

# SEXUALITY AS WORK

Silvia Federici



# *Essays by autonomist feminist Silvia Federici*

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**Class consciousness is knowing  
which side of the fence  
you're on.**



**Class analysis is figuring out  
who is there with you.**



## On Sexuality as Work

Sexuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process. It is the necessary complement to the routine, regimentation of the work-week. It is a license to 'go mad,' to 'let go,' so that we can return more refreshed on Monday to our jobs. 'Saturday' is the irruption of the 'spontaneous,' the irrational in the rationality of the capitalist disciplining of our life. It is supposed to be the compensation for work and is ideologically sold as the 'other' from work, a field of freedom in which we can presumably be our true selves, have the possibility for intimate contacts in a universe of

social relations where we are constantly forced to repress, defer, postpone, hide, even from ourselves, what we desire. This being the promise, what we actually get is far from our expectations. As we cannot go back to nature by simply taking off our clothes, so cannot become 'ourselves' simply because it is love-making time. Little spontaneity is possible when the timing, conditions and the amount of energy available for love are out of our control. Not only after a week of work our bodies and feelings are numb and we cannot turn them on like a machine. But what comes out when we 'let go' is more often our repressed violence and frustration than our hidden self ready to be reborn in bed.

Among other things, we are always aware of the falseness of this spontaneity. No matter how much we scream, sigh, and how many erotic exercises we make in bed, we know that it is a parenthesis and that tomorrow we both will be back in our civilized clothes – we will have coffee together preparing to go to work. The more we know that it is a parenthesis which the rest of the day or the week will deny, the more difficult it becomes for us to turn into 'savages' at the socially sanctioned sex-time and forget everything else. We cannot avoid feeling ill at ease. It is the same embarrassment we experience when we undress knowing that we will be making love, the embarrassment of the morning after, when we are already busy re-establishing distances; the embarrassment (finally) of pretending to be completely different from what we are during the rest of the day. This transition is particularly painful for women; men seem to be experts at it, possibly because they have been subjected to a more strict regimentation in their work. Women have always wondered how it was possible that, after a nightly display of passion, he could get up already in a different world, so distant at times that it would be difficult for her to re-establish even a physical contact with him. In any case, it is always women who suffer most from the schizophrenic character of sexual relations, not only because we arrive at the end of the day with more work and more worries on our shoulders, but because we also have the responsibility of making the sexual experience pleasurable for the man. This is why women are usually less sexually responsive than men. Sex is work for us, it is a duty. The duty to please is so built into our sexuality that we have learned to get pleasure out of

giving pleasure, out of getting men excited.

Since we are expected to provide a release, we inevitably become the object on which men discharge their repressed violence. We are raped, both in our beds and in the streets, precisely because we have been set up to be the providers of sexual satisfaction, the safety valves for everything that goes wrong, and men have always been allowed to turn their anger against us, if we do not measure up to the role, particularly when we refuse to perform.

Compartmentalization is only one aspect of the mutilation of our sexuality. The subordination of our sexuality to the reproduction of labor power has meant that heterosexuality has been imposed on us as the only acceptable sexual behavior. In reality, every genuine communication has a sexual component, for our bodies and emotions are indivisible and we communicate at all levels all the time. Sexual contact with women is forbidden because in bourgeois morality anything that is unproductive is obscene, unnatural, perverted. This has meant the imposition of a schizophrenic condition on us, as early in our lives we must learn to draw a line between the people we can love and the people we just talk to, those to whom we can open our body and those to whom we can only open our 'souls,' our friends and our lovers. The result is that we are bodiless souls for our female friends and soulless flesh for our male lovers. And this division separates us not only from other women but from ourselves as well, in the sense of what we do or do not accept in our bodies and feelings – the 'clean' parts that are there for open display, and the 'dirty,' 'secret' parts that can only be disclosed in the conjugal bed, at the point of production.

The same concern for production has demanded that sexuality, especially in women, be confined to certain periods of our lives. Sexuality is repressed in children and adolescent as well as in older women. Thus, the years in which we are allowed to be sexually active are the years in which we are most burdened with work, so that enjoying our sexual encounters becomes a feat.

But the main reason why we cannot enjoy sex is that for women sex is work; giving pleasure is part of what is expected of every woman. Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly it is important not to be stoned to death if we are 'unfaithful' or if it is found that we are not

virgins. But sexual freedom means more work. In the past we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double work-day, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. And we must enjoy it as well, something which is not expected of most jobs for a bored performance would be an insult to male virility, which is why there have been so many investigations in recent years concerning which parts of our body – whether the vagina or the clitoris – are more sexually productive. But whether in its liberalized or more repressive form, our sexuality is still under control. The law, medicine and our economic dependence on men all guarantee that, although the rules are loosened, spontaneity is still impossible in our sexual life. Sexual repression in the family is a function of that control. In this sense fathers, brothers, husbands, pimps all act as agents of the state, supervising our sexual work, ensuring that we provide sexual services according to the established, socially sanctioned productivity norms.

Economic dependence is the ultimate means of control over our sexuality. This is why sexual work is still one of the main occupations for women and prostitution underlines every sexual encounter. Under these circumstances, there cannot be any spontaneity in sex for us nor can sexual pleasure be more than an ephemeral thing for us. Because of the exchange involved and the duty to give pleasure to men, sexuality for women is always accompanied by anxiety and it is the part of housework most responsible for self-hatred. In addition, the commercialization of the female body makes it impossible for us to feel comfortable with our body regardless of its shape or form. Few women can happily undress in front of a man knowing that they will be ranked according to highly publicized standards of beauty that everyone, male or female, is well aware of, as they are splashed all around us on every wall in our cities, and on every magazine or TV screen. Knowing that our looks will be judged and that in some way we are selling ourselves has destroyed our confidence and our pleasure in our bodies. This is why, whether we are skinny or plump, long or short nosed, tall or small, we all hate our body. We hate it because

we are accustomed to look at it from the outside, with the eyes of the men we meet, and with the bodies-market in mind. We hate it because we are used to think of it as something to sell, something that has become almost independent of us and that is always on a counter. We hate it because we know that so much depends on it. Depending on it, we can get a good or bad job (in marriage or work outside the home), we can gain a certain amount of social power, some company to escape the loneliness that awaits us in this society. And our body can turn against us, we may get fat, get wrinkles, age fast, make people indifferent to us, lose our right to intimacy, lose our chance to be touched or hugged.

In sum, we are too busy performing, too busy pleasing, too afraid of failing, to enjoy making love. The sense of our value is at stake in every sexual relation. It is always a great pleasure if a man says that we are good in bed, whether we have liked it or not; it boosts our sense of power, even if we know that afterwards we still have to do the dishes.

We are never allowed to forget the exchange involved, because we never transcend the value-relation in our love relation with a man. 'How much?' is the question that governs our experience of sexuality. Most of our sexual encounters are spent in calculations. We sigh, sob, gasp, pant, jump and down in bed, but in the meantime our mind keeps calculating 'how much': how much of ourselves we can give before we lose or undersell ourselves, how much will we get in return. If it is our first date, it is how much can we allow him to get: can he go up our skirt, open our blouse, put his fingers under our brassier? At what point should we tell him to stop, how strongly should we refuse? How much can we tell him that we like him before he starts thinking that we are 'cheap'? Keep the price up, that's the rule, at least the one we are taught. If we are already in bed the calculations become even more complicated, because we also have to calculate our chances of getting pregnant, so that, through the sighing and gasping and other shows of passion, we have to quickly run down the schedule of our period. Faking pleasure in the sexual act, in the absence of an orgasm, is extra work and a hard one, because when you are faking it you never know how far you should go, and you always end up doing



more for fear of not doing enough. It has taken a lot of struggle and a leap in our collective social power to finally being able to admit that nothing was happening.



LUZ

# Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint

*Precarious work is a central concept in movement discussions of the capitalist reorganization of work and class relations in today's global economy. Silvia Federici analyzes the potential and limits of this concept as an analytic and organizational tool. She claims reproductive labor is a hidden continent of work and struggle the movement must recognize in its political work, if it is to address the key questions we face in organizing for an alternative to capitalist society. How do we struggle over reproductive labor without destroying ourselves, and our communities? How do we create a self-reproducing movement? How do we overcome the sexual, racial, and generational hierarchies built upon the wage?*

*This lecture took place on October 28th 2006 at Bluestockings Radical Bookstore in New York City, 172 Allen Street as part of the "This is Forever: From Inquiry to Refusal Discussion Series. "*

Tonight I will present a critique of the theory of precarious labor that has been developed by Italian autonomist Marxists, with particular reference to the work of Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and also Michael Hardt. I call it a theory because the views that Negri and others have articulated go beyond the description of changes in the organization of work that have taken place in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the globalization process— such as the “precarization of work,” the fact that work relations are becoming more discontinuous, the introduction of “flexy time,” and the increasing fragmentation of the work experience. Their view on precarious labor present a whole perspective on what is capitalism and what is the nature of the struggle today. It is important to add that these are not simply the ideas of a few intellectuals, but theories that have circulated widely within the Italian movement for a number of years, and have recently become more influential also in

the United States, and in this sense they have become more relevant to us.

## **History and Origin of Precarious Labor and Immaterial Labor Theory**

My first premise is that definitely the question of precarious labor must be on our agenda. Not only has our relationship to waged work become more discontinuous, but a discussion of precarious labor is crucial for our understanding of how we can go beyond capitalism. The theories that I discuss capture important aspects of the developments that have taken place in the organization of work; but they also bring us back to a male-centric conception of work and social struggle. I will discuss now those elements in this theory that are most relevant to my critique.

An important premise in the Italian autonomists' theory of precarious labor is that the precarization of work, from the late seventies to present, has been a capitalist response to the class struggle of the sixties, a struggle that was centered on the refusal of work, of as expressed in the slogan "more money less work." It was a response to a cycle of struggle that challenged the capitalist command over labor, in a sense realizing the workers' refusal of the capitalist work discipline, the refusal of a life organized by the needs of capitalist production, a life spent in a factory or in office.

Another important theme is that the precarization of work relations is deeply rooted in another shift that has taken place with the restructuring of production in the 1980s. This is the shift from industrial labor to what Negri and Virno call "immaterial labor." Negri and others have argued that the restructuring of production that has taken place in the eighties and nineties in response to the struggles of the sixties has begun a process whereby industrial labor is to be replaced by a different type of work, in the same way as industrial labor replaced agricultural work. They call the new type of work "immaterial labor" because they claim that with the computer and information revolutions the dominant form of work has changed. As a tendency, the dominant form of work in today's capitalism is work

that does not produce physical objects but information, ideas, states of being, relations.

In other words, industrial work — which was hegemonic in the previous phase of capitalist development— is now becoming less important; it is no longer the engine of capitalist development. In its place we find “immaterial labor,” which is essentially cultural work, cognitive work, info work.

Italian autonomists believe that the precarization of work and the appearance of immaterial labor fulfills the prediction Marx made in the Grundrisse, in a famous section on machines. In this section Marx states that with the development of capitalism, less and less capitalist production relies on living labor and more and more on the integration of science, knowledge and technology in the production process as the engines of accumulation. Virno and Negri see the shift to precarious labor as fulfilling this prediction, about capitalism’s historic trend. Thus, the importance of cognitive work and the development of computer work in our time lies in the fact that they are seen as part of a historic trend of capitalism towards the reduction of work.

The precarity of labor is rooted in the new forms of production. Presumably, the shift to immaterial labor generates a precarization of work relations because the structure of cognitive work is different from that of industrial, physical work. Cognitive and info work rely less on the continuous physical presence of the worker in what was the traditional workplace. The rhythms of work are much more intermittent, fluid and discontinuous.

In sum, the development of precarious labor and shift to immaterial labor are not for Negri and other autonomist Marxists a completely negative phenomenon. On the contrary, they are seen as expressions of a trend towards the reduction of work and therefore the reduction of exploitation, resulting from capitalist development in response to the class struggle.

This means that the development of the productive forces today is already giving us a glimpse of a world in which work can be transcended; in which we will liberate ourselves from the necessity to work and enter a new realm of freedom.

Autonomous Marxists believe this development is also creating a new kind of “common” originating from the fact that immaterial labor presumably represents a leap in the socialization and homogenization of work. The idea is that differences between types of work that once were all important (productive/reproductive work e.g.; agricultural/industrial/“affective labor”) are erased, as all types work (as a tendency) become assimilated, for all begin to incorporate cognitive work. Moreover, all activities are increasingly subsumed under capitalist development, they all serve to the accumulation process, as society becomes an immense factory. Thus, e.g. the distinction between productive and unproductive labor also vanishes.

This means that capitalism is not only leading us beyond labor, but it is creating the conditions for the “commonization” of our work experience, where the divisions are beginning to crumble.

We can see why these theories have become popular. They have utopian elements especially attractive to cognitive workers—the “cognitariat” as Negri and some Italian activists call them. With the new theory, in fact, a new vocabulary has been invented. Instead of proletariat we have the “cognitariat.” Instead of working class, we have the “Multitude”, presumably because the concept of Multitude reveals the unity that is created by the new socialization of work; it expresses the communalization of the work process, the idea that within the work process workers are becoming more homogenized. For all forms of work incorporate elements of cognitive work, of computer work, communication work and so forth.

As I said this theory has gained much popularity, because there is a generation of young activists, with years of schooling and degrees who are now employed in precarious ways in different parts of the culture industry or the knowledge-production industry. Among them

these theories are very popular because they tell them that, despite the misery and exploitation we are experiencing, we are nevertheless moving towards a higher level of production and social relations. This is a generation of workers who looks at the “Nine to Five” routine as a prison sentence. They see their precariousness as giving them new possibilities. And they have possibilities their parents did not have or dreamed of. The male youth of today (e.g.) is not as disciplined as their parents who could expect that their wife or partners would depend of them economically. Now they can count on social relationships involving much less financial dependence. Most women have autonomous access to the wage and often refuse to have children.

So this theory is appealing for the new generation of activists, who despite the difficulties of resulting from precarious labor, see within it certain possibilities. They want to start from there. They are not interested in a struggle for full employment. But there is also a difference here between Europe and the US. In Italy e.g. there is among the movement a demand for a guaranteed income. They call it “flex security.” They say, we are without a job, we are precarious because capitalism needs us to be, so they should pay for it. There have been various days of mobilization, especially on May 1st, centered on this demand for a guaranteed income. In Milano, on the May Day of this year, movement people have paraded “San Precario,” the patron saint of the precarious worker. The ironic icon is featured in rallies and demonstrations centered on this question of precarity.

## **Critique of Precarious Labor**

I will now shift to my critique of these theories— a critique from a feminist viewpoint. In developing my critique, I don’t want to minimize the importance of the theories I am discussing. They have been inspired by much political organizing and striving to make sense of the changes that have taken place in the organization of work, which has affected all our lives. In Italy, in recent years, precarious labor has been one of the main terrains of mobilization together with the struggle for immigrant rights.

I do not want to minimize the work that is taking place around issues of precarity. Clearly, what we have seen in the last decade is a new kind of struggle. A new kind of organizing is taking place, breaking away from the confines of the traditional workplace. Where the workplace was the factory or the office, we now see a kind of struggle that goes out from the factory to the “territory,” connecting different places of work and building movements and organizations rooted in the territory. The theories of precarious labor are trying to account for the aspects of novelty in the organization of work and struggle; trying to understand the emergent forms of organization.

This is very important. At the same time, I think that what I called precarious labor theory has serious flaws that I already hinted at in my presentation. I will outline them and then discuss the question of alternatives.

My first criticism is that this theory is built on a faulty understanding of how capitalism works. It sees capitalist development as moving towards higher forms of production and labor. In *Multitude*, Negri and Hardt actually write that labor is becoming more “intelligent.” The assumption is that the capitalist organization of work and capitalist development are already creating the conditions for the overcoming of exploitation. Presumably, at one point, capitalism, the shell that keeps society going will break up and the potentialities that have grown within it will be liberated. There is an assumption that that process is already at work in the present organization of production. In my view, this is a misunderstanding of the effects of the restructuring produced by capitalist globalization and the neo-liberal turn.

What Negri and Hardt do not see is that the tremendous leap in technology required by the computerization of work and the integration of information into the work process has been paid at the cost of a tremendous increase of exploitation at the other end of the process. There is a continuum between the computer worker and the worker in the Congo who digs coltan with his hands trying to seek out a living after being expropriated, pauperized, by repeated

rounds of structural adjustment and repeated theft of his community's land and natural sources.

The fundamental principle is that capitalist development is always at the same time a process of underdevelopment. Maria Mies describes it eloquently in her work: "What appears as development in one part of the capitalist faction is underdevelopment in another part."

This connection is completely ignored in this theory; in fact and the whole theory is permeated by the illusion that the work process is bringing us together. When Negri and Hardt speak of the "becoming common" of work and use the concept of Multitude to indicate the new commonism that is built through the development of the productive forces, I believe they are blind to much of what is happening with the world proletariat.

They are blind to not see the capitalist destruction of lives and the ecological environment. They don't see that the restructuring of production has aimed at restructuring and deepening the divisions within the working class, rather than erasing them. The idea that the development of the microchip is creating new commons is misleading. communalism can only be a product of struggle, not of capitalist production.

One of my criticisms of Negri and Hardt is that they seem to believe that the capitalist organization of work is the expression of a higher rationality and that capitalist development is necessary to create the material conditions for communism. This belief is at the center of precarious labor theory. We could discuss here whether it represents Marx's thinking or not. Certainly the Communist Manifesto speaks of capitalism in these terms and the same is true of some sections of the Grundrisse. But it is not clear this was a dominant theme in Marx's work, not at least in Capital.



## Precarious Labor and Reproductive Work

Another criticism I have against the precarious labor theory is that it presents itself as gender neutral. It assumes that the reorganization of production is doing away with the power relations and hierarchies that exist within the working class on the basis of race, gender and age, and therefore it is not concerned with addressing these power relations; it does not have the theoretical and political tools to think about how to tackle them. There is no discussion in Negri, Virno and Hardt of how the wage has been and continues to be used to organize these divisions and how therefore we must approach the wage struggle so that it does not become an instrument of further divisions, but instead can help us undermined them. To me this is one of the main issues we must address in the movement.

The concept of the “Multitude” suggests that all divisions within the working class are gone or are no longer politically relevant. But this is obviously an illusion. Some feminists have pointed out that precarious labor is not a new phenomenon. Women always had a precarious relation to waged labor. But this critique goes far enough.

My concern is that the Negrian theory of precarious labor ignores, bypasses, one of the most important contributions of feminist theory and struggle, which is the redefinition of work, and the recognition of women’s unpaid reproductive labor as a key source of capitalist accumulation. In redefining housework as WORK, as not a personal service but the work that produces and reproduces labor power, feminists have uncovered a new crucial ground of exploitation that Marx and Marxist theory completely ignored. All of the important political insights contained in those analysis are now brushed aside as if they were of no relevance to an understanding of the present organization of production.

There is a faint echo of the feminist analysis –a lip service paid to it– in the inclusion of so called “affective labor” in the range of work activities qualifying as “immaterial labor.” However, the best Negri and Hardt can come up with is the case of women who work as

flight attendants or in the food service industry, whom they call “affective laborers,” because they are expected to smile at their customers.

But what is “affective labor?” And why is it included in the theory of immaterial labor? I imagine it is included because –presumably– it does not produce tangible products but “states of being,” that is, it produces feelings. Again, to put it crudely, I think this is a bone thrown to feminism, which now is a perspective that has some social backing and can no longer be ignored.

But the concept of “affective labor” strips the feminist analysis of housework of all its demystifying power. In fact, it brings reproductive work back into the world of mystification, suggesting that reproducing people is just a matter of making producing “emotions,” “feelings,” It used to be called a “labor of love;” Negri and Hardt instead have discovered “affection.”

The feminist analysis of the function of the sexual division of labor, the function of gender hierarchies, the analysis of the way capitalism has used the wage to mobilize women’s work in the reproduction of the labor force—all of this is lost under the label of “affective labor.”

That this feminist analysis is ignored in the work of Negri and Hardt confirms my suspicions that this theory expresses the interests of a select group of workers, even though it presumes to speak to all workers, all merged in the great caldron of the Multitude. In reality, the theory of precarious and immaterial labor speaks to the situation and interests of workers working at the highest level of capitalistic technology. Its disinterest in reproductive labor and its presumption that all labor forms a common hides the fact that it is concerned with the most privileged section of the working class. This means it is not a theory we can use to build a truly self-reproducing movement.

For this task the lesson of the feminist movement is still crucial today. Feminists in the seventies tried to understand the roots of women’s oppression, of women’s exploitation and gender hierarchies. They describe them as stemming from a unequal

division of labor forcing women to work for the reproduction of the working class. This analysis was basis of a radical social critique, the implications of which still have to be understood and developed to their full potential.

When we said that housework is actually work for capital, that although it is unpaid work it contributes to the accumulation of capital, we established something extremely important about the nature of capitalism as a system of production. *We established that capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor, that it not built exclusively or primarily on contractual relations; that the wage relation hides the unpaid, slave -like nature of so much of the work upon which capital accumulation is premised.*

Also, when we said that housework is the work that reproduces not just “life,” but “labor-power,” we began to separate two different spheres of our lives and work that seemed inextricably connected. We became able to conceive of a fight against housework now understood as the reproduction of labor-power, the reproduction of the most important commodity capital has: the worker’s “capacity to work,” the worker’s capacity to be exploited. In other words, by recognizing that what we call “reproductive labor” is a terrain of accumulation and therefore a terrain of exploitation, we were able to also see reproduction as a terrain of struggle, and, very important, *conceive of an anti-capitalist struggle against reproductive labor that would not destroy ourselves or our communities.*

How do you struggle over/against reproductive work? It is not the same as struggling in the traditional factory setting, against for instance the speed of an assembly line, because at the other end of your struggle there are people not things. Once we say that reproductive work is a terrain of struggle, we have to first immediately confront the question of how we struggle on this terrain without destroying the people you care for. This is a problem mothers as well as teachers and nurses, know very well.

This is why it is crucial to be able to make a separation between the creation of human beings and our reproduction of them as labor-

power, as future workers, who therefore have to be trained, not necessarily according to their needs and desires, to be disciplined and regimented in a particular fashion.

It was important for feminists to see, for example, that much housework and child rearing is work of policing our children, so that they will conform to a particular work discipline. We thus began to see that by refusing broad areas of work, we not only could liberate ourselves but could also liberate our children. We saw that our struggle was not at the expense of the people we cared for, though we may skip preparing some meals or cleaning the floor. Actually our refusal opened the way for their refusal and the process of their liberation.

Once we saw that rather than reproducing life we were expanding capitalist accumulation and began to define reproductive labor as work for capital, we also opened the possibility of a process of re-composition among women.

Think for example of the prostitute movement, which we now call the “sex workers” movement. In Europe the origins of this movement must be traced back to 1975 when a number of sex workers in Paris occupied a church, in protest against a new zoning regulation which they saw as an attack on their safety. There was a clear connection between that struggle, which soon spread throughout Europe and the United States, and the feminist movement’s re-thinking and challenging of housework. The ability to say that sexuality for women has been work has led to a whole new way of thinking about sexual relationships, including gay relations. Because of the feminist movement and the gay movement we have begun to think about the ways in which capitalism has exploited our sexuality, and made it “productive.”

In conclusion, it was a major breakthrough that women would begin to understand unpaid labor and the production that goes on in the home as well as outside of the home as the reproduction of the work force. This has allowed a re-thinking of every aspect of everyday life — child-raising, relationships between men and women,

homosexual relationships, sexuality in general– in relation to capitalist exploitation and accumulation.

## **Creating Self-Reproducing Movements**

As every aspect of everyday life was re-understood in its potential for liberation and exploitation, we saw the many ways in which women and women's struggles are connected. We realized the possibility of "alliances" we had not imagined and by the same token the possibility of bridging the divisions that have been created among women, also on the basis of age, race, sexual preference.

We can not build a movement that is sustainable without an understanding of these power relations. We also need to learn from the feminist analysis of reproductive work because no movement can survive unless it is concerned with the reproduction of its members. This is one of the weaknesses of the social justice movement in the US.

We go to demonstrations, we build events, and this becomes the peak of our struggle. The analysis of how we reproduce these movements, how we reproduce ourselves is not at the center of movement organizing. It has to be. We need to go back to the historical tradition of working class organizing "mutual aid" and rethink that experience, not necessarily because we want to reproduce it, but to draw inspiration from it for the present.

We need to build a movement that puts on its agenda its own reproduction. The anti-capitalist struggle has to create forms of support and has to have the ability to collectively build forms of reproduction.

We have to ensure that we do not only confront capital at the time of the demonstration, but that we confront it collectively at every moment of our lives. What is happening internationally proves that only when you have these forms of collective reproduction, when you have communities that reproduce themselves collectively, you have struggles that are moving in a very radical way against the

established order, as for example the struggle of indigenous people in Bolivia against water privatization or in Ecuador against the oil companies' destruction of indigenous land.

I want to close by saying if we look at the example of the struggles in Oaxaca, Bolivia, and Ecuador, we see that the most radical confrontations are not created by the intellectual or cognitive workers or by virtue of the internet's common. What gave strength to the people of Oaxaca was the profound solidarity that tied them with each other—a solidarity for instance that made indigenous people from every part of the state to come to the support of the “maestros,” whom they saw as members of their communities. In Bolivia too, the people who reversed the privatization of water had a long tradition of communal struggle. Building this solidarity, understanding how we can overcome the divisions between us, is a task that must be placed on the agenda. In conclusion then, the main problem of precarious labor theory is that it does not give us the tools to overcome the way we are being divided. But these divisions, which are continuously recreated, are our fundamental weakness with regard to our capacity to resist exploitation and create an equitable society.



## **Feminism, Finance and the Future of #Occupy - An interview with Silvia Federici**

Silvia Federici discusses the Occupy Movement and the struggles of social reproduction to challenge capital.

Occupations and the Struggle over Reproduction

*Silvia Federici is a veteran activist and writer who lives in Brooklyn, NY. Born and raised in Italy, Federici has taught in Italy, Nigeria, and the United States, where she has been involved in many movements, including feminist, education, and anti-death penalty struggles. Her influential 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch: Women,**

*the Body and Primitive Accumulation, built on decades of research and activism, offers an account of the relationship between the European witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the rise of capitalism. Federici's work is rooted in a feminist and Marxist tradition that stresses the centrality of people's struggle against exploitation as the driving force of historical and global change. With other members of the Wages for Housework campaign, like Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and with feminist authors like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Federici has been instrumental in developing the idea of "reproduction" as a key way to understand global and local power relations. Reproduction, in this sense, doesn't only mean how humans reproduce biologically, it is a broad concept that encompasses how we care for one another, how we reproduce our physical bodies depending on our access to food and shelter, how culture and ideology are reproduced, how communities are built and rebuilt, and how resistance and struggle can be sustained and expanded. In the contest of a capitalist society reproduction also refers to the process by which "labor power" (i.e. our capacity to work, and the labor force in general), is reproduced, both on a day to day basis and inter-generationally. It was one of the main contributions of the theorists of the Wages For Housework Movement to Marxist feminist theory to have redefined reproductive work in this manner. In this interview, an extended version of which will appear in a forthcoming issue of Politics and Culture, Federici reflects on the #Occupy movements, their precedents and their potentials.*

Max Haiven: We hear a lot of talk about the originality of Occupy Wall Street and the other Occupations. But people have been pointing out that this movement isn't unprecedented and it has been building in various ways for a long time. What do you see as the feminist roots of the Occupations, both in New York and more broadly?

Silvia Federici: This movement appears spontaneous but its spontaneity is quite organized, as it can be seen from the languages and practices it has adopted and the maturity it has shown in response to the brutal attacks by the authorities and the police. It reflects a new way of doing politics that has grown out of the crisis



of the anti-globalization and antiwar movements of the last decade, one that emerges from the confluence between the feminist movement and the movement for the commons. By “movement for the commons” I refer to the struggles to create and defend anti-capitalist spaces and communities of solidarity and autonomy. For years now people have expressed the need for a politics that is not just antagonistic, and does not separate the personal from the political, but instead places the creation of more cooperative and egalitarian forms of reproducing human, social and economic relationships at the center of political work.

In New York, for instance, a broad discussion has been taking place for some years now among people in the movement on the need to create “communities of care” and, more generally, collective forms of reproduction whereby we can address issues that “flow from our everyday life (as Craig Hughes and Kevin Van Meter of the Team Colors Collective have put it [1]). We have begun to recognize that for our movements to work and thrive, we need to be able to socialize our experiences of grief, illness, pain, death, things that now are often relegated to the margins or the outside of our political work. We agree that movements that do not place on their agendas the reproduction of both their members and the broader community are movements that cannot survive, they are not “self-reproducing,” especially in these times when so many people are daily confronting crises in their lives.

Great sources of inspiration here have been the response of Act Up to the AIDS crisis, the anarchist tradition of ‘mutual aid,’ and, above all, the experience of the feminist movement which realized that “the revolution begins at home” in the restructuring of our reproductive activities and the social relations that sustain them. In recent years, this merging of feminism and political ‘commoning’ has generated a great number of local initiatives - community gardens, solidarity economies, time banks, as well as attempts to create ‘accountability structures’ at the grassroots level to deal with abuses within the movement without resorting to the police. Often these initiatives seemed to remain confined at the local level and lack the power to link up to confront the status quo. The Occupy movements show us that this need not be the case.

The Occupy movement is also a continuation of the student movement that has grown throughout North America and internationally over the last decades in response to the commercialization of education. The very concept of 'occupation' connects it with the tactics that students adopted over last two years, from New York to Berkeley and beyond, and especially in Europe. For all their contradictions, these student struggles expressed the same need: not only to oppose the authorities but to produce moments of collective experience and collective reproduction on different terms than the competitive logic of neoliberal capitalism. It is significant that some of the young people who started Occupy Wall Street (OWS) were City University of New York students who, in June of this year, were involved in the creation of 'Bloombergville,' an around-the-clock encampment in front of New York City Hall protesting the budget cuts planned by Mayor Bloomberg's administration.

I also cannot help thinking that the experience of the 'tent cities' set up by homeless/evicted people over the last few years across America has contributed to shaping the collective imagination. They also evoke the historic memory of the Hoovervilles and the Bonus Army of the Great Depression, where thousands of out-of-work families and veterans camped out, both to demand government action and to support their own survival.

MH: Many people have criticized the Occupations for having a relatively narrow focus on the crimes of finance, rather than the broader systems of power of which finance is just a part. What do you make of the movement's general orientation?

SF: I do not think that this movement is exclusively concerned with the crimes of the finance world. A visit to OWS or some of the other occupations spreading across the country would demonstrate the great variety of issues discussed and the diversity of organizing going on, as well as the diverse composition of this movement. Occupations are becoming a point of convergence for all kinds of struggles: opposition to the war, opposition to the prison system, support for healthcare and education reforms. A movement of

teachers and students to abolish student debt is presently being coordinated through the occupations, at least in the United States. On November 21st an anti-student debt movement was officially launched at OWS, its members pledging to refuse to pay back their debts when the pledge reaches one million signatories [2]. The Occupy movement is also developing an alternative to representative politics and becoming, in effect, a school of direct democracy and self-government.

I must add that, in the present economic context, is it impossible to take on Wall Street's 'crimes' without confronting the entire economic system at the basis of its abuses. As with any other movements, there are different strands within the Occupations. Some participants may be satisfied with just obtaining a more regulated banking system, or a return to Keynesianism. But the economic crisis is bringing to light, in a dramatic way, the fact that the capitalist class has nothing to offer to the majority of the population except more misery, more destruction of the environment, and more war.

Occupations, in this context, are sites for the construction of a non-capitalist conception of society and a coming together of the practices that, in recent years, have begun to concretize this project. A sign of the broad scope of this movement and its capacity to resonate beyond downtown Manhattan is that in Egypt the people of the squares have recognized the commonality between their movement and that of OWS or Oakland.

As some have put it, the Occupy movement is the first worldwide anti-capitalist movement to appear in a long time in the US. It is the first movement in this country to give expression to the growing revolt against the present economic and political order, which is the reason why it has spread so rapidly and has excited the collective imagination to such a degree.

MH: Where do you see the Occupations going? What will be critical for their success?

SF: There are already two encouraging developments under way. On one side, the Occupations are organizing a network that is circulating experiences, information, forms of mutual support, and articulating a perspective for the construction of nationwide and worldwide mobilizations. There is now a plan to hold a general assembly on July 4, 2012 in Philadelphia that will be a test of the 'constituent' power of this movement, by which I mean the ability of the movement to create new models of social cooperation.

I agree with Mike Davis, however, that the movement should not be too eager to produce programmatic demands and should concentrate, instead, on making its presence more visible, on reaching out to other communities, and on 'reclaiming the commons.' This is beginning to happen with the migration of the occupations into the neighborhoods, which is essential to reconstruct a social fabric that has been dismantled through years of neoliberal restructuring and the gentrification and suburbanization of space."

The most crucial test, however, will be whether the Occupy movement has the capacity to address the divisions that have structured the history of this continent. Clearly, you cannot have an egalitarian society without undoing the legacy of centuries of enslavement, genocide, and imperial warfare that have left a deeply scarred and divided social body. Confronting racism, colonialism and other forms of oppression and exploitation, both within the movement and in broader society and its institutions, will have to be the centerpiece of the drive for the production of a new "constitution," whatever forms this may take.

A positive sign is that the composition of the movement is already quite diverse, although the degree of diversity varies in different parts of the country. It has been a long time since we've seen a movement bringing together students, nurses, veterans, radicals and trade unionists with immigrant- and people of color-led grassroots community organizations. The key questions will be whether this movement can be a bridge to the millions of incarcerated in the US jails, or to the many more who cannot take

their money out of the banks because they have no bank accounts, and whether the movement's agenda can include an end to the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and the policy of deportation.

MH: Is feminism critical for this movement, and how so?

SF: Feminism is still critical for this movement on several grounds, and I am encouraged by the fact that many young women today identify themselves as feminists, despite a tendency in past years to dismiss feminism as merely “identity politics.”

First, many of the issues that were at the origins of the women’s movement have not been resolved. In some respects the position of women has worsened. Despite the fact that more women have access to paid employment, the root causes of sexism are still in place. We still have an unequal sexual division of labor, as reproductive work remains primarily a woman’s responsibility, even when she works also outside the home, and reproductive work is still devalued in this society. Though we are less dependent on individual men, we are still subject to a patriarchal organization of work and social relations that degrades women. In fact, we have seen a re-masculinization of society with the glorification of war and the increasing militarization of everyday life. Statistics speak clearly: women have the longest work-week and do most of the world’s unpaid labor, they are the bulk of the poor, both in the US and around the world, and many are practically sterilized because they cannot afford to have children. Meanwhile, male violence against women has intensified rather than diminishing, not only at the individual level but also at the level of institutions: in the US, for instance, the number of women in jail has increased fivefold since the ‘80s.

For all these reasons feminism is crucial for the Occupy movement. You certainly cannot have a ‘sustainable’ movement if the unequal power relations between women and men and male violence against women are not addressed.

I am also convinced that the Occupy movement has much to learn both from the egalitarian vision of society that the feminist movement developed in its radical phase -- which was also an inspiration for the queer and the ecological movements. Consensus-based decision-making, the distrust of leaders (formal or charismatic) and the idea that you need to prefigure the world you want to create through your actions and organization, these were all developed by radical feminist movements. Most importantly, like the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the radical feminist movement began to address the question of unequal power relations in the movement and in society by, for instance, creating autonomous spaces in which women could articulate the problems specific to their conditions. Feminism has also promoted an ethics of care and sisterhood and a respect for animals and nature that is crucial for the Occupy movement and, I believe, has already shaped its practice. I have been impressed by the tolerance and patience people demonstrate to one another in the general assemblies, a great achievement in comparison with the often truculent forms of behavior that were typical in the movements of the '60s.

MH: Where do you see feminism in this movement and what do you make of the gender dynamics as you have observed and encountered them?

SF: I do not want to be unduly optimistic, but it seems to me that feminists are well represented in this movement, though it would be naïve to imagine that this is sufficient to eliminate sexism from it. As a recent article published in *The Nation* on this subject pointed out, "women are everywhere": they facilitate and speak in the general assemblies, organize educational forums, make videos, run the information center, speak to the press, and circulate information through scores of blogs on the net [3]. At OWS, before the eviction, they created an all-women space, a tent "for women by women," that functioned as a safe autonomous zone. This is what I learned in my visits to OWS and from my online reading about other occupations.

What is especially promising is the diversity of women who are active and present in the occupations: this is a movement that brings together white women and women of color, young women and women with white hair. I also see the influence of feminism in the fact that this movement places its own reproduction at the center of its organizing. The lesson of the feminist movement—which is that you cannot separate political militancy from the reproduction of your everyday life, in fact you must often revolutionize your reproduction relations in order to engage in the struggle—is now being applied on a broad scale, including the creation of ongoing free food distribution, the organization of cleaning and medical teams, and the activities of the working groups that are daily discussing not only general principles and campaigns but all the issues concerning daily co-existence.

That OWS is no longer a standing camp, after its eviction from Liberty Square, does not invalidate this point. Hundreds of occupations are now taking place all over the country and around the world. The loss of the camp at Liberty Plaza in New York is only the start of a new phase of the movement. Hopefully it will be a phase in which the building of reproductive commons will take on a new meaning and dimension. Soon, in fact, the movement must begin to pose the question of how to create a reproductive network outside of the market, for instance connecting with the existing urban farming projects and other elements of the solidarity economy.

MH: Since the 2008 financial crisis, we've heard a lot of attempts to understand and critique the system, both from liberal critics and from Marxists and others on the Left. But we haven't heard a lot of feminist explanations. What does a feminist critique of finance capitalism look like?

SF: Finance capitalism is not different in nature from capitalism in general. The idea that there is something more wholesome about production-based capitalism is an illusion we must abandon. It ignores the fact that finance capitalism is also based on production and unequal and exploitative class relations, although in a more circuitous way. A feminist critique of financial capitalism, then,

cannot be substantially different from a critique of capitalism in every other form. Nevertheless, looking at finance capitalism from the viewpoint of women, we can gain an insight into some of the ways in which our everyday reproduction and the relation between women and capital have changed.

We see first that financial transactions—through credit cards, student loans, mortgages—have become part of our everyday means of subsistence. Like male workers, many women too have come to rely on them to make ends meet and satisfy their desires. This by itself indicates that the world of finance is not a fictitious sphere of capitalist relations, but reaches deeply into our day-to-day lives. It also indicates that, increasingly, women now confront capital directly, rather than through the mediation of the male wage, as was the case for women who worked exclusively in the home, or through the mediation of the state, as was the case of women on welfare and other forms of social assistance. Indeed, through the entanglement of finance capital in the working of our daily lives, financialization has become one of the main grounds of confrontation between women and capital, and this is an international phenomenon.

We see the same dynamics with the development of micro-credit in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. Micro-finance has become one of the main tools by which international agencies have attempted to bring a whole population of women formerly engaged in subsistence economies under the control of global monetary relations by encouraging them to see themselves as market entrepreneurs and take out loans for small enterprises. While these programs have been heavily promoted by investors, banks and “development” professionals in the global North, they have proven one of the most contested policies directed towards women worldwide, since far from ‘empowering’ women (as the rhetoric goes) they are turning them into debtors and, in this way, transforming their daily micro-reproductive/marketing activities into sources of value-creation and accumulation for others. In some cases (e.g. in Bolivia in 2002) women have besieged the banks to protest their debts and the extortionist policies banks and lenders



have enforced. There have also been cases of women who have hanged themselves because they could not pay back their debts.

This situation shows that when we speak of a “financial crisis” we must be very careful not to assume that we speak of one reality alone. For surely the massive indebtedness that women have incurred both in the North and the South, through credit cards, loans or micro-credit, is a financial crisis in itself!

As for the other financial crisis, the one that capital declared in 2008 and that continues to this day, we can see that it is one more twist and turn in a process that has been unfolding now for 35 years, starting in the mid 1970s, when I wrote my first paper on women and the crisis. [4].

Since then, global capitalism has waged a continuous attack on people’s means of subsistence, women’s in particular. This has been especially devastating for women in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The difference, today, is that the crisis has been unleashed on populations that, by now, have nothing left, and the attack has also been extended to relatively affluent people in Europe and North America. But its objectives, and the effects it has on women, are predictable. Not surprisingly, the reports on this subject coming from international institutions (like the United Nations) are increasingly formulaic. Once again, we hear that “the conventional conceptual frameworks used to design macro-economic policies are gender blind.” We hear of “the disproportionate burden women bear in the financial crisis,” and the negative impact this will have on their access to education and healthcare. We are told that the crisis “threatens women’s meager gains” and will lead to a further expansion of women's unpaid and ‘informal’ labor. How many times have we heard these laments, often from women (self-described feminists included) who are totally complicit with the institutional system that is responsible for the policies that have caused the crisis in the first place, over which now they shed crocodile tears?

Clearly employers and the state once again expect women to absorb the cost of the new austerity programs that are being

introduced and to compensate both for the cuts in social services and for the increased costs of food, fuel and housing with extra labour, both in the home and outside the home. This is what British Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Big Society' program is about: downloading the costs of reproduction from society and government onto women – never mind demanding a greater share from corporations and capital, despite the fact that they depend on that reproduction. The financial crisis is an excuse to extend these policies. But if the Occupy movement is a sign of the response to be expected to this new assault on our means of reproduction in the months to come, this crisis may very well backfire.

MH: How can we improve inter-generational learning in our movements?

SF: In the '60s there was a saying that if you were over 30 you were already on the other side. It never worked that way and the contribution of activists from the older generation was always important for the movement. But activists today are certainly more open to intergenerational learning. The question, however, is what kind of structures are necessary for knowledge to be transmitted and for intergenerational cooperation, in both directions, to be made possible.

Building archives and reproducing materials are all-important steps, but they are not enough. I think activists today need to rethink the history of the movements of the '60s -- their contributions and limits, and the issues they left open -- in the same way as those movements reconstructed the history of the labor movement and the old left of the pre-war and post-war periods. I am thinking, for instance, of the feminist movement. Its history has been so distorted by the media and by its subsumption within the United Nations that many young women in recent years have dissociated themselves from it. But they are discovering that they still face many of the same problems that led to the establishment of 'women's liberation.' I am referring here not only to the fact that there is still evidence of sexism within social movements, but that, in the best of cases, women today can achieve some economic independence only at

the cost of “becoming like men,” that is, at the cost of accepting work regimes that make no space for other relations: children, friends, families, and political activism. I have also heard, over and over, young women complaining of the balancing act they must perform in a workplace that expects them to be both ‘feminine’ and competent at the same time. Add to this that many of the achievements of the feminist movement today are in jeopardy. For instance, Access to abortion is constantly being attacked and reduced. In the US, several states are trying to pass laws which greatly extend the government’s control over a women reproductive capacity, for instance making it possible to charge pregnant women with murder for engaging in any activity that can be construed as jeopardizing the foetus. Presently, about 50 women are jail under this charge. Indeed, over the years, we have seen that no gains women have made can be taken for granted. I am convinced that learning the history of the struggles of the past is crucial in this context as they enable us to understand what forces we up against.

More generally, there is a great amount of knowledge that should be recuperated so that younger activists do not repeat the same mistakes as those who have gone before them, so that we can better understand what is new and specific about today’s struggles, and also so we can learn to anticipate the strategies our rulers will deploy to try to defeat us. That said, it is clear that the present Occupations are a great moment of intergenerational exchange, and I am confident that, as the movement grows, younger activists will see the need to re-appropriate the radical past, and that activists like myself from an older generation will be able to celebrate what is new in this movement, rather trying to put new wine into old bottles.

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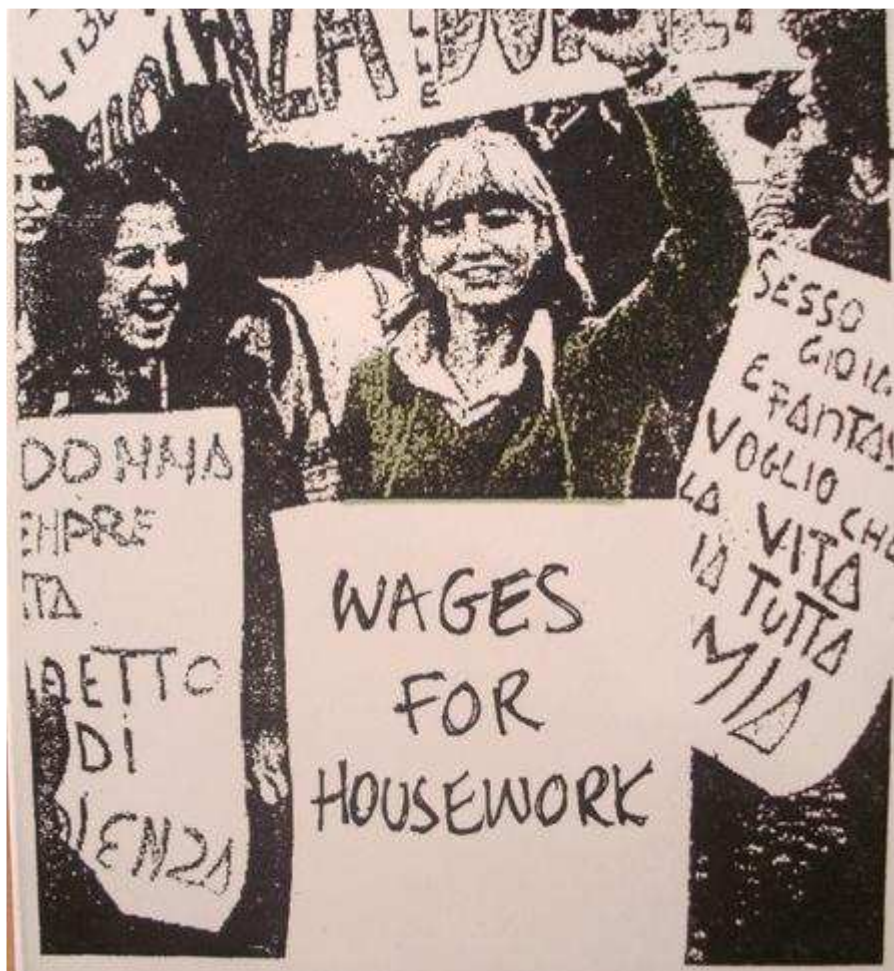
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Interview by Max Haiven



# Wages against housework

Italian autonomist Silvia Federici on wages and housework.

*They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.*

*They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.*

*Every miscarriage is a work accident.*

*Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions...but homosexuality is workers' control of production, not the end of work.*

*More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile.*

*Neuroses, suicides, desexualization: occupational diseases of the housewife.*

Many times the difficulties and ambiguities which women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the reduction of wages for housework to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective. The difference between these two standpoints is enormous. To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society.

When we view wages for housework in this reductive way we start asking ourselves: what difference could some more money make to our lives? We might even agree that for a lot of women who do not have any choice except for housework and marriage, it would indeed make a lot of difference. But for those of us who seem to have other choices-professional work, enlightened husband, communal way of life, gay relations or a combination of these-it would not make much of a difference at all. For us there are

supposedly other ways of achieving economic independence, and the last thing we want is to get it by identifying ourselves as housewives, a fate which we all agree is, so to speak, worse than death. The problem with this position is that in our imagination we usually add a bit of money to the shitty lives we have now and then ask, so what? on the false premise that we could ever get that money without at the same time revolutionising – in the process of struggling for it – all our family and social relations. But if we take wages for housework as a political perspective, we can see that struggling for it is going to produce a revolution in our lives and in our social power as women. It is also clear that if we think we do not 'need' that money, it is because we have accepted the particular forms of prostitution of body and mind by which we get the money to hide that need. As I will try to show, not only is wages for housework a revolutionary perspective, but it is the only revolutionary perspective from a feminist viewpoint and ultimately for the entire working class.

## **A Labour of Love**

It is important to recognise that when we speak of housework we are not speaking of a job as other jobs, but we are speaking of the most pervasive manipulation, the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class. True, under capitalism every worker is manipulated and exploited and his/her relation to capital is totally mystified. The wage gives the impression of a fair deal: you work and you get paid, hence you and your boss are equal; while in reality the wage, rather than paying for the work you do, hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit. But the wage at least recognizes that you are a worker, and you can bargain and struggle around and against the terms and the quantity of that wage, the terms and the quantity of that work. To have a wage means to be part of a social contract, and there is no doubt concerning its meaning: you work, not because you like it, or because it comes naturally to you, but because it is the only condition under which you are allowed to live. But exploited as you might be, you are not that work. Today you are a postman, tomorrow a cabdriver. All that matters is how much of that work you have to do and how much of that money you can get.

But in the case of housework the situation is qualitatively different. The difference lies in the fact that not only has housework been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework had to be transformed into a natural attribute rather than be recognised as a social contract because from the beginning of capital's scheme for women this work was destined to be unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity to make us accept our unwaged work. In its turn, the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it, except in the privatized kitchen-bedroom quarrel that all society agrees to ridicule, thereby further reducing the protagonist of a struggle. We are seen as nagging bitches, not workers in struggle.

Yet just how natural it is to be a housewife is shown by the fact that it takes at least twenty years of socialization – day-to-day training, performed by an unwaged mother – to prepare a woman for this role, to convince her that children and husband are the best she can expect from life. Even so, it hardly succeeds. No matter how well-trained we are, few are the women who do not feel cheated when the bride's day is over and they find themselves in front of a dirty sink. Many of us still have the illusion that we marry for love. A lot of us recognise that we marry for money and security; but it is time to make it clear that while the love or money involved is very little, the work which awaits us is enormous. This is why older women always tell us 'Enjoy your freedom while you can, buy whatever you want now...' But unfortunately it is almost impossible to enjoy any freedom if from the earliest days of life you are trained to be docile, subservient, dependent and most important to sacrifice yourself and even to get pleasure from it. If you don't like it, it is your problem, your failure, your guilt, your abnormality.

We must admit that capital has been very successful in hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women. By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love,

capital has killed many birds with one stone. First of all, it has got a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life (the magic words: “Yes, darling, you are a real woman”). At the same time, it has disciplined the male worker also, by making his woman dependent on his work and his wage, and trapped him in this discipline by giving him a servant after he himself has done so much serving at the factory or the office. In fact, our role as women is to be the unwaged but happy, and most of all loving, servants of the ‘working class’, i.e. those strata of the proletariat to which capital was forced to grant more social power. In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally and sexually – to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time invisible. It is not an accident that most men start thinking of getting married as soon as they get their first job. This is not only because now they can afford it, but because having somebody at home who takes care of you is the only condition not to go crazy after a day spent on an assembly line or at a desk. Every woman knows that this is what she should be doing to be a true woman and have a ‘successful’ marriage. And in this case too, the poorer the family the higher the enslavement of the woman, and not simply because of the monetary situation. In fact capital has a dual policy, one for the middle class and one for the proletarian family. It is no accident that we find the most unsophisticated machismo in the working class family: the more blows the man gets at work the more his wife must be trained to absorb them, the more he is allowed to recover his ego at her expense. You beat your wife and vent your rage against her when you are frustrated or overtired by your work or when you are defeated in a struggle (to go into a factory is itself a defeat). The more the man serves and is bossed around, the more he bosses around. A man’s home is his castle ... and his wife has to learn to



wait in silence when he is moody, to put him back together when he is broken down and swears at the world, to turn around in bed when he says 'I'm too tired tonight,' or when he goes so fast at lovemaking that, as one woman put it, he might as well make it with a mayonnaise jar. (Women have always found ways of fighting back, or getting back at them, but always in an isolated and privatised way. The problem, then, becomes how to bring this struggle out of the kitchen and bedroom and into the streets.)

This fraud that goes under the name of love and marriage affects all of us, even if we are not married, because once housework was totally naturalised and sexualised, once it became a feminine attribute, all of us as females are characterised by it. If it is natural to do certain things, then all women are expected to do them and even like doing them—even those women who, due to their social position, could escape some of that work or most of it (their husbands can afford maids and shrinks and other forms of relaxation and amusement). We might not serve one man, but we are all in a servant relation with respect to the whole male world. This is why to be called a female is such a putdown, such a degrading thing. ("Smile, honey, what's the matter with you?" is something every man feels entitled to ask you, whether he is your husband, or the man who takes your ticket, or your boss at work.)

## **The revolutionary perspective**

If we start from this analysis we can see the revolutionary implications of the demand for wages for housework. It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us.

To ask for wages for housework will by itself undermine the expectations society has of us, since these expectations – the essence of our socialisation – are all functional to our wageless condition in the home.

In this sense, it is absurd to compare the struggle of women for

wages to the struggle of male workers in the factory for more wages. The waged worker in struggling for more wages challenges his social role but remains within it. When we struggle for wages we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role. In the same way there is a qualitative difference between the struggles of the waged worker and the struggles of the slave for a wage against that slavery. It should be clear, however, that when we struggle for a wage we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them. We struggle to break capital's plan for women, which is an essential moment of that planned division of labour and social power within the working class, through which capital has been able to maintain its power. Wages for housework, then, is a revolutionary demand not because by itself it destroys capital, but because it attacks capital and forces it to restructure social relations in terms more favourable to us and consequently more favourable to the unity of the class. In fact, to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity.

Against any accusation of 'economism' we should remember that money is capital, i.e. it is the power to command labour. Therefore to reappropriate that money which is the fruit of our labour – of our mothers' and grandmothers' labour – means at the same time to undermine capital's power to command forced labour from us. And we should not distrust the power of the wage in demystifying our femaleness and making visible our work – our femaleness as work – since the lack of a wage has been so powerful in shaping this role and hiding our work. To demand wages for housework is to make it visible that our minds, bodies and emotions have all been distorted for a specific function, in a specific function, and then have been thrown back at us as a model to which we should all conform if we want to be accepted as women in this society.

To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking. At the same time, it shows that we have cooked, smiled, fucked throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice. Our faces have become distorted from so much smiling, our feelings have got lost from so much loving, our oversexualisation has left us completely desexualised.

Wages for housework is only the beginning, but its message is clear: from now on they have to pay us because as females we do not guarantee anything any longer. We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create what will be our sexuality which we have never known. And from the viewpoint of work we can ask not one wage but many wages, because we have been forced into many jobs at once. We are housemaids, prostitutes, nurses, shrinks; this is the essence of the 'heroic' spouse who is celebrated on 'Mother's Day'. We say: stop celebrating our exploitation, our supposed heroism. From now on we want money for each moment of it, so that we can refuse some of it and eventually all of it. In this respect nothing can be more effective than to show that our female virtues have a calculable money value, until today only for capital, increased in the measure that we were defeated; from now on against capital for us in the measure we organise our power.

## **The struggle for social services**

This is the most radical perspective we can adopt because although we can ask for everything, day care, equal pay, free laundromats, we will never achieve any real change unless we attack our female role at its roots. Our struggle for social services, i.e. for better working conditions, will always be frustrated if we do not first establish that our work is work. Unless we struggle against the totality of it we will never achieve victories with respect to any of its moments. We will fail in the struggle for the free laundromats unless we first struggle against the fact that we cannot love except at the

price of endless work, which day after day cripples our bodies, our sexuality, our social relations, unless we first escape the blackmail whereby our need to give and receive affection is turned against us as a work duty for which we constantly feel resentful against our husbands, children and friends, and guilty for that resentment. Getting a second job does not change that role, as years and years of female work outside the house still witness. The second job not only increases our exploitation, but simply reproduces our role in different forms. Wherever we turn we can see that the jobs women perform are mere extensions of the housewife condition in all its implications. That is, not only do we become nurses, maids, teachers, secretaries-all functions for which we are well-trained in the home-but we are in the same bind that hinders our struggles in the home: isolation, the fact that other people's lives depend on us, or the impossibility to see where our work begins and ends, where our work ends and our desires begin. Is bringing coffee to your boss and chatting with him about his marital problems secretarial work or is it a personal favour? Is the fact that we have to worry about our looks on the job a condition of work or is it the result of female vanity? (Until recently airline stewardesses in the United States were periodically weighed and had to be constantly on a diet-a torture that all women know-for fear of being laid off.) As is often said – when the needs of the waged labour market require her presence there – A woman can do any job without losing her femininity,' which simply means that no matter what you do you are still a cunt.

As for the proposal of socialisation and collectivisation of housework, a couple of examples will be sufficient to draw a line between these alternatives and our perspective. It is one thing to set up a day care centre the way we want it, and demand that the State pay for it. It is quite another thing to deliver our children to the State and ask the State to control them, discipline them, teach them to honour the American flag not for five hours, but for fifteen or twenty-four hours. It is one thing to organise communally the way we want to eat (by ourselves, in groups, etc.) and then ask the State to pay for it, and it is the opposite thing to ask the State to organise our meals. In one case we regain some control over our lives, in the other we extend the State's control over us.

## The struggle against housework

Some women say: how is wages for housework going to change the attitudes of our husbands towards us? Won't our husbands still expect the same duties as before and even more than before once we are paid for them? But these women do not see that they can expect so much from us precisely because we are not paid for our work, because they assume that it is 'a woman's thing' which does not cost us much effort. Men are able to accept our services and take pleasure in them because they presume that housework is easy for us, that we enjoy it because we do it for their love. They actually expect us to be grateful because by marrying us or living with us they have given us the opportunity to express ourselves as women (i.e. to serve them), 'You are lucky you have found a man like me'. Only when men see our work as work-our love as work-and most important our determination to refuse both, will they change their attitude towards us. When hundreds and thousands of women are in the streets saying that endless cleaning, being always emotionally available, fucking at command for fear of losing our jobs is hard, hated work which wastes our lives, then they will be scared and feel undermined as men.

But this is the best thing that can happen from their own point of view, because by exposing the way capital has kept us divided (capital has disciplined them through us and us through them-each other, against each other), we – their crutches, their slaves, their chains – open the process of their liberation. In this sense wages for housework will be much more educational than trying to prove that we can work as well as them, that we can do the same jobs. We leave this worthwhile effort to the 'career woman', the woman who escapes from her oppression not through the power of unity and struggle, but through the power of the master, the power to oppress-usually other women. And we don't have to prove that we can "break the blue collar barrier". A lot of us broke that barrier a long time ago and have discovered that the overalls did not give us more power than the apron; if possible even less, because now we had to wear both and had less time and energy to struggle against them. The things we have to prove are our capacity to expose what we are

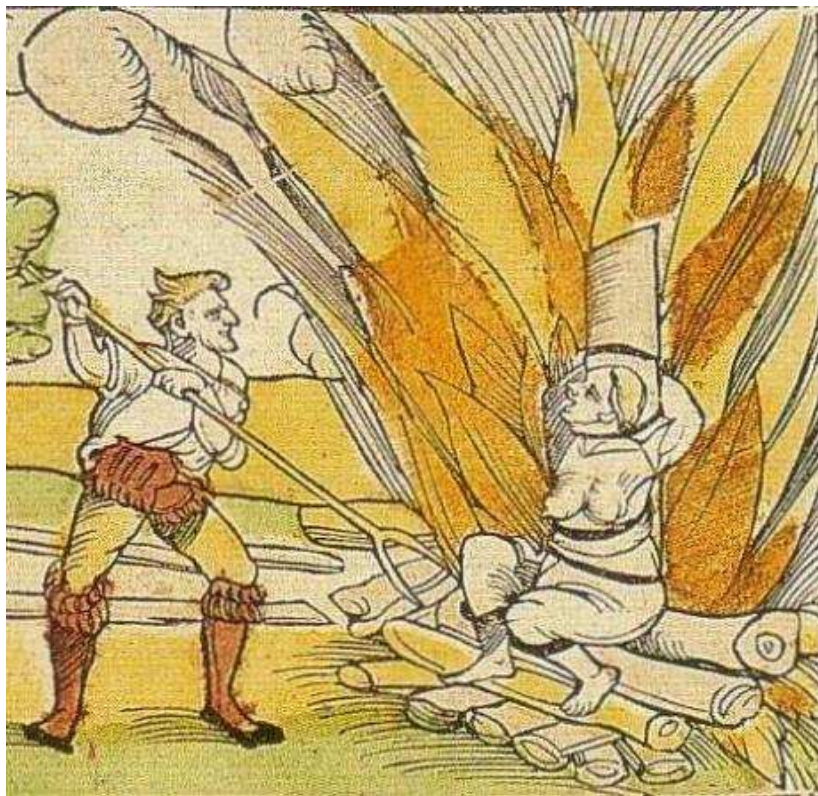
already doing, what capital is doing to us and our power in the struggle against it.

Unfortunately, many women-particularly single women-are afraid of the perspective of wages for housework because they are afraid of identifying even for a second with the housewife. They know that this is the most powerless position in society and so they do not want to realise that they are housewives too. This is precisely their weakness, a weakness which is maintained and perpetuated through the lack of self-identification.

We want and have to say that we are all housewives, we are all prostitutes and we are all gay, because until we recognise our slavery we cannot recognise our struggle against it, because as long as we think we are something better, something different than a housewife, we accept the logic of the master, which is a logic of division, and for us the logic of slavery. We are all housewives because no matter where we are they can always count on more work from us, more fear on our side to put forward our demands, and less pressure on them for money, since hopefully our minds are directed elsewhere, to that man in our present or our future who will "take care of us".

And we also delude ourselves that we can escape housework. But how many of us, in spite of working outside the house, have escaped it? And can we really so easily disregard the idea of living with a man? What if we lose our jobs? What about ageing and losing even the minimal amount of power that youth (productivity) and attractiveness (female productivity) afford us today? And what about children? Will we ever regret having chosen not to have them, not even having been able to realistically ask that question? And can we afford gay relations? Are we willing to pay the possible price of isolation and exclusion? But can we really afford relations with men?

The question is: why are these our only alternatives and what kind of struggle will move us beyond them?



# Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation

## *Upping the Anti*

Ending women's oppression is crucial to the struggle for human liberation, but serious investigations of why women suffer distinct forms of oppression, and why rape and other forms of violence play such an integral role in this oppression, have generally been beyond the scope of most left analysis.

Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* is a welcome addition to a growing list of works that address the oppression of women from an anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist perspective. Federici's historical analysis brings previously "invisible" (at

least, to those who don't experience them) forms of oppression and resistance to light, exposing the subjugation and oppression of women as central not only to capitalist history, but also to our unfinished quest to find a way out of it. Medieval "women's struggles" were not separate from "class struggles" (any more than they are today); rather, they were class struggles in their own right. Gender, Federici stresses, "should be treated as a specification of class relations".

*Caliban and the Witch* is both a history of the making of the European working class and a re-telling of the birth of capitalism that places women at the center of the story. It is not only instructive, but also a joy to read. Rich in anecdote, oftentimes exciting and moving, this is one of those books that makes history come alive. Due to spatial constraints, this review will not be able to touch on all of the ground covered by Federici (her chapter about how capitalism changed people's understanding and experience of their own bodies in particular would require an entire separate article to do it justice).

Instead, this review will follow Federici's core argument that "primitive accumulation" involved not only the accumulation of wealth and "free" workers, but also the accumulation of hierarchies within the working class itself. With mixed results, she attempts to show how this process continues to this day, especially in the neo-colonies. As she makes clear, the transition to capitalism was neither smooth nor natural, but was built upon the institutionalization of male violence against women.

Federici's narrative begins in Europe's High Middle Ages (1000-1300 AD). The ruling class at that time consisted of the Church and the various warlords who formed a continental military caste known as the nobility. Most people were serfs: peasants who were tied to "their" plot of land, and who were forced to labour under the authority of the lord.

Contrary to popular belief, this was a world in revolt, where the poor were gaining ground and the ruling class was on the defensive. Serfdom would eventually be abolished, not as a result of aristocratic benevolence, but in reaction to struggles by the serfs themselves – not only using the covert "weapons of the weak"<sup>2</sup> (such as sabotage, foot dragging, theft, etc.), but also through organized armed religious-political movements that swept across the continent. These "heretical sects" attracted hundreds of thousands of people, and openly called for a classless society, often specifically rejecting gender hierarchies as well as hierarchies of wealth. Not surprisingly, many of those who banded together and took up arms, in



what Federici describes as “the first proletarian international,” were women.

The heretical sects were the main organized resistance to feudalism, and the seriousness of their challenge kept on intensifying until, in the early fifteenth century, it took the form of actual warfare. At the same time, there was an acute labour shortage, an effect of the plague that had killed off a third of the population one hundred years earlier. This fact in particular gave workers and peasants the upper hand in determining their labour’s worth, and so wages skyrocketed, doubling and even tripling, while prices, rents and the length of the work day all dropped. As the old feudal economy faltered, self-sufficient communities began to form.

Federici argues convincingly that capitalism, rather than evolving out of a mature feudal economy, was a radical counter-measure to the social forces that had arisen to challenge the feudal system, a wild ruling class gambit to maintain class rule: “Capitalism,” she argues, “was the counter-revolution that destroyed the possibilities that had emerged from the anti-feudal struggle – possibilities which, if realized, might have spared us the immense destruction of lives and the natural environment that had marked the advance of capitalist relations worldwide.”<sup>3</sup> Class warfare repeatedly forced the Church and nobility to retreat, resorting to defensive maneuvers to maintain their power. All too often, however, these maneuvers only laid the basis for more advanced forms of exploitation and left the ruling class in a position to regain the upper hand. One way this happened was by manipulating differences within the working class, by intensifying the exploitation of some sections in order to reduce pressure on, or even buy off, other sections. (These strategies of social bribery and division have played out time and time again within our own recent history, along the fault-lines of race, sex and nation.) Federici traces the ways in which “hierarchies built upon gender, as well as ‘race’ and age, become constitutive of class rule, and the formation of the modern proletariat.”

With the ruling class pushed to the brink by widespread class revolt and the effects of the plague, opportunism and division amongst the oppressed proved crucial to ruling class efforts to hold on to power. Federici details how male workers’ rebelliousness was channeled into sexual violence, with women’s bodies serving as a diversion and safety valve to relieve social pressure that would otherwise have been directed at the ruling class. Drawing on Jacques Rossiaud’s research about prostitution in fifteenth century France,<sup>4</sup> she describes a literal rape movement, whereby sexual assaults on poor women were now tolerated

and essentially decriminalized by the authorities. At the same time, state-run brothels were established where the masses of poor landless women could earn the money necessary for their survival.

Rossiaud interprets the mass raping of women as a form of class protest, the rapists often believing that their victims – often maids, servants, or washerwomen – were having sex with their masters, and were therefore deserving of punishment. This is one of the most intriguing assertions of *Caliban and the Witch*, even though only a page or so was spent discussing it. Neither the internet nor most standard works on medieval women discuss this, so, considering that Federici describes this as both a *decriminalization* of rape and as a ruling class *strategy*, she needs to provide more information about the previous legal situation, as well as evidence that this was a thought-out plan. This is an area where it is difficult to distinguish between documented developments and Federici's particular interpretation of them.

Simultaneous to this rape movement, a similar dynamic was playing out in regards to women's labour. In this, too, crafts*men* played a key role – campaigning to exclude women from their workshops, claiming that they were working for lower wages. This complaint, still heard in anti-immigrant campaigns today, as well as in the right-wing of the anti-globalization movement, should be understood as one set of ambitious workers trying to increase the price of their skills (their wages) by limiting the labour supply through the exclusion (and, incidentally, the impoverishment) of another set of workers. When people depended more and more on money to acquire the necessities of life, women's ability to earn this money was increasingly curtailed to the benefit of the men of their class.

Federici explains how “it was from this alliance between the crafts and the urban authorities, along with the continuing privatization of land, that a new sexual division of labour [...] was forged, defining women in terms – mothers, wives, daughters, widows – that hid their status as workers, while giving men free access to women's bodies, their labour, and the bodies and labour of their children.”

As German feminist Maria Mies remarks in her 1986 book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, “[t]he process of proletarianization of the men was... accompanied by a process of housewifization of women.”

One part of Federici's argument that bears reflection upon is her insistence that in oppressing proletarian women male workers were in fact

acting against their own interests. Federici argues that the “state-backed raping of poor women undermined the class solidarity that had been achieved in the anti-feudal struggle,” and that “the devaluation and feminization of reproductive labour was a disaster also for male workers, for the devaluation of reproductive labour inevitably devalued its product: labour-power.”

Because there is no explicit discussion of the nature of class in the book – beyond her promising observation that gender can be a specification of class relations – it is difficult to know Federici’s rationale for claiming that these opportunistic acts were against men’s interests. Perhaps she believes that, since men’s alienation and exploitation can only be solved by revolution, any behaviour that works against this goal is not in their interest; in this sense it might be said that although this opportunism was in their *personal* interests it remained against their *class* interests. This formulation, however, becomes unwieldy when we insist on taking gender as a “specification of class,” and unconvincing when we are given no evidence of male resistance to women’s subjugation. Men, it seems, often collabourated in the new mechanisms of exploitation and oppression, so that, like race today, gender in these instances appears to have been *the most important* specification of class.

Perhaps one way to untie this knot is to acknowledge that men must also have been warped by this process – becoming more sexist, less respectful of the women in their community, more prone to dismiss, to degrade, to beat and to rape. So while the abstract, genderless, ideal “worker” may have suffered as a result of these attacks on women, the new male worker was served by the increasing subordination of women – which in no way lessens the scale of this historic human tragedy.

Looking back, these attacks on working class women in the fifteenth century appear as signs of things to come. The ruling class continued to be driven to more and more desperate measures, and it was in these increasingly violent and “radical” developments that we can see the appearance of what we would now call “primitive accumulation.” This process built on and exacerbated the oppression of women, so that “an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class ... become constitutive of class rule, and the formation of the modern proletariat.”

Just a couple of hundred years after the plague, the labour shortage that continued into the sixteenth century was exacerbated by a new decrease

in the population (probably due to the increased poverty as the gains of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were undone). This was the era of the capitalist counter-revolution, and yet the fledgling capitalist class, though it could produce cloth and steel, could not produce the labour it needed.

Federici agrees with Maria Mies that two of the greatest crimes of that age were committed in order to find a way around this crisis: the witch hunt in Europe and the mass kidnapping and enslavement of Africans.

While Federici does not deal with the effects of the slave trade on gender relations within Africa, and only touches upon the way in which ideas of male and female power developed amongst African slaves in the “New World,” she does note that “capitalism may not even have taken off without Europe’s ‘annexation of America,’ and the ‘blood and sweat’ that for two centuries flowed to Europe from the plantation.”

What Federici concentrates on, rather, is the war against women in Europe, the hammer of housewifization which “degraded maternity to the status of forced labour”.

European men had been burning witches since the fifteenth century, but this had originally just been one part of the campaigns against the heretics. In the sixteenth century, the persecution of witches went from the margins to the center of this campaign, and the accusations changed from being primarily about religious beliefs to a new focus on sexual perversion, infanticide and reproduction. By the seventeenth century, as many as 100,000 women had been killed, and just as many more had their lives ruined by the accusation.<sup>5</sup> Federici characterizes this as a politically motivated war against women: what had to be destroyed was “the *female personality* that had developed, especially among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle against feudal power, when women had been in the forefront of the heretical movements, often organizing in female associations, posing a growing challenge to male authority and the Church.”

Federici does us the service of locating this mass murder within the context of a growing misogyny that accompanied the rise of capitalism. Prostitution was now criminalized so as to punish the woman but hardly touch the male customer, the word “gossip” (which had meant “female friend” previously) now took on disparaging meaning, and new levels of male hostility forced women indoors, for to be seen walking the streets

without a male escort was to risk insult or attack. And at the same time as “witches” were being publicly tortured and killed, governments across Europe were passing laws against contraception, abortion, adultery, and especially infanticide – all of which were punishable by death.

All of these changes worked in tandem, snuffing out centuries of rebellion and resistance to class rule, and ending “a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women’s power in pre-capitalist Europe, and the condition for their resistance in the struggle against feudalism”.

In the final chapter of *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici makes her most ambitious claim, that the witch hunt was not just a European phenomenon, but also stretched across the Americas as conquistadors and pilgrims sought to break indigenous women’s power here. Relying on Irene Silverblatt’s *Moon, Sun, and Witches* and Luciano Parinetto’s *Streghe e Potere*, Federici argues that the colonization of the “New” World in many ways mirrored the proletarianization and housewifization that confronted men and women in Europe.

It is here that Federici’s argument falters. Silverblatt and Parinetto both seem to limit their studies to the colonization of modern-day Peru and Mexico by Spain – not a wide enough sample to draw any kind of solid conclusions about the experience of indigenous victims of colonialism around the world. In her book *The Military Strategy of Women and Children*, Amazon theorist Butch Lee has shown that colonialism involves a war against women, and that breaking indigenous women’s power is key to capitalist expansion, but Federici’s suggestion that the witch-hunt was *the* model for this process seems unnecessarily narrow, and potentially misleading.

Even more problematically, Federici’s analysis of colonialism comes across as inconsistent and underdeveloped (at 25 pages, the chapter is the shortest in the book). The end result is that even the most obvious specificities of colonialism (apart from super-exploitation) are glossed over, giving the impression that indigenous peoples are different from the European proletariat only insofar as they may have been more or less successful in resisting capitalist rule. Genocide itself is subsumed into the relationship between capital and labour, as when the annihilation of indigenous nations – which is described as a Holocaust – is explained as “work, disease and disciplinary punishments” killing two thirds of the

indigenous population. It is painful to try to fit the extermination of entire peoples into such a small conceptual box.

Noting this, one wonders about the virtual absence of Jews and Moslems from Federici's account. It has been established that relations between Christendom and these groups were also thoroughly gendered. Pogroms, the crusades, legal codes which proscribed the death penalty for any Christian woman found guilty of miscegenation, the oversexualized Christian stereotypes about Jews, the use of rape in warfare... all of this is mentioned only in passing, if at all. Agreeing with Federici's observation that primitive accumulation necessitates the accumulation of hierarchies within the proletariat, one is left wondering how the imposition of hierarchies of "race" played out in the European subcontinent.

*Caliban and the Witch* is, I must emphasize, an extremely useful resource which can be applied not only to the history of European women, but also sheds needed light on the question of patriarchy and capitalism in the neo-colonies today. But to do so, readers need to use both their imagination and their critical sense, and the book should definitely not stand alone. To get the most out of Federici's work, I would strongly suggest people also check out Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Butch Lee's *The Military Strategy of Women and Children*, and the growing body of literature examining how capitalism either uses or introduces patriarchy to those societies it colonizes. J. Sakai's *Settlers: Mythology of the White Proletariat* (which does not deal with gender) and Butch Lee and Red Rover's *Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain* (which does deal with gender) are also worth reading for the light they shine on the question of how classes are made and unmade, and the role of parasitism and opportunism (which capitalism teaches us to call "ambition") in this process.

Despite its weaknesses, *Caliban and the Witch* promises to become a classic. By showing how men's subjugation of women has played a crucial role in the imposition of more advanced forms of exploitation, Federici provides us with the evidence necessary to draw our own conclusions about class, and about class collaboration.

It is only by facing the hard truths of our present and our past that we can perhaps finally reconstitute a resistance movement that tolerates no hierarchy and accepts no exploitation, demanding – at a minimum – liberation for all.



# ESSAYS BY AUTONOMIST SILVIA FEDERICI

1. **Sexuality as Work**
2. **Precarious Labor: A feminist viewpoint**
3. **Feminism, finance and the future of #Occupy**
4. **Wages against Housework**
5. *Review of **Caliban and the Witch***

