

# Women: Marx's Forgotten Proletariat

Silvia Federici's Critique of Marx

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While Marx developed some important tools for building a critique of capitalism from the perspective of the worker, he did not devote much thought to capital's exploitation of women.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici critically revisits the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the historical analysis of which plays a significant role in *Capital*.

Her focus is on the process of Marx's concept of "primitive accumulation," the origin of capital, which entailed, she writes, "an immense accumulation of labor-power—'dead labor' in the form of stolen goods, and 'living labor' in the form of human beings made available for exploitation—realized on a scale never before matched in the course of history."

She addresses specifically how "we do not find in [Marx's] work any mention of the profound transformations that capitalism introduced in the reproduction of labor-power and the social position of women," and the crucial role of women in the shift to a capitalist mode of production.

Primitive accumulation entails the violently-enforced destruction of certain ways of life in order for an elite social strata to gather together previously unavailable material resources necessary for capitalization. Basically, before you can force people to work for you, you have to steal their means of providing their own subsistence and make them dependent on the work you offer them (or else you just enslave them).

Instead of living off of the land as peasants did, the earliest factory workers were paid a subsistence wage; the lowest wage possible with which the workers could survive and return to work the next day. Even so, this was often not enough to meet the needs of the workers and their families.

But the subsistence wage is not the only determinant factor in a worker's ability to labor, and the value created by workers is not the only value stolen. Marx mentions briefly the extermination of indigenous peoples in the Americas and the initiation of the transatlantic slave-trade, both foundational appropriations of value in the forms of dead and living labor.

Yet these are clearly marginalized details in *Capital*, remaining secondary to the creation of the European proletariat. For Marx, primitive accumulation occurs primarily through the separation of peasants from their land and the commons and their subsequent transformation into a male, industrial working class. This class becomes an historical protagonist, playing the central role in the development of capitalism as the object of exploitation and locus of all truly revolutionary potential.

While the traditional Marxist analysis leans heavily on the violent struggle to displace the peasantry and funnel potential labor-power into growing urban slums, it neglects the process of subjugation by which women were simultaneously reduced to their reproductive capacities and then harnessed as breeding stock for bodies whose labor-power could be consumed by capital. It is a simple fact that workers must be born and raised in order to toil.

This reality did not escape early capitalists in the post-plague era, when shortages of labor were common throughout Europe.

Across the continent, during and after the “peak of the demographic and economic crisis” in the 1620s and 1630s, “a population crisis, an expansionist population theory, and the introduction of policies promoting population growth” developed.

Federici points out how this “required the transformation of the body into a work-machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work-force.”

Since the reproduction of labor-power encompasses not only pregnancy, birth, and the rearing of children, but sexual activity itself, “new disciplinary methods” were adopted by the state to “regulate procreation and break women’s control over reproduction” during The General Crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In effect, controlling the bodies and sexual activity of women became instrumental in breeding a workforce large enough that labor-power could be had at rock-bottom prices, in order to ensure the continuation of exploitation and profitable development of early capitalism.

Capital’s main methods for accomplishing this in Europe were the “extermination of the ‘witches’” and the ensuing transformation of the family, which “emerges in the period of primitive accumulation also as the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women’s labor.”

The witch-hunt “literally demonized any form of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality, while charging women with sacrificing children to the devil,” ultimately destroying “a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women’s power in pre-capitalist Europe.” Simultaneously, the family became the site of a “new ‘sexual contract’” which defined women in terms like “mothers, wives, daughters, [and] widows” that “hid their status as workers while giving men free access to women’s bodies, their labor, and the bodies and labor of their children.”

Women were forced to conform to a “new model of femininity...passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, and chaste.” This violent rearrangement resulted in the expansion of the “unpaid part of the working day” whereby capital used “the (male) wage to accumulate women’s labor.”

It is easier to exploit workers when there is someone taking care of them. It is difficult to run a business when one’s workers are naked, starving, sleep-deprived, and socially isolated; it is equally undesirable to spend valuable capital providing for these basic human needs beyond the lowest possible wage. There is no better way to externalize the costs of labor’s upkeep than breaking social life into public and private spheres.

In the private sphere, subordinated women’s labor cooking, cleaning, mending, providing a psychological outlet (via sex, violence, and emotional caretaking), meanwhile raising the next generation of workers—can be exploited, while capital reaps the rewards. The result is that “in the new capitalist regime women themselves became the commons, as their work was defined as a natural resource, laying outside the sphere of market relations.”

Though capitalism has often been identified by orthodox Marxists as an advanced stage in the progress of humanity and the necessary precursor to a more just society, this is a gross error based on a fundamental oversight. Capitalism, in unleashing productive powers on an inhuman scale, has “created more brutal and insidious forms of enslavement.”

Marx’s silence concerning the production and reproduction of the “waged male proletariat” is an historical and economic exclusion—in effect, a political exclusion. He ignored the “accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as ‘race’ and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat.”

By focusing too much on the intensive capitalist policy of a “totalitarian regime using every means to extract the maximum of work from every individual,” he neglected completely the extensive policy, enacted with complicity and material assistance from the state, “consisting in the effort to expand the size of population, and thereby the size of the army and the work-force.” This has resulted in silencing women’s historical experience of subordination—the appropriation of women’s bodies and the theft of women’s labor necessary for the development of capitalism.

Today, Marx’s omission continues to haunt us. Women’s voices and thus their experiences continue to be silenced in the struggle against domination, which is not only capitalist, but patriarchal. One of his great mistakes was to never acknowledge “that procreation could become a terrain of exploitation and by the same token a terrain of resistance.

Marx never imagined that women could refuse to reproduce, or that such a refusal could become part of class struggle.” Excluding a liberatory feminist perspective that takes into account the historical reality of women’s subjugation to a male-dominated economic order, any idea of revolution becomes reactionary and false.

Marxists would do well to re-assess their obsession with the male working-class as the sole site of revolutionary potential.

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