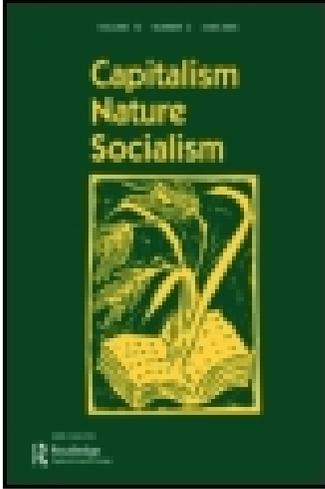


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BOOK REVIEW

Three Decades of Reflection on Drudgery

*Sutapa Chattopadhyay**

Silvia Federici, *Reproduction at Point Zero*, Oakland, California, PM Press, 2012.

Reproduction at Point Zero is a compilation of essays that deconstruct *reproduction* by examining everyday activities and relations of gendered labor as well as counter-struggles against state and corporate exploitation of nature and minority populations, through neoliberalism, war, and Western interventionism. The book has three sections: politics of housework; globalization and social reproduction; and grassroots commoning initiatives.

Feminist Autonomous Marxist scholar Silvia Federici, who has dedicated her life to understanding the mechanisms that keep housework unwaged, encapsulates in this book more than three decades of research and observations. Academic writing often misconstrues people's lived experiences, its jargon failing to communicate political involvement, and liable to obscure questions of social exclusion and the ingenuity of autonomous struggles. This inspirational collection reaches out across geographic spaces to people of different political currents, backgrounds, and identities.

Federici's analysis of reproduction started as far back as 1972 through her association with the Wages for Housework (WfH) movement and continued through her extensive research on primitive accumulation, a war waged by capitalism against women across three centuries of witch hunts (Federici 2004), and her analysis of the nexus of reproduction from domestic work to subsistence farming (Dalla Costa 2005). She scrutinizes the double character of housework as work that re-produces women and valorizes them both toward their integration in the labor market and against it. "Reproduction at Point Zero" stems from her own forced socialization to housework. From the 1950s to the 1960s, she observed her mother's fervor in performing multiple chores. Then, selectively and reluctantly participating in daily tasks, she began to wonder why our societies take unpaid housework for granted.

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She suggests that “social reproduction” forms the base of economic and political systems that rely on vast amounts of paid and unpaid work. Wealth accumulation relies on huge amounts of work by housewives, slaves, indentured or bonded servants, colonized plantation workers, prisoners, and indeed students. These people are outside the wage relation but are inside capitalist relations by virtue of their life-long or contracted servitude. Even when waged, our work is often coerced. As a contract faculty member at various universities in the USA and Europe I gave away my copyrights to corporate publishers for their profit, knowing that the knowledge generated by my time and innovative thinking would not permeate out through academic journals for any social good. The difference between housework and waged work, however, is that housework is transformed into an innate womanly attribute.

In the section on theorizing and politicizing housework, Silvia argues that capital convinces us to keep housework unwaged, as it is expected, obvious, “fulfilling”, and should be performed out of love and altruism. In the 1970s, WfH brought together workers and activists ranging from liberals, anarchists, socialists, and feminists to those who were involved in anti-colonial, civil rights, vanguard workers’ (*operaist*), and students’ movements. It was a revolutionary moment in the understanding of how women’s oppression occurred through the insidious workings of capitalism that segregated the working class and used women’s unwaged labor to discipline male waged labor and vice versa. Although some feminist writers argued that WfH was an Italian or European phenomenon, Federici points out that the USA—as a settler-colonial nation built on the appropriation of native lands and labor—still thrives on migrant-prison-unwaged labor, where many women work, some have second jobs, and single-women-headed households (notably from minority backgrounds) struggle to earn a living (Lopate 1974; Federici 2012a, 16, 126–148; [1974]2012b; [1975]2012c).

The wage is a social contract, a function that mystifies and subordinates waged labor, and this mystification extends to the family as a social function that disciplines social relations within the “cash nexus” (Federici 2012a, 35). Reproductive work dovetails with women’s contribution to capital, and what we get in return slowly yet steadily transforms and nurtures our capacities to cooperate and reconstruct spaces of care. Federici draws from Mario Tronti’s (1966) concept of the “social factory”, in which capitalist relations are so hegemonic that every social relation is subsumed under capital until the distinction between society and factory is put into doubt. Just as the trade union protects its labor, the family protects, nurtures, and rejuvenates its workers to ensure “quality” and “quantity” of labor, organizes and subordinates them under the relations of production. “Capital” convinces women that housework should be performed out of love and altruism, and remain unwaged, since it is expected, obvious, and “fulfilling” (Federici 2012a, 16; Federici [1974]2012b and see Lopate 1974).

In the final section on reproducing the commons, Federici contradicts a contention made by the feminist Carol Lopate in 1974 that counter-struggles cannot rise-up from isolated women, thus destabilizing “women” as revolutionary entities

(see Omvedt 1975). Consider women's pivotal roles in civil rights movements, rent strikes, welfare struggles, women's liberation movements, the Mau Mau struggle (Elkins 2005), the Chipko forest uprisings (Shiva 1989), the Argentinean Madres de la Plaza de Mayo struggles (Federici 2012a), the communal soup kitchens in Chile (Federici 2012a), the Cochabamba water struggles in Bolivia, migrant gardening initiatives (Fernandes 2003, Carlsson 2008), and the recent pushback against austerity measures in Southern Europe. Not only has Western feminism failed to produce a context- and history-specific analysis of southern women but the Southern left has lumped women's issues into the broader class struggle, overlooked women's domestic struggles and participation in social movements, and failed to codify the need for separate women's organizations. Yet women-led social movements show that power does not have to be deposited in global institutions or techno societies, but can be constructed through women's alliances with each other and with oppressed people to revolutionize their lives and seek sustainable survival mechanisms through direct action, mutual aid, and non-hierarchical egalitarian initiatives (Mies and Bennholt-Thomsen 1999).

This book should not be shelved and forgotten or used as an academic exercise as it is a straightforward read that resonates with people's everyday lives, challenges, and self-determination.

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