**Introduction to Dalla Costa**

In the foregoing articles we have seen how capital first imported immigrant workers and then clamped restrictions on them when their struggles ruptured capitalist control. One basic issue remains unexplored: why European and North American capital was forced to go outside its home territory to obtain these extra workers. Why was the internal supply of employed and surplus labor insufficient to restrain the growth of local worker struggles?

The first obvious answer is demographic: the rate of accumulation in the post-WWII period outstripped the growth rate of the population – such that the growth in the demand for labor tended to outstrip the growth in its supply – and there were inadequate redundancies caused by technological change to replenish the labor reserve. Further analysis shows the decline of the population growth rates in the labor-importing countries to be due to declines in birth rates greater than the fall in mortality rates. At this point economists, sociologists and economic demographers usually launch into a debate on the concept of the “demographic transition”. Some say falling birth rates are explained by rising real income that reduces incentives for large families. Others say falling birth rates are the *cause* of rising real income and must be explained by such exogenous factors as changes in government policies, etc.

An entirely different and more politically useful approach to understanding the fall in birth rates that pushed business and government into importing large numbers of workers is proposed by Mariarosa Dalla Costa. She presents a class analysis of falling birth rates that focuses on the autonomous struggles of women against their traditional role as mothers and for an income and freedom of their own. Predating WWII but vastly stimulated by women’s war-time experience of commanding an independent wage for the first time, women’s struggles have taken two important forms. First, a breaking away from marriage and the family that tended to reduce the birth rate, and second, within the family a growing resistance to procreation (and all of the housework it entails) that again tended to lower birth rates. The spread of informal “family planning” has really meant women’s planning of fewer children and less housework. In short, Dalla Costa argues that the relationship between income and birth rates is not an immediate one, but is mediated by women’s struggles. Why the need to import workers? Because European women increasingly refused to produce the number of workers desired by business and the State! Where were the immigrant workers obtained? From those sectors of the female working class with less power to control the number of their children – the women of the Mediterranean area and Third World.

If we apply this analysis to North America, we observe the same phenomenon. In the United States and Canada – after the immediate post-WWII “baby boom” that resulted from women being pushed out of the waged workplace and back into the home – there was a steady decline in population growth rates. Again this slowed rate of growth in the labor force was partially made up for by importing labor.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Dalla Costa goes on to sketch the history of the conflict between women and the State over procreation. She points to the continuity of State policy, during and after European fascism, that has sought to coerce or entice women into having more children.[[2]](#footnote-2) From strict anti-abortion and anti-contraception laws that have been quite self-consciously aimed at raising birth rates, to institutions such as “family allowances” that have the same purpose but concede payment for the work, she shows how the issue of procreation has been central to the struggles of women and how the success of those struggles have determined the conditions of struggle of the working class as a whole.

Again, in North America this analysis helps us to see beyond the moral ideology of the right-to-life movement to its underlying class content: one more attempt to use child-bearing and the family to control women; one more attempt to coerce women into expanding the labor supply by denying them control over their own sexuality.

Starting from these fundamental points, Dalla Costa goes on to explore the relationship between emigration and the struggles of women. She looks at the impact on women left alone by emigrating men and at the impact of immigration on women in the labor importing areas. In the former case she compares the situation of women in Italy (especially the South) with that of women in Algeria as one example in the Third World. Italian women, she argues, have been much more successful in escaping rural patriarchy and gaining control over either emigrant remittances or their own wage than women in North Africa. In Algeria the strict patriarchal control of women that has been maintained even after independence from France has limited their options for struggle. Even the struggles of Algerian women who emigrate to Europe are still hindered by this patriarchal structure that is reproduced in the immigrant community. To what degree community issues and the newly emerging “micro-physics” of the labor market described by Moulier and Ewencyzk are creating greater space for these women remains to be seen.

In the labor importing countries Dalla Costa argues that immigration has clearly been used to limit the struggles of local women. Essentially, the State has inserted millions of immigrant workers into the waged jobs that might otherwise have been filled by women fleeing the countryside and the family. More recently, since the blockage of immigration in 1974, the State has expanded experimentation with the use of women to replace recalcitrant immigrants. But to the degree that this succeeds it can only exacerbate the State’s inability to stimulate indigenous labor supply.

Another important aspect of women’s struggles that has had an impact on emigration has been the effects of women’s refusal of male authority on their children. Dalla Costa argues that much of the youth explosion in the late 1960s and especially in the 1970s and 1980s can be traced to the anti-authoritarian experiences of this generation at home, in their own families. Children learned from their mothers that traditional authority could be successfully defied. In part, the so-called “second generation” problem is a product of a first generation women’s revolt – at least in the case of intra-European immigration. In the case of the “second generation” of immigrants who originated in the Third World, Dalla Costa’s own arguments suggest that the weaker position of immigrant women may have played a smaller role in teaching rebellion to their children. On the other hand, the steady expansion of immigrant community conflicts with the State since this article was written has clearly involved the growing participation of immigrant women, especially in such areas as self-regulation of prices, the fight for housing, etc. It seems likely that the space for and the actuality of immigrant women’s struggles are growing rapidly in both production and reproduction.

This article was originally presented at a seminar in February 1973 at the Institute of Political and Social Science of the University of Padua, Italy.[[3]](#footnote-3) We are publishing this English translation because the article was, and remains, a seminal one. It is seminal because for the first time, it brought out the close interrelationship between two important political phenomena that until then had been grasped as distinct and separate: immigration and the women’s movement. As Moulier and Ewenczyk’s article makes clear, by 1972 the explosion of immigrant struggles was already prompting changes in State policies. During this same period the women’s movement was massifying politically and asserting its own autonomy within the class struggle through the creation of separate political organizations.[[4]](#footnote-4) This article, by showing the link between emigration and reproduction indicates a new political terrain on which struggles that have been organized separately can be connected.

The continuing relevance and importance of Dalla Costa’s analysis is by no means limited to historical background. The demographic trend since 1973 in Europe has continued to include a drop in the birth rate. This will be accentuated if the successes of European women in the last few years in pushing through abortion and contraception reform continues. (Abortion rights were only obtained by women in France in 1975, in Germany in 1976 and by women in Italy in 1978 after massive protests and demonstrations.[[5]](#footnote-5)) The same is true in the United States and Canada where women’s rights in this area are generally more advanced. Even in some Eastern European countries and the USSR birth rates are being pushed down steadily, despite the best efforts of the State to reverse the trend. These perspective declines in the labor force have capitalist planners – West and East – deeply worried.

In the West, the State has in some cases been using red tape and fiscal crisis – reduced medical funding – to block the implementation of abortion rights. In Europe, as in the United States, the “right to life” counter-attack on women’s escape from biological servitude has been heavily supported by the extreme Right and openly encouraged by various governments.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the East, government policies to deal with declining birth rates are caught in a serious bind. On the one hand, governments have been forced in recent years to raise standards of living to induce people to work, or to work in areas where their labor is needed. On the other hand, the increases in income create new life possibilities, especially for women, outside of traditional large families. In the Soviet Union such ideological enticements to higher birth rates as promising “Glory of Motherhood” medals to women who have given birth to and raised ten or more children have not reversed women’s growing refusal of procreation. This forced the Soviet State in 1974 to institute monthly cash payments for each child – a system comparable to “family allowances” in the West.[[7]](#footnote-7) In some Eastern European countries such as East Germany and Hungary there have been rapid declines in the number of legal abortions. In the case of Hungary, this can be traced directly to the imposition of legal restrictions in 1974.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Alongside these attacks on European women we must also locate the role of immigrant women. Since the blockage of immigration in 1974, several European governments have adopted a relatively relaxed policy toward immigration for family reunification, e.g., Germany. This, of course, means an increased percentage of women in immigration. Now it happens to be the case, as Dalla Costa’s article suggests, that the weaker position of immigrant women is manifested in part by birth rates that are higher than those of local women. For example, in Germany in 1974, the gross reproduction rate (the number of female births per 1,000 women) for foreigners was 1,155 as against only 698 among Germans. In France, the trend is striking. The average number of births per foreign woman was 50 percent higher than that for French women in 1962, 60 percent more in 1968 and 80 percent higher in 1975.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a result of these differences immigrant women are clearly being used to supply a growing proportion of the labor force. Third World procreation previously being used against European women through immigration is now being imported directly.

There are at least two contradictions here that worry European capital. The first problem is immediate and drastic: the “second generation” problem. Even if immigrant women continue to provide a growing proportion of youth to the European labor supply (and the development of their struggles may well undermine that), it will be of no help to capital if those young people expand their present resistance to work and integration. (See the article by Mogniss in this issue.)

The second contradiction is that even with this greater control over immigrant procreation, labor supplies are still projected to decline. In a recent summary of such studies the authors conclude that the demographic models “. . . show clearly that by the second half of the next decade most of the major European industrialized countries will face a growing scarcity of labor”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similar forecasts for the U.S., some Eastern European countries and the USSR show the same trend: emerging labor shortages – especially for lower-waged occupations. This, coupled with the expected continuation of higher birth rates and labor supply growth in source countries, has led some Western planners to discuss the possibilities of renewed expansion of immigration in the late 1980s and 1990s.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the East there is also the possibility of an expanded recourse to immigration – both between countries, and in the case of the Soviet Union within its own borders. The overall decline in Soviet birth rates hides a sharp distinction between a rapid decline in the western USSR and a continuing rise in the underdeveloped eastern regions of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and the Transcaucasia republics. There are, however, serious political obstacles that have so far prevented the Soviet State from making recourse to its Eastern regions to solve its labor shortages. These obstacles include the resistance of many to leave their own regions as well as growing requirements for labor in a stagnant, State-controlled agricultural sector. Nevertheless, the increasing seriousness of the labor supply problem suggests that future recourse to large scale, forced or induced, internal migration cannot be ruled out.[[12]](#footnote-12)

A final problem created for capital by the decline in birth rates and the decline of large scale importation of young workers, is the aging of the population. With a decline in birth rates not only are fewer potential workers produced but the average age grows and there is a serious increase in the proportion of the population in the post-work or pension age brackets, e.g., in the USSR the percentage of the population older than 55 is expected to have doubled between 1950 and 2000, from 10.4 percent to 19.2 percent. Not surprisingly, this too worries the State and has prompted action in North America, Northern Europe and the Soviet Union to put retired people back to work. In the United States there is a raging debate about raising the retirement age – indeed it has already been done in some institutions. In the Soviet Union there has been an effort since 1973 to mobilize pensioners to work in firms or at home.[[13]](#footnote-13) In capitalist societies where the non-working old are neglected and often shunted off into prison-like nursing homes, many retired persons have expressed sympathy for these proposals. What should be clear, however, is that their needs are not for a job *per se* but for breaking out of stagnant isolation, gaining increased human interaction with the rest of society and often gaining a wage to supplement their pensions.

Thus we see that there will continue to be important interrelationships between immigration and reproduction in the class conflicts of the years ahead. The political implications need to be carefully explored by both those in the women’s movement and those involved with immigration struggles.

1. See the discussion of the Bracero Program for importing cheap agricultural labor in the article “Food, Famine and International Crisis,” in *Zerowork* #2, 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pro-natalist programs became widespread in Europe after WWI in response to the huge number of casualties: over 30 million people, military and civilians, died. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The papers from this symposium were published as Alessandro Serafini, et. al, *L’operaio multinazionale in Europa*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1974, including “Riproduzione e emigrazione”, pp. 207-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dalla Costa’s own essay “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” (Padova: Marsilio) appeared in 1972 as one of the most fundamental political theorizations of women’s position in, and struggle against, capitalist society. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See “European Abortion Update,” *Newsfront International*, No. 233, February 1980, pp. 14-16 and “Italian Women March to Defend Abortion Rights,” *Newsfront International*, No. 242, December 1980, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Murray Feshbach and Si Rapawy, “Soviet Population and Manpower Trends and Policies,” *Soviet Economy in a New Perspective*, Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, 1976, pp. 114-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert R. King and J.F. Brown (eds) *Eastern Europe’s Uncertain Future*, New York: Praeger, 1977, p. 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A. Lebon and G. Falchi, “New Developments in Intra-European Migration since 1974,” *International Migration Review*, 14(4), Winter 1980, p. 562. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, p. 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the U.S. see Arnold R. Weber, “The Changing Labor Market Environments,” in Jules Backman (ed) *Business Problems of the Eighties*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980, p. 58; and Sidney Weintraub and Stanley R. Ross, *The Illegal Alien from Mexico: Policy Choices for an Intractable Issue*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Feshbach and Rapawy, op.cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. pp. 124-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)