

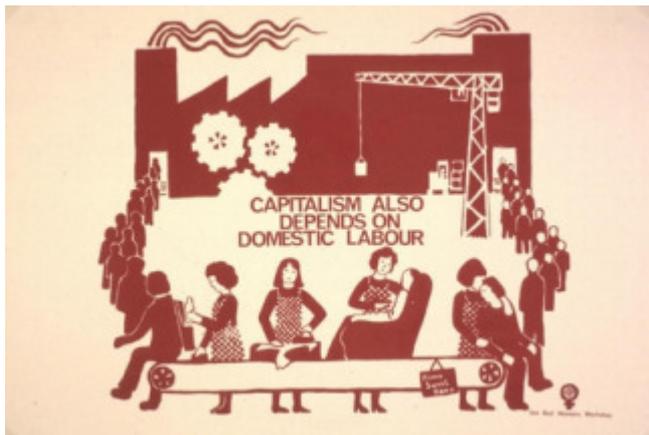
A Feminist Critique of Marx by Silvia Federici

[Silvia Federici](#) is one of the most important political theorists alive today. Her landmark book [Caliban and the Witch](#) demonstrated the inextricable link between anti-capitalism and radical feminist politics by digging deep into the actual history of capital's centuries-long attack on women and the body.

In this essay, originally written in 2008, she follows up on that revelation by laying out her feminist anti-capitalist vision, and how it extends beyond traditional Marxism. This piece is comprehensive – long but far-reaching. At times seeing the truth requires seeing in the dark – acknowledging the true horrors of the world as it currently is manifest.

This essay was updated and published in Silvia's new anthology [Revolution at Point Zero](#), and I have made a few small additional edits. Enjoy! [alex]

The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution (2011 edition)



“Women’s work and women’s labor are buried deeply in the heart of the capitalist social and economic structure.” – David Staples, *No Place Like Home* (2006)

“It is clear that capitalism has led to the super-exploitation of women. This would not offer much consolation if it had only meant heightened misery and oppression, but fortunately it has also provoked resistance. And capitalism has become aware that if it completely ignores or suppresses this resistance it might become more and more radical, eventually turning into a movement for self-reliance and perhaps even the nucleus of a new social order.” – Robert Biel, *The New Imperialism* (2000)

“The emerging liberative agent in the Third World is the unwaged force of women who are not yet disconnected from the life economy by their work. They serve life not commodity production. They are the hidden underpinning of the world economy and the wage equivalent of their life-serving work is estimated at \$16 trillion.” – John McMurtry, *The Cancer State of Capitalism* (1999)

“The pestle has snapped because of so much pounding. Tomorrow I will go home. Until tomorrow Until tomorrow... Because of so much pounding, tomorrow I will go home.” – Hausa women’s song from Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

WAGES AGAINST HOUSEWORK

They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.
They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.
Every miscarriage is a work accident.
Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions . . .
 but homosexuality is workers' control of production, not the
 end of work.
More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying
 the healing virtues of a smile.
Neuroses, suicides, desexualisation: occupational diseases of the
 housewife.

by **Silvia Federici**

This essay is a political reading of the restructuring of the (re)production of labor-power in the global economy, but it is also a feminist critique of Marx that, in different ways, has been developing since the 1970s. This critique was first articulated by activists in the Campaign for Wages For Housework, especially Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati, among others, and later by Ariel Salleh in Australia and the feminists of the Bielefeld school, Maria Mies, Claudia Von Werlhof, Veronica Benholdt-Thomsen.

At the center of this critique is the argument that Marx’s analysis of capitalism has been hampered by his inability to conceive of value-producing work other than in the form of commodity production and his consequent blindness to the significance of **women’s unpaid reproductive work** in the process of capitalist accumulation. Ignoring this work has limited Marx’s understanding of the true extent of the capitalist exploitation of labor and the function of the wage in the creation of divisions within the working class, starting with the relation between women and men.

Had Marx recognized that capitalism must rely on both an immense amount of unpaid domestic labor for the reproduction of the workforce, and the devaluation of these reproductive activities in order to cut the cost of labor power, he may have been less inclined to consider capitalist development as inevitable and progressive.

As for us, a century and a half after the publication of *Capital*, **we must challenge the assumption of the necessity and progressivity of capitalism** for at least three reasons.

First, five centuries of capitalist development have depleted the resources of the planet rather than creating the “material conditions” for the transition to “communism” (as Marx anticipated) through the expansion of the “forces of production” in the form of large scale industrialization. They have not made “scarcity” – according to Marx a major obstacle to human liberation – obsolete. On the contrary, scarcity on a world scale is today directly a product of capitalist production.

Second, while capitalism seems to enhance the cooperation among workers in the organization of commodity production, in reality it divides workers in many ways: through an unequal division of labor, through the use of the wage, giving the waged power over the wageless, and through the institutionalization of sexism and racism, that naturalize and mystify through the presumption of different personalities the organization of differentiated labor regimes.

Third, starting with the Mexican and the Chinese Revolution, the most anti-systemic struggles of the last century have not been fought only or primarily by waged industrial workers, Marx’ projected revolutionary subjects, but have been fought by rural, indigenous, anticolonial, antiapartheid, feminist movements. Today as well, they are fought by subsistence farmers, urban squatters, undocumented migrants, as well as industrial workers in Africa, India, Latin America, and China. Most important, these struggles are fought by women who, against all odds, are reproducing their families regardless of the value the market places on their lives, valorizing their existence, reproducing them for their own sake, even when the capitalists declare their uselessness as labor power.

What are the prospects, then, that Marxist theory may serve as a guide to “revolution” in our time? I ask this question by analyzing the restructuring of reproduction in the global economy. My claim is that if Marxist theory is to speak to 21st century anti-capitalist movements, it must rethink the question of “reproduction” from a planetary perspective.

Reflecting on the activities that reproduce our life dispels the illusion that the automation of production may create the material conditions for a non-exploitative society, showing that the obstacle to revolution is not the lack of technological know-how, but **the divisions that capitalist development reproduces in the working class**. Indeed, the danger today is that besides devouring the earth, capitalism unleashes more wars of the kind the United States has launched in Afghanistan and Iraq, sparked by the corporate determination to appropriate all the planet’s natural resources and control the world economy.

SECTION 1. MARX AND THE REPRODUCTION OF THE WORK-FORCE



Mujeres Libres were an organization of women in Spain during the 1936 revolution fighting against fascism and for equality.

Surprisingly, given his theoretical sophistication, Marx ignored the existence of women's reproductive work. He acknowledged that, no less than every other commodity, labor power must be produced and, insofar as it has monetary value, it represents "a definite quantity of the average social labor objectified in it." (Marx 1990, Vol. 1: 274)

But while meticulously exploring the dynamics of yarn production and capitalist valorization, he was succinct when tackling reproductive work, reducing it to the workers' consumption of the commodities their wages can buy and the work the production of these commodities requires.

In other words, as in the neoliberal scheme, in Marx's account too, all that is needed to (re)produce labor-power is commodity production and the market. No other work intervenes to prepare the goods the workers consume or to restore physically and emotionally their capacity to work. No difference is made between commodity production and the production of the work-force. (ibid.) One assembly-line produces both. Accordingly, the value of labor-power is measured by the value of the commodities (food, clothing, housing) that have to be supplied to the worker, to "the man, so that he can renew his life-process," that is, they are measured on the labor-time socially necessary for their production (Marx 1990, Vol. 1: 276-7).

Even when he discusses the reproduction of the workers on a generational basis, Marx is extremely brief. He tells us that wages must be sufficiently high to ensure "the worker's replacements," his children, so that labor-power may perpetuate its presence on the market. (Marx, *ibid.*: 275) But, once again, the only relevant agents he recognizes in this process are the male, self-reproducing workers, their wages and their means of subsistence. The production of workers is by means of commodities. Nothing is said about women, domestic labor, sexuality and procreation. In the few instances in which he refers to biological reproduction, he treats it as a natural phenomenon, arguing that is through the changes in the organization of production that a surplus population is periodically created to satisfy the changing needs of the labor market.

Why did Marx so persistently ignore women's reproductive work? Why for instance, did he not ask what transformations the raw materials involved in the process of reproduction of labor-power must undergo in order for their value to be transferred into their products (as he did in the case of other commodities)?

I suggest that the conditions of the working class in England – Marx's and Engel's point of reference – partly account for this omission. (Federici 2004) Marx described the condition of the industrial proletariat of his time as he saw it, and women's domestic labor was hardly part of it. Housework, as a specific branch of capitalist production, was below Marx's historic and political horizon at least in the industrial working class. Although from the first phase of capitalist development, and especially in the mercantilist period, reproductive work was formally subsumed to capitalist accumulation, it was only in the late 19th century that domestic work emerged as the key engine for the reproduction of the industrial workforce, organized by capital for capital, according to the requirements of factory production.

Until the 1870s, consistently with a policy tending to the “unlimited extension of the working day” and the utmost compression of the cost of labor-power production, reproductive work was reduced to a minimum, resulting in the situation powerfully described in *Capital Vol.1*, in the chapter on the Working Day, and in Engels’ *Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845): that is, the situation of a working class almost unable to reproduce itself, averaging a life expectancy of 20 years of age, dying in its youth of overwork.

Only at the end of the 19th century did the capitalist class begin to invest in the reproduction of labor, in conjunction with a shift in the form of accumulation, from light to heavy industry, requiring a more intensive labor-discipline and a less emaciated type of worker. In Marxian terms, we can say that the development of reproductive work and the consequent emergence of the full-time housewife were the products of the transition from “absolute” to “relative surplus” value extraction as a mode of exploitation of labor.

Not surprisingly, while acknowledging that “the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital,” Marx could immediately add: “But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation. All the capitalist cares for is to reduce the worker’s individual consumption to the necessary minimum...” (*Capital Vol.1*, chapter 23: 718).

We can also presume that the difficulties posed by the classification of a labor not subject to monetary valuation further motivated Marx to remain silent on this matter. But there is a further reason, more indicative of the limits of Marxism as a political theory, that we must take into account, if we are to explain why not just Marx, but generations of Marxists, raised in epochs in which housework and domesticity were triumphant, have continued to be blind to this work.

I suggest that Marx ignored women’s reproductive labor because he remained wedded to a **technologicistic concept of revolution, where freedom comes through the machine**, where the increase in the productivity of labor is assumed to be the material foundation for communism, and where the capitalist organization of work is viewed as the highest model of historical rationality, held up for every other form of production, including the reproduction of the work-force. In other words, Marx failed to recognize the importance of reproductive work because he accepted the capitalist criteria for what constitutes work, and he believed that waged industrial work was the stage on which the battle for humanity’s emancipation would be played.

With few exceptions, Marx’s followers have reproduced the same assumptions, (witness the continuing love affair with the famous “Fragment on Machines” in the *Grundrisse* [1857-8]), demonstrating that the idealization of science and technology as liberating forces has continued to be an essential component of the Marxian view of history and revolution to our day. Even Socialist Feminists, while acknowledging the existence of women’s reproductive work in capitalism, have in the past tended to stress its presumably antiquated, backward, pre-capitalist character and imagined the socialist reconstruction of it in the form of a rationalization process, raising its productivity level to that achieved by the leading sectors of capitalist production.

One consequence of this blind spot in modern times has been that Marxist theorists have been unable to grasp the historic importance of the post-World War II women’s revolt against reproductive work, as expressed in the Women’s Liberation Movement, and ignored its

practical redefinition of what constitutes work, who is the working class, and what is the nature of the class struggle. Only when women left the organizations of the Left did Marxists recognize the political importance of the Women's Liberation Movement.

To this day, many Marxists do not acknowledge the gendered character of much reproductive work, as it is the case even with an eco-Marxist like Peter Burkett, or pay lip service to it, as in Negri's and Hardt's conception of "affective labor." Indeed, Marxist theorists are generally more indifferent to the question of reproduction than Marx himself, who devoted pages to the conditions of factory children, whereas today it would be a challenge to find any reference to children in most Marxist texts.

I'll return later to the limits of contemporary Marxism, to notice its inability to grasp the significance of the neoliberal turn and the globalization process. For the moment suffice to say that by the 1960s, under the impact of the anti-colonial struggle and the struggle against apartheid in the United States, Marx's account of capitalism and class relations was subjected to a radical critique by Third Worldist political writers like Samir Amin and Gunder Frank who criticized its Eurocentrism and his privileging the waged industrial proletariat as the main contributor to capitalist accumulation and revolutionary subject. However, it was the revolt of women against housework, in Europe and the US, and later the rise of feminist movements across the planet, in the 1980s and 1990s, that triggered the most radical rethinking of Marxism.

SECTION 2. WOMEN'S REVOLT AGAINST HOUSEWORK AND THE FEMINIST REDEFINITION OF WORK, CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE CAPITALIST CRISIS.



It seems to be a social law that the value of labor is proven and perhaps created by its refusal. This was certainly the case of housework which remained invisible and unvalued until a movement of women emerged who refused to accept reproduction work as their natural destiny. It was women's revolt against this work in the '60s and '70s that disclosed the centrality of unpaid domestic labor in capitalist economy, reconfiguring our image of society as an immense circuit of domestic plantations and assembly lines where the production of workers is articulated on a daily and generational basis.

Not only did feminists establish that the reproduction of labor-power involves a far broader range of activities than the consumption of commodities, since food must be prepared, clothes have to be washed, bodies have to be stroked and cared for. Their recognition of the importance of reproduction and women's domestic labor for capital accumulation led to a

rethinking of Marx's categories, and a new understanding of the history and fundamentals of capitalist development and the class struggle.

Starting in the early 1970s, a feminist theory took shape that radicalized the theoretical shift which the Third Worldist critiques of Marx had inaugurated, confirming that capitalism is not identifiable with waged, contractual work, arguing that, **in essence, it is un-free labor**, and revealing the umbilical connection between the devaluation of reproductive work and the devaluation of women's social position.

This paradigm shift also had political consequences. The most immediate was the refusal of the slogans of the Marxist left, such as the ideas of the "general strike" or "refusal of work," both of which were never inclusive of house-workers. Over time, the realization has grown that Marxism, filtered through Leninism and social-democracy, has expressed the interests of a limited sector of the world proletariat, that of white, adult, male workers, largely drawing their power from the fact that they work in the leading sectors of capital industrial production, at the highest levels of technological development.

On the positive side, the discovery of reproductive work has made it possible to understand that capitalist production relies on the production of a particular type of worker, and therefore a particular type of family, sexuality, procreation, and thus to redefine the private sphere as a sphere of relations of production and a terrain of anti-capitalist struggle. In this context, policies forbidding abortion could be decoded as devices for the regulation of the labor supply, the collapse of the birth rate and increase in the number of divorces could be read as instances of resistance to the capitalist discipline of work. **The personal became political** and capital and the state were found to have subsumed our lives and reproduction down to the bedroom.

On the basis of this analysis, by the mid 1970s – a crucial era in capitalist policy-making, during which the first steps were taken towards a neo-liberal restructuring of the world economy – many feminists could see that the unfolding capitalist crisis was a response not only to factory struggles but to women's refusal of housework, as well as to the increasing resistance of new generations of Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Caribbeans to the legacy of colonialism. Key contributors to this perspective were activists in the Wages for Housework Movement, like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati, who showed that women's invisible struggles against domestic discipline were subverting the model of reproduction that had been the pillar of the Fordist deal.

Dalla Costa, for instance, in "Emigrazione e Riproduzione" (1974) pointed out that, since the end of WWII, women in Europe had been engaged in a silent strike against procreation, as evinced by the collapse of the birth rate and governments' promotion of immigration. Fortunati in *Brutto Ciao* (1976) examined the motivations behind Italian women's post-WWII exodus from the rural areas, their re-orientation of the family wage towards the reproduction of the new generations, and the connections between women's post-war quest for independence, their increased investment in their children, and the increased combativeness of the new generations of workers. Selma James in "Sex, Race and Class" (1975) showed that women's "cultural" behavior and social "roles" should be read as a "response and rebellion against" the totality of their capitalist lives.

By the mid 1970s women's struggles were no longer "invisible", but had become an open repudiation of the sexual division of labor, with all its corollaries: economic dependence on

men, social subordination, confinement to an unpaid, naturalized form of labor, a state-controlled sexuality and procreation. Contrary to a widespread misconception, the crisis was not confined to white middle class women. On the contrary, the first women's liberation movement in the US was arguably a movement formed by black women. It was the Welfare Mothers Movement that, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, led the first campaign for state-funded "wages for housework" (under the guise of Aid to Dependent Children) that women have fought for in the country, asserting the economic value of women's reproductive work, and declaring "welfare" a women's right.

Women were on the move also across Africa, Asia, Latin America, as the decision by the United Nations to intervene in the field of feminist politics as the sponsor of women's rights, starting with the Global Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975, demonstrated. Elsewhere I have suggested that the UN played the same role, with respect to the spreading international women's movements, that it had already played, in the 1960s, in relation to the anti-colonial struggle. As in the case of its (selective) sponsorship of "decolonization," its self-appointment as the agency in charge of promoting women's rights enabled it to channel the politics of women's liberation within a frame compatible with the needs and plans of international capital and the developing neoliberal agenda.

Indeed, the Mexico City conference and those that followed stemmed in part from a realization that women's struggles over reproduction were redirecting post-colonial economies toward increased investment in the domestic workforce and were the most important factor in **the failure of the World Bank's development plans for the commercialization of agriculture.**

In Africa, women had consistently refused being recruited to work on their husbands' cash crops, and had instead defended subsistence-oriented agriculture, transforming their villages from sites for the reproduction of cheap labor (Meillassoux) into sites of resistance to exploitation. By the 1980s, this resistance was recognized as the main factor in the crisis of the World Bank's agricultural development projects, prompting a flood of articles on "women's contribution to development," and later, initiatives aimed at integrating them into the money economy such as NGO-sponsored "income-generating projects" and microcredit lending schemes. Given these events, it is not surprising that the restructuring produced by the globalization of the world economy has led to a major reorganization of reproduction, as well as a campaign against women in the name of "population control."

In what follows, I outline the modalities of this restructuring, identify the main trends, its social consequences, and its impact on class relations. First, however, I should explain why I continue to use the concept of **labor-power**, even though some feminists have criticized it as reductive, pointing out that women produce living individuals – children, relatives, friends – not labor-power.

The critique is well taken. Labor-power is an abstraction. As Marx tells us, echoing Sismondi, labor-power "is nothing unless it is sold," and utilized. (1990: 277) I maintain this concept, however, for various reasons. First, in order to highlight the fact that in capitalist society reproductive work is not the free reproduction of ourselves or others according to our and their desires. To the extent that directly or indirectly it is exchanged for a wage, reproduction work is, at all points, subjected to the conditions imposed on it by the capitalist organization of work and relations of production. In other words, housework is not a free activity. It is "the production and reproduction of the capitalist most indispensable means of

production: the worker” (ibid.) As such, it is subject to all the constraints that derive from the fact that its product must satisfy the requirements of the labor market.

Second, highlighting the reproduction of “labor-power” reveals the dual character and the contradiction inherent in reproductive labor and, therefore, the unstable, potentially disruptive character of this work. To the extent that labor-power can only exist in the living individual, its reproduction must simultaneously be a process of creation and valorization of desired human qualities and capacities, and an accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labor market.

As impossible as it is, then, to draw a line between the living individual and its labor-power, it is equally impossible to draw a line between the two corresponding aspects of reproductive work. Nevertheless, maintaining the concept brings out the tension, the potential separation, and it suggests a world of conflicts, resistances, contradictions that have political significance. Among other things (an understanding that was crucial for the women’s liberation movement) it tells us that we can struggle against housework without having to fear that we will ruin our communities, for this work imprisons the producers as well as those reproduced by it.

I also want to defend my continuing to maintain, against postmodern trends, the separation between production and reproduction. There is certainly one important sense in which the difference between the two has become blurred. **The struggles of the 1960s in Europe and the US**, especially the student and feminist movements, have taught the capitalist class that investing in the reproduction of the future generation of workers “does not pay.” It is no guarantee of an increase in the productivity of labor. Thus, not only has state investment in the work-force drastically reduced, but reproductive activities have been reorganized as value-producing services that workers must purchase and pay for. In this way, the value which reproductive activities produce is immediately realized, rather than being made conditional on the performance of the workers they reproduce.

But the expansion of the service sector has by no means eliminated home-based, unpaid reproductive work, nor has it abolished the sexual division of labor in which it is embedded, which still divides production and reproduction in terms of the subjects of these activities and the discriminating function of the wage and lack of it.

Lastly, I speak of “reproductive,” rather than “affective” labor because in its dominant characterization, the latter describes only a limited part of the work that the reproduction of human beings requires and erases the subversive potential of the feminist concept of reproductive work. By highlighting its function in the production of labor-power, and thus unveiling the contradictions inherent in this work, the concept of “reproductive labor” recognizes the possibility of crucial alliances and forms of cooperation between producers and the reproduced: mothers and children, teachers and students, nurses and patients.

Keeping this particular character of reproductive work in mind, let us ask then: how has economic globalization restructured the reproduction of the workforce? And what have been the effects of this restructuring on workers and especially on women, traditionally the main subjects of reproductive work? Finally, what do we learn from this restructuring concerning capitalist development and the place of Marxist theory in the anti-capitalist struggles of our time?

My answer to these questions is in two parts. First, I will discuss briefly the main changes globalization has produced in the general process of social reproduction and the class relation, and then I will discuss more extensively the restructuring of reproductive work.

SECTION 3. NAMING OF THE INTOLERABLE: PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF REPRODUCTION



There are four major ways in which the restructuring of the world economy has responded to the cycle of struggles of the 1960 and 1970s and transformed the organization of reproduction and class relations.

First, has been the expansion of the labor market. Globalization has produced a historic leap in the size of the world proletariat, both through a **global process of “enclosures”** that has separated millions from their lands, their jobs, their “customary rights” and through the increased employment of women. Not surprisingly, globalization has presented itself as a process of Primitive Accumulation, which has taken many forms:

1. in the North, globalization has taken the form of industrial deconcentration and relocation, as well as the flexibilization and precarization of work, and just-in-time production;
2. in the former Socialist countries, there has been the de-statalization of industry, the de-collectivization of agriculture and privatization of social wealth;
3. in the South, we have witnessed the *maquilization* of production, import liberalization, currency devaluation, “structural adjustment” and land privatization.

The objective, however, has everywhere been the same.

By destroying subsistence economies, by separating producers from the means of subsistence and making millions dependent on monetary incomes, even when unable to access waged employment, the capitalist class has re-launched the accumulation process and cut the cost of labor-production. Two billion people have been added to the labor market. This demonstrates the fallacy of theories [see Negri and Hardt in *Multitude* and *Empire*] arguing that capitalism no longer requires massive amounts of living labor, because it presumably relies on the increasing automation of work.

Second, **the de-territorialization of capital and financialization of economic activities**, which the “computer revolution” has made possible, have created the conditions whereby primitive accumulation has become a permanent process, through the almost instantaneous movement of capital across the world, breaking over and over the constraints placed on capital by workers’ resistance to exploitation.

Third, we have witnessed the **systematic disinvestment by the state in the reproduction of the work-force**, implemented through Structural Adjustment Programs and the dismantling of the “welfare state.” As already mentioned, the struggles of the 1960s have taught capital that investing in the reproduction of labor-power does not necessarily translate into a higher productivity of work. As a result, a policy and ideology have emerged that recast workers as micro-entrepreneurs, responsible for their self-investment, being presumably the exclusive beneficiaries of the reproductive activities expended on them.

Accordingly a shift has occurred in the temporal fix between reproduction and accumulation. As subsidies to healthcare, education, pensions, and public transport have all been cut, as high fees have been placed upon them, and workers have been forced to take on the cost of their reproduction, every articulation of the reproduction of labor power has been turned into an immediate point of accumulation.

Fourth, **the corporate appropriation and destruction of forests, oceans, waters, fisheries, coral reefs, animal and vegetable species** has reached an historic peak. In country after country, from Africa to the Pacific Islands, immense tracts of crop lands, and coastal waters – home and sources of livelihood for large populations – have been privatized and made available for agribusiness, mineral extraction, or industrial fishing.

Globalization has so unmistakably revealed the cost of capitalist production and technology that it has become inconceivable to speak, as Marx did in the *Grundrisse*, of the “civilizing influence of capital,” issuing from its “universal appropriation of nature” and “its production of a stage of society [where] nature becomes simply an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility, [where] it ceases to be recognized as a power in its own right; and the theoretical acknowledgement of its independent laws appears only as a stratagem designed to subdue it to human requirements, either as an object of consumption or a means of production” (Karl Marx: Selected Writings, 363-4).

In 2011, after the BP spill and Fukushima – among other corporate-made disasters – as the oceans are dying, imprisoned by islands of trash, as space is becoming a junkyard as well as an army depot, such words can have for us only ominous reverberations.

In different degrees, these developments have affected all populations across the planet. Yet, the New World Order is best described as a process of recolonization. Far from flattening the world into a network of interdependent circuits, it has reconstructed it as a pyramidal structure, increasing inequalities and social/economic polarization, and deepening the hierarchies that have historically characterized the sexual and international division of labor, which the anti-colonial and the women’s liberation movements had undermined.

The strategic center of primitive accumulation has been the former colonial world, historically the underbelly of the capitalist system, the place of slavery and plantations. I call it the “strategic center” because its restructuring has been the foundation and precondition for the global reorganization of production and the world labor market. It is here, in fact, that we have witnessed the first and most radical processes of expropriation and pauperization and the most radical disinvestment by the state in the reproduction of the labor force. These processes are well documented.

Starting in the early 1980s, as a consequence of structural adjustment, unemployment in most “Third World” countries has soared so high that USAID could recruit workers offering

nothing more than “Food for Work.” Wages have fallen so low that women *maquila* workers have been reported buying milk by the glass and eggs or tomatoes one at a time. Entire populations have been demonetized, while their lands have been taken away for government projects or given to foreign investors.

Currently, half the African continent is on emergency food aid. In West Africa, from Niger, to Nigeria, to Ghana, the electricity has been turned off, national grids have been disabled, forcing those who can afford them to buy individual generators whose buzzing sound fills the nights, making it difficult for people to sleep. Governmental health and education budgets, subsidies to farmers, support for basic necessities, all have been gutted, slashed, and axed.

As a consequence, life expectancy is falling and phenomena have reappeared that capitalism’s “civilizing influence” was supposed to have erased from the face of the earth long ago: famines, starvation, recurrent epidemics, even witch-hunts. Where “austerity” programs and land grabbing could not reach, war has completed the task, opening new grounds for oil drilling and the harvesting of diamonds or coltan.

As for the targets of these clearances, they have become the subjects of a new diaspora, siphoning millions of people from the land to the towns, which more and more resemble encampments. Mike Davis has used the phrase “Planet of Slums” in referring to this situation, but a more correct and vivid description would speak of a planet of ghettos and a regime of global apartheid.

If we further consider that, through the debt crisis and structural adjustment, “Third World” countries have been forced to divert food production from the domestic to the export-market, to turn arable land from cultivation of edible crops to mineral extraction and bio-fuel production, to clearcut their forests, and become dumping grounds for all types of waste, as well as grounds of predation for pharmaceutical gene hunters, then, we must conclude that, in international capital’s plans there are now world regions marked for “near-zero-reproduction.” Indeed, **the destruction of life in all its forms** is today as important as the productive force of biopower in the shaping of capitalist relations, as a means to acquire raw materials, dis-accumulate unwanted workers, blunt resistances, and cut the cost of labor production.

It is a measure of the degree to which the reproduction of the work force has been underdeveloped that worldwide, millions are facing untold hardships and the prospect of death and incarceration in order to migrate. Certainly migration is not just a necessity but an exodus toward higher levels of struggle, a means to reappropriate the stolen wealth, as argued by Yann Moulier Boutang and Dimitris Papadopoulos, among others. This is why migration has acquired an autonomous character that makes it difficult to use it as a regulatory mechanism for the structuring of the labor market.

But there is no doubt that, if millions of people leave their countries for an uncertain destiny, thousands of miles away from their homes, it is because they cannot reproduce themselves, not at least under adequate living conditions. This is especially evident when we consider that half of the migrants are women, many married with children they must leave behind.

From a historical viewpoint this practice is highly unusual. Women are usually those who stay, not due to lack of initiative or traditional restraints, but because they are those who have been made to feel most responsible for the reproduction of their families. They are the ones

who have to make sure that the children have food, often themselves going without it, and who make sure that the elderly or the sick are cared for. Thus, **when hundreds of thousands leave their homes to face years of humiliation and isolation**, living with the anguish of not being able give to the people they love the same care they give to strangers across the world, we know that something quite dramatic is happening in the organization of world reproduction.

We must reject, however, the conclusion that the indifference of the international capitalist class to the loss of life which globalization is producing is proof that capital no longer needs living labor. In reality the destruction of human life on a large scale has been structural component of capitalism from its inception, as the necessary counterpart of the accumulation of workers, which is inevitably a violent process. The recurrent “reproduction crises” we have witnessed in Africa over the last decades are rooted in this dialectic of labor accumulation and destruction. Also the expansion of non-contractual labor and of other phenomena that may seem like abominations in a “modern world” – such as mass incarceration, the traffic in blood, organs, and other human parts – should be understood in this context.

Capitalism fosters a permanent reproduction crisis. If it has not been more apparent in our lifetimes, at least in many parts of the Global North, it is because the “human catastrophes” it has caused have been most often externalized, confined to the colonies, and rationalized as effects of cultural backwardness or attachment to misguided traditions and “tribalism.” For most of the ’80s and ’90s, moreover, the effects of the global restructuring in the North were hardly felt except in communities of color, or could appear in some cases (e.g., the flexibilization and precarization of work) as liberating alternatives to the regimentation of the 9-to-5 routine, if not anticipations of a workerless society.

But seen from the viewpoint of the totality of worker-capital relations, these developments demonstrate capital’s continuing power to de-concentrate workers and undermine workers’ organizational efforts in the waged workplace. Combined, these trends have abrogated social contracts, deregulated labor relations, reintroduced noncontractual forms of labor not only destroying the pockets of communism a century of workers’ struggle had won but threatening the production of new “commons.”

In the North as well, real incomes and employment have fallen, access to land and urban spaces has been reduced, and impoverishment and even hunger have become widespread. Thirty-seven million are going hungry in the United States, according to a recent report, while 50 percent of the population, by estimates conducted in 2011, is considered “low income.” Add that the introduction of labor saving technologies far from reducing the length of the working day has greatly extended it, to the point that (in Japan) we have seen people dying from work, while “leisure time” and retirement have become a luxury.

Moonlighting is now a necessity for many workers in the United States while, stripped of their pensions, many sixty-to-seventy years old are returning to the labor market. Most significantly, we are witnessing the development of a homeless, itinerant workforce, compelled to nomadism, always on the move, on trucks, trailers, buses, looking for work wherever an opportunity appears, a destiny once reserved in the US to seasonal agricultural workers chasing crops, like birds of passage, across the country.

Along with impoverishment, unemployment, overwork, homelessness, and debt has gone **the increasing criminalization of the working class**, through a mass incarceration policy recalling the 17th century Grand Confinement, and the formation of an *ex-lege* proletariat made of undocumented immigrant workers, students defaulting on their loans, producers or sellers of illicit goods, sex workers. It is a multitude of proletarians, existing and laboring in the shadow, reminding us that the production of populations without rights — slaves, indentured servants, peons, convicts, *sans papiers* — remains a structural necessity of capital accumulation.

Especially harsh has been the attack on youth, particularly working class black youth, the potential heirs of the legacy of Black Power, to whom nothing has been conceded, neither the possibility of secure employment nor access to education. But for many middle class youth as well the future is in question. Studying comes at a high cost, causing indebtedness and the likely default on student loans repayment. Competition for employment is stiff, and social relations are increasingly sterile as instability prevents community building. Not surprisingly, but very telling, among the social consequences of the restructuring of reproduction, there has been an increase in youth suicide, as well as an increase in violence against women and children including infanticide.

In sum, from the viewpoint of social reproduction we can see that **the technological leap achieved through the computerization of production has been premised on an immense destruction of social, economic, and ecological wealth**, an immense leap in the exploitation and devaluation of labor, and the deepening of divisions within the world proletariat.

From this viewpoint, it is impossible to share the optimism of Hardt and Negri, who argue that with the computerization of work and the information revolution we are entering that phase of total automation anticipated by Marx in *Grundrisse*, when capitalist production no longer requires living labor, when labor-time is no longer the measure of value, and the end of work is at hand, only depending on a change in property relations.

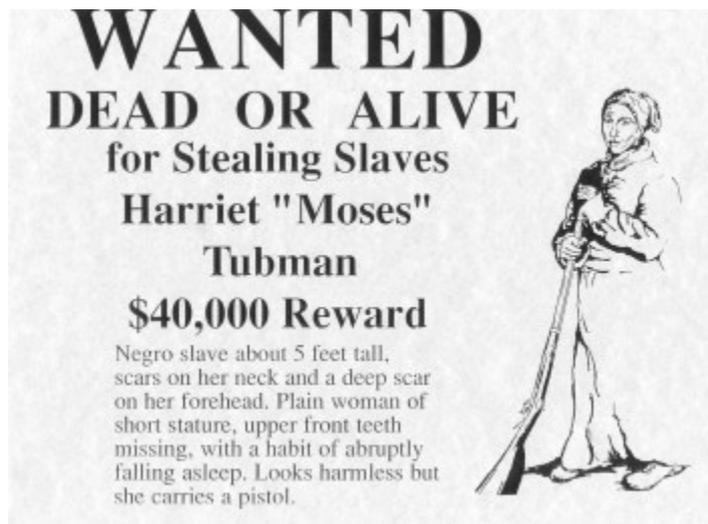
Just as with steel plants, computers too — their materials, their fabrication, and their operation — have a major polluting effect on the environment. The old as well as the new machines are already destroying the Earth, so much that as the recent conference in Poland demonstrates “survivability” has become a political demand. But the unwillingness/inability of policy makers to change capital’s course, in the face of accumulating evidence of global warming and other catastrophes in the make, demonstrates not only that “capitalism is unsustainable” but any dream of technological exodus from it is preposterous.

The assault on our reproduction has not gone unchallenged, however. Resistance has taken many forms, some remaining invisible until they are recognized as mass phenomena. This financialization of everyday reproduction through the use of credit cards, loans, indebtedness, especially in the United States, should be also seen in this perspective, as a response to the decline in wages and a refusal to the austerity imposed by it, rather than simply a product of financial manipulation. Across the world, a movement of movements has also grown that, since the ’90s, has challenged every aspect of globalization — through mass demonstrations, land occupations, the construction of solidarity economies and other forms of commons building.

Most important, the recent spread of prolonged mass uprisings and “Occupy” movements that over the last year has swept much of the world, from Tunisia, to Egypt, through most of the

Middle East, to Spain, and the United States have opened a space where the vision of a major social transformation again becomes possible. After years of apparent closure, where nothing seemed capable of stopping the destructive powers of a declining capitalist order, the “Arab Spring” and the sprawling of tents across the American landscape, joining the many already set in place by the growing population of homeless, show the bottom is once again rising, and a new generation is walking the squares determined to reclaim their future, and choosing forms of struggle that potentially can begin to build a bridge across some of the main social divides.

SECTION IV. REPRODUCTIVE LABOR, WOMEN WORK AND GENDER RELATIONS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY



Against this background, we must now ask how reproductive work has fared in the global economy, and how the changes it has undergone have shaped the sexual division of labor and the relations between women and men. Here as well, the substantive difference between production and reproduction stands out.

The first difference to be noticed is that while production has been restructured through a technological leap in key areas of the world economy, no technological leap has occurred in the sphere of domestic work, significantly reducing the labor socially necessary for the reproduction of the workforce. In the North, the personal computer has entered the reproduction of a large part of the population, so that shopping, socializing, acquiring information, and even some forms of sex-work can now be done online. Japanese companies are promoting the robotization of companionship and mating. Among their inventions are “nursebots” that gives baths to the elderly and the interactive lover to be assembled by the customer, crafted according to his fantasies and desires. But even in the most technologically developed countries, housework has not been significantly reduced. Instead, it has been marketized, redistributed, mostly on the shoulders of immigrant women from the South and former socialist countries. And women continue to perform the bulk of it.

Unlike commodity production, the reproduction of human beings is to a great extent irreducible to mechanization, requiring a high degree of human interaction and the satisfaction of complex needs, in which physical and affective elements are inextricably combined. That reproductive work is a labor-intensive process is most evident in the care of children and the elderly that, even in its most physical components, involves providing a sense of security, consoling, anticipating fears and desires. None of these activities is purely

“material” or “immaterial,” nor can they be broken down in ways making it possible for them to be mechanized or replaced by the virtual flow of online communication.

This is why, rather than being technologized, housework and care work have been redistributed on the shoulders of different subjects, through commercialization and globalization. As women’s increased participation in waged work has immensely increased, especially in the North, large quotas of housework have been taken out of the home and reorganized on a market basis through the virtual boom of the service industry, which now constitutes the dominant economic sector from the viewpoint of wage employment. This means that more meals eaten out of the home, more clothes are washed in laundromats or by dry-cleaners, and more food is bought already prepared for consumption.

There has also been a reduction of reproductive activities as a result of women’s refusal of the discipline involved in marriage and child-raising. In the US, **the number of births has fallen from 118 per 1000 women in the 1960s to 66.7 in 2006**, resulting in an increase in the median age of the population from 30 in 1980 to 36.4 in 2006. The drop in the demographic growth has been especially high in Western and Eastern Europe, where in some countries (e.g., Italy and Greece) the women’s “strike” against procreation continues, resulting in a zero growth demographic regime that is raising much concern among policy makers, and is the main factor behind the growing call for an expansion of immigration. There has also been a decline in the number of marriages and married couples, in the US from 56% of all households in 1990 to 51% in 2006, and a simultaneous increase in the number of people living alone – in the US by seven and a half million, from twenty three to thirty and a half million – amounting to a 30% increase.

Most important, in the aftermath of structural adjustment and economic reconversion, a restructuring of reproduction work has taken place internationally, whereby much of the reproduction of the metropolitan work-force is now performed by immigrant women coming from the Global South, especially providing care to children and the elderly and for the sexual reproduction of male workers.

This has been an extremely important development from many viewpoints. Nevertheless its political implications are not yet sufficiently understood among feminists from the viewpoint of the new power relations it has produced among women, and the limits of the commercialization of reproduction it has exposed. While governments celebrate the “globalization of care,” which enables them to reduce the investment in reproduction, it is clear that this “solution” has a tremendous social cost, not only for the individual immigrant women but for the communities from which they originate.

Neither the reorganization of reproductive work on a market basis, nor the “globalization of care,” much less the technologization of reproductive work, have “liberated women” or eliminated the exploitation inherent to reproductive work in its present form. If we take a global perspective we see that not only do women still do most of the unpaid domestic work in every country, but due to cuts in social services and the de-centralization of industrial production, the amount of domestic work, paid and unpaid, that women perform may have actually increased, even when they have had an extradomestic job.

Three factors have lengthened women’s workday and returned work to the home.

First, women have been the shock absorbers of economic globalization, having had to compensate with their work for the deteriorating economic conditions produced by the liberalization of the world economy and the states' increasing dis-investment in the reproduction of the workforce. This has been especially true in the countries subjected to Structural Adjustment where the state has completely cut spending for healthcare, education, infrastructure and basic necessities. As a consequence of these cuts, in most of Africa and South America, women must now spend more time fetching water, obtaining and preparing food, and dealing with illnesses that are far more frequent at a time when the privatization of healthcare has made visits to clinics unaffordable for most, while malnutrition and environmental destruction have increased people's vulnerability to disease.

In the United States, too, due to budget cuts, much of the work that hospitals and other public agencies have traditionally done has been privatized and transferred to the home, tapping women's unpaid labor. Currently, for instance, patients are dismissed almost immediately after surgery and the home must absorb a variety of post-operative and other therapeutic medical tasks (e.g., for the chronically ill) that in the past would have been done by doctors and professional nurses. Public assistance to the elderly (with housekeeping, personal care) has also been cut, house visits have been much shortened, and the services provided reduced.

The second factor that has re-centered reproductive labor in the home has been the expansion of "homework," partly due to the de-concentration of industrial production, partly to the spread of informal work. As David Staples writes in *No Place Like Home* (2006), far from being an anachronistic form of work, home-based labor has demonstrated to be a long-term capitalist strategy, which today occupies millions of women and children worldwide, in towns, villages, and suburbs. Staples correctly points out that work is inexorably drawn to the home by the pull of unpaid domestic labor, in the sense that by organizing work on a home basis, employers can make it invisible, can undermine workers' efforts to unionize, and drive wages down to a minimum. Many women choose this work in the attempt to reconcile earning an income with caring for their families; but the result is enslavement to a job that earns wages "far below the median wage it would pay if performed in a formal setting, and [which] reproduces a sexual division of labor that fixes women more deeply to housework." (Staples 1-5)

Lastly, the growth of female employment and restructuring of reproduction has not eliminated gender labor hierarchies. Despite growing male unemployment, women still earn a fraction of male wages. We have also witnessed an increase of male violence against women, triggered in part by fear of economic competition, in part by the frustration men experience not being able to fulfill their role as family providers, and most important, triggered by the fact that men now have less control over women's bodies and work, as more women have some money of their own and spend more time outside the home. In a context of falling wages and widespread unemployment that makes it difficult for them to have a family, many men also use women's bodies as a means of exchange and access to the world market, through the organization of pornography or prostitution.

This rise of violence against women is hard to quantify and its significance is better appreciated when considered in qualitative terms, from the viewpoint of the new forms it has taken. In several countries, under the impact of Structural Adjustment, the family has all but disintegrated. Often this occurs out of mutual consent – as one or both partners migrate(s) or both separate in search of some form of income. But many times, it is a more traumatic event, when husbands desert their wives and children, for instance, in the face of pauperization.

In parts of Africa and India, there have also been attacks on older women, who have been expelled from their homes and even murdered after being charged with witchcraft or possession by the devil. This phenomenon most likely reflects a larger crisis in family support for members who are seen as no longer productive in the face of diminishing resources. Significantly, it has also been associated with the ongoing dismantling of communal land systems. But it is also a manifestation of the devaluation that reproductive work and the subjects of this work have undergone in the face of the expansion of monetary relations.

Other examples of violence traceable to the globalization process have been the rise of dowry murder in India, the increase in trafficking and other forms of coerced sex work, and the sheer increase in the number of women murdered or disappeared. Hundreds of young women, mostly maquila workers, have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez and other Mexican towns in the borderlands with the USA, apparently victims of rape or criminal networks producing pornography and “snuff.” A ghastly increase in the number of women murder victims has also been registered in Guatemala. But it is above all institutional violence that has escalated. This is the violence of absolute pauperization, of inhuman work conditions, of migration in clandestine conditions. That migration can also be viewed as a struggle for increased autonomy and self-determination through flight, as a search for more favorable power relations, cannot obliterate this fact.

Several conclusions are to be drawn from this analysis. First, fighting for waged work or fighting to “join the working class in the workplace,” as some Marxist feminists liked to put it, cannot be a path to liberation. Wage employment may be a necessity but it cannot be a coherent political strategy. As long as reproductive work is devalued, as long as it is considered a private matter and women’s responsibility, women will always confront capital and the state with less power than men, and in conditions of extreme social and economic vulnerability.

It is also important to recognize that there are serious limits to the extent to which reproductive work can be reduced or reorganized on a market basis. How far, for example, can we reduce or commercialize the care for children, the elderly, the sick, without imposing a great cost on those in need of care? The degree to which the marketization of food production has contributed to the deterioration of our health (leading, for example, to the rise of obesity even among children) is instructive. As for the commercialization of reproductive work through its redistribution on the shoulders of other women, this “solution” only extends the housework crisis, now displaced to the families of the paid care providers, and creates new inequalities among women.

What is needed is the re-opening of a collective struggle over reproduction, reclaiming control over the material conditions of our reproduction and creating new forms of cooperation around this work outside of the logic of capital and the market. This is not a utopia, but a process already underway in many parts of the world and likely to expand in the face of a collapse of the world financial system. Governments are now attempting to use the crisis to impose stiff austerity regimes on us for years to come.

But through land takeovers, urban farming, community-supported agriculture, through squats, the creation of various forms of barter, mutual aid, alternative forms of healthcare – to name some of the terrains on which this reorganization of reproduction is more developed – a new economy is beginning to emerge that may turn reproductive work from a stifling,

discriminating activity into the most liberating and creative ground of experimentation in human relations.

As I stated, this is not a utopia. The consequences of the globalization of the world economy would certainly have been far more nefarious except for the efforts that millions of women have made to ensure that their families would be supported, regardless of their value on the capitalist labor market. Through their subsistence activities, as well as various forms of direct action (from squatting on public land to urban farming) women have helped their communities to avoid total dispossession, to extend budgets and add food to the kitchen pots.

Amid wars, economic crises, devaluations, as the world around them was falling apart, they have planted corn on abandoned town plots, cooked food to sell on the side of the streets, created communal kitchens – *ola* communes, as in Chile and Peru – thus **standing in the way of a total commodification of life** and beginning a process of re-appropriation and re-collectivization of reproduction that is indispensable if we are to regain control over our lives.

The festive squares and “occupy” movements of 2011 are in a way a continuation of this process as the “multitudes” have understood that no movement is sustainable that does not place at its center the reproduction of those participating in it, thus also transforming the protest demonstrations into moments of collective reproduction and cooperation.

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