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Reviews

Engaging Federici on Marx, Capitalism, and Social Reproduction

- Reviews section -

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The discussion of Marx is embedded in Federici's signature critique of the social reproduction of labor power in capitalist societies. Federici correctly identifies a crucial shortcoming in Marx's oeuvre: his failure to theorize the production of the very commodity, labor power, upon which he insists capitalist value-making and profits depend. But because she ultimately flattens the distinction between unpaid social reproductive work and waged work, her critique of Marx leads readers down certain questionable paths. This conflation is symptomatic of a general predicament of the autonomist-influenced feminist tradition of which Federici is part: The impulse to stretch Marxist categories in potentially promising ways is undermined by a lack of specificity that confounds more than it clarifies.

Critical Framework: From Wages for Housework to the Patriarchy of the Wage

To take up Federici's discussion of Marx, it is helpful to first unpack the book's wider theoretical scaffolding. Those familiar with her work will know that Federici's early insights about unpaid housework have developed into a critique of wagelessness that addresses disenfranchised producers in general. She proposes that both capital and Marx fail to recognize these producers despite their essential contribution to capitalism and despite their centrality to a politics of liberation. While the essays in *Patriarchy of the Wage* track this evolution in Federici's thinking, they do not always address or resolve the difficulties associated with her original formulations—difficulties that stem from equating “capitalistically unproductive” (social reproductive) labor with “capitalistically productive” labor.

Chapters One and Two, written in the mid-1970s, introduce the ideas and debates that the later chapters circle back to and extend. Here, Federici (and co-writer Nicola Cox) advance the case for theorizing housework and unwaged work as “the pillars of capitalist production” (12), while lambasting “productivist” leftists for their narrow understanding of capitalism as a system of waged labor alone and for their disdain for the politicization of housework (instead tying the prospects for women's liberation to participation in waged labor). “Leftists,” they write, “are not interested in freeing us from housework but only want to make our work more efficient” (26).

These chapters usefully affirm a point that critics often occlude: The Wages for Housework campaign that Federici co-founded was not imagined as a reformist bid for monetary compensation. [2] It was an anti-wage, and therefore anti-capitalist, demand. Campaigners vied “not to be let into the wage relation (though we are unwaged, we were never outside of it) but to be let out, for every sector of the working class to be let out” (19). In refusing to reproduce for capital, Wages for Housework feminists aimed “to be priceless, to price ourselves out of the market” (22). Such paradoxical logic is clever but ultimately confusing: The wage demand is after all, on the face of it, a demand for a capitalist wage. Even Federici and Cox cannot avoid the implication, noting, “We want a wage in order to reclaim our time and energy and not have to be confined by a second job because we need financial independence” (20). Unfortunately, Federici misses the opportunity here (in footnotes or later chapters) to address these and other confoundments.

Rather, her later essays, while dropping the wage demand, do not engage critics of her focus on women's unpaid work. In a 2017 essay, for instance, Federici continues to position women's unpaid domestic and sex work as the defining feature of women's oppression, writing that “capitalism has empowered men to supervise and command our unpaid labor and discipline our time and space” (44). Without denying that many women are oppressed by their partners at home, her claim is far from universally true (consider that the number of U.S. households that are headed

by single parents or same-sex couples is much higher today than in the 1970s). [3] Federici likely wouldn't contest such facts, but she nonetheless fails to account for them theoretically. Neither does she take up the longstanding criticism (beginning in 1981 with Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class*) that this portrayal of oppression does not generally resonate with Black women's experiences. [4]

Federici does address race and racism when she extends her analysis beyond the housewife, though this discussion is brief and unsatisfying. In a 2014 essay, she links the conditions of unpaid, undervalued housewives to those of subsistence farmers and informal laborers who produce the food and clothing that keep the cost of socially reproducing other waged workers low (57). Together, she proposes, these are the workers that capital exploits but does not recognize, drawing on racist and sexist ideologies to divide the labor market. This observation has the virtue of emphasizing that capitalism thrives on multiple forms of work, not just waged labor in the formal economy. And it describes racism as structured into the global organization of the labor market in ways that contain the overall costs of social reproduction. But it theorizes racism simply as an ideology that serves capital, a fairly obvious but not full or nuanced explanation. [5] Moreover, the passage says nothing about the specificity of racial, colonial, and sexist relations within capitalism, while also effacing any meaningful distinction between the social reproductive work of producing human life and that of precarious informal workers who produce goods and services for the capitalist market (some, not all, of which are essential to life).

This sliding between groups of workers who endure radically different conditions of work speaks to a more general, and frustrating, tendency in these essays to overlook or bypass significant distinctions in favor of making sweeping claims. We see as much in Federici's uptake of Marxist categories, such as her insistence that unwaged social reproductive work, though not organized directly by capital (57), is nonetheless fully subsumed to capital (42). We also see it in her more descriptive passages, such as her proposal that women's decisions to divorce or bear fewer children constitutes a "revolt" against capital (29) or that women's refusal to reproduce children is the impetus for the "formation of a global labor market" (93). [6]

Yet Federici's sweeping approach has an upside. She is a big thinker, by which I mean someone who never loses sight of the whole, of the capitalist totality. If she often ignores the nuances, she identifies larger patterns that highlight the core dynamics of capitalism. One such pattern appears in Chapters Three and Six, in which she links increasing state intervention in family life (beginning with the passage of protective legislation in England in 1842 and intensifying through the 1870s into the turn of the century with the criminalization of sex work, compulsory schooling, and the emergence of domestic arts training and day nurseries) with the shifts in the dominant form of capitalist exploitation—the shift, that is, from light to heavy industry, which called for a more resilient, disciplined, and "skilled," workforce. Over this period, she writes, social reproduction "becomes the object of a specific state initiative binding it more tightly to the need of the labor market and the capitalist discipline of work" (42). This inaugurates what Federici calls the "patriarchy of the wage," an era that lasts until the 1970s in which the wage grants working-class men control over their wives (and children's) bodies and work [7]

Federici's commentary here does not acknowledge the complexity of power relations: The state appears to act simply on behalf of the capitalist, and male workers mostly collude in keeping women out of waged work [8]. Still, the move to track state regulation of social reproduction in relation to the dominant forms of exploitation in capitalist society is precisely the sort of empirical work that can advance social reproduction feminism as a field of study. If not a novel contribution—Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* along with books by Antonella Picchio and Wally Secombe are trailblazers in this regard—Federici's thesis serves as an important point of reference for further research. [9]

On Marx and Marxism

The thesis on state involvement in social reproduction unfolds as part of a discussion of Marx and Marxism. Here,

Federici pursues two questions: Why does Marx not theorize women's oppression and social reproductive labor in particular? And why do feminists need Marxism? She answers the second question without reservation. Marx's historical materialist methodology and analysis are essential to feminism primarily because he provides a language and set of concepts that reveal how the capitalist organization of work is exploitative and based upon social antagonisms and subordination. In "refusing to separate the economic from the political" (52), Marx shows us that the economy is not the closed system that classical political economists would have us believe. Marx is also essential, she proposes, for locating the key to social liberation in the communal organization of work.

Feminists cannot dispense with Marx, therefore. But they must also recognize the limits of his oeuvre and push beyond them if they are to account for women's oppression in capitalist societies. In this, Federici is spot on, helpfully identifying those limits in Marx's conceptual frame and reasoning. But the weaknesses outlined above resurface in her explanation of Marx's shortcomings, leading her to stretch and/or misconstrue the evidence in ways that ultimately produce a one-sided, and thus inaccurate, account of Marx and Marxism.

Federici considers two types of explanation for why Marx was not a feminist, one taking stock of his socio-historical positioning, the other of his theoretical concepts and analysis. Regarding the former, Federici informs readers that her thinking has changed over time (38-39). In early essays, she writes, she accepted that Marx was writing at a moment when the patriarchal proletarian family was not yet consolidated. Since working-class women and children were, initially, swept into formal waged labor, his neglect of domestic labor is, if not forgivable, perhaps understandable. Today, however, Federici no longer buys this, and what flows from her skepticism is a thoughtful, if not always fair, appraisal of Marx's social and political milieu.

As early as the 1830s, Federici points out, feminist utopian socialists were debating and experimenting with the socialization of housework, while by mid-nineteenth century, women comprised just 20 to 30 percent of factory workers, as many exited waged work upon childbirth. Those who remained struggled for reduced working hours—allowing them to shift domestic work from evenings onto a Saturday afternoon (38-39). So, domestic work was an issue for women workers in Marx's time. Moreover, Federici notes, while Marx laments both the harsh conditions of female factory workers and the fact that male heads of households controlled the wages of their wives' labor, he does not attempt to explain these gendered power imbalances. Had he done so, she writes, he "would have recognized the existence of a fundamental anomaly in capitalist relations," (85)—namely that juridical "freedom" is not a universal condition of all waged workers.

This leads Federici to a series of speculations. She submits that perhaps Marx was a creature of his time, after all, pointing out that increasingly after 1830, in the state and popular imaginary, "worker" meant "laborious, honest wage worker" (82)—an ethical and rights-bearing figure distinct from more precarious, less trustworthy members of the underclasses. From here Federici moves on to another, less tenable, speculation: Marx's neglect of domestic labor was a matter of "political expedience" (86). As a leader of the First International Workingmen's Association, Marx, in 1872, supported the ousting of Section 12, led by American feminist Victoria Woodhull. He did so by urging a resolution insisting that two-thirds of the membership of any IWA section be wage earners, thereby precluding any section's domination by unwaged housewives. To shore up the evidence of his sexism, Federici cites Harriet Law, the only woman on the IWA's General Council. Law castigates Marx for his supposed "fence-sitting" (87) in debates over the family wage. Though he supported women's right to work in the factories, he harshly criticized the conditions of such work—a stance Law believed emboldened the anti-feminists. This was possibly politically expedient, suggests Federici, because Marx knew that such a view would go over well with the majority of the IWA membership.

These are tantalizing speculations, even if they are not terribly compelling. As Federici acknowledges, Marx's apparent support for the family wage was possibly "temporary" (87) and no doubt ambivalent because he anticipated the dissolution of the family and believed working-class consciousness could only develop if women were welcomed into the ranks of waged workers. [10] As for Marx's support for the expulsion of Section 12, one should (but Federici doesn't) at least take into account his overt justification, which has to do with fears of middle-class reformers

swamping IWA sections, fears that, according to Hal Draper, informed Marx's politics from the 1840s onward. [11]

While Federici is correct that we cannot excuse Marx for simply being ignorant that unpaid domestic work was a point of individual or collective struggle, it is equally true that we may never definitively know Marx's motivations. And it is for this reason that her other question—about the theoretical apparatus we inherit from Marx—is more germane.

Here, Federici identifies a “contradiction” (55) at the heart of Marxism: Although Marx saw work as social activity that takes a specific social form, he fails to extend this understanding to procreation, childcare, and domestic and sexual work. [12] His naturalization of these activities is especially vexing because he builds his theory of capitalist accumulation upon the sale of labor power—a commodity that he understood was produced outside the capital/labor relation. Marx, writes Federici, “should have realized that though housework appeared as an age-old, natural activity and a personal service, in reality, no less than the production of commodities, it was a historically specific type of work, a product of the separation between production and reproduction that had never existed in societies not governed by the law of exchange value, and essential, in proletarian communities, to the production of labor power” (39).

Federici accepts that this is at least in part because Marx's attention in *Capital* is on the “inner logic” of the system (81). “According to his political theory,” she writes, “the sphere of familial and gender relations had no specific function in capital accumulation or the constitution of workers' subjectivity and class formation” (77). And this, she proposes, leads him to codify the separation between production and reproduction despite apparently knowing better. At this point in the text, Federici directs readers to a quote from Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value, Part I*, in which he writes, “Productive labor would therefore be such labor as produces commodities or directly produces, trains, develops, maintains or reproduces labor-power itself” (93, n. 21). In appearing to claim that social reproductive labor is value-productive, claims Federici, Marx proves that he saw such labor as “an essential part of capitalist production” (82).

This is, frankly, wrong. The citation is from a passage in which Marx discusses Adam Smith's (not his own) understanding of reproductive labor. And he goes on to say that Smith ultimately excludes reproductive labor from the category of labor producing capitalist value—a position Marx agrees with, albeit for different reasons than those Smith gives. [13] Not only does Federici misrepresent Marx's view here, the point is irrelevant to the argument that she, correctly, wants to advance. That is, whether or not Marx knew better, he does fail to theorize social reproductive work, and this failure stands despite his clear understanding that labor power is attached to living labor that is produced in some other way.

Holding that Marx knew better, however, Federici isn't content to rest with the “inner logic” explanation. And so she reaches for another, rooted in Marx's apparent misrecognition of what capitalist work is and how capitalism lays the material foundation upon which socialism can be built. Marx, she proposes, defined work narrowly, as male, white, waged labor, ascribing to it positive, liberating qualities. That is, Marx saw the capitalist organization of work into large-scale, industrialized operations as advantageous insofar as it taught workers “uniformity, regularity, and the principles of technological development” (60)—qualities essential to building communism. (She doesn't explain how he reconciles this view with his critique of alienated labor.) Federici stresses that Marx condemned preindustrial forms of production as backward and put his faith in technology's productive powers as the basis for provisioning a future socialist society, freeing workers from the drudgery of work.

Yet social reproductive work, Federici observes, is typically resistant to rationalization and technologization, thus falling outside of Marx's purview. Moreover, far from preparing workers for communism, she notes, capitalism (and automation) destroys cooperative forms of work that did exist, robs workers of essential skills and knowledge, and ruinously depletes the world's ecosystems. Feminists must reject this “machine-based communism” (62) in favor of a politics of the commons that prioritizes self-organized “communing activities,” such as urban gardening, time-banking,

and open-sourcing (67). In this way, she claims, work itself is restructured, subverting capitalist meanings and production of value.

Part of what Federici writes here cannot be denied. Marx did focus on waged work and did have an overly optimistic appraisal of industrialization and industrial work as laying the material foundations for the transition to communism. And she is wise to warn against the idea that workers could simply take over existing technology and use it to advance the collective good. But Marx's views are far more critical than Federici presents—a point she acknowledges almost as quickly as she dismisses. For example, she writes that Marx “intuited” (61, emphasis added) how devastating the mechanization of agriculture was to the soil and the worker. And that Marx “apparently abandoned some of his political axioms” (52, emphasis added) after the Paris Commune and his reading of Ancient Society. These are clear understatement that skirt serious engagement with the scholarship of people like Kevin Anderson, Heather Brown, and John Bellamy Foster (all researchers that Federici cites). [14] Downplaying these and other aspects of Marx's critique is consistent with Federici's “big picture” politics but does little to promote confidence in her conclusions. [15]

The reader of this review will no doubt sense my ambivalence. It is difficult to make my own sweeping pronouncement about this book. While there is much I disagree with and find unconvincing in Federici's writings, I nonetheless respect and value her contribution. The left needs Federici's tireless commitment to promoting an anti-capitalist theory that highlights the centrality of social reproductive labor, especially one that doesn't shy away from questions about what liberation looks like and how to get there. And in no small way, her analytic confluences and sweeping statements can help advance a socialist critique and politics: They present an opportunity for us to clarify what are often tricky, elusive theoretical ideas and through that, to develop the political arguments that might assist the project of overturning capitalism and building a better, communal, and truly democratic world in its place. In that regard, this “return to Federici” has much to offer.

Source: [New Politics](#)

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[1] It is important to bear in mind that some social reproductive labor is also capitalistically productive. I make this critique of autonomist-influenced feminism in Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), Chpt. 8.

[2] See Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972-77*, trans. Käthe Roth (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018) for an account of the campaign's misinterpretation.

[3] United States Census Bureau, “[National Single Parent Day, March 21, 2021](#),”; and “Family Fact Sheet, November 2017”.

[4] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (Vintage Books, 1981). A recent study of U.S. Black families also highlights this experiential division: Chrishana M. Lloyd et al., “[Family, Economic, and Geographic Characteristics of Black Families with Children](#),” *Child Trends*, March 5, 2021..

[5] See, for example, David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007) for an account that stresses that race and racism cannot be explained simply by their functionality for capital.

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[6] For a powerful critique of autonomist-influenced social reproduction feminism's uptake of Marxist categories, see Paula Varela, "Marxism, Autonomism, and Social Reproduction in Dispute," *Spectre* (No. 4, Fall 2021), forthcoming.

[7] The "patriarchy of the wage" era is difficult to reconcile with Davis' critique that Black women have, post-slavery, always worked for a wage, performing domestic work for white households among other jobs; see Davis, *Women, Race and Class*.

[8] See, for example, pp. 85-86. For more balanced assessments of working-class support for protective legislation, see the landmark essays: Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, "Rethinking Women's Oppression," *New Left Review* (No. 144, 1984), 33-71; and Jane Humphries, "Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State, and Working-Class Men: The Case of the 1942 Mines Regulation Act," *Feminist Review* (No. 7, 1981), 1-33.

[9] Antonella Picchio, *Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Wally Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (London: Verso, 1993); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).

[10] Federici provides no hard evidence that Marx actually promoted the family wage, and she acknowledges that he criticized the capitalist family, seeing women's entry into factory work as a means of undermining patriarchy. Heather Brown's meticulous study of this question supports the view that Marx was ambivalent about women working in factories, but this was not because he endorsed the family wage. His one discussion of it appears in an article for *The People's Paper*, in which Marx reports, without further comment, on women's support for the family wage on behalf of their husbands. Brown also notes that these women later struggled with the trade-off between fighting for a family wage and for equal treatment as workers. Heather Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Haymarket, 2012), 103-04.

[11] Marx is admittedly scathing in his discussion of Victoria Woodhull, referring to the American Section as comprised of "middle-class humbugs and worn-out Yankee swindlers" while calling Woodhull "a banker's woman, free-lover and general humbug." Aside from referencing her marital status, however, this language is no more harsh than he often used to describe men with whom he disagreed. Karl Marx, "[Notes on the American Split](#)," Marxist Internet Archive; Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: State and Bureaucracy*, vol. 1 (Monthly Review Press, 1977), Chpt. 10.

[12] . Considering that the theorization of social reproductive work extends rather than overturns Marx's analysis of capitalism, I quibble with the term "contradiction." What Federici goes on to describe is more accurately labeled an "absence" or "shortcoming" of Marx's work.

[13] See Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value, Part I*, trans. Emile Burns (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963 [1861-63]), 262-73. Federici may be picking up on Leopoldina Fortunati's discussion—and misreading—of this passage; see Fortunati, *The Arcane of Revolution: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. Hilary Creek (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995 [1981]), Chpt. 8. Marx calls Smith's exclusion of social reproductive work from "productive" (i.e., value-creating) work "arbitrary," but he does not do so because he thinks Smith is wrong to exclude it (contrary to Fortunati's interpretation of this passage). He has in fact been arguing for ten pages prior to the passage quoted that much (though not all) reproductive labor is unproductive. (Some "menial" and other personal service work, like hotel cooks and seamstresses in factories, he writes, is commodified and therefore directly part of the capitalist value-making system.) Rather, Marx calls Smith's position "arbitrary" because Smith excludes it from productive work for the wrong reasons.

[14] As John Bellamy Foster and others have shown, Marx more than "intuited" the effects of agricultural mechanization; he studied the works of German chemist and ecologist Justus von Liebig, whose condemnation of British industrial agriculture helped him theorize the metabolic interaction between labor and the earth and the ecological crisis that capitalist agriculture portended. John Bellamy Foster, "Marxism and Ecology: Common Fronts of a Great Transition," Great Transition Initiative, October 2015. On the evolution of Marx's views on colonialism and gender, see Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family*.

[15] This one-sided account also promotes a sort of argument by implication, evident, for example, when after claiming Marx "was deeply mistaken" about technology's liberating potential, Federici writes, "Machines are not produced by machines in a sort of immaculate conception" (61). As if this would be news to Marx!