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Economy

The reproduction crisis and the birth of a new “out of law” proletariat

- Features -

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Feminist philosopher, political economist, and activist Silvia Federici on the transformation reproductive labor has experienced over the last 40 years, and in particular, with the post-2009 austerity. Originally published in Italian in Francesca Coin (ed.), *Salari rubati. Economia politica e conflitto ai tempi del lavoro gratuito*, Verona: Ombre Corte, 2017, pp. 99-106.

Francesca Coin (FC): In the 70's you were among the first to discuss unpaid labor, showing how the accumulation process in the factories started from women's body. What has changed in the following years?

Free labor has exploded. What we saw at that time from the particular perspective of domestic work permeated the whole society. Actually, if we look at capitalism history we can see that unpaid labor has been widely practiced. If we think of slavery, of reproductive labor, of agricultural work under conditions of semi-slavery – from campesinos to peones – we can see how paid labor has been a true exception compared to unpaid labor.

The latter, today, is continuing to grow in traditional as well as in new forms, because now, in order to access to a paid job, one has to do at least a part of not paid labor. In Greece, some people told me that that nowadays it is necessary to work for free for 6 or 7 months wishing to find a paid job, and this is true in many different contexts: they hire you for free, you work for 6 or 7 months and then you come back home.

Unpaid labor coercion is an even more widespread practice. The school has been the first to exploit it. In that case, the idea of training is central. Traineeships are presented as a benefit for the students but in this way they actually are exploited from their first (productive) years. The age (for being productive) is lowering and free labor is practiced also in high schools.

The media are now talking a lot of gig workers. Gig is an expression that comes from jazz music to refer to improvised tracks and now this term is applied to the labor world. It's about on demand services that extend the Uber model to all other sectors, to point out that working life precariousness has been furthered to the highest levels.

This point is crucial to feminism, in particular for those feminists that consider the entrance in the paid labor as a kind of improvement or emancipation, while it is even more prefigured as not paid labor.

FC: You already pointed out some time ago that the crisis of Fordism was characterized by the reiteration of “reproductive crisis” featured by the erosion of all public services. From this point of view, it is surprising how, in the last 40 years, non paid labor has been made the norm, while it has been made invisible through a blaming discourse that imputse the causes of the current social agony to those that suffer of it. For example, I think of the narration that produces and stigmatizes the “working slacker” (people who enter the office and immediately go away, TN)– there is a big talk about them in these days – to hide the dismantling of the welfare state behind the need of discipline those people that – they say – sponge off society. What does all of this imply in social relationships?

It's an upside down world. From the 70's there has been a Fordist approach to social policies – actually such policies preceded Fordism and they were based on the use of public investments in order to reproduce the labor force. It is an approach which culminates with the New Deal in order to create a meeker and more productive work force. By the end of Fordism this idea ends up too. From public investment we came up to the financialization of reproductive

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work: what once was financed by the State is now paid by us. From the moment in which the public subsidies were cut, reproduction has become a moment of accumulation.

The removal of grants forced students to take on huge debts, so that today we have a student population that is strongly indebted even before entering to the labor market. The same happened for health care and social assistance, particularly assistance for the elderly, child care and kindergartens.

The United States led this process. Those who need medical care have to pay a consistent amount of money and the few social assistants that remain endure a constant work overload.

In these years, the Taylorist model has been applied to the assistance labor. Public expenditure has been cut off while (public) services have been “taylorized”. So, today, those practicing social services have many more customers\users than before while unpaid labor is increasing too. This reduction to the minimum of public facilities is at the heart of the reproduction crisis we are experiencing.

The victims of this dramatic crisis are mainly women, children and seniors. The situation in the nursing homes is critical because the lack of staff is redeemed by an ongoing medicalization.

Mistreatments in nursing institutions are widespread and continuous. Seniors are often sedated and tied to bed. It is no coincidence that the number of suicides among them is hugely increased.

Drug use is also a common practice among children in schools in order to force them to be docile and disciplined. This repercussion of the reproduction crisis is the result of the shift from social spending to the market model. This means that you have to assume the cost of reproduction and in many contexts this has lethal consequences for the population.

You also refer to another aspect of the crisis of reproduction, that is public shaming – those rituals of public slander that accuse the few who still enjoy a state subsidy of being privileged and fraudulent.

These bad guys are put on the pillory and accused of being the cause of budget impoverishment as if they were disrupting the economy. In Italy public slander reached shameful levels. It seems important to me to emphasize that we have to strongly reject the idea that the State’s financial disruption is due to the misuse of State aid: rather, it is a direct responsibility of the State which in many cases forces the proletariat to criminality.

They are forcing us to be criminals in order to survive because they have cut off the forms of subsistence and of legal access to reproduction so drastically that it is no longer possible to survive for a large part of population without falling into illegality: without selling drug, without prostitution, without false allowance.

That is why the United States, the leading country in the application of neo-liberalism, is also the leading country for the creation of a prison society, i.e. a society where, as a system of governance, a large part of population is reclude because it is not a source of income and because it is seen as potentially subversive and combative because, having been historically discriminated, it could claim repairs for what has been taken away. And so it is previously imprisoned and excluded from the few legal channels that remain for survival in a vicious and perverse circle.

Marx emphasized how the development of capitalism led to the formation of an “out of law” proletariat. We might say that the formation of such a proletariat is nowadays a global phenomenon systematically pursued.

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We can see it clearly in the case of migration. To survive, it is increasingly necessary to enter illegality and this then allows the State to act with violence on the workforce.

FC: Recently I read some data about Greece saying that the dismantling of public expenditure impacts negatively on women twice, the first time because the cut of social spending leaves at home mainly women that worked in the public sector and the second time because the cut forces women to play again traditional, unpaid role in assistance and caring. It has also been said that violence against women should be considered as a consequence of social violence caused by austerity policies.

Violence is hugely increased in these years. It is the violence of permanent war. They are destroying a country every few year. The world is more and more a war field and a prison system. Capitalistic violence is continuing to grow. You can see it in the resurgence of penalties and in the militarization of life.

Today in the United States and in Latin America police are trained by the army; the United States have built prisons all over the world; firms and corporations have their private soldiers and the number of security guards is steadily rising. The model of violence is shaping society and subjectivity from the point of male subjectivity.

As usual, these processes affect women foremost. I recently attended a Forum on Femicide in Colombia in a Pacific port in the Buenaventura area where there were many massacres.

There you can see many of the factors contributing to this violence. Buenaventura is perhaps one of the most beautiful places in the world. It is a town overlooking the Pacific ocean from the middle of a wonderful tropical forest that was recently contaminated due to the extraction of gold. The water and the rivers that the population used for their reproduction were contaminated by mercury. So there are continual clashes, because the extractions policy leads to the exploitation and expulsion of local people.

In these places, violence, especially violence against women, serves to terrorize the population. A Latin American anthropologist, Rita Segato, wrote an interesting book about it. She speaks of a violence-message, of a pedagogical cruelty in the sense that, by killing women who are helpless and not part of the fighting armies, people are warned that they cannot withstand the expulsion because they would collide with forces that have no pity. Killing women is a message of unconditional cruelty.

It must be added that women are the key actors for the recovery of the global economy. In the 1970s, women's labor reactivated the economic system. Traditionally, women faced violence in the domestic environment: the husband through violence disciplined his wife when she did not do housework.

Today, in order to survive, women must often work in places where they are particularly exposed to male violence. It is said that women migrating from Guatemala to the United States take contraceptives because they are sure they will be raped by men on the journey. Many of them seek forms of survival by selling things in the streets so that every day they collide with violence and with the police. Sex work, labor in maquilas – the new plantations fields where is required to work for 14-16 hours per day – the work of street vendors ... these are all occasions of violence.

Violence also has an intimidating effect. It prevents or limits the possibility for self-organization. The militarization of life means that women are increasingly confronted with men who work with violence: the soldier, the prison guard, the security guard.

This militarization has an influence on subjectivity and on personal relationships. Fanon wrote that those who torture everyday will not be able to become good husbands when they come back home, because they will continue to resolve conflicts in the way they are used to. Today, we see it in a society that is more and more war-oriented, where exploitation is based on direct violence and this has more and more influence on the relationship between men and women.

In the 70's you showed how exploitation was hidden in subjectivity and in femininity, and how it was naturalized and made invisible so that women's labor was considered a birthright. Transforming this invisibility into political struggle was fundamental to highlight the way in which accumulation takes place through the body and on it. The concealment of exploitation into subjectivity – I think of migrant labor and of *Race at work*, a book by Anna Curcio and Miguel Mellino– is sometimes considered acquired but often, on the contrary, is elusive. I think of the idea of homo oeconomicus. This category is still widely used even though today these “entrepreneurs of the self” are ultimately individuals without a safety net and whose only hedge against the future depends on their availability to working longer hours for even less pay. Isn't this idea of the homo oeconomicus another kind of exploitation presented as emancipation?

The ideology of homo oeconomicus, of the choice and of the self-employment, is completely neoliberal. In fact, the autonomy granted by self-employment is very limited. If the 8-hours working day in factory was a jail, it is the same when you don't know whether in six months you will have an income that allows you to live, so you don't have any chance to plan and schedule.

In fact, there is no emancipation in living with ongoing instability and with a permanent anxiety due to life's precarizations. [Franco] Bifo [Berardi] wrote about this in one of his books. He said that precariousness affects personal relationships, creates personalities prone to opportunism and forced to cultivate social relationships in order to survive. We can see this in the (social) movements as well. If once there was a clear separation between work and politics – politics went into labor when the latter was rejected but work didn't have a political use – borders are now confused, and this has negative consequences because it introduces forms of opportunism in politics and I think this is one of the biggest problems we face today.

FC: Last year, when you were in Greece, you spoke of the occupied spaces and squats in Athens as important experiences to rescue the conditions of reproduction to monetary control. In recent years there have been very rich experimentations such as collective forms of expropriation in supermarkets, the self-reduction of rents and bills, attempts of reappropriation of the lands, the creation of alternative economic circuits able to use reproduction as an opportunity to free life from exploitation. How can this money command be disbanded?]

The command of money can be evaded foremost by defending our “common goods” and reapplying control and use of land, forests and water. This is one of the most important struggles in the world today, and it is no coincidence that capitalism is destroying entire regions to make sure that their mineral resources do not fall into other hands.

The fight against mining extraction, as well as against monoculture, transgenic crops and transnational corporation control over seed, is at the center of the social movements politics in Latin America as well as in the United States and Canada. One of the strongest struggles in the United States today is the Sioux fight against the construction of a pipeline that would cross their territory to connect Dakota to Illinois. Representatives of indigenous people, as well as many other activists, are coming from various parts of the country and from Latin America to block this project.

It is important to emphasize that these struggles for the defense of common goods are never purely defensive. All of them aim to create a “common” good. Defining your land also means to defend the possibility of controlling the territory that is necessary to build political autonomy and self-government.

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In urban areas, squats and organizational networks created by women in the streets – because nowadays reproduction in more and more countries is moving to the streets – create new forms of subsistence and solidarity. In Brazilian favelas or Argentine villas, people evicted from rural areas create new neighborhoods, new camps where houses, gardens and spaces for children are built.

I visited one of these “villas” in Argentina, Villa Retiro bis, where I met women who really impressed me. I felt that something new was going on because these women live in a situation in which every moment of their everyday life becomes a moment of political discussion. The point is that there is nothing guaranteed there and everything must be conquered. Everything has to be defended.

Water and electricity must be negotiated with the State. But they do not allow the State to organize their own life. They struggle with the State to have seeds, to have free electrical power, to have drinkable water, to have roads instead of just mud and therefore it is always a continuous struggle.

These women are trying to create their own life, they are linked to each other, they have created a “women’s home” where there are also spaces for preventive care. The State built a wall to separate the “villa” from the rest of the city and to prevent other appropriations but women destroyed it. These women use the “theater of the oppressed” as a form of political education, to establish a political debate among themselves and to address some issues such as sexual abuse, sometimes also in a fun way, inviting other women to participate.

I do not know if what is happening will have the ability to counteract macro-politics, but I know something new is happening and we have to start from here.

Translated from the original by Stefano Oricchio

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