

Interview with Silvia Federici

Matthew Carlin and Silvia Federici: The Exploitation of Women, Social Reproduction, and the Struggle Against Global Capital

Silvia Federici is a feminist activist, teacher and writer. She was one of the founders of the International Feminist Collective, the organization that launched the Campaign for Wages For Housework. She is the author of many essays on political philosophy, feminist theory, cultural studies, and education. Her published works include: *Revolution at Point Zero*. Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle (September 2012); *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004); *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African Universities* (2000, co-editor). *Enduring Western Civilization: The Construction of Western Civilization and its "Others"* (1994 editor). Silvia Federici is Emerita. Professor at Hofstra University (Hempstead, New York).

Matthew Carlin teaches and works in Mexico and New York City. His work revolves around questions concerning politics and aesthetics in Latin America, with specific attention given to the relationship between material and visual culture, the State, and social change.

Abstract [insert 100-word abstract here]

In this interview the work of philosopher and activist Silvia Federici is discussed. Topics include: primitive accumulation and the exploitation of women; domestic work; the concept of reproduction; and resistance to global capitalism. Among many things, Federici argues that in order to effectively resist the continued exploitation of women and the devaluation of the activities by which our lives and labor-force are reproduced, we must create new forms of communalization that not only establish some distance between ourselves and the market/state nexus, but allow us to create the kinds of solidarity necessary for re-appropriating the resources that we reproduce.

Introduction

Silvia Federici is a feminist. However, her work is located at the intersection of a number of different theoretical trajectories, including Marxism, Italian Operaism, anti-colonial theory, which prohibit any simple reduction of her work to any one person or political movement.

It is certainly true that her research and thought stand alone. However, what makes her presence in academic circles particularly important today is not merely her writing but also her activism and political work dedicated to the defense of collective and communal forms of life that resist the violent and catastrophic effects of neo-liberal capitalism.

At the forefront of much of her early writings and activism was the question of domestic work that, she argued, is the central site for the reproduction of the basic conditions of everyday life - an issue whose importance to anti-capitalist struggle achieved a critical visibility with the Wages for Housework Movement (WFH) of the 1970's which Federici helped to found.

Most frequently identified with the work of Selma James and Maria Della Costa, the Wages for Housework Movement of the 1970's was founded on the assumption that the roots of women's oppression are to be found in women's position in the capitalist organization of work as unpaid domestic workers, and in the unequal sexual division of labor constructed on the differential between waged and unwaged work. Most important, WFH argued that domestic work (including child-raising, sexual work) - deemed ancillary by the Left - is necessary to the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist social relations because it is work that produces labor-power. At the crux of the WFH reinterpretation of labor was also a new analysis of the wage relation, focusing on the differential between waged and unwaged labor as the root of the labor hierarchies in capitalism. The politics of WFH, then, were in stark contrast with those of Socialist Feminism, which traced gender based discrimination to the exclusion of women from industrial labor.

It was her confrontation with the question of 'reproduction' and her own life experience, growing up in Italy in the post WWII period, that provided the impetus for the development of Federici's political and intellectual work. Theoretically, Federici's interest in reproduction also resulted from her engagement with Marx and with the Italian Operaist movement. However, Federici's indebtedness to both should not be overstated as much of her work criticizes the Marxist tradition for its privileging of industrial labor and the industrial proletariat as the terrain and subject of revolutionary activity. Also of importance in Silvia's growth as a philosopher and activist was her coming to the United States in the late 60's, and her activism in the student movement where she was introduced to the civil right movement and the struggle for black power.

Federici's interest in the reproduction of labor power is not unique being shared, as we have seen, with other members of WFH. However, what is unique in Federici's approach is that she has applied the analysis of reproduction forged by WFH to a reinterpretation of Marx's concept of "primitive accumulation" which, in her account, includes not only the expropriation of workers from their land but the expropriation, capture and use of women's bodies by capital and the state in the process of capitalist development. In other words, for Federici, the 'enclosure' of the communal lands, at the dawn of capitalist development, was accompanied by the enclosure, i.e. the expropriation, of women's bodies, which turned women into machines for the production of labor power.

Federici's discussion of the ways in which capitalism turned women's bodies into means of production of a global work-force is most concisely developed in her most famous work: *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, a book that makes us reconsider the entire history of capitalism. Here the history of the hundreds of thousands of women tortured and burned as witches at the hands of church and state during the 15th to 18th centuries takes on a renewed significance. It demonstrates how the demonization of women's control over their reproductive capacity, and the subsequent violence unleashed against them, was absolutely necessary for global capitalism to emerge. This work also forces us to reconsider the history of bio-politics and the significance that Michel Foucault granted to the 18th century as the time of the emergence of new forms of population control. As Federici points out, it is startling to consider that a scholar so attuned to the workings of power on the body and the development of disciplinary regimes could have been so blind to one of the most deliberate, sustained, and horrific attacks on the body that had ever occurred in any part of the world : the

European witch-hunt.

Federici's work, then, shows how women and men have had different histories in the development of capitalism. Instead of focusing on the conditions that gave rise to the creation of a waged labor force made up primarily of men, it shows that women were never 'liberated' to the wage, that 'primitive accumulation' began with a major attack on women's bodies, and to a new patriarchal form which she describes as the "patriarchy of the wage", as well as to a new division of labor that completely devalued reproductive work.

It is because of their structural devaluation of human life, that Federici challenges the Marxian idea that the development of capitalism and the process of industrialization may serve as a precondition for the liberation of humanity. The history of women in capitalism – she argues – like the history of slavery, precludes such assumption, and confirms that first on our political agenda must be the transcendence of capitalist relations.

In conclusion, readers and listeners of Federici will find in her more recent work the same passion, determination, and theoretical rigour that one found in her writings that emerged in the context of the Wages for Housework Movement in the early 1970's. In both, there is a vigorous critique of capitalist exploitative social relations that have become ubiquitous under neo-liberalism, and an unwavering commitment to raise consciousness about the dynamics of domestic work, which she describes as both the site for the fortification of market values, and (potentially) as a site for the creation of another existence fundamentally at odds with it.

Carlin: Much of your work has centered around clarifying the link between the establishment and subsequent expansion of capitalism and the degradation of women -specifically how the reproduction of the work force inherently depends on the exploitation of women's labor and bodies. In spite of your work on this topic in the books *Caliban and the Witch*, as well as your collection of essays in *Revolution at Point Zero*, the issue pertaining to the relationship between capitalism and the exploitation of women has (at best) remained ancillary, and (at worst) has been completely neglected within the vast majority of contemporary analyses of global capitalism.

First, how might you explain this omission? Secondly, why do you think it is imperative for any effective resistance to global capitalism to understand the gendered dynamics of the accumulation of capital and the reproduction of labor today?

Federici: Actually, several feminist writers have analyzed the relationship between global capitalism and the exploitation of women. Think of Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopolda Fortunati, Nancy Hartsock. There are also eco-feminists, like Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Ariel Salleh, who have shown that there is a connection between the way in which capitalism has freely appropriated women's labor and the way in which it has appropriated the wealth of nature: lands, seas, forests, all treated as free resources to be used, destroyed, even exhausted without any thought of the social and ecological cost involved. A growing number of marxist political economists and historians as well - like David McNally, Massimo De Angelis, Peter Linebaugh - is also recognizing the strategic importance of reproductive work in the restructuring of the global economy and the need to go beyond Marx on this account.

There are many reasons why it is important to bring special attention to the exploitation of women in capitalist society. First, it is crucial to establish that 'sexism' has a material basis and is not simply a matter of 'culture.' Moreover, women are -still - the main subjects of the reproduction of the work-force, which is the activity that sustains the entire organization of work in capitalist society. By analyzing how capitalism exploits women and the models of femininity, gender and family relations that it promotes, we gain crucial insights concerning the changes in the capitalist organization of work and the labor-market and the struggles that women are making on this terrain. Looking at capitalism from the viewpoint of 'women' and 'reproduction' we can also see the profound crisis of social reproduction which is confronting us, in every part of the world, and recognize that it is not accidental, that capitalism must devalue the activities by which our lives and the labor-force are reproduced, which is why it continuously creates underclasses that perform these activities without any remuneration and under conditions that make their exploitation invisible and naturalized.

As important as bringing attention to the exploitation of women in capitalism, and the deepening crisis in social reproduction that we are witnessing worldwide, is documenting the struggles women are making against it. Because their means of reproduction are being destroyed and because they are those most responsible for the reproduction of their communities women are leading in the effort to create cooperative forms of reproduction, enabling them to survive despite their very limited access to monetary income. This has been the case especially in South America, where in response to economic and political repression since the 1990s, women have 'collectivized' reproductive work and created forms of subsistence that have given them some autonomy from the state and the market. A powerful description of these activities can be found in Raúl Zibechi's *Territories in Resistance* which describes the many cooperative forms of reproduction (*comedores populares*, urban gardens, shopping, sowing, cooking committees) women in Chile, Peru, Argentina have created to support their families, in this process transforming reproductive work and their relation to their families.

Carlin: In your answer you refer to reproduction. In fact, reproduction is a theme that runs throughout your work, and serves as the point around which you analyze both the history of capitalism and its current neo-liberal form. In your answer above you seem to pose two forms of reproduction against one another: the capitalist reproduction of the workforce and the concomitant exploitation of women's bodies; and women's reproduction in terms of the workforce and communal forms of socio-cultural life.

Can you explain exactly what you mean by "reproduction" and how it relates to capitalism and the exploitation of women?

Federici: By "reproduction" or better by reproductive work I refer to the complex of activities, relations, and institutions that in capitalism produce and reproduce labor-power, that is people's capacity to work. These include domestic work, child raising, sex work as well as subsistence forms of farming that in many countries are an integral part of housework. However, labor-power does not have an independent existence. As Marx already pointed out, it only subsists in living individuals. Therefore, reproductive work has a double character; it is at the same time the reproduction of the individual and the reproduction of labor-power, and this duality is often the site of a conflict, which has been very important for women to recognize. As I have often pointed out, it was important for us to recognize that in capitalism the reproduction of individuals has

been subsumed (though never completely) to the production of workers for the labor market. This has enabled us to disentangle activities that are necessary for the development of our capacities from the activities that are instrumental to the preparation of workers for exploitation. This distinction, this disentanglement has allowed us to see that we can refuse “housework,” or part of it, without necessarily undermining the well-being of the people we care for, because much domestic work is the work of being a disciplinarian, the work of reducing expectations. From this point of view, the challenge is to transform reproductive work from work that reproduces people for the market to work that reproduces them for the struggle.

Recognizing that reproductive work in capitalism is work that reproduces labor-power also enables us to see that domestic/ family/sexual/ relations are ‘relations of production.’ That is, they are shaped by the logic of capitalist production. This means that the production of a particular type of worker requires a particular type of family etc. This recognition too has had a liberating effect; it has enabled us to understand that much of the misery of family life is generated by the constraints under which the family operates, and its function in the social assembly line.

Carlin: It seems to me that the increasing commercialization and quantification of everyday life, that are a product of the capitalist desire to extract profit from every waking hour of our lives, indicate a de-feminization of socio-cultural life, a further devaluation of women's lives and work. Expanding *maquiladora* zones in Mexico where the murders of women have become commonplace, the suicides of women in Niger or Bangladesh who are unable to repay their World Bank loans, and the fact that women are forced to leave their children in Nairobi, Manila, and Central and South America to find work in European or American cities stand out as examples. Your book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* explains that, from the get-go, the emergence of capitalism was bound to the denigration, torture, and murder of women beginning with the “witch” burnings and the associated formation of a proletariat in the late middle ages. In what ways do you see a connection between the contemporary violence against women and the rise of neo-liberal capitalism? Is this the product of an overall defeminization of socio-cultural life, or is something else at work here?

Federici: I think that different factors are involved, interconnected and with antecedents in previous periods of ‘primitive accumulation.’ First (but not necessarily in order of importance) there is the capitalist need to control women’s bodies and reproductive capacity, which are the main force of production—production of labor-power, production of workers. It is important here to remember that the restructuring of the world economy, that has taken place with the advent of neo-liberalism, was a political response to the truly revolutionary cycle of struggle that peaked in the ‘60s, especially with the anti-colonial struggle, that expressed the demand for a new world system and a global redistribution of wealth.

Not surprisingly, a key aspect of this response by international capital has been a program of ‘population control,’ attempting to reduce the number of children women in the former colonies procreate. This ‘population control’ program has been conducted with a maximum of violence. No effort has been spared in the ‘80s and ‘90s to sterilize women, to make them use contraceptives they could not control (from Depo-Provera to Norplant) no matter how sick they made them. In many rural regions, international agencies with the complicity of local governments would wait for the months between the harvesting of crops, when people could be expected to be starving, to ‘convince’ women to accept sterilization in exchange for a handful of

grains. That today we see a good part of the capitalist class—especially in the US—opposing contraception should not deceive us, nor should it be attributed simply to ‘religious motivations.’ The fact is that the danger of revolution has passed and the world population, especially in the former colonial world, is already declining because of war, emigration, hunger and disease. Indeed, structural adjustment and the politics of ‘economic liberalization’ and ‘globalization’ are a form of sterilization, as they are causing an immense destruction to human life, of the environment, and are producing a decline of life expectancy. Actually, life expectancy, for low-income people, is declining also in the US and Europe, especially among women. In the US, for instance, it is calculated that women with low income levels and low levels of formal education can now expect to live five years less than their mother.

Another example of ‘population control’—in this case camouflaged as concern for life- comes again from the US, where according to a recent report (issued on January 25, 2013, by the *Journal of Health Politics, Policies and Law*), being pregnant for low income/ black women is a risky condition, that puts them outside of constitutional boundaries, exposed to the possibility of being arrested for forms of behavior that would never expose other people to criminalization. Some women, for instance, have been arrested, when in a car accident, after telling the police they were pregnant, presumably for recklessly exposing the fetus they were carrying to danger. Meanwhile, in Tennessee has become the first state that will jail women and charge them with aggravated assault if they use drugs during pregnancies.

A second cause of institutional violence, less visible but equally damaging, results from the assault that is being waged on the means of reproduction available to communities, by the World Bank, the IMF and all forms of corporate capital, through cuts in employment, in services and other welfare provisions, and through the drive to eliminate subsistence agriculture. In societies which have been demonetized and, in many instances, live off the remittances sent by those who have migrated, subsistence farming and trading—activities mostly done by women—are essential to the survival of thousands of people. Yet, no effort is being spared to put an end to such practices. I believe that there is a direct connection between the World Bank’s drive to privatize communal lands and put an end to and devalue subsistence farming and the return of witch-hunting in several parts of the world, like Africa, India, more recently Papua New Guinea—a persecution that has already cost the lives of thousands of women. The attack on people’s means of subsistence is by itself a form of violence. In most cases it requires the use of direct physical violence, the use of thugs, death squads, paramilitary organizations, and of course war and imprisonment. It is also significant that the number of women incarcerated in the US, from the mid-1970s to present, has increased by 700 percent, mainly due to the increase in economic ‘crimes’ women have resorted to in order to survive.

To the institutional violence against women we must add the violence inflicted on them by individual men, mostly family members. Men take out on women their anger for their loss of economic power, and their reduced capacity to command women’s labor and conduct. They also respond to the fact that women are asserting their autonomy and prefer to live alone and even raise children alone rather than being in a subordinate position. Add that many men use women’s bodies as a means to enrich themselves and gain access the commodities market, which requires an immense amount of violence. Key examples are the phenomenon of the ‘dowry murders’ in India, the production of ‘snuff’ and other violent forms of pornography, and the violence that

permeates the sex industry. Violence against women has increased across the world. We have heard of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of women who have disappeared and have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez and other towns at the border between the US and Mexico, as well as in Guatemala at the hands of dismissed Contra forces. But these are not isolated cases. It is important to add that, as Jules Falquet has noted, the creation of a state of permanent warfare in much of the world, and the growing militarization of everyday life have enormously increased the number of men who make a living by the exercise of violence, as guards, soldiers, paramilitaries, and encouraged the celebration of aggressive forms of masculinity that have certainly contributed to the violence against women.

Carlin: For me, one of the extremely important aspects of your work is that you talk and write about reproduction in a way that allows your audience to make sense of it on an everyday level. In other words, the way you speak of reproduction shows that the valorization of competition, quantification, appropriation, and the logic of profit endemic to contemporary capitalism make their way into other spheres of everyday life that often appear to exist separately from the work place. What seems to be particularly important here is your argument that the struggle against the violence of capital cannot be successful unless we also reorganize our private lives. In your essay “Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation” you state “... breaking down the isolation of life in a private home is not only a precondition for meeting our most basic needs and increasing our power with regard to employers and the state. ...but is also a protection from ecological disaster.” Can you provide some examples of how you envision such a transformation of everyday life taking place (including that of a private home) and how this is linked with the struggle against neo-liberal global capitalism and the ecological disaster that now confronts us?

Federici: This is a very important issue. Isolation, loneliness, segregation by age, as well as by race and class, are today poisoning our lives and adding to the misery caused by economic insecurity, the ecological degradation of our environment and the anguish of living in a society that is on a constant war path and undergoing a process of militarization that affects every aspect of our lives. Focusing in particular on the misery that results from the privatization of our lives, we can see that this too has many aspects, but certainly the organization of the space/s in which we live contributes greatly to it. Everything has been done to ensure that our reproduction occurs in ways that discourages collective relations and cooperation. In my writings I often quote the work of the feminist urban planner Dolores Hayden. In a number of books, now classics, she has reconstructed the initiatives by which, in the post-war period, in the US, suburbia was created, and the political intent behind it, which was to disperse workers, to ensure they would not congregate after work and possibly indulge in radical ideas and projects. The consequence has been a complete fragmentation and serialization of the space in which millions live. But even if you are not in suburbia, the way in which the life of the nuclear household is organized is a source of tremendous isolation for which women in particular have paid a great price. It is also an immense source of waste. The individual, nuclear model of the house serves no purpose but to encourage an idea of privacy that is very detrimental, ecologically and socially, and pre-empts the possibility of dealing with many of our problems collectively, and even realizing that they are collective problems and not the result of failures for which individuals are responsible.

Reorganizing the home and domestic work in more cooperative ways is today one of the tasks

we have to take on. We have important examples before us. In *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (1985), Dolores Hayden has well documented how, already in the late 19th century, some feminists in the US - radical as well as reformist - recognized that the nuclear home is 'unsustainable' and re-imagined it, proposing collective kitchens allowing for a more effective social organization of work and resources.

We need to relaunch this project. A reorganization of our everyday reproduction is called for also because of the labor-intensive nature of reproductive work. This is especially the case in the presence of young children and family members who are sick or non-self-sufficient. The restructuring of healthcare has contributed to increase the burden families today - women in particular - have to take on, as a lot of work previously done in clinics and hospitals has now to be done in the home. To be able to rely on more communal forms of reproduction, with shared spaces, shared daily relations, less separation between the home and the neighborhood, would be extremely important and, of course, more ecologically sound, because much energy could be saved with the elimination of the one-family dwelling, which disperses heat and cold and consumes an excessive amount of resources.

However, we cannot think of reorganizing the home and the process and space of our everyday reproduction without at the same time transforming our relation to every form of work and without challenging the divisions that have been created in our society especially along the lines of age, gender and race. Short of that, a communal reorganization of the home can only produce gated communities, concerned with their own comfort but oblivious to the misery of others and not interested in the transformation of reproduction as a process of social, collective transformation. The importance of communalizing our reproduction is the solidarity it can generate, enabling us to tackle many of the problems we are facing, including the degradation of public school and hospitals, the militarization of our streets, especially in black and low income neighborhoods, the constant reduction and degradation of basic services, the poisoning of our ecological environment. With the building of communal solidarity we can gain the strength to devise alternatives, build our capacity for resistance and reclaim the wealth we produce.

Carlin: Finally, could you speak about your relationship to the political project of *autonomia*, and whether or not you think it still has the potential to instigate the 'communalization of reproduction' and greater forms of 'communal solidarity' that you speak about above. I know in the past you have expressed to me the fact that your relationship to Italian *autonomia* is a complex one. But here we might speak of autonomy more broadly -as a kind of engaged withdrawal that is taking place in a variety of places such as southern Mexico and Brazil from dependence on capitalist institutions. In other words, do you see the politics of 'autonomy' as a means by which we might be able to devise alternatives to the current impasses we are facing in the midst of neoliberal global capitalism?

Federici: The concept and practice of 'autonomy' has been used in many different political contexts over the last decades. In the women's liberation movement 'autonomy' meant independence from men in the family and in political organizations. It referred in particular to the practice of organizing separately from men. In Italy, in the '60s and '70s the concept of 'workers' autonomy' referred to the increasing refusal by workers of the politics of the Communist party and the unions. It meant not only organizational separation but refusal of

identification with the support that both the CPI and the unions gave to capitalist development in the country. But as you said, since at least the mid-1990s, 'autonomy' has acquired a different meaning. It is increasingly used to refer to the efforts that, especially in Latin America, rural and urban movements are making to create forms of reproduction outside the control of the market and the state, and in many cases (e.g., the Zapatistas and the MST in Brazil) establish forms of territorial control. A powerful book on this subject is Raúl Zibechi's *Territories in Resistance* (AK Press, 2012), which points out that women have been leading these efforts, contributing to a major transformation in the organization of reproduction and social life. Will these efforts expand? Will they be sufficient to resist the assault being waged on our lives, on our ability to reproduce ourselves and "change the world? This is a very difficult question to answer. But I am convinced that they are crucial, indispensable to create communities of resistance, to reconstruct the social fabric that has been lacerated by decades of neo-liberal assault on our livelihood and on our forms of organization.