

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Autonomedia, 2009 (1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2004). Page numbers in our essay refer to that edition.

<sup>2</sup> J. Darwin, *After Tamerlan. The Rise & Fall of Global Empire 1400-2000*, Bloomsbury Press, 2008, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, quoting the Governor-General of India in his 1834-45 Report, *Capital*, vol. I, chap. 15, § 5.

<sup>4</sup> Though “Free Caliban” can sometimes be seen painted on street walls, there is less concern for his mother, “this damned witch Sycorax.” Genderwise interestingly, a production of *The Tempest* filmed by Julie Taymor in 2010 morphs the duke and magician Prospero into a woman, Prospera, played by Helen Mirren.

<sup>5</sup> We intend to publish an essay on “the women question” in some near future.

<sup>6</sup> *The Making of Capitalist Patriarchy: Interview with S. Federici*, December 2013, Black Sheep. A Socialist Podcast.

<sup>7</sup> S. Federici, *Precarious Labor and Reproductive Work* (2010), excerpt from “Precarious labor: A feminist viewpoint,” a 2006 lecture. ‘On the “caring labor:” an archive’ site, subtitled “power to the caregivers and therefore to the class.” The name says it all: *class* is meant to consist of all those (women, mainly) who are in charge of care work.

<sup>8</sup> Full text on columbia.edu site.

<sup>9</sup> *Origins of the Family, Private Property, & the State*, 1884, Chap. II, Part 4. The idea originated with the early socialist and feminist Flora Tristan (1803-44).

<sup>10</sup> Interview in Black Sheep.

<sup>11</sup> S. Federici, *Precarious Labor and Reproductive Work* (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by G.Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Social movements & the Decolonization of Everyday Life*, Chap. 2, eroseffect.com.

<sup>13</sup> Interview in Black Sheep.

<sup>14</sup> As Federici explains, *Caliban & the Witch* is based on M. Della Costa and S. James’ *Women & the Subversion of the Community*, 1972. Also by S. James: *Sex, Race & Class*, 1975. “Gender + class + race,” the magic triptych of 21st radicalism was already there forty years ago.

<sup>15</sup> S. James, interview in *The Guardian*, April 25,

2012.

<sup>16</sup> *Caliban & the Witch*, p. 16. Here again, the concept is invested with excess meaning. Women, Federici insists, are the most productive force because of their role as mothers and carers. Now violence is presented as the essential productive force: just another one, equally essential, or more essential? A similar mental blur surrounds *class*: we do not know whether women are part of the exploited class or a class as such, since “‘women’s history’ is ‘class history’,” and gender, we are told, “should be treated as a specification of class relations”(p. 14). It’s up to the reader to grasp what is meant by *specification*. Intellectual shifts are the stuff this book is made of.

<sup>17</sup> S. Federici, “Feminism & the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation,” 2010 article, in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction & Feminist Struggle*, PM Press, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Louise Weydemeyer, March 11, 1861.

<sup>19</sup> Red Notes, *Italy 1977-78: Living with an Earthquake* (highly recommended). Also Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978*. Both readable on libcom.

<sup>20</sup> A contribution to such a critique: *Value, Labor Time & Communism: Re-Reading Marx*, on this site (a chapter of *Eclipse & Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*, PM Press, 2014). For a more detailed analysis, Bruno Astarian & G. Dauvé’s *Everything Must Go ! Abolish Value*, to be published in 2016. A real breakthrough, needless to say, will require more than words.

<sup>21</sup> Regrettably and perhaps inevitably, this is the case with other Italian *Autonomia* ex-luminaries, Toni Negri for example, who grew out of extremism to moderate politics, the school’s naughty boy turned teacher. As the Italian class and daily life offensive went quite deep, its opposed reformist tendencies naturally also developed, especially with the ebbing of the wave. Far-left leaders are quite good at de-radicalizing themselves.

<sup>22</sup> *Let’s Spit on Hegel*. C. Lonzi traces back Marxist disregard for women to a line of thought that runs from Plato via Hegel to Marx, Engels, Lenin and the inevitable Gramsci (apparently the utmost in communist standard theory for those who ignore Pannekoek and Bordiga).

<sup>23</sup> Matthew, 5: 13. More religious undercurrent flows under political attitudes than meets the eye.



# Federici

# vs

# Marx

...rough magic I here abjure...

William Shakespeare  
*The Tempest* (1610)

*Caliban & the Witch* is of undeniable interest for our understanding of social movements at the critical juncture between medieval and modern times, of the advent of capitalism, its sexual dimension, the treatment of women and the conversion of female and male bodies into a work-machine, among other things. But the book also sets forth a vision of past and present which is as questionable as the political perspective that this vision entails.<sup>1</sup>

knew of was what Carla Lonzi, one of the founders of Rivolta Femminile, summed up in 1970 as the “ideal of a common ownership of goods,” a project which was all too easy to pin down as grossly inadequate to women (*and men*, an essential point C. Ponzi failed to see).<sup>22</sup> The Marxism they were targeting was its popularized version, i.e. a Marxism that eulogized the working class and equated socialism or communism with a worker-managed economy.

*Work* is the salient point. *Ex-operaismo* theorists are incapable and unwilling of exploring it. Their propulsive force was exhausted nearly forty years ago, and the old fires have long turned to ashes. It is up to the 21st century to re-examine Marx. Autonomist feminists go the opposite road. Instead of digging into what Marx meant by *work* (especially by looking anew at *Capital's* first chapter), they stretch out the concept to the point of qualifying women as *woman workers*. A woman is not a woman, they say, she is a worker because she produces children. Radical feminism prides itself on having gained recognition for woman as a *worker*: as a real worker, that is, on par with the (male) wage-earner, as a really exploited human being, as though she was now entitled to be a full-fledged member of the “revolutionary subject.” In 1970 current leftist talk, the metalworker was the salt of the earth, then the salt seemed to lose its saltiness, so how could it be made salty again?<sup>23</sup> By adding fresh layers of salt, i.e. more exploited people. Women perfectly fit the role: they are downtrodden and numerous. The old revolutionary subject (the working class) was too small and, what's worse, short-sighted (sexist, homophobic, productivist, etc.). Now we'll have a larger and broader-minded historical agent. How simple.

Those who embarked on such a course were turning their backs on the actual

breakthrough that the most forward-looking proletarians had tried to engage in. The refusal of work and the critique of daily life pointed to a revolution that would not bring about the community of “associated producers” advocated by Marxism. What it could positively be remained fairly cloudy, but at least it was perceived in a negative way. The worker movement was rejected not just because it was usually conservative and sometimes counter-revolutionary (which it was), but because the future world *could not be a workers' world*. On the contrary, quite a few autonomists, including feminist ones like Federici, looked for possibilities of enlarging the worker movement to include more categories than those employed in factories and offices, from schoolkids to mental patients, of course the largest category being that of women. In other words, they were enlarging the labor movement when the problem of the day was how to go beyond it. Whenever the personnel of the revolution becomes the revolutionaries' number one issue, it's an unmistakable sign they are going astray.

Federici's failings are not her own: they express the limits of the latest proletarian wave. Sadly, when reconstructed into doctrines and political programs, historical inadequacies solidify into stumbling blocks. Instead of a critique of work, we are offered its generalization, as if extending the status of worker to everyone could blow the whole system apart. The practical inability to undertake a critique of the factory resulted in the factory being theoretically expanded to the home. The 1970s radicals were forced to act and think within the bounds of what was happening in their time, and Silvia Federici's present popularity suggests that this time is not quite over yet.

Gilles Dauvé  
Nov. 2015

once wrote.<sup>18</sup> James and Federici believe that half-change today is the step to full change tomorrow. Gramsci's strategy of permeating the civil society has become the group-think of the day.

Like S. James, Federici talks about *class*, but her notion is so flexibly elastic that there are no proletarians any more, just six billion commoners who confront capitalism (or what's left of the concept) with their collective needs and self-organized communities. Don't ask if this revolution is on its way or as of now happening: this would be a sure sign that you are still entangled in obsolete thought-patterns. Real change is here and now, "commons" theorists like Federici want us to believe. They replace communist revolution with *alternativism*: in a nutshell, the pressure of old community bonds which capitalism has not yet taken over, combined with the emergence of a new collaborative, free software and sharing economy, plus bottom-up participatory direct democracy, is supposed to be able to overcome capitalism gradually but surely.

## What critique of Marxism? What critique of Marx?

J. Ph. Becker, a 19th century German socialist, called *Capital* the "Bible of the working class." Marxism (related to but different from Marxian thought) was the theory of the labor movement asserting itself *within capitalism*, either in collaboration with the bourgeois (in the social-democratic variant), or in their place, i.e. doing away with the bourgeoisie (Leninist variant). As regards the present topic, Marxism by and large relegated women to the side-lines. Sex was one of Marx's blind spots.

Thus defined, Marxism broke up in the 1970s under the shock of the refusal of work by a number of workers, a minority of course, yet determined enough to challenge social realities and certainties.<sup>19</sup>

The 1970s are gone, but the effects of this theoretical crisis still rumble on and on. These are jarring times, ridden with trauma and denial, like life after a loss. The earthquake revealed the shortcomings of revolutionary tenets without being strong enough to supersede them, and it has only been able to blow holes in out-of-date beliefs.

Silvia Federici is part of the vast array of semi-critics who live off these shortcomings, particularly off what is inevitably lacking in Marx. The author of *Capital* emphasized the crucial feature of primitive accumulation: the separation between the producer and the means of production. He downplayed women, the rationalization and mechanization of nature as well as of society, the dispossession of the body and the mind/body dichotomy, the role of language, animal (mis)treatment, etc. So *Caliban & the Witch* is read as if it was exploring what Marx barely touched, while in fact Federici comes up with a completely different vision. The whole point is whether it is relevant to put women center-stage in the advent of capitalism as well as in its inner nature. Just because Marx ignored substantial elements or left them at the periphery, is not enough to make them central.

Nobody escapes the borders of his times.

"I'll drown my book," says Prospero at the end of *The Tempest*. No point in drowning *Capital*, but we need a critical review of Marx.<sup>20</sup>

We cannot expect Federici to contribute to it. She partakes of the weakest expressions of the Italian social upheaval in the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> The only communist program radical feminists

## Primitive accumulation according to Silvia Federici

Federici claims to be writing "against Marxist orthodoxy" (p. 6), and *Caliban & the Witch* is commonly read as a complement (or for some readers, as an alternative) to Marx's *Capital*, especially Part VIII. Federici writes:

...my description of primitive accumulation includes a set of historical phenomena that are absent in Marx, and yet have been extremely important for capitalist accumulation. They include: 1) the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; 2) the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged-work and their subordination to men; 3) the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers." (p. 11)

So we expect to read what was missing in the accepted master narrative, especially as history suffers from a long tradition of writing women off. The question is, where does a counter-hegemonic history lead us? In Federici's case, the author is not merely filling in gaps: her analysis of primitive accumulation amounts to nothing less than a conception of capitalism not just different from Marx's but indeed opposed to it.

In order to understand the birth of capitalism, she emphasizes the specific oppression that social groups, women in particular, were subjected to. That is what she is targeting, and her approach prioritizes certain factors and downplays others.

The question is, what tipped the historical scales?

In the seventeenth century, labor costs in Indian cotton mills were estimated at one-seventh of what they were in Europe. The East India Company was importing and

selling such quantities of Indian textiles in England that "the volume of Indian textile exports threatened to overwhelm the cloth industry in Britain, which sought commercial safety in protected tariffs."<sup>2</sup> Later, in the mid-19th century, half of the cotton goods produced in the world were manufactured in the north of England, and the contemporaries were as much impressed by the growth of Manchester (nicknamed *Cottonopolis*) as people are today when they visit Shanghai or the Shenzhen zone. Meanwhile, "the bones of the cotton-weavers [were] bleaching the plains of India."<sup>3</sup>

What had happened in two centuries? How did the English bourgeois manage to shift the balance of power? Bluntly put, by lowering the cost of labor in their own country, by manufacturing the same articles much cheaper. Even on military grounds, European superiority only became effective in the 19th century because the West was benefiting from better soldiery and weaponry due to the industrial revolution and modern wage-labor. The destructive capability of the machine gun paralleled that of the power-loom. History is not mono-causal, but the driving force of the ascent of a few countries was their ability to put millions into productive work.

In contrast, Federici selects dispossession as a major cause. Yet dispossessing farmers of their lands, villagers of their community links and women of their crafts and skills was only a negative condition, a necessary albeit insufficient condition. *Caliban & the Witch* is marred by the omission of essential "push" factors. The historical account does not add up. It neither supplements nor enriches *Capital*: it goes a completely divergent way.

Why? Because Federici's vision of primitive accumulation is fueled by a definition of capitalism that is worlds apart from that of Marx.

## Capitalism according to Silvia Federici

*Caliban & the Witch* is a good Shakespearean title,<sup>4</sup> with the added benefit of accurately summing up the book's thesis: not only was capitalism built on slavery and woman's subjugation in the past, but that is also how it has perpetuated itself and still soldiers on. Federici is providing grist for her mill.

In her setting, the slave and the woman play a more decisive part than the male or female worker, and the female worker a more vital part because of her role at home than because of what she does in the workshop or office.

Giving primacy to slavery and woman's subordination is not documented by facts. Slavery played an indispensable role in the rise of capitalism from the 16th to the 18th centuries, but its importance began to decline with large scale industrialization and England, the industrial revolution leader, was one of the prominent abolitionist countries, first of the slave trade, then of slavery itself. Various forms of slavery exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet they have long ceased to be vital to the capitalist economy. As for sexual inequality, it certainly has not disappeared, but it is on the decrease in the most "advanced" countries. While it still discriminates against women, capitalism includes more and more of them in the working world, employs them in traditionally male-dominated trades and hires them at top executive jobs. Of all existing social systems, capitalism is the one which seems to treat sexes in the least unequal way. It does not emancipate women, but it is not based upon their subjugation.<sup>5</sup>

These facts are immaterial for Federici, whose analysis is based on a presupposition. Everything hinges on which historical turning point is chosen as a starting point. She *has to* locate the emergence of the capitalist mode of

production at the crossroads between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, i.e. before the industrial revolution, because she equates the birth of capitalism with the exclusion of women from the world of work, from value productive labor, their relegation in the 15th-16th centuries to the "reproductive" sphere, and later to lesser paid jobs.

Federici approaches wage-labor not on the basis of what it is, but on what is exterior to it, what takes place outside the work-place and (according to her) makes wage-labor possible. *Reproduction* becomes the key word. Quite a relevant concept, indeed. Unfortunately, when it is extended to everything, and distinctions are blurred between population reproduction, capital reproduction, class system reproduction and the whole social reproduction, the overstretched concept drifts into irrelevance.

Old worker-focused Marxism was committed to giving prominence to factories. Federici is biased too, albeit with a different bias: the focus has shifted from production to reproduction, meaning the reproduction of children. A vital role is now bestowed upon women: *vital* is the most adequate word, because Federici thinks women play a key position in capitalism because they are the givers of life: they are the ones who have pregnancies and bear children.

...women have been the producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist commodity: labor power... women's unpaid labor in the home has been the pillar upon which the exploitation of the waged workers...has been built, and the secret of its productivity. (p.7)

*Caliban & the Witch* is famous as a ground-breaking study of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but for all Federici's research, her account is based on a repeated postulate. As readers are impressed by the wealth of historical data, they are inclined to

To preempt glib critique, let us say that *reformism* is no insult for us: it is a reality that has to be acknowledged where it exists, unless of course one sees no difference between reform and revolution, as is the case with Selma James. *Caliban & the Witch* insistently refers to S. James as a major inspiration to Federici's work. All evidence points to the fact that Federici sees no objection to the most objectionable aspects of James' persistent political choices. We have to assume that for her the reform/revolution distinction is outmoded.

### Silvia Federici as a theorist of "the commons"

*Caliban & the Witch* outlines an agenda the author never leaves us any doubt about. Though some readers may have been slow on the uptake, her political stance has been an open secret for years. The only difference is Federici now explicitly makes the link between her historical interpretation and her support for the "commons" theory. She traces contemporary resistance movements to the privatization of natural resources back to the struggle of the past "commons" crushed by the 16th to 18th century enclosures, and calls for a renewal of the "intense female sociality and solidarity that enabled women to stand up to men" (p. 24) before they were crushed by the coming of capitalist modernity. According to Federici, the communal effort that was defeated by the ascent of capitalism is now rebounding against globalization, on a larger scale and with better chance of success.

One of the main threads of *Caliban & the Witch* is the historical importance of violence, which Federici believes Marx underestimated: in the transition to capitalism, she says, the use of brutality and constraint was more crucial than the bourgeois' ability to organize the productive forces: "violence itself becomes the most productive force."<sup>16</sup>

We would rather argue that there are sound historical reasons to think that violence facilitated this epoch-making transformation. This logic, however, would run counter to Federici's method. The whole book is built on the assumption that human evolution is first and foremost a question of *power*: either the control of a ruling minority over the vast majority, or the co-operative self-organization of the people, therefore social change consists in creating or recreating new forms and places of power. The essential features of the capitalist system hardly matter: as long as they are collectively managed, money, work, and wage-labor will undergo a change in nature and cease to be exploitative and oppressive:

If capital is defined as constraint, we only have to act freely to do away with it.

And if capital is defined as dispossession, let's repossess the world, and this joint communal reappropriation will be enough to transform what now exists.<sup>17</sup>

Federici sees capitalism as a force *exterior* to society, and reduces exploitation to predation: capitalists are akin to gangsters who steal from the community, therefore change will come when the community gathers together. "Common" is just another word for *social*, for something that is always potentially there, and "the commons" is society regaining its self again, escaping the clutches of capitalism.

Does the society we struggle for already exist in the present one, and if so, could it grow within the present one until it takes over? Federici's answer to both questions is **yes**, and that is the message *Caliban & the Witch* drives home. There lies the parting of the ways with those who maintain a fundamental difference between reform and revolution. "I am not fond of half measures," Jenny Marx

launch an awareness campaign with the result that, as the capitalists are unwilling and unable to implement that claim, the social pressure to have it satisfied would explode the system. “With a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, I shall move the world,” Archimedes is quoted as saying. In the present case, the lever would be the all-embracing demand to wage the un-waged, and the practically unlimited proletarian mass would provide the fulcrum. The reasoning would be compelling if history functioned on the same principles as physics. The “wage the un-waged” campaign was based on the belief that revolutionaries could invent a demand that would be both felt as universal by the exploited (in the broadest sense) and deemed unacceptable by the rulers. This quest for the miracle cure is a constant of leftist politics: activists artificially graft their magic remedy onto rank-and-file struggles which usually remain unresponsive. The Italian social storm had brought with it the old obsession: how to give the exploited a push forward? how to free the locomotive of history from its rusty brake? A unifier, a force multiplier would do the trick.

As it happened, activists failed to conjure this fiercely logical formula into reality. Unlike votes for women, birth control, abortion, equal job opportunity and equal pay, the “Wages for Housework” initiative was not really grounded on actual struggles, and in practice was tacked on to women’s collectives by political groups which had chosen this theme as a major part of their platform.

Besides, supposing millions of people had taken to the streets and demanded enough money to live on, viz. at least as much as the so-called minimal wage and probably more, those millions of women and men would have already passed the stage of requiring money for all, and started asking themselves how to create a world *without* money.

After 1977, the watershed year, things were closing in on revolutionary endeavors. As often with activists, when it became clear that practice did not match theory, they stuck to their tactics and hoped for success by repeating their watchword again and again. The “Waging the un-waged” campaign moved into overdrive, predictably with little results.

Other “Wages for Housework” defenders, however, managed to make this topic into an issue debated in political circles and the media. They were more successful because they were less extreme, more simply women-focused, either in a radical or reformist perspective, or in a mixture of both. Selma James, for example, has been combining grassroots organizing and lobbying activities for decades.<sup>14</sup> Her campaigning in favor of the official recognition of unwaged work does its best to convince governments and the United Nations that carers (beginning with women) are essential to economic and political life. While she meets legislators to try and influence their policy, her action is still often worded in *class* terms.<sup>15</sup> Yet in spite of such radical talk, her endeavors bring about nothing more than what capitalism has been doing for ages: granting family, child, non-working mother or single parent allowances. Far from subverting the wage system, these additional benefits contribute to the indirect or *social* wage which is now part of the capital/labor relation. At its most modern, capitalism cannot ignore the welfare of those who take care of child breeding and rearing, and therefore it includes the formerly excluded — i.e. women at home — within its overall reproduction.

Far-left feminism started as a critique of traditional (male-dominated) left-wing politics and unionism, which supposedly defended factory workers, and neglected what happened outside the shop-floor. What used to be radicalism is now merely complementing trade union reformism.

accept the author’s assumption: a definition of capitalism based on two essential and interlinked features: dispossession and constraint. While the enclosures deprived millions of rural families of their means of livelihood, millions of women were being dispossessed of their crafts and traditional community knowledge, and driven out of what is now called the formal economy. This indispensable condition, however, does not define capitalism. The very bedrock of Marxist feminism is a premise that is no way provable.

## The theory of “reproductive” labor

*Caliban & the Witch* was written to validate a theory. As the author makes clear at the outset, an earlier version (in 1984) “was an attempt to rethink Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation from a feminist viewpoint,” and the second (2004) broadened the scope. The book harnesses facts for a polemic. Federici has explained why she

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...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...it’s essential, pivotal work...<sup>6</sup>

...one of the most important contributions of feminist theory and struggle...is the redefinition of work, and the recognition of women’s unpaid

reproductive labor as a key source of capitalist accumulation. In redefining housework as **work**, as not a personal service but the work that produces and reproduces labor power, feminists have uncovered a new crucial ground of exploitation that Marx and Marxist theory completely ignored.<sup>7</sup>

This was one of the cornerstones of Italian Autonomy and radical feminism in the 1960-1980 period, expressed as early as 1970 by Rivolta Femminile’s *Manifesto*: “We identify in unpaid domestic work the help that allows both private and State capitalism to survive.”<sup>8</sup>

This theory has remained one of the tenets common to radical feminism, enjoys the reputation of a fire-tested creed, and any attempt to strike a different note is sure to draw flak from many circles.

Because this extends the notion of *surplus labor* from the work-place to the home, a brief reminder might help. Marx argues that a wage-earner is paid the value of his labor-power, i.e. what its reproduction costs. This commodity, however, is quite special: it is not an object, but an active capacity to do something. One part of the working day will be spent reproducing the means of subsistence necessary for the worker to live and raise a family. Another part comes after the hours when the worker has earned his keep: this part is therefore unpaid and additional (hence the term “surplus labor”): it is the source of the boss’s profit.

The gist of the (female) “reproductive labor” concept is to locate another source of “gratuitous” labor in the activities performed by housewives.

According to this thesis, domestic work (done by women) lowers the cost of labor power: if the (male) worker had to eat out or buy pre-packaged meals, take his washing to the launderette, etc., he would be spending more

than if a woman did the cooking and the washing at home for him. Thanks to the unpaid activity of that woman, the boss saves money: he benefits from this work, as it offloads the cost of maintaining and raising male wage-workers on to the women. Housework, so the thesis goes, is like a free gift given to the capitalist, and one of the essential permanent sources of capital valorization.

It logically follows that the “secret” of capitalist wealth is not just to be found in what is known as the work-place, but also in the home. One mental step further, and the *also* becomes *mostly*, as proved by the above quotes where Federici calls housework “the most productive,” “essential,” and “pivotal.”

If this were true, since a wage pays the cost of production of labor, the male worker living on his own would cost more than his married colleague and he should be paid more. Actually, the same logic would apply to the single female worker, and her boss would have to pay her a better wage than if she was living in a family. This is not the case. It is despicable and oppressive that lots of males walk home, put their feet up and wait for their wives to bring them dinner while they watch TV, but a family is not a factory workshop. We can call *work* whatever we want, yet the only work that reproduces capital is the one done for a company.

Whether housework is equally shared (which is rarely the case) or whether the husband takes advantage of his wife, does not change anything in the reproduction of capital. Men certainly “profit” from women, but this has nothing in common with a company profit. Housework does not result in surplus-value, it does not generate a commodity sold on a market.

Besides, the “reproductive” labor theory assumes living in a couple to be the norm for workers, which again is not true. There is a

large variety of ways of life for wage-earners. Some live in families, others are single, others are housed in big blocks of flats where couples mix with single people, others still in barrack-style dormitories. Whereas traditional miners have a family life close to their pits, open-cast mining has the labor force dwell in arranged accommodation far from home for the duration of the employment contract. The same applies to oil-rig personnel. Millions of Asians, male and female, leave their families to find jobs on building sites or in the service sector in the Middle East, and they have to make do with camps, container settlements, or sometimes stay in their boss’s home.

Moreover, what about a single childless woman living on her own without attending to any relative (not the majority of cases, but a significant number all the same): what “reproductive labor” does she perform? Strictly speaking, the “reproductive labor” theme is not a *woman’s* theory, only a *housewife’s* theory.

From whichever point of view you look at it, female domestic work is not structurally indispensable to capital. True, Engels wrote that “within the family [the husband] is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat.”<sup>9</sup> This does not warrant turning an analogy into hard theory, yet autonomist feminism is quite fond of analogical reasoning.

Federici proceeds by duplicating the theory of value: surplus-value does not only result from productive work done for the benefit of a company, but also — and in fact mostly — from domestic work. It all boils down to what is meant by *production* and *reproduction*. Concepts undergo a semantic shift here:

...value production is not ever really the product of any particular location, but is determined socially...you have a broad social assembly line...that is all necessary for the production of surplus

value...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. [This is] a social factory that extends beyond the factory itself...for women, the home is the factory; it’s a place of production.<sup>10</sup>

...the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers, the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance.... (p.15)

In this mindset, *reproduion* encompasses all and everything, capital, classes, population, labor power, bourgeois men and women, proletarian men and women, etc. Reasoning here again by analogy, Federici stretches concepts to a point where the definition is so loose that the meaning is lost. Lots of activities may currently be labeled “social,” yet not every reproductive act generates value. Federici, however, writes as if everything was exploitation, everything was work and everything created value.

Well, not everything. One reproduction, Federici argues, surpasses them all: procreating and bringing up kids. Because women produce children without whom there would be neither society nor capitalism, “reproductive labor” theory endows them with a productive role that seems similar to the roles of other input factors, though this theory gives them in fact a determining role.

*Caliban & the Witch’s* wealth of information serves a purpose: to hammer in the notion that the capitalist system is based on women’s past and present subjugation. The book aims at “...housework now [being] understood as the reproduction of labor-power, the reproduction of the most important commodity.”<sup>11</sup>

Federici feminizes Marxism; that’s probably what has made her popular.

## “Wages for housework”: a political slogan

If a social movement was strong enough to have women paid for their domestic activity, we would be happy as we would welcome the success of a claim that improves the condition of the proletarian, female or male. The “all or nothing” principle is not our politics, neither is “the worse, the better.”

The proponents of this measure, however, expect something different.

For some of its supporters, asking for domestic work to be paid was a radical watchword. Italian autonomists were looking for something that would unite and mobilize all exploited groups beyond the traditional “working class” and narrowly-defined wage issues. As Lotta Feminista put it in 1973: “One part of the class with a salary, the other without. This discrimination has been the basis of a stratification of power between the paid and the unpaid, the root of class weakness...”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore “Wages for Housework” activists aimed at re-uniting all the exploited, because this watchword “dismantles the whole social architecture that has been extremely powerful in keeping people divided...”<sup>13</sup> The working class, as Autonomists put it, is not enough. Among other failings, it hardly cares about woman’s subordination. So politics must be inclusive: fighting for a “political wage” was tantamount to asking for the out-of-work, the housewife, the student, the sick or the hospital patient to be paid as the employed worker normally is. Since capitalism only gives the means to live to the minority it puts on the payroll, such a demand was meant to expose the system’s absurd and grinding logic.

In fact, those who floated the idea never expected the demand to be met and, what’s more, did not want it to be. The plan was to