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Women and work

The Making of Capitalist Patriarchy

- Features - Sexual politics -

Publication date: Tuesday 25 February 2014

This interview with Silvia Federici, a feminist activist and scholar, and author of *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* and *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* was published on The North Star website on 24 February 2014.

In December, we interviewed Silvia Federici, a Marxist-feminist thinker, author and activist. Federici was a member of the International Feminist Collective beginning in the 1970's, which produced the Campaign for Wages for Housework along with Selma James and Maria Dalla Costa. She is the author of **Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation** and **Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction**, and *Feminist Struggle*.

We were interested in talking to Federici because of the rare work she has done writing about the women's labor and investigating the relationship between housework and the capitalist system. There is a fairly complicated body of work considering "the woman question" in the socialist tradition, attempting to understand sexual divisions within the capitalist system. Engels of course wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* as a contribution to this discussion, where essentially he and Marx believed that the development of the capitalist mode of production would be a progressive force that would diminish social differences by sex.

While the particular thesis of sexual equalization is handily dismissed at this point, other aspects of Marx and Engels' positions continue to hold sway. Rosa Luxemburg suggested that patriarchal institutions were a holdover from previous modes of production and not a specifically capitalist relationship.

Federici is part of a group of thinkers who firmly reject the notion that patriarchy, housework and women's inferiority are somehow "outside" of capitalism. Federici still draws quite heavily from a reading of Marx's Capital, but uses his political economy, labor theory of value and narrative of primitive accumulation to investigate the ways in which women's labor was transformed into a specifically capitalist form, and one that she argues is essential to the reproduction of the capitalist system. Federici here suggests that women's domestic work is a whole complex of activities that reproduce the workforce for capital, which capital benefits from because it is unwaged. Further, Federici discusses the ways in which this condition was forced onto women in the period of primitive accumulation through violence and social exclusion, and was not a natural carryover of a previous relationship.

TE: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself? How did you get involved in the feminist struggle and become a writer?

Silvia Federici: I became involved in the women's movement in the 1970's because like many women of my generation I shared the frustration of anticipating a life mostly devoted to housework. In the late 1960's I came to the United States to work on my dissertation. I was involved in the student movement and the antiwar movement, and I had the frustration of being in a very male-dominated environment.

The roots of my involvement with feminism go deeper. I grew up in the postwar period in Italy, and the effects of the war were very important in creating a disaffection with respect to the question of reproduction. Having seen the carnage that World War II caused, the thought of idealizing motherhood as our mothers did, or at least had been expected to do, became very alien to us.

Then of course, Italy was a very patriarchal society. The influence of fascism was very strong, and fascism had a glorification of motherhood and a sacrificial image of feminity: the woman is the one who sacrifices for the common good. All these factors were important in my immediate enthusiasm for the women's movement.

AS: One of the things we wanted to ask you is that there are very few radical feminist economists, or Marxist thinkers who are concerned about women's work in particular. You tend to be known for your arguments for "wages for housework", so we were hoping that you could explain this argument and why it's important.

SF: In 1972 I had read an article published by an Italian feminist, Maria Dalla Costa, The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community. In that article, Dalla Costa presented an analysis of housework that immediately resolved many questions I had for myself. Against the whole presentation of housework in radical and liberal literature, she stated that housework, domestic work and the whole complex of activities by which our whole lives are reproduced, is actually work that is essential to the capitalist organization of labor. It produces not just the meals and clean clothes, but reproduces the workforce and therefore is in a sense the most productive work in capitalism. Without this work, no other forms of production could take place.

That argument made an immense impression on me, and in the summer of 1972 I traveled to Italy to meet Dalla Costa and I became involved in the foundation of the International Feminist Collective, which launched the Campaign for Wages for Housework. Wages for housework was really the practical translation of that analysis, which basically saw the devaluation that housework has suffered in capitalism and its invisibility of work as the product of the fact that housework has been unwaged.

At the time the Wages for Housework campaign was very unpopular among many feminists, who accused us of wanting to institutionalize women in the home. But one function of the campaign was to make housework visible, to redefine in the public consciousness what this work is. We wanted to show that it's essential, pivotal work and not a personal service to men and their children. The demand also had an important economic dimension in that we saw how many women were forced into dependence of men because of the unwaged nature of this work. Power relations were embedded in this work, because women for example could not leave an abusive relationship because of their dependent situation.

This wagelessness, this unwaged condition, followed women wherever they would go, even when they took a job outside the home. We saw that the pattern of women spending their lifetimes working for no forms of remuneration was certainly at the roots of the conditions they would meet when they would work outside the home: they are lower paid, and most of the occupations women would find were just extensions of housework.

We never saw the demand as an endpoint, but we saw it as a leveler to change the power relationship between women and men, and women and capital. It involved a whole analysis of the wage: What is the wage? It took us way beyond Marx.

For Marx, the wage hides the unpaid labor that workers perform but what Marx does not see is how the wage has been used to organize hierarchies that divide labor, beginning with gender as well as racial hierarchies.

We saw wages for housework as basically destabilizing and undermining an unjust, unequal social-sexual division of labor. In a sense, it performed the same function that the revolt against slavery had performed. We used to say that there's an important difference between the struggle of the slave for wage labor and the struggle of the worker for higher pay. It dismantles a whole social architecture that has been extremely powerful in keeping people divided and expecting an immense amount of unpaid labor.

This was the goal and the rationale for the campaign, which as I said was opposed by many sections of the women's movement. But I've noticed a change in recent times, and I think your question reflects this, there's a new interest that I think has to do with the fact that thirty years later the grand illusion that the women's movement had about the emancipating power of working for wages outside the home has very much declined.

TE: Reading the first few essays in Revolution at Point Zero your way of talking about reproduction and highlighting what the work relationship is, pointing out that it is in fact a form of valuable work and then using the wages for housework demand as a tool to reveal it all, was really eye opening for me.

SF: Yes! I actually titled the essay that opens the book "Wages Against Housework", because it was very clear for us that wages for housework was at the same time wages against housework. Women who have revolted against housework have suffered from an immense guilt. They've never seen themselves as workers in struggle. Neither have family members or their communities seen them as workers in struggle when they've wanted to refuse these duties, instead they've been seen as bad women. That's how much its been naturalized. You're not seen as a worker, you're just seen as fulfilling your natural destiny as a woman. Wages for housework for us was cutting that umbilical chord between us and housework.

TE: Continuing talking about the economics of housework, many would argue that the capitalist form of production is going to a worksite, selling your labor-power, getting a wage and that's capitalism. Housework falls outside of that. I'm wondering what your response to that depiction is?

SF: I would absolutely disagree! That's in fact why I began to do the historical work that resulted in Caliban and the Witch. I wanted to have a historical as well as a theoretical foundation to say that housework was not a legacy or leftover from a pre-capitalist era, but it was a particular type of activity that in its social relations had been constructed by capitalism. In other words it was a new kind of activity.

The work that I did was geared to show how capitalism constructed the figure of the housewife. Obviously, in different historical periods responding to different demands, so we begin in the 16th-17th century with the bifurcation of work activities so that only some, at the inception of the market economy, are recognized work. Only waged labor is valued, and waged reproductive activities begin to disappear. That's the first fundamental, foundational step.

But then of course, over the course of the following century and particularly in the 19thcentury, you can actually trace a whole set of very specific policies. I point out in Caliban that by the 17th century, women were being expelled in Europe from most of the occupations they had outside the home. In the middle ages, they were expelled from the guilds, which were roughly equivalent to workers' organizations today. Soon enough, they could only obtain forms of employment that were forms of housework, as nurses, wetnurses, maids, washerwomen, etc. You begin to see the formation very concretely, in precise historical forms in the course of the 16th and 17th century, of a new form of worker who is increasingly invisiblized.

By the second half of the 19th century, you begin to see a very determined construction of the full-time working class housewife. That is demonstrated by a whole set of policies, the beginning of the "family wage", the expulsion of women through different protection acts from the factories, the institution of the marriage act. It's a very long story, but it's clear that housework is work that has been subsumed to the capitalist organization of work.

In fact, it is part of the assembly line that produces the workforce. Marx speaks of the reproduction of the worker, but he speaks of it in a way that is very peculiar. For Marx, reproduction of the worker occurs through the wage, and through the acquisition by means of the wage of commodities. The worker consumes the commodities. He basically uses the paycheck to buy food and clothing, and then consumes this commodity and reproduces himself. Well,

there’s no trace of any other work in the picture that Marx presents.

I’ve always explained this phenomenon, arguing at the time that Marx was writing it’s a moment in the development of industrial capital where there is maximum employment of women, particularly younger women, in the factories. Perhaps Marx saw this female workforce industrialized and in the first phase of industrial development when he was writing reproductive work was extremely reduced; this is one explanation I give for his misunderstanding. But clearly, a lot more is necessary for the day-to-day and generational reproduction of the labor force. Starting with 1860, this is work that was definitively assigned to women.

By the turn of the century and later with World War One, there’s a concerted production of the housewife and domestic work becomes the object of a science. It’s a science that is taught in schools to every girl, and there is an ideological campaign deployed to turn the home into a center of production and reproduction of the workforce. The argument that domestic labor is essential to the process of valorization of capital has a very strong historical foundation.

AS: One of the big parts of this is that many Marxists hold to value theory as an important part of understanding capitalism and making a critique. When you’re talking about reproduction, in Capital Volume 1 I think there are only a couple of pages devoted to the subject, which is kind of vague as saying that all reproduction is in turn production. I was wondering does your argument for wages for housework have a corresponding value theory? Something that you can understand how women contribute to the production of surplus value?

SF: The production of surplus value is a social product. It’s never a product of one particular activity or person. That’s something that remains very important and valid from Marx’s work. In capitalism, value production is not ever really the product of any particular location, but its determined socially. In other words, you have a broad social assembly line (I’m using the notion figuratively) that is all necessary for the production of surplus value. Surplus value is realized of course in the sale of the products of labor. If you have a factory that produces a dozen cars and those cars are never sold, its not realized.

What I’m suggesting here is that the activities by which the wage laborer is reproduced are part of that social assembly line: it’s part of a social process that determines surplus value. Although we cannot pinpoint a direct relation between what occurs in a kitchen and the value that is realized, for example through the sale of a car or any other product, nevertheless when we see the social nature of value production, a social factory that extends beyond the factory itself.

TE: Keeping that in mind, how would something like wages for housework change that dynamic? Would winning a wage enter into a different relationship?

SF: For us, the defining element in the campaign for wages for housework was capacity to unify women. Not only what it would produce in terms of a redistribution of wealth that would give women more power and would address the question of dependency on men, and therefore change the relationship between women and men, but its unifying power. The first thing you want to know when you pose a demand is whether it has a unifying power, it gives you more strength to struggle, or in fact it’s a demand that reestablishes or deepens divisions among people.

Wages for Housework was a campaign of unification between women because we saw that of course there is a minority of women who are men for all practical purposes because they control capital and they are capitalist, but the majority of women on the planet who perform housework are devalued, very often dependent on men, in the home and outside the home. So for us this demand was first of all important as a means of unification and a way that we

would expose the work that we already do and the devaluation of housework in capitalism. For us it was never, “OK, a check arrives at home, but everything remains the same.”

AS: So I just wanted to clarify on this point a little bit. One of the things I notice when I read through your essays is that you take an idea that on its face seems very simple, like wages for housework, and then there are a lot of small distinctions and nuances. I was hoping you could clarify those. For example, you were saying that wages for housework has to come from capital, and that you are not arguing for housework to become part of the waged workforce. Could you talk about the demand, “wages for housework”, and how you see something like that workingâ€”who are the actors and how do you conceive of this being “administrated”?

SF: Often people wanted us to lay out the program, and we always resisted that. We realized that like welfare and so many other forms of social assistance, all of these programs can be organized and administrated in many different ways: they can be defined in ways that unite people, that divide people, that create hierarchies or don’t. Take social security: it has been organized in a way that excludes people who do housework. You may be working all of your life, but in the home you will never have social security, except through your husbandâ€”and even then only after you’re together for nine years!

We resisted going through the specifics because we realized that at that time, we still had to build the kind of social power that would enable us to confront the state in a way that the demand of wages for housework could be organized in the ways that we envisage it. In other words, we saw that it could be organized along the lines of what has happened with welfare, which has been continually structured in a way that is rather penalizing to women who received it.

We were always extremely aware of the question of social power, “With what power do you fight for certain demands?” Some things were always clear to us: one, it had to come from the state, not through individual men. We saw the state as the representative of collective capital. Two, every employer benefits from the fact that someone is at home doing the domestic work, men or women or children. We understood very well also that we had to emphasize that this was wages for housework, not wages for housewives, not wages for women. We saw the demand as having the power to desexualize housework.

The demand was something we saw as being able to be fulfilled in many different ways; not just monetary, but also support for housing. One of our arguments is that for women, the home is the factory; it’s a place of production. Yet, we are expected to pay to be there. But we didn’t want to fight for childcare in the way that many have fought for it, where the struggle for childcare is to liberate time to go to work.

Wages for housework could be obtained through a wage, but also through a host of other benefits and services that would recognize that what is taking place in the home is a labor process and those that perform it should have the right to time off from their work. So we never worked out a blueprint, because we expected to have more power before we actually began the kind of negotiation that would create a map of possibilities.

TE: I was hoping we could switch to another topic and talk about primitive accumulation, which you talk about in Caliban and the Witch. Marx typically talks about how capitalism grew and got its original surplus through conquest, robbery and slavery. You have a narrative about primitive accumulation in Caliban, which is based closely off of Marx but has many important differences. Can you talk about that?

SF: The notion of primitive accumulation was invented by Adam Smith and then Marx took it to make his own argument. Marx explained that for capitalism to begin there had to be a period where some of the most fundamental

relations had to be laid out and some of the assets that were necessary for capitalism to take off had to be accumulated. In particular, what was necessary was the separation of the producers from the means of production.

Marx describes that period of preparation for the capitalist takeoff as a period of primitive accumulation, which is really the accumulation of land, labor and silver. You had the conquest of part of the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries and that produces a cache of silver that goes into fueling the money economy. In many parts of Europe, beginning with England and France, you had the process of enclosures that expropriates much of the peasantry. This progressively transforms a population of people, peasants, farmers, artisans, people with some access to the means of their reproduction, into people who are completely dispossessed and forced to work for a pittance.

What I argue in my book is that the description that Marx gives of this process is extremely limited. He probably sees the importance of the colonial conquest and the enclosures of land as essential, but what he omits are other processes that in my view are extremely foundational of what was to become the new capitalist society.

In particular, Marx neglects the role of the witch-hunts, which was a major war on women where hundreds of thousands of women were arrested, tortured, killed, burned on village squares. He also does not discuss the role of legislation that penalized all forms of contraception and control over the process of biological reproduction, or legislation that introduced a new type of family, a new type of sexual relations. That placed the body of women under the tutelage of the state. What you begin to see with the development of capitalism is a policy that looks at the body of women and procreation as a fundamental aspect of the production of the workforce. In that sense, with the development of capitalism women's' bodies are turned into machines for the production of workers, which explains why these very fierce and bloody laws against women are instituted where capital punishment is administered for any form of abortion.

What I've been showing in *Caliban and the Witch* is that there's another history that has to be written: a history not only of the process of production, but the transformation of the process of the reproduction of the workforce. It's a history that sees the state basically waging a war against women, destroying the power of women who have to be relegated to a position of unpaid labor.

This is the historical work I've done, which not only adds a new chapter to what we already knew about this period, but in a way redefines what capitalism is and what the requirements for the reproduction of capitalist society is. Writing this history, I developed a theoretical framework that I later used to interpret the restructuring of the global economy.

TE: Reading through Caliban, you talk about the witch trials and expand on Marx's account of primitive accumulation, but you also seem to expand on the categories of what is accumulated. You discuss land, labor and money, but you also talk about knowledge, specifically women's knowledge about contraceptives and how knowledge was dispossessed about our own bodies and our ability to reproduce or form families as we chose.

SF: Yes! Starting from that rethinking of primitive accumulation, you can think of multiple enclosures: not only the enclosure of the land but also the enclosure of the body. Your body is truly enclosed the moment that you are so terrorized that you cannot control your own reproduction, your sexual life. We can think of an enclosure of knowledge because, for example, there was an attack against the means that women had used to control procreation. Women passed on an immense amount of knowledgeâ€"today we might shake our heads about some of it and think that maybe it was not too valid as providing a safe form of contraception, but certainly there were many techniques passed from generation to generation.

To me, what to I object to in Marx's account, as important as it is, is the limited conception of the kind of dispossession that was necessary for the creation of the modern proletariat.

AS: One of the things you mention in your book, Revolution at Point Zero, is a kind of criticism of the Marxist or anticapitalist cannon. I was wondering if you could talk about this and explain what having an understanding of the gendered aspects of capitalism has on our political practice?

SF: I have a feeling that the question of reproduction is essential not only to the capitalist organization of work, but it is also central to any true revolutionary process; any process of genuine transformation of society. I think it is especially important today because we see first of all that neither the state nor the market is reproducing us. The dismantling of the welfare state is proceeding across the world in ways that practically leave almost no support for our reproduction.

There is also another necessity, which has to do with the disintegration of the social fabric of our lives and our communities because of the economic destruction we've seen in the last three decades. The forms of organization and the kinds of solidarity bonds that have been constructed over many years are now basically not there any longer. There is a whole process of reconstruction that has to take place if we want to have the power to begin to change our lives, to impose a different type of society. Reproductive work and what takes place in the home are really fundamental because they demonstrate in a very clear way all the divisions that are keeping people enslaved in this society, beginning with the division between women and men but also young and old, and also on the basis of race.

AS: The main thing I'm getting at is that a lot of people on the far left, anarchists and Marxists alike, have this thought that if women's issues are important to them, they still have a focus on the formal workplace. They may agree with many of your arguments, but would say that for the resources we have we should focus on the formal capitalist factory or production site because that has the most transformative power. I was wondering if you could respond?

SF: It seems to me that that's a very shortsighted view of what people have called the class struggle. Even in terms of our recent history, many of the movements that had a very profound impact on the 1960's and 70's were movements whose base of power was largely outside of the factory. The civil rights movement, the black power movement, these were largely not factory based. It should have shown that there's a power in the community, and power is not only in the factory. With the precarization of work and the kind of blackmail that waged workers now are exposed to, we find that even the struggles in the waged workplace usually do not succeed unless they have support in the community. That connection between the factory and the community was typically the rule before the 1930's and 40's with the New Deal.

We need to rethink that separation. It seems to me that a central aspect of a struggle today is how we transform the kind of reproduction that is generally imposed on us, where we are reproduced as workers, as labor power, and people destined to different forms of exploitation. We need to transform that into a reproductive work that reproduces us according to our real needs and desires. That is one of the fundamental challenges that we need to take on today.

