

Book Review

Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle

by Silvia Federici. Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012. \$15.95 US, paper. ISBN: 978-1-60486-333-8. Pages: 1-188.

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Revolution at Point Zero is a collection of twelve important essays (plus a preface and introduction) by the Marxist-feminist political theorist Silvia Federici. As a collection, it is remarkable for its combination of historical breadth – the earliest essay was originally published in 1975, and the latest in 2011 – and sustained engagement with the topic of reproductive labor. Reproductive labor is not just the book’s organizing theme; it emerges through the process of reading Federici’s essays in sequence as the political problem that manifestly joins what would otherwise appear to be very different historical conditions of struggle, from the Wages for Housework campaign in the ‘70s to the anti-globalization movements of the *fin de siècle*. It is, as Federici affirms in the preface, “the work in which the contradictions inherent in ‘alienated labor’ are most explosive, which is why it is the *ground zero* for revolutionary practice, even if it is not the only ground zero,” (2012, p. 2, emphasis in the original).

Federici’s concept of reproductive work (or labour) is maximally inclusive without ever seeming to be imprecise. It includes everything that goes into the reproduction of labour-power, that is, of human beings, from the constitutively unwaged labour of motherhood, to subsistence agriculture, to the grossly underpaid services of personal care workers. It excludes, by definition, the so-called productive labour of commodity production that generates surplus value for capital at the expense of the worker. Still, because this latter expense is measured in the difference between what the working class requires to reproduce itself and what it is capable of producing, reproductive and productive labour are inextricably linked, even as they are constantly opposed by the movement of capital. This is important because it clarifies Federici’s relationship to

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orthodox Marxism: While insisting that the exploitation of women, and others, cannot be understood or combated independently of the material conditions of production required and generated by global capitalism, she is equally insistent that global capitalism cannot be understood or overthrown without acknowledging the enormous surplus and critical significance generated by unpaid labour in the sphere of reproduction.

It is this crucial expansion of the revolutionary dialectic to include as central those forms and aspects of life that are disingenuously externalized by capitalist production – cooking, childrearing, gardening, subsistence farming, as well as the life-giving capacities of nature itself – that enables a book whose theoretical underpinnings were born in the feminist struggles of the 1970s to feel so timely in the contemporary context of intensifying neoliberalism. Armed with the understanding that reproductive work is absolutely essential to the functioning not only of capitalism but of whatever social system we may decide to put in its place, and that it is therefore revolutionary, Federici is able to explain why so many contemporary anti-capitalist mobilizations ...

... have not been fought only or primarily by waged industrial workers, Marx's 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, as well as industrial workers in Africa, India, Latin America and China. Most importantly, 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 (p.92-93).

What unites these struggles is that they are all waged not only against capitalism but also in defense of the alternative sphere of reproduction and, implicitly, a mode of production that would be subordinate to that sphere rather than the other way around. Otherwise, they are all very different, and herein lies Federici's most crucial contribution to the discussion of revolutionary subjects and subjectivities, most clearly articulated in the 2008 essay, "The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution," quoted above: By dismantling Marxist claims that capitalism has a progressive character (p.92) Federici frees us from the expectation that the revolution must come "after" it.

In the case of the five essays written during the Wages for Housework campaign, this means that, "you don't need to enter a factory to be part of a working class organization" (p.38). In the case of the six anti-

globalization essays written much later, it means that the historically continuous attack on subsistence, whether this be the expropriation of peasants in Europe and Asia, women gardeners in Africa and inner-city North America, or indigenous people everywhere, is fundamentally an attack on these subjects' revolutionary ability "to resist a more intense exploitation," (p.86). In other words, our capacity to resist capitalism from the outside just as much as our capacity to revolt against it from within both rely on our ability – contingent on our control of the means of subsistence in time (reproductive labor) and space (land) – to be different from it. This perspective dismantles the prevalent supposition that the anticolonial struggle for territory and workers' struggle for higher wages are constitutively opposed. It also dispenses with the attractive illusion, made prominent by the writings of Hardt and Negri², that the disappearance of autonomous localities in the face of globalization could ever engender, never mind sustain, a revolutionary uprising (Federici 2012, p.142).

I should add that the essays in *Revolution at Point Zero* could absolutely be read independently of each other, as precise analyses of specific political situations. The essay, "On Elder Care Work and the Limits of Marxism," for instance, is a particularly compelling analysis of an under-theorized crisis of our time, while the final essay, "Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation," articulates Federici's relationship to important contemporary debates about common property and neoliberalism's new enclosures. To read them this way is to read them as a student or a scholar, which is good and valuable enough. But to read them all is to read them as a subject of history, compelled by capital and invited in solidarity, which is much better.

2 Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.