

# Body at Work

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A review of

*Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle: Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* by Silvia Federici PM Press 2020

Before history appears on any page, it is written on the bodies of those who live it—as muscle, callous, stretch mark, wound. “The history of the body is the history of human beings,” writes Marxist and feminist scholar Silvia Federici, “for there is no cultural practice that is not first applied to the body.” The history of capitalism, then, is a history of bodies and their subjugation: of bodies exploited, enslaved, colonized and mechanized, bodies made work-machines in service of productive labor—or, for those bodies called “woman,” reproductive labor.

Reproductive labor—the unwaged, unrecognized domestic and care work that capitalism has forcibly consigned to some bodies, then justified as “natural” to those bodies—has been a central concern of Silvia Federici’s lifetime of scholarship and activism, as two new collections of her writings show. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* gathers four decades of Federici’s research and theory on social reproduction and the capitalist division of labor across gendered, racial, and geographic lines. And in the essays collected in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, Federici considers the body as a site of intersecting histories, contemporary feminist debates and new forms of capitalist exploitation.

In a body of work spanning from 1975 to 2016, the newly revised and expanded edition of *Revolution at Point Zero* presents Federici’s ongoing reflections and research on the nature of reproductive labor and its central role in capitalist social reproduction. The book is divided into three sections: one on housework, one on globalization, and one on the commons. While the book lacks biographical information on Federici, those familiar with her work will recognize the trajectory of these writings as corollary to her co-founding of the Wages for Housework movement in the 1970s in New York City, her subsequent tenure in Nigeria and her organizing with the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, and her ongoing public dialogue with Marx, international feminisms, and Leftist thought.

Federici, alongside the Italian feminists with whom she co-founded Wages for Housework, draws from the Italian Marxist tradition of operaismo, or workerism. First developed by Mario Tronti in postwar, post-fascist Italy, operaismo holds that, in late capitalism, the factory extends beyond its own walls: society becomes a “social factory,” a manufacturer of labor power. Society provides the worker with the means to sleep, eat, and have sex only so that he can wake up and work hard and produce children who will one day replace him in the factory. But Tronti’s operaismo ignores the workers, most of them women, who cook, make the beds, birth the new workers and take care of the old ones. Federici and her cohort recognized women as workers and the unpaid, unacknowledged domestic work they do as work, essential to the upkeep of the capitalist social system. This is the reproductive labor that capitalism has forced onto women’s bodies. And so the habits of femininity—mothering, caring, smiling, submitting—are not natural, not intrinsic to those bodies termed “women,” but, in Federici’s words, a “work function,” distinct from gender. Capitalist production begins at the site of reproduction: the kitchen, the bedroom, the home. And it is there, Federici argues, we can find the “point zero” of feminist revolution. As she writes in the opening of “Wages Against Housework,” the 1975 essay that opens *Revolution at Point Zero*, “They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.”

The first section of the book develops and defends that perspective. To demand wages for housework, Federici asserts, is to demand revolution. First, it is to recognize that “behind every factory, behind every school, behind every office or mine there is the hidden work of millions of women who have consumed their life, their labor, producing the labor power that works in those factories, schools, offices, or mines.” Second, the demand for wages for housework is not a demand for equality with men. The goal is not to put women in factories or women in military uniforms. “Ultimately,” writes Federici, “when we say that we produce capital, we say that we can and want to destroy it, rather than engage in a losing battle to move from one form and degree of exploitation to another.”

This insistence on feminism as an anti-capital, autonomous movement to improve the material conditions of all workers’ lives, paired with an emphasis on the value of reproductive labor, animates the remainder of the book. In the second section, Federici examines globalization and the neoliberal feminism that helps to prop it up. In a globalized world, capital still requires workers, workers still require reproductive labor, and women still bear most of the burden of reproductive labor—the system is simply organized along neocolonial lines of race and geography. Globalization, Federici asserts, is “in essence a war against women, a war that is particularly devastating for women in the “Third World”—that is, for the primarily Black and Indigenous women whose lives have been discounted, displaced, and destroyed by Global Adjustment Programs, continuous wars, austerity economics, and the privatization of communal lands, women whose interests are not represented by the tame, deradicalized feminism of the United Nations. The third section explores the “commons.” For Federici, the commons are not abstract: they are the reclaimed farmlands of the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil, the elder mutual care collectives in Italy, and the New York City community gardens. To create a commons is to enact a new kind of social reproduction—one that serves community, not capital.

Many essays in this volume, particularly those in the last two sections, overlap and repeat each other. Others conclude only with nebulous exhortations—to reconstruct history, for example, or undo “the gendered architecture of our lives.” These papers and articles represent the thrusts and ripostes of Federici the activist, rather than the primary source-backed historical scrutiny of Federici the author of *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, a central feminist text that many readers will encounter first. (Those familiar with *Caliban*, first published in 2004, will recognize its thesis hovering in the margins of the pieces here.)

*Revolution at Point Zero* also provides readers interested in Federici’s thinking with a sense of its development against the changing landscapes of global capital and the Left. *The Wages for Housework* writings present the “proletariat housewife” as the figure of feminist class struggle and understand reproductive labor primarily as housework. It’s relevant to note that *Wages for Housework* faced criticism from Angela Davis, among others, for its failure to acknowledge Black women’s particular history of paid and unpaid work in the domestic sphere; the same critique could apply to many of the essays in this volume. In Federici’s later writings on globalization and the commons, the category of “housework” broadens to include subsistence farming and elder care, and she positions migrant domestic workers as the leaders of the new feminist movement in North America. Federici also shifts from a refusal of all domestic labor to a “valorization” of housework as “expressive of a collective experience.”

One throughline is Federici’s grounding in the material world—in land and bodies, both as the subjects of capitalism’s worst degradations and as sites of revolutionary conflict with the state. While her concern with bodies is sometimes implicit in the essays of *Revolution at Point Zero*, it is the explicit focus of both *Caliban and the Witch* and her newest book, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*. In *Caliban*, Federici describes the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a process inextricably linked to the mechanization of bodies in general and the subjugation of bodies termed “women” in particular. Through this subjugation, carried out most dramatically in the form of witch hunts, capitalism forced reproductive labor onto women—and then called that unwaged, invisible labor “feminine nature.”

The writings collected in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* extends the work she began in *Caliban* to the present day and into the future. Federici considers the new ways capitalism seeks to make our bodies into the kind of machines it needs. She also contemplates ways for us to resist these restrictions, to imagine our bodies beyond capital’s control. The eleven essays of this slim volume track body politics across a broad expanse of philosophical and historical territory: Federici touches on the 1970s feminist movement, gender performance theory, cyborgs, surrogacy, Freud, prostitution, Fordism, Mormonism, and space colonies.

Here, as in *Revolution at Point Zero*, Federici stresses that feminism must affirm the value of reproductive labor always, fight for material resources for all women, and reject state discipline in all forms. She critiques liberal white feminists, willing to accept equal pay, corporate representation and abortion rights without demanding more resources, autonomy, and wages for all, as simply another pillar of hierarchy. She is suspicious of new technologies and their markets—from brain microchips to commodified surrogacy—as new means of entrenching old class and race divisions. In “With Philosophy, Psychology, and Terror: Transforming Bodies into Labor Power,” she outlines psychology’s role as “the discipline most directly involved in controlling the work force.” As the enforcers of “normal” behavior—meaning productivity—psychologists and psychiatrists have, at various points, cast tiredness, sadness, sexuality, gender, and even “accident proneness” as mental disorders.

But some of the arguments in *Beyond the Periphery* lack rigor and clarity. Federici’s attack on “gender performance theory” is one example. While she praises the 1970s feminist movement for successfully “denaturalizing” femininity by separating femininity from gender and gender from housework, she chastises 21<sup>st</sup>-century movements for ignoring that “‘bodies’ and ‘nature’ have a history; they are not a raw bedrock on which cultural meaning are attached.” As ever, her emphasis is on the material—but that emphasis leads her to gloss over the theoretical. She asserts that modern feminism treats bodies as “purely culturally produced realities that we have the power of making and unmaking,” but offers no examples of this discourse. And because Federici herself repeatedly describes the body as part of “nature” that evolved in concert with the earth, it’s not always clear how her definition of women’s bodies differs from repressive definitions that marry abstract gender essence to material physiology.

*Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* is at its most compelling in its conception of a unified, communal body, “the body as a ground of resistance.” The essay “In Praise of the Dancing Body” is delightfully precise and practical in that it highlights one particular way to activate the body’s potential for resistance: dance.

The dancer is one iteration of the expansive, boundaryless body in the collection’s title, the body as a commons, the body that exists, as Federici describes in the collection’s introduction, in “magical continuity with the other living organisms that populate the Earth: the bodies of humans and the not-humans, the trees, the rivers, the sea, the stars. This is the image of a body that reunites what capitalism has divided...without windows and without doors, but moving instead in harmony with cosmos, in a world where diversity is a wealth for all and a ground of commoning rather than a source of divisions and antagonisms.” If the history of capitalism is the history of subjugations of the body, then the future of capitalism—that is, capitalism’s end—must be written as the body’s liberation.

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