

# 9. Women's Autonomy & Renumeration of Care Work<sup>1</sup>

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Every construction of autonomy has its own history that evolves in a specific context and must face specific obstacles and battles. Yesterday I mentioned the first stages of this history through the initiatives of that feminist movement in which I directly participated – initiatives necessary for women to regain the availability of their body. I have also recalled how, on a planetary level, this battle is far from being concluded. Here I would like to consider other aspects of this history, starting again from the initial moments of that political experience, to assess what is the relation between women and autonomy today with respect to some emergent problems, and also to ask, in relation to the latter, what has happened to both the

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demand that housework (or care work) be remunerated and to women's economic autonomy.

### First Act

Today there is a great celebration of differences. But I always feel the need to specify of what difference we are talking about, from whose point of view and for whom it constitutes a problem, for whose benefit or disadvantage it is. This is the only way to focus on the question and find any solutions.

We thought it was enough, at the time of the movement, to identify one *difference insofar as it was producing a crucial hierarchy*: the difference of being, as reproducers of labor-power, unwaged workers in a waged economy where men, as producers of commodities, would be destined, by the capitalist sexual division of labor, to be waged workers. We worked on this question, and it kept us busy for about ten years. The rest followed from this fundamental fact. By demanding *wages for housework* we wanted to attack *the capitalist stratification of labor* starting from *its deepest division*, that between the male work of production of commodities and the female work of production and reproduction of labor power. But *if this work was vital for capitalism*, as it produces its most precious commodity, labor power itself, then we had in our hands a *formidable lever of power*, as we *could refuse to produce*. Starting from this fact, we could demand a new type of development centered on different conditions for the care of human beings, beginning with *women's economic autonomy* and a more equitable sharing of care work with men. For this rea-

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son we also demanded a general, *drastic reduction* of work time outside the home, so that women and men, both could share the burden but also the pleasure of reproduction. Thus *time, money and services*, were in those years the basic elements of our demands.

*The high point of the movements* in Italy, at the end of the '60s and beginning of the '70s, was *the training ground of our militancy*, the arena where many of us learnt to struggle and analyze that perverse thing that is capitalist development. I too, at the beginning of my work at the University (I had begun to work there in 1967), was holding seminars for students on *Capital*, but first I would go to leaflet, in pale dawns full of mosquitoes, in Porto Marghera, discovering what is a factory, its rhythms, its health hazards, its history. Because factories, I remember I wrote on a leaflet, trying to explain the concept, are not like trees that have always existed... I do not remember by any means that period as a time of convivial aggregation, as others have said they remember it. It was rather a period of great learning, of very austere living, of much sacrifice and commitment, of much determination. Perhaps the most beautiful thing was the immediacy of relations, finding ourselves active in the same cause, and the blooming of this great community to which we belonged. It was not necessary to fix appointments in order to meet, we all knew where the others were, it was a life in common. Seen from a woman's viewpoint, that experience represented undoubtedly the *decisive emancipation from the family* of origin and its expectations; it meant to have found a *free and friendly territory* from where to discover the world, without being forced to marry soon, a territory where *to learn different things* from those necessary to be a good

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wife. Yes, like for the *insurgentes* of the Ezln, the question “when are you going to marry?” remained more and more unanswered.

But precisely that capacity we had elaborated, to become aware of a problem and analyze it, at a certain point made us discover that for us women in those relations there was still some *suffering and uneasiness*. For all relations are *power relations*, even in the *sexual revolution* which nevertheless took place, and everything that we represented and did as women continued to count very little and not to be recognized. We felt *split* between the imperative that wanted us to be like men, capable of being and acting like them, and the feeling that we belonged in any case to another world, where men as well would ask us different things and expected us to be different. But then the window would close again over that world that remained without a name. It was a sort of *clandestinity of femininity*. But not long after we would come out of the clandestinity and pass from resistance to the attack.

Already in 1970 I began the elaboration of a new course, the feminist analysis and path that I would undertake. But I usually point to 1971 as the turning point because in June of that year, in Padova, by inviting some women activists, to discuss a document I had drafted, I held the first feminist meeting. I gave birth to that organization that would be called *Lotta Femminista* (Feminist Struggle), which later was transformed into the network of Committees and Groups for Wages For Housework that was active at the national and international level. The *separation* from the male comrades was not *without pain*. Our hypothesis that they should be happy because by engaging in new struggles we broadened the anti-capitalist front was

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not verified. On the contrary, because they thought that certain struggles were crucial, the fact that we privileged others meant for them that we subtracted militant power from these struggles. We also paid for the fact that since we were no longer under their eyes engaged in the same actions, from their point of view, we were "doing nothing." In the same way as they had not seen our housework, they did not see our autonomous political work. We were accused, especially at the beginning, of risking to embark in things that did not promote a class viewpoint, that were inter-classist, such as abortion and violence which concerned all women. Moreover, as women "in movement" we changed and consequently relations, even personal ones, broke up. When we began to speak of housework, the first reaction on the male front was a mocking smile. What were we bothering with? After all it was not a big thing, not even real work to be sure, and with the daycare centers all problems would be resolved. That strange idea that with daycare centers, that is, with a few hours of child care, every problem concerning housework would be resolved, lasted for a long time. There was not even a minimal idea of the number of material and immaterial tasks, predictable and unpredictable, that constitute the daily allotment of this work. We too were charged with being separatists, with wanting to divide the movement, but actually I think that it was no longer possible to speak of an anti-capitalist struggle without seeing how much unpaid labor the wage commanded, starting with women's labor, and without taking into account therefore women's "insurgency." In Rome, on July 7, 1972, we had organized, at the University, a workshop on female employment. We decided that it should be open only to women. This was an

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absolute novelty, it had never happened at the university. The reaction of groups of men generically self-identified as comrades, was to prevent the workshop from taking place, by launching from outside the room condoms full of water that broke the windows. What followed was an intense debate in the pages of *Il Manifesto* and *Lotta Continua*<sup>2</sup> that gives an idea of what the times were like. Just the fact that women could meet by themselves could provoke a violent reaction. It would not be right to absolutize these kind of reactions. There were comrades who understood the centrality of our discourse, the importance of the work we carried on, and behaved accordingly. But that episode is indicative of how hysterical the male response could be when faced with the new fact: women analyzing and discussing autonomously not in the presence of men. Concerning the charge of separatism, I want to make it clear that we never theorized *separatism*, but theorized autonomy. However, there were at least *three good reasons* why, we, like many others, had to work separately. First, the presence of men, precisely because of the power relations between them and women, would have limited our ability to speak, to let emerge and thoroughly analyze the issues that most directly concerned us, and with regard to some of them, it would have undoubtedly created some uneasiness. Second, these issues were so big that they

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<sup>2</sup> *Il Manifesto* (Translator's Note, TN:*The Manifesto*), July 14 and 20, August 4, *Lotta Continua* (TN: *Continuous Struggle*) July 15 and 21, 1972. See also *L'Offensiva, Quaderni di Lotta Femminista* n.1(TN: *The Offensive. Notebooks of Feminist Struggle* n.1), Mussolini Editore, Torino 1972, which collects the reports destined to that seminar and the militant materials that came out concerning that moment of confrontation.

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would absorb all our energy, therefore, as I said on other occasions, the idea of a double militancy (in feminism and in some extra-parliamentary group) was never an issue, because we would not have had the time for it. Finally, if the behavior of the comrades was also a reason for our separation, they had to confront the problem of how to change it. Reversing the charge, we could say that it was their male chauvinist behavior that divided the movement.

From what I am learning, the same charge is now being moved against Mayan women. But I believe that only the women who experience a certain situation can decide how much separately or how much together they can conduct a cycle of struggles. It is true, however, that how much we can struggle "together" is a question that must be confronted also by the other side, that is, by men, in support of the issues raised by women, because generally support is given only by one side, that of women.

In Italy, today, young women who are active around some issues, often the precariousness of work and the transformations taking place in the university, consider it unacceptable to work separately from their male companions, they do not feel the need for it. But they are obviously benefiting from the victories won by their mothers and by the feminist movement of the 1970s. Their relations with their male partners are more egalitarian; the hard struggle to regain control over our body was fought by those who preceded them. Although there are still political forces who try to take away the freedom that women have won<sup>3</sup>, women today have the means to live their sex-

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<sup>3</sup> There was a particularly strong attempt, over the last years, by catholic forces to abrogate the law 194/78 which authorizes the

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uality with less risks than a quarter of a century ago. In any case, even if one becomes pregnant, it is not likely that she will be thrown out of her home. On the contrary, many women decide to become pregnant independently of having a relation with a man. They are determined to have a child, but are less eager to embark in the type of life in which it is necessary to mediate daily one's choices with those of a partner. They are also determined to break a relation, even a marriage, if it is not satisfactory. On other issues, instead, various associations have formed, made only of women or predominantly of women, first of all those of the Anti-Violence Centers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we have a complex situation where, depending on the issue, one feels the need to work only with women or not, in a context in

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voluntary interruption of pregnancy. The Veneto Region has proposed a regional bill that would authorize the presence of members of catholic organizations in the *consultori* (clinics for family counseling) and hospital wards. In response to all this, women have decided to make their voice heard and with the support of the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labor) have organized a rally in Venezia on October 7, 2006, under the banner of "Let's break the silence." It was in fact from the times of the feminist movement of the '70s that women did not make their voice heard with such strength. And this time men, participating to the demonstration, supported the cause of women.

<sup>4</sup> If in Europe the first Antiviolence Centers or Houses for Women (who have suffered violence) were formed at the end of the '70s, in Italy, aside from the initiatives set up by the feminist movement, we had to wait until the beginning of the '90s. Significantly, a decade of repression and normalization had to pass before Anti-Violence Centers began to be formed. Today there are more than eighty, of which one fourth offers hospitality in a secret apartment also called shelter. The first four houses for women who have suffered violence were formed between 1990 and 1991 in Bologna, Milano, Modena and Rome.



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any case not comparable to that of the movement of the '70s. Today, organizing in associations that have a relation with the institutions *has taken the place of the action of the spontaneous group* of that decade. Those groups functioned as a *battering ram demolishing the doors of the many prisons* in which the rights of women were enclosed. These associations try to monitor the situation and offer a first point of reference and aid to those who continue to be the victims of the violation of these rights.

It was immediately clear to us that *building our autonomy* required a *great battle*. We had to equip ourselves. Immediately maternity emerged as a *difficult knot to untangle*, for it is an irreversible choice that conditions the entire life of a woman and it is not resolved by taking children to a daycare center. But above all it became clear to us that the "*refusal of work*" strategy that we still approved of as a form of struggle, *was not applicable in all cases* to the work of reproduction and care work. We extended our refusal to the refusal of marriage, of co-habitation with men not to see our energies absorbed by the fact of having to respond to male expectations (a woman at home is always on call, we used to say). But we could never have had children and then refused to take care of them. Care work, insofar as it is work that concerns human beings, put precise limits to our action, it prospected a situation in which the strategy of refusal appeared not practicable, a utopia. In our hearts we had to decide. Those of us more engaged in organizational work renounced to have children, because it would have been incompatible not only with the amount of political work that we planned to do, to make the world more moonlike (to recall the ancient Mayan divinity, half sun, half moon),

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but incompatible, above all, with *our mental availability* to program and deal with the deadlines and the contingencies of our activity. This too was in perfect correspondence with the decision of many Chiapas *insurgentes*, given the impossibility of combining maternity with that type of militancy. However, maternity became a cardinal point of our discourse: if the *productivity* of the capitalist family and the female body was centered on the production of children, then women's liberation required that we break with this imposition, with being condemned to this sole function, with the fixation of this role. Hence the slogan: "Women let's procreate ideas not just children!" This was a cry of liberation from biological determination, an invitation to a different creation, to procreate ideas that could generate another world in which the mother-wife function would not constitute any longer our only possible identity, or be paid at the cost of so much toil, isolation, subordination, and lack of economic autonomy. This is why we put forward *the demand for wages for housework*, to reject its gratuitous attribution exclusively to womankind, so that women's economic autonomy might be constructed starting from the recognition of that first work. In the refusal of maternity we read a behavior that would become more and more widespread in Italy, as in other advanced countries, and more recently in countries not particularly advanced <sup>5</sup>, leading in our case to a natality rate of 1, 2

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<sup>5</sup> To this phenomenon is devoted the article "Ecco la generazione No figli" (TN: "Here the No children generation") published in the daily *La Repubblica* of August 28, 2006. It reports that very low natality rates are now found not only in Italy but in other countries of Southern, Northern, Eastern Europe and the far East, where in the case of Singapore and South Korea it is a new phenomenon.

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which is considered very negatively by politicians.<sup>6</sup> *Not only the demand, but above all the perspective of making the work of reproduction cost* in all the places supported by this work, brought our struggles – a type of struggle very different from those that had been waged so far– to the neighborhoods, the schools, the universities, the factories, the hospitals. It would be impossible here to deal with them, in any case everything has been accurately documented in the material we used on our militant front: leaflets, pamphlets, journals, small books<sup>7</sup>.

What was the *response of the state* to all this, to that autonomy that women had begun to build by re-appropriating their own body, but that still needed to be

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<sup>6</sup> The Minister for Family Policies, Rosy Bindi, has declared the following on television: the most worrisome lack of growth in Italy is that concerning natality. (Rai 3, broadcast of the early evening program Ballaro', Tuesday, October 3, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> I mention here, above all, the journal "*Le operaie della casa*" (TN: "The House-Workers"), published by Marsilio Editore, Venezia, and also a series of little books for militant use, put out by the same publisher, edited by the Collettivo Internazionale Femminista (International Feminist Collective). Of this series the following booklets were published: *Le operaie della casa*, (TN: *The House-Workers*"), 1975; *8 marzo 1974. Giornata internazionale di lotta delle donne*, (English Translation: *Wages for Housework Committee of Toronto, Women in Struggle. Italy Now*, n.3), 1975; *Aborto di Stato: Strage delle innocenti* (TN: *State abortion: Massacre of the innocent women*), 1976; *Dietro la normalità del parto. Lotta all'ospedale di Ferrara* (TN: *Behind the normality of childbirth. Struggle at the hospital of Ferrara*), 1978; Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox, *Contropiano dalle cucine*, 1978 (Original text in English: *Counterplanning from the kitchen*, 1975). And also *L'Offensiva* (already cited), and *Il Personale é Politico. Quaderni di Lotta Femminista* n.2 (TN: *The Personal is Political. Notebooks of Lotta Femminista* n. 2) Musolini Editore, Torino, 1973.

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rooted in an economic autonomy starting from the recognition of their first work? The response was fundamentally *a bit more emancipation*. This was accompanied, at the end of the 1970s, by *a repression of all the movements*. From 1972 to 1979, female employment increased by one million and a half. The new Family Code<sup>8</sup> was approved, centered on the parity of the partners (this too corresponded to the need not to subordinate to the will of the husband the choices of a wife that increasingly was looking for and finding job). But the real wage diminished, and during the '70s the buying power of the families was rather guaranteed by the broader involvement of the various members of the family in the labor market, often with jobs off the table, in the new context offered by the decentralization of production.<sup>9</sup> From then on the family would be supported by the presence of at least two paychecks that the passage from fordism to post-fordism and then to the neo-liberal globalization would have increasingly made precarious.

The state then managed to evade the demand that the women's movement had put forward on the economic level, and women accepted the only kind of autonomy that was being offered, that is emancipation, but *they did not perform the miracle of coupling, cost what may*, their unpaid

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<sup>8</sup> The Reform of the Family Code issued in 1942 was sanctioned with the bill n.151, approved on May 19, 1975, that stipulated first of all the parity of the partners in the married couple. Other bills were later approved that changed the regulation of other important aspects of the Code.

<sup>9</sup> M. Dalla Costa, "Emigrazione, immigrazione e composizione di classe in Italia negli anni '70" (TN: "Emigration, immigration, and class composition in Italy in the '70s"), in *Economia e lavoro*, n.4, October-December, 1981.

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work in the family, including childcare, with work outside the home. Many never married, many decided to live alone, the number of divorces and separations increased<sup>10</sup>, and the collapse of the birth rate continued. Women's refusal of procreation triggered that type of *crisis of social reproduction* that later was reflected in the unbalance between young and old; for a time, however, there was no major cause for alarm.

The prevailing *sociological literature* spoke of the women's *double presence* as a female capacity to combine the two works, domestic and extra-domestic, and described the many strategies women used to implement it. In reality, in my opinion, *there were only two strategies*: the first, a drastic reduction of the number of children, the second, the use of unpaid work of women relatives, or the employment of other women as domestic workers by the hour. But the sociological literature did not use to speak of this side of the story. While the permanent live-in domestic worker, in Italy, was a figure on the way to extinction, domestic workers by the hour were a very important support to women's outside employment. Thus, the *salarization of housework proceeded in indirect ways*. Women had more and more consistently refused unpaid domestic work, changing the modalities of its condition, "rationalizing" it to the extreme, and reducing it, also by making life choices different from those of their mothers. They had chosen as their priority the construction of their economic autonomy, that state policies allowed them only through

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<sup>10</sup> *La Repubblica*, on November 9, 2006, reported that from 1995 to 2000, separations grew by 59%, divorces by 66,8%, and that it is the South that registers the most conspicuous growth, (p.38).

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extra-domestic work. They had in their hands more money than they had in the days before the movement. With that money they paid other women to do a significant amount of housework; some more housework went out of the home to be transformed in goods and services offered by the market. It is enough to think, to give an example, of the restaurant and catering sectors. Thus, unpaid housework shrank, while paid work expanded, in and out of the family. Although the employment of a domestic and/or baby sitter often consumed a large part of the female wage, women more and more refused work that did not produce money. Moreover, in the 1970s, already in Italy a migratory flow was growing that had already brought to the country hundreds of thousands of people. Within it, by '77, it was calculated that the domestic workers of color were 100.000, out of a total immigrant workforce estimated as consisting of 3-400.000 of people. This female labor force tended to take those jobs of live – in maid that Italian women no longer wanted. It was the beginning of a type of immigration of men and women, mostly from Africa and Asia, of whom many would be destined to domestic work, a flow that in the following decades would become more robust and would be restructured as immigrant came from a broader range of countries. The *question of the relation between immigrant women and care work*, the so-called question of the *globalization of care*, was to become in time increasingly important. At the end of the '70s, therefore, women's autonomy has made great steps ahead, at least in Italy and other advanced countries, with respect to the re-appropriation of one's body and oneself as a person. Laws that are fundamental had been approved, like that on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, and the law

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instituting the *consultori* (clinics for family counseling). The referendum on divorce had been won, and there was a new family law. This autonomy, instead, remained in a precarious state as far as domestic work or care work was concerned, constrained between a refusal of this work that involved heavy sacrifices, like for example renouncing maternity, and emancipation. But precisely through that emancipation, housework would become more and more visible and waged. The '70s were also the decade in which, on the wave of the feminist movement, the United Nations' global conferences on the condition of women began. The first, to celebrate the International Year of The Woman, was held precisely in Mexico City in 1975. On December 18, 1979 the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which went into effect in 1981. We had to wait, instead, until 1993, when the UN Conference on Human Rights was held in Vienna to see women's fundamental rights recognized as an integral part of human rights, and to have the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women. This was a problem that had already been denounced in all its seriousness, and in the various forms it took across the world, at the Nairobi Conference of 1985, held at the end of the first UN Decade for Women. In the same conference it was also stipulated, in the final document<sup>11</sup>, that "the contribution, remunerated and unremunerated, that women make to all aspects and sectors of development

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<sup>11</sup> This occurred with the acceptance of the amendment (proposed by Housewives in Dialogue) of the paragraph 120 of the document "Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women." (In English in the text).

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should be recognized, and that this contribution should be measured and included in economic statistics and the Gnp (Gross national product).”

There is always a lot of skepticism about the efficacy of these Charters but undoubtedly the planetary dimension of the policy debate has strengthened the power to decide what is just and what is unjust in traditions and legislations, and go beyond the constraints of both to affirm new principles and new norms.

## Second Act

The '80s marked the take off of neo-liberalism that would fully unfold with the neo-liberal globalization of the '90s. In various countries these were years of normalization and repression after the great struggles of the previous decade. These were the years of the deepening of the international debt and the ever more drastic application of structural adjustment policies<sup>12</sup>, officially adopted to enable the indebted countries to pay at least their service on

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<sup>12</sup> On the problematic of international debt the literature is very vast. I refer above all to the works of Susan George. Among them: *Il debito del Terzo Mondo*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma, 1989 (Translated from the English: *A fate worse than debt*, Penguin Group, England, 1988 ); *Il boomerang del debito*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma, 1992 (Translated from the English, *The Debt Boomerang*, Westview Press, 1992); Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *L'indigeno che é in noi, la terra cui apparteniamo*, in A. Marucci ed., *Camminando domandando*, DeriveApprodi, Roma, 1999, (English translation “The Native in Us, the Land We Belong to” in *Common Sense*, n. 28, 1998, and in *The Commoner*, n.6, 2002, in [www.thecommoner.org](http://www.thecommoner.org)); M. Dalla Costa and G.F. Dalla Costa (a cura di), *Donne e politiche del debito*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1993, (English translation: *Paying the Price*.



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the debt. These politics actually aimed at lowering standards of living and expectations, so that the new forms of production, premised on the cheapening and precarization of labor, could take off everywhere, thus enabling business to have a competitive advantage in the different regions of the planet. But, above all, being strongly oriented toward export, the type of development that was imposed through the structural adjustment policies could only aggravate the debt. In that period, the privatization of communal goods, like land and water, the privatization of public goods, like state and parastatal agencies, the currency devaluations, the withdrawal of subsidies from basic goods, the strong subsidies given to modernized, mono-cultural agriculture, the wage cuts, the reduction and precarization of employment, the cut of public spending on social services and entitlements, starting with pensions, the cut and restructuring of public expenditure with the privatization of health care and education, the increase in the fees paid by the consumers, the liberalization of commerce with the adoption of policies aiming to favor export and import, represented a *powerful instrument of the underdevelopment of reproduction* at the global level, functional to the take off of a new phase of accumulation. This also signified an unprecedented attack against the struggles waged by

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*Women and the Politics of International Economic Strategy*, Zed Books, London, 1995). (Japanese Translation: *Yakusokusareta hatten?*, Impact Shuppankai, Tokyo, 1995) and by the same editors, *Donne, sviluppo e lavoro di riproduzione. Questione delle lotte e dei movimenti*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1996 (English translation: *Women, Development and Labor of Reproduction. Struggles and Movements*, Africa World Press, Trenton, N.J., EE.UU., and Asmara, Eritrea, 1999).

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women not only for the well-being of their families and the improvement of their living conditions, but *to gain a higher level of autonomy*. In the advanced regions this meant *the loss of a "good job,"* the loss, therefore, of the type of emancipation that this employment guaranteed, and *the immersion in precarity, poverty and dependence*. In the less advanced areas this meant, above all, that more and more land was expropriated, for so-called processes of agricultural modernization or for large and often devastating projects financed by the World Bank, of which the construction of dykes is only the best known example. This poverty - caused by the politics of debt, rooted in land expropriation and then, particularly in the '90s, by the intervention of a permanent politics of war that made the land increasingly unusable because of military operations and war residues - generated those *migratory flows* that brought to the advanced countries, of Europe above all, new subjects, of whom a considerable part, *mostly women*, were to do *large amounts of reproductive work*. These neo-liberal, belligerous (war producing) politics will be at the origin of a *new division of reproductive labor* worldwide, whereby increasingly women coming from the so-called developing countries or from others, defined 'in transition,' ("transition to democracy" in the case of Eastern European countries) would come to do this work for the advanced countries. They had to leave behind a torn reproductive environment, that of the family first of all, patched up at the cost of a greatly increased toil for those remaining, but at least compensated by the remittances sent by the women who migrated. The reproduction of *the areas considered 'more peripheral'* has been *devastated*, in order to redefine and deepen on a planetary level the stratification

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of the working social body. The plan is to produce cheap labor power to employ in the reproduction sector of the more developed regions. In this way, the state could avoid confronting the problems emerging in this context and avoid taking on the financial burdens that should be its responsibility.

*But what were these problems? What were these urgent necessities, becoming always more conspicuous, given that fewer and fewer children were procreated? What expanded this new need for labor? The emerging question, though it was not the only one, was the care of not self-sufficient elderly, an issue that was to become particularly crucial in the discourse on women's autonomy that we are elaborating.*

### Third Act

*It is since 1990 on, after a decade of general application of the politics of debt and with the unfolding of neo-liberal globalization, that emigration has become a truly worldwide phenomenon, reaching the figure, according to the estimates of the United Nations<sup>13</sup>, of more than 175 million emigrants across the planet. Italy, traditionally an exporter of labor power, in the '80s and '90s, becomes a net importer, attracting laborers from Asia and Africa and more recently Eastern Europe. An increasing number of women have migrated towards Europe, during the last decades. At the end of the '90s, 45% of immigrants to Eu-*

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<sup>13</sup> UN Census, 2000.

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rope were women, this coinciding with a growing demand for domestic workers in Southern Europe<sup>14</sup>.

It is exactly in the '90s that a new figure of worker begins to take a more precise shape, increasingly embodied by immigrant women, the *caregiver*. She is the one (at times it is a man)<sup>15</sup> who cares for a person who is no longer capable of being self-sufficient in his/her daily tasks, *generally an elder, male or female, with more or less serious problems as far as self-sufficiency*. The *need* for this new figure of domestic worker, the demand for this *specific type of care work* stems from *demographic changes* that have seen both life expectancy increase as well as the percentage of the elderly in the population, as women's refusal of maternity has remarkably reduced the number of young people. This is a trend that affects the European countries as a whole, not just Italy. It is a *crisis of social reproduction* because the balance between young and old breaks down, and there is no longer an adequate generational replacement. Because of women's refusal of maternity, the prospect is that in Italy (a country that, according to the Istat estimates, has one of the lowest birthrates in the world, namely the 1,2 ratio mentioned above, recently raised to 1,3 thanks to the new born to immigrant women)

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<sup>14</sup> In Italy the immigrants registered as legal residents were 1.512.324 in 2002, of whom 45.8% were women (Caritas, *Dossier statistico immigrazione 2003*, (TN: Caritas, *Statistical dossier on immigration 2003*), Edizioni Nuova Anterem, Roma, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> It is estimated that in Italy the male component of the work of *caregiver* is 25% and that 73% of those who do this job are about 30-40 years old (*La Repubblica*, October 16, 2006, p.16. It cites the following sources: Inps, Caritas Ambrosiana and the CGIL, Lombardia).

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within a 30 year period one out of three people will be over 65.

The significant fact, that must be properly interpreted, is that *in Europe the majority of those over 65 (with the exception of those over 90) lives at home*, not in private or public institutions. This situation is obviously the result of a decision made non only by the elderly, when still able to express themselves, but by the younger woman, a relative, generally the daughter, who is aware that this is the most humane option. This decision is made, despite the fact that, due to the amount of tasks and duties involved, *it will heavily condition her life and limit her autonomy*, even with the intervention, whenever possible, of the paid work of other women. The feminist refusal of unpaid reproduction work, expressed also through the refusal of maternity, has not substantially liberated women from care work, except for a certain period of their lives, when they would have had to raise a child. "Mom has gone out" was the title of an exhibition organized by the Wages For Housework Group of Varese<sup>16</sup>. But "she had to come back," we would have to write today, if we were to have that exhibition again. The time out has lasted a brief period. The problem of care has returned, in an even heavier and more complex way, with the elderly, who are often not self-sufficient. A fifty or sixty years old woman, or even older, who had participated in the struggles of the feminist movement, who needs herself some rest, and if retired, needs to enjoy what during her work life she could not

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<sup>16</sup> This is discussed in the homonymous article in the journal *Le operaie della casa* (TN: *The houseworkers*), double issue, November-December 1975/January-February 1976, p.21.

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have, must face the problem of having parents in a very advanced age, *often over eighty*, with all the *typical old age ailments*. The burden is on her, who often has no adult sons or daughters who at least could in part collaborate. After having worked hard to construct her autonomy, this autonomy is further reduced because the problem of the care of others, who are weaker and depend on her, has not been resolved. The *social body* is precisely that, a body; it is not divisible, and it *re-proposes the problem of care in an eternal return*.

It is in this context that we must place the work of the *caregiver*<sup>17</sup> that is done by women who migrate to Italy, in the wake of the disasters produced in their countries by structural adjustment policies, by wars, and by “democratizing interventions.” It responds to a need which state policies are still too far from satisfying. Their employment demonstrates first of all that also this type of care work has been increasingly subsumed under that *process of salarization* of housework that I just mentioned, and

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<sup>17</sup> It is calculated that half of these workers in Italy are not regularized. Many of the women who do this specific work come from Eastern Europe, from Romania, Moldavia, and Ukraine. Again *La Repubblica*, in the article already mentioned, dedicated to the presence and work of *caregivers* in Italy (October 16, 2006, pp.16-7) reports a growth of regular presences that goes from 51.110 in 1994 to 142.196 of 2000, to 490.678 of 2003, to 693.000 of whom 619.000 foreigners in 2006. See on this matter Rossana Mungliello, “Segregation of Migrants in the Labour Market in Italy: The Case of Female Migrants from Eastern European Countries Working in the Sector of Care and Assistance for the Elderly. First Results of an Empirical Study Carried Out in Padova,” in *Zu Wessen Diensten? Frauenarbeit zwischen Care-Drain und Outsourcing*, Zurich, Frauenrat fur Aussenpolitik, 2005, pp.72-77.

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that *the problem is such that it is usually necessary to employ a person full-time to deal with it*. But some common notions must be demistified. The first is that the *caregiver* liberates the relative from the care of the elder. On the contrary, the work of a caregiver cannot function well if it is not accompanied by the constant guidance, cooperation and verification of the female relative. A work that begins with the presentation of the case situation, which is always different and changing and requires a constant help, practically a division of tasks between the female relative and the paid woman. It is generally the former who must do the shopping, because it is difficult to do it together with the person cared for, she is also the one who does the bureaucratic work, keeps the administration and the financial management of the house, she takes the elder to the doctors and must guarantee an immediate presence and intervention in all the emergencies. Precisely because of the loneliness that comes with living every day with an elder, who is often mentally debilitated, the caregiver herself has to be reproduced. Thus, the so-called “work-of love”<sup>18</sup> comes back not only as a real need in the care of the elders, who will be poorly assisted if there is not a real concern for their well-being, but also as a need in the relation between the employer (often the daughter) and the *caregiver*. The former will have to follow the situation as it evolves to cope in a timely way with those moments when the problems become difficult to sustain, and will have to offer all the resources and facilitations that can

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<sup>18</sup> G.F. Dalla Costa, *Un lavoro d'amore*, Edizioni delle donne, Roma, 1978 (English Translation: *The Work of Love*, Autonomedia, New York, 2008). (Japanese translation: Ai no rodou, Impact Shuppankai, Tokyo, 1991).

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make that work less burdensome. Often she will have to substitute herself to the caregiver to concede her some extra periods of rest in the most demanding moments, and above all more money if the situation becomes too heavy. Let us keep in mind that if there is no extra money in the family to pay for another caregiver on Saturdays and Sundays, considering that this type of work has a high cost<sup>19</sup> with respect to the normal family budget, it will be the daughter and the husband who will care for the elder relative during these days, which means that their weekly rest and the time that would have devoted to shopping, in case they still had a job, would vanish. This is how many couples spend their week-ends, and the problem returns during the vacation month of the caregiver, because while a cleaning job can wait, or find a temporary solution, elders who are not self-sufficient cannot be left alone even for a moment, and they cannot find themselves suddenly face with other people that they do not know

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<sup>19</sup> For the caregivers who have a regular contract, this stipulates from 750 to 900 euros net, plus 200 euros of contributions by the employer, one month of paid vacation, and another month of pay as a thirteenth monthly pay ("*tredicesima*"), and another again as severance pay. Food is provided by the employer, and so is a room in the apartment, a problem that is usually resolved by changing the use of another room. The live-in *caregiver* who stipulates a contract for at most 8 or 9 hours a day, has the right to have two or three hours a day free, and a day and a half a week also free, generally Sunday and Saturday afternoon. But there are also part-time contracts, not like those for live-in, it depends on the conditions of the person to be assisted and what the caregiver is most interest in. Many prefer to work as live-in for some years, not to have expenses for food and rent and be able to send home almost all the salary.



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and that have not been instructed about how to relate to them and what tasks to perform. This is not tendentially a precarious work because there is no convenience for the employer to change the caregiver after having done all the work of teaching that this work requires, and if a good relation between the caregiver and the person cared for has been established.

Precairity intervenes, instead, when there are irregular work conditions, and this shows how crucial it is that a more substantial economic support be given by the state to the families to enable them to stipulate regular work contracts.

I thought it was important to detail this combination of tasks, those done by the caregiver and those done by the relative, not to make the opposite mistake than the one mentioned before. There was a time, after the end of the feminist movement of the '70s, when the identification of women's emancipation with a job outside the home kept hidden the role of domestic workers employed by the hour; today, in dealing with the work of the caregivers, the risk is that it will be treated as an "*a solo*", with no mention of the work done by female relatives.

The employment of immigrant women has highlighted the magnitude of the problem. It is not a care work that the female relative, if she does it alone, can combine with other jobs. If today the subjects who take on this task have been forced to do it because of the political circumstances that have devastated their lives, it is desirable that in the future this work may become a normal "good job," done also by Italian women (in part this has already started), above all if the state gives a more substantial support to this work and its conditions improve. There is no ques-

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tion, in fact, that the State should devote more funds to pay for this work, given that its cost for many families is already unsustainable, and this leads to conditions of irregular employment. Let's keep in mind, however, that this is a terrain where from the central State or from the local government some economic response to *care work* or *domestic work* arrived. It is thanks to this response that many families can manage to stipulate an employment contract. First of all there has been the *assegno di accompagnamento* ("Attendance Allowance"), 450 euros a month, paid by the National Social Insurance office (Inps), independently from income levels directly to the person to be assisted, when not self-sufficient physically or mentally. But it is very difficult to obtain it. It is conditioned on a declaration by the Health National Service of total and permanent disability. Many cases, above all of physical rather than mental disability, are not considered serious enough to justify it. There are other provisions as well, coming from the Regions, conditioned upon very low income levels, not alternative to the mentioned Attendance Allowance. Among them, is the "caregiver grant" ("contributo *badante*") up to a maximum of 250 euros monthly, given by the Veneto Region to those who have hired a *caregiver at least for 20 hours a week*. Then the Alzheimer grant (516 euros monthly) added to what is prescribed by the regional law n. 28 of 1991.<sup>20</sup> There are also specific support services. In order to put an end to the clandestinity of many caregivers and the risks connected with the

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<sup>20</sup> Since 2007 these regional policies have been all replaced by only one provision: the "care grant", for a maximum of 520 euros monthly, introduced by the Veneto Region.

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possibility of infiltrations by criminal organizations, initiatives have been taken also by the Provinces, like Bergamo, which has decided to devote 400 euros monthly to families who have already hired a caregiver or need to do it.

Despite the neo-liberal tendency to cut public spending on social welfare, we must nevertheless reckon that the terrain of welfare, where some "salarization" of care work has been obtained, resurfaces as an irreducible terrain of bargaining, starting precisely from policies of this type. The crisis of social reproduction creates problems also for the state. Presently, the Minister for Family Policies, Rosy Bindi, is proposing to make banks and foundations participate in the expansion of the funds to be devoted to the elderly; at the same time, warning about the fall of the birthrate, she is proposing to give 2500 euros yearly for every new born till adulthood. *Wages For Housework*, so much opposed by the institutional forces in the high phase of the movement, returns articulated in various forms, as an irrepressible need. Those who would have preferred that this money be used again to support institutes for the elderly where to ghettoize the third or fourth age made a mistake. Institutes are appropriate for those extreme cases that cannot be cared for at home. Not only is the care they provide of a different quality, but above all the elderly themselves do not like these places and prefer to stay at home. The woman, *through her refusal* to be the one solely responsible for unpaid reproduction work, no matter what the case and conditions, *has led* in this specific sector as well to a *process* of "visibilization" and "salarization". But *she has also guaranteed*, by accepting a *limited freedom*, that is, a *relative autonomy*, the *preservation of the relative autonomy and the physical as well as*

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*psychological wellbeing of those, who, in weak conditions, depend on her.* With her refusal and relative acceptance, she has shown that in the case of care work refusal alone is a utopia, and that this specific elder care work must be supported by a higher level of funding by the state, so that the families can cope with the cost, and the work itself can be performed in regular contractual conditions, in the same way as the state must expand the services devoted to this weak sector of the population. Women have also shown that one of the main obstacles to keeping an elder at home or in the home of a relative is the hike in real estate prices and rents, which has reduced the space in the apartments to a minimum, so that often there is not even a room available for the elder or for the caregiver. This is a problem that people had already faced for years in the case of children. Increasingly, apartments are holes that do not allow for visits and even less the permanent presence of parents or the arrival of children. Nevertheless, the problem posed by the presence of not self-sufficient elders also re-proposes the question of having children, and having therefore some economic support to raise them, in addition to different living conditions, so that people can begin to desire again to have a child and see it as a possible choice. In fact, with rare exceptions, nobody else but the children will care about keeping at home the elders who are not self-sufficient, nor will organize and watch over their reproduction. The problem of elder care is one that in different ways and with very different situations is present at a planetary level. Thus, the question of an economic support by the state for this work must, I believe, enter the political agenda as one of the most urgent issues.

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If these are the emergent problematic of care work, to say, then, that *domestic work, i.e. reproduction work*, tends to become more and more *immaterial work*<sup>21</sup>, or at least that it can be included into the sphere of immaterial work, indicates a lack of knowledge of this work. The work of reproduction, which is articulated in many components, of which here we have considered just one, has always been a combination of a lot of material work grafted on immaterial work of reproduction, psychological, affective etc. Therefore, there is nothing new under the sun. But to say that today the category of immaterial work would grasp better its novelty is to do an injustice to this work and the new realities that traverse it, of which the one discussed above is a good example, loaded with heavy and material tasks. The fact that these tasks must possibly be performed with affection does not make them immaterial. If the condition of being an elder and not self-sufficient is a significant difference, arguing that “women are increasingly burdened with the control of the flows of difference,”<sup>22</sup> and to see this as immaterial work again implies not to see in its reality the work that is burdened with this difference and its problems.

It is equally clear, considering the terrain of eldercare (and similarly childcare) that the work of reproduction *cannot be resolved with communication*.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly so as its problematics are not exhausted by the search for better agreements among the partners, but im-

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<sup>21</sup> A. Negri, *Movimenti Nell'Impero* (TN: *Movements in the Empire*), Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2006, pp. 241, 215, 184.

<sup>22</sup> A. Negri, *op.cit.*, p.193.

<sup>23</sup> See C. Marazzi, *Il posto dei calzini* (TN: *The place of the socks*), Edizioni Casagrande, Bellinzona, 1994.

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ply for women many hours of work, lack of money, the risk of poverty, the lack of autonomy. All these are problems that cannot be resolved with communication.

Nor is what is necessary a further technological innovation. Nor do we need the genial idea of some "informatic" worker, whose political program would seem to me not very promising precisely because of its coming from the realm of the immaterial<sup>24</sup>. Genial ideas is not what we need.

*What is needed is work more adequately remunerated, and more free time for all, women and men.*

*What is necessary is to recognize the materiality of life and of the works that safeguard it, in the house as in the field<sup>25</sup>, and their ties with human relations and with the land, and this holds true for the work of women as for the work of peasants.<sup>26</sup> If anything, women have shown that*

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<sup>24</sup> A. Negri, *op. cit.*, p.184.

<sup>25</sup> The emerging networks of peasants in the South as in the North defend the fact of being able to have an agriculture managed according to sustainable methodologies often very traditional and with a large use of living labor (which implies a large occupation) resting on the availability of very material goods like land, water and natural seeds, instead of other methodologies that are being imposed on them. Even in the North it is significant what peasants say, as they do not refuse technology *tout court*, but prefer not to depend too much on machines and use, instead, where it makes more sense, the greatly available resource of labor. See on this point J. Bové and F. Dufour, *Il mondo non é in vendita*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2001 (English translation, *The world is not for sale*, Verso, London, New York, 2001). I believe that the new subjectivities, that are significant from a political viewpoint, emerge from these contexts, not from the leading capitalist methodologies.

<sup>26</sup> M. Dalla Costa, *L'Indigeno che é in noi, la terra cui apparteniamo*, see previous citation, and "Rustic and Ethical" in *Ephemera*,

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the autonomy that everyone pursues and desires faces irreducible conditionings, whether it is by children or the elderly, and if today the difference is between those who are burdened with this work and those who are not, this is a difference that should not be celebrated but demolished, by building a more common responsibility with regard to care work, and demanding from the state (since the “common” does not exhaust the “public”) more substantial and generalized allocations of money and services.

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