Social reproduction meets the world market: a reply to ‘The “hardship” of ordinary crises: gendered precariousness and horizons of coping in Vietnam’s industrial zones’ by Helle Rydstrom

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Introduction

In Vietnam, the making and consolidation of a globalising market economy over the last three decades has entailed major transformations in the social relations, institutions and ideas shaping routine social life. For Vietnam’s people, these changes have been experienced not in the abstract, that is, as various discrete problems belonging to this or that academic discipline, but through complex patterns of continuity and change in the social relations of production and reproduction upon which their livelihoods depend and within which their life journeys unfold. Through her article, Helle Rydstrom (2022) provides us with a rare and penetrating ethnographic analysis of how these relational, institutional and ideational changes have unfolded to shape the livelihoods of women in Vietnam’s expanding industrial sector. This is a skillfully rendered and conceptually and theoretically sophisticated account of the interplay of social relations of production and reproduction, and how it can be studied and understood.

Capital, class and multi-scalar crises of crisis management

Taking inspiration from an exploration of the prospective value of crisis studies as an agenda of interdisciplinary research (Bergman-Rosamond et al, 2020), Rydstrom extends this programmatic perspective to an exploration of the livelihoods of women in Vietnam’s heavy industrial sector. For Rydstrom, a well-developed concept of crisis – which can be broadly understood as a situation in which a prevailing set of
institutional arrangements and conditions is subject to acute stress and strain – can be eminently helpful for conceptualising, understanding and explaining how dynamic features of economies shape and impact the interplay of productive and reproductive labour, and their effects across a variety of socio-spatial scales.

According to Claus Offe’s (1976) time-tested formulation, a crisis can be understood as a situation and/or process wherein essential properties of a given social system or set of social arrangements are called into question, put under severe strain or threatened with annihilation (from within or without), leading either to an instance of fundamental social change or some process of crisis mitigation or crisis management. An important implication of such an understanding is that, defined as earlier, a specific crisis or set of crises of any sort (whether they be crises of capitalism or capital accumulation in a particular time or place, or of the family, for example) are intelligible only with reference to the specific features and logics of prevailing social and institutional arrangements that come under pressure. Such is the nature of crises.

This brings us to the question of how to study crises and their practical significance, as well as the even thornier question of multiple crises of different sorts on different scales across different social fields. An example might be helpful. Capitalism as a particular form of economy and society can be said to be in crisis state when the social-relational, institutional and ideational basis of the capitalist way of instituting an economy and the accumulation of value within it comes under threat. This carries the implication of a crisis of capital accumulation for an entire capitalist economy or for capitalist firms within it. The welfare state (which we have been told has been in crisis for at least 40 years) can be said to be in crisis in an objective sense when its fundamental social-relational and institutional basis are subject to severe strain, whether owing to fiscal crisis or a neoliberal revolution from above. To say that the COVID-19 crisis has visited strains on health systems or institutional arrangements governing health and well-being is to claim that it has placed the health systems and arrangements underpinning public health under severe strain. Furthermore, crises unfolding in one social and institutional field can carry significant implications for other social and institutional fields, across a variety of social scales. Take, for example, the Schumpeterian dynamics that define capitalism and their collateral impacts on communities or even individual families. The point is that crises can and do crop up and register their effects on and across a variety of social scales – whether globally, across or within nationally scaled politically economies, or within regions, firms or families. It is in this multi-scale (or multi-scalar) respect that Rydstrom’s analysis shines, as she shows us how crisis dynamics operating on and across specific localised settings within a specific corner of the contemporary world market unfold and shape and roil lives.

**A global ethnography of localised crises of productive and reproductive labour**

While Vietnam is considered a development success story, an instance of ‘inclusive growth’, and indeed preforms better than other countries on various measures of women’s status, it is nonetheless the case that life in Vietnam for blue-collar workers, and blue-collar women especially, is arduous, to say the least. In her analysis, Rydstrom presents us with the living, breathing lives of women and their gendered and class relations on the shop floor, at home and in their movements in between. This is, as ethnographers know, a formidably difficult thing to do.
In key respects, Rydstrom’s analysis does what Michael Burawoy (1988) has termed ‘the extended case method’, that is, extending insights from theoretical literature on a particular set of phenomena to the analysis of concrete instances of those phenomena, while also using the case materials to engage in the critique and further development of theory. In Rydstrom’s case-based research analysis of crises, dynamics are gleaned through proximate observations of the performance of labour, collected by way of numerous site visits and in–depth interviews. These allow the reader to follow the workers at home, at work and in between, and to observe first hand, with the aid of Rydstrom’s analytic narrative, the relational, institutional and ideational logics that shape women’s lives, as well as how these are subject to tensions, contradictions, stresses and strains. In so doing, we learn a great deal about the intimate worlds of her subjects and, more broadly, the features of social relations women face in waged productive labour and unpaid reproductive labour in early 21st-century Northern Vietnam.

Given limited space, I wish to point out two especially admirable features of Rydstrom’s analysis. The first of these, as I have suggested, is her efforts to situate the micro-social features of women’s lives within processes unfolding at the meso- and macro-social scales, that is, to shed light on how dynamic features of capitalism and their implications for women unfold across a variety of scales. This is done by linking features of transnational capitalism and Vietnam’s nationally scaled economy and its sociocultural embedding to dynamics unfolding in various industrial sub-sectors and on to the noisy, hot and physically dangerous shop floors of specific firms operating within them. In this way, we see the micro-dynamics of women’s lives in their broader totality. At the broadest level, Rydstrom examines Vietnam’s rapidly restructuring economy, epitomised by its expanding industrial zones and the authority of the Communist Party of Vietnam lurking in the background. At the meso level, she establishes the features and unrelenting competitive practices that prevail in various industrial sectors and in specific firms. Rydstrom notes, for example, the different technologies that are used, the presence and absence of appropriate ventilation and safety equipment, and so on. This is a Schumpeterian analysis of capital accumulation within a market-Leninist political economy (London, 2020), defined by a combination of substantively capitalist relations of production and patrilocal relations of social reproduction that are specific to Vietnam but that also invite comparison and theorisation.

The second admirable aspect of Rydstrom’s article (2022) is her skill in traversing or transiting between and within the productive and reproductive spheres, reminding us of their inextricable interdependence. Rydstrom presents a richly hewn account of the disruptions, pressures and crises that the world of competitive capitalism visits on women workers on the shop floor, at home and in between. She shows how these dynamics take form and are refracted through specific features of the sectors, firms and labour processes in question, and their management in the Vietnam context, as well as the power relations, institutions and norms that prevail at specific workplaces, in the home and in the no-less-treacherous terrain of extended family. In this way, we see how the subjects of her research toil through 70–hour working weeks while also managing the arduous and unrelenting demands of social reproduction in the domestic sphere, as well as the never-ending, impossible task of satisfying and supporting various spouses, children and in–laws, none of which their competitively determined wages or limited time or devotion and care can meet. We see these women shuttling
between home and work, toiling, sleeping on concrete floors, and being separated from children, and we observe their physical and emotional tolls. The World Bank and The Financial Times tell us that Vietnam’s women are experiencing increasing income and high labour market participation. This is what it that looks like up close.

Rydstrom is our guide. We follow her subjects to and from their factory, observe their small talk in the food line, see the gendered divisions of labour, and feel the physical and mental trials and hazards of each step of their comprehensively surveilled labour process. Drawing our attention to the specific dynamics of tình cảm (caring) in its specific Vietnam context – with its association with patrilocalism – Rydstrom brings the reader along on workers’ daily, and at times lonely, repeat trips between these spheres, where overtime shifts at the factory are followed or preceded by overtime shifts engaged in feeding and bathing ageing parents and parents-in-law, hanging laundry out to dry in the cold drizzly months, and forgoing caregiving to their own daughters in the name of the extended family. Combined with her account of the health hazards of the work and consequent maladies experienced by the women workers, this was a powerful reminder of the physical and psychic costs that Vietnam’s ‘development’ visits on its subjects in the name of capital accumulation, modernisation, industrialisation and civilisation.

In her attention to the intersection of these spheres, Rydstrom exposes and explodes the false dichotomies between these inseparable aspects of life, illustrating points raised in theoretical literature on the subject (see, for example, Beier, 2018). She provides a window onto the pursuit of livelihoods in industrialising Vietnam and what it can mean, materially, physically and emotionally, for women. Pairing an analysis of global value chains with women’s productive and reproductive labour, Helle Rydstrom has pointed out a path for exploring the nexus of production and reproduction across multiple social scales. She has provided us with a brilliant example of how one might pursue crisis studies on production and reproduction in a variety of global settings.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References