes from. Is it a consequence of the denial of resources? What is it exactly? I do not know. I cannot answer this. I have lived in Africa and have seen what real poverty is. I have seen real incapacity to take action due to lack of resources. It is my contention that feeling powerless is a luxury of those who are sufficiently well off to look for individual solutions. Not knowing how to survive on a daily basis is a completely different story. There really are situations that have touched me deeply, in which there are also no collective solutions, because the poverty is simply too great or the power of the ruling class is too great, so that I can indeed do nothing more. Here, in Switzerland, it is not the case that I cannot do anything. I was in a war, in one of the greatest massacres of history, in Burundi, the neighboring country of Rwanda, where an incredible number of people had already been massacred, following the same seemingly ethnic conflict that resulted from a long political process. There students, people I knew, were simply picked up by the military. The only thing I could wish them was that they would just be shot, rather than tortured to death. This I call feeling powerless.

If we talk about people in Switzerland who feel powerless and do not really live in great poverty or are ill or depressive, I would tell them: Are you out of your mind? I do not understand this! Cut the crap!

Yes! But if you wish that money be evenly distributed globally, that there be no poverty... this may be naïve, but with this wish one can feel powerless, even here in Switzerland.

Of course I feel powerless with this wish, too, but I make a difference between political powerlessness and personal powerlessness. I think that these are altogether different things. The question for me is: What is the purpose of this powerlessness, what is it supposed to justify? I am convinced that through the expansion of the monetary economy, along with a consciousness of personal freedom of action, a feeling of powerlessness arises, which then expresses itself in the assault on Davos, so to say, which I honestly find completely absurd. The campaigns on Davos are great, but a fetish is created. It is not true that the economy works outside of the law. There are thousands of laws, thousands of government decisions that make the economy work the way it does. I think it is not deregulation we are witnessing – but a re-regulation in favor of the rich and powerful. The term deregulation is wrong and misleading in my view. Constantly, new regulations are invented, which simply work differently. It is not about dismantling the state, either, that is all rubbish. Under Thatcher, the proportion of state expenditure rose. The money was simply collected, and spent, in more anti-social ways. Look at how much a society like the Swiss state provides for big corporations. The question is how much human and other resources are at the disposal of the big corporations and the banks for their accumulation, and what the state does to ensure that this is how things work. I think this is an essential point, to understand that there are a lot of regulations. That is a possible starting point for struggle. When the course is set for major developments, for instance in genetic engineering, nuclear technology, traffic policies, trade policies or international loan conversions, it is quite relevant to know who will be disadvantaged by the decisions made, and how drastically so. But the system as such will not be changed by such struggles. This must be addressed on a much smaller scale. The question is

then: how do we do alternative politics, how do we speak, publicly and critically, how does a movement function, how are women represented nowadays in these anti-globalization movements, for instance. How are all the things we have been referring to, like democracy or justice between genders, present in the alternative scene? Why is there such a backlash? That's what I would like to know!

CIVIC SCULPTURE

