

Interview with Silvia Federici by Sara Buraya Boned

Part of Degrowth and Progress

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Sara Buraya Boned: The pandemic has made the injustices of the capitalist way of life for the majority of people all the more visible. It has shown up the crisis of the system, in both its material and symbolic accumulation, its exploitation of human and non-human lives and its brutal consequences. In March 2020, during confinement, there was the illusion that the capitalist machine of production and consumption had stopped. In that initial disruption and confusion, capitalism had to reinvent ways of operating, and us, new ways of articulating in the present context of social distance (that is, the damage to social bonds and new ways of weaving the communitarian fabric) had to be found. Do you think we are living through a change of paradigm? And if so, in what direction are we going?

Silvia Federici: I do not think that we are changing or that we are experiencing a change of paradigm. The paradigm that is governing the transformation of the economy and social life, and the changes that we can anticipate are part of a long process that has been typical of all the neoliberal phases of capitalism: the constant erosion of the policies which give security and promote people's lives, people's reproduction. What we are witnessing is a continuation, and intensification, of the kind of attack that has been taking place for many years now. Consider, for instance, the famous mortgage crisis and the housing crisis of 2008, which involved a major transference of wealth from below to rescue the capitalist class. What we are seeing is a capitalism that is trying to reduce and undermine the services and resources available for our reproduction, and introduce more exploitative forms of work.

Clearly, many jobs will be reorganized on a home basis as this will reduce costs. And much of the cost of production will be carried by the workers themselves. We also see a trend towards sending many women back into the home. For years now social services have been cut or underfunded, and women now have to take care of children. So many will be working from home, adding telework to domestic work. The home will become a really full factory, where women will be doing housework, caring of the children and helping with their schoolwork, while, at the same time, carrying on a job outside the home through telework. This is an escalation of a

crisis that women have already been experiencing, being charged with multiple jobs, as wage earners, care workers, educators.

Women have been facing a constant impoverishment, a constant dispossession for some time, as the jobs they find are very poorly paid. The Covid crisis has had disastrous effects. In the United States, an increasing number of people do not have enough food, are unable to pay their rents and risk eviction. But these trends were already there. In the streets of New York, for years now, there have been homeless people, begging for money. These are young people, old people, people who are homeless, but still have jobs. This crisis has been here for a long time, but it is intensifying.

SBB: Thinking about political proposals that have reflected on this capitalist escalation, we believe that feminisms in history, as both theoretical proposals and activist proposals, have created different strategies to contest and face this idea of progress. The idea of progress was foundational to the project of modernity and liberalism. What has been the role of female/feminised labour in the development of progress as the ideological framework of capitalism?

SF: The concept of progress is bankrupt. It is part of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy, which proclaimed that capitalist development would bring prosperity to the world. Behind the idea of progress there was the assumption that social life, beginning with economic activities, would be organised according to rational, scientific principles. The child of the scientific revolution was industry, which opened up immense resources and was supposed to improve all the tasks necessary for our reproduction. This involved a complete devaluation of the past. Improvement was conceived as only occurring in the future; past knowledges, customs were totally devalued.

We have all internalised this idea that somehow it is the future that brings all improvement, new ideas, better forms of life. But what has been hidden are the knowledges that were acquired and produced by people in the past. The devaluation of the past has also concealed the destruction that capitalism has made of previous cultures, of previous social systems, of previous systems of knowledges.

We can see the lies sustaining the idea of progress just by looking at the conditions of women. The history of capitalism (as I have written and said many times) begins with two centuries of witch-hunting. The eighteenth century, which is the century of the alleged great democratic revolution, is a period in which women had no rights, and in both France and England this continued into the nineteenth century, especially for married women. In England, married women weren't legal persons. You had the system of *femme couverte* (covered woman) – she is covered because she's represented in front of the state by a man, a family member, a tutor. She could not go to court directly, like women in the Middle Ages. She became a kind of minor and she had to be under the tutelage of a man.

Women, as Virginia Woolf and others feminist writers have denounced, have always been excluded from democracy. This of course was even more true for black women, black men. The age of progress was the age of slavery, it was the time when millions of Africans were enslaved. The American plantation, with its slave-based economy, is the essence of progress. As C.L.R. James has pointed out in

The Black Jacobins, the promoters of the French Revolution were bourgeois entrepreneurs who had built fortunes with the slave trade and in the process had gained the confidence to confront the aristocracy and demand their share of power. So 'progress' is a concept we have to reject and unmask as it has a very destructive history.

SBB: Following that line of thought, we have seen how paid or unpaid work is based on a very complex mechanism of hierarchical ordering. How, in your terms, have feminisms shown that up, or how have they redefined established hierarchies by challenging the idea of progress?

SF: Like scholars/activists speaking from the viewpoint of the colonies, or from the history of slavery and institutional racism, feminists have shown that capitalism has not advanced the social position of women. If women over the last two centuries have gained any rights this is because of the struggles they have made, not because of the 'enlightenment' of the capitalist class. The very fact that capitalist development begins with conquest, colonisation, the slave trade, two centuries of witch-hunting makes any idea of progress, for women or any other population, an absurdity. Add the devaluation of reproductive work, the plunder of the environment, a policy of constant warfare and the creation of labour hierarchies and differential labour regimes that have reproduced, coerced, unfree labour in many different forms. Also add the immense efforts the capitalist class has made to isolate people, individualise exploitation, foment a culture of distrust where the other is the enemy, which all contribute to our political paralysis.

In feudal Europe, the serfs provided labour services for the landlords, they were a subjugated population, but, at the same time, they received as their compensation the use of land and other customary rights that gave them direct access to means of reproduction, land and resources. It is only with capitalism that we begin to see a separation between production and reproduction, and the appearance that reproductive activities are not essential, 'women's work', of so little value for the community as to not deserve any compensation. Also, the community that emerged because of collective forms of work and reproduction has continuously been destroyed.

With the rise of capitalism, the reproduction of life, the reproduction of workers and the production of goods have become the carriers of different social relations – reproductive work has become feminised, while production (with exception of the first phase of the Industrial Revolution) has mostly become a male area. With the rise of capitalism, you have a new division of labour which separated men and women, that separated production and reproduction, in a way which introduced into the community of the oppressed a whole set of hierarchies and divisions and dependencies. Women have become more and more dependent on men, and this has been one of the causes of the increase of domestic violence, as dependence has been trapped in the home. This is the system I have defined as 'the patriarchy of the wage'.

So, when we look at the idea of progress and capitalist development, we can see that women actually in the transition to capitalism, have lost their autonomy (limited as it was – in the late Middle Ages in Europe and in Latin America, I should say Abya

Yala, before the conquest). This is what I have argued in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Clearly, we have to be careful with generalisations. In the case of Black women, for instance, they have never been able to rely on the male wage and have had no choice but to accept the most exploited jobs, like paid domestic service. This is why in the struggle of domestic workers today, many of them make the connection between this work and slavery.

As we well know, even when women have had a job outside the home, it has always been something marginal, underpaid, often an extension of housework, which did not give them real autonomy benefits, no vacations, no social services to rely upon. The devaluation of the woman as social subjects, has been continuous throughout the history of capitalism and in many ways continues today, and to a great extent it is rooted in the devaluation of reproductive activities. Despite the celebration of women's emancipation through participation in the job market, in reality the majority get jobs that are so poorly paid they cannot make do, unless they take on loans. In the US, this explains why women who have paid jobs carry the highest debt burden; they have to use their wage as collateral for loans, which are always at very high interest rates. So, they work and work and never have the kind of security and autonomy they are seeking. The way progress is sold is very far from the actual experiences of women.

As I mentioned, since the beginning of Covid two million women in the US have lost their jobs, mostly because they did not have access to childcare. They had no choice, they had to be there, and also help with schoolwork. Now they have to use the internet to carry on with their employment – that's another cost for the families. First, they have to buy a computer, then they have to get access to the internet. And somebody has to help the children, with schooling and also to cope with depression. Almost every night on TV we have some programme about children being traumatised: hearing about people dying, people's fear, wearing the mask, and, above all, being stuck all day, week after week, at home; not being able to go to school, meet their friends, be with other children. Imagine the work that women have to do: keeping up with their job, doing the domestic work, now amplified because you have to wash and clean, wash and disinfect, all the time. And then there is the emotional work.

This is a time when women should take action, launch a debate about what is to be done. We cannot expect – contrary to what some feminists so often told us – that going out of the home, getting a job and joining a union is going to solve the problem.

SBB: I agree, completely. Now, in confinement, reproductive work – work that was invisible – is at the centre. While planning this ePub, we as editors acknowledged that there is no way that reproductive work and care can degrowth. Indeed, it has had to increase on so many levels during the pandemic. But in this particular moment, when care is at the centre, we are seeing how the vocabularies and reflections about care developed in the last decades by feminist movements and theorists like yourself are being overused and overexposed publicly by neoliberal governments and big companies. What are for you the risks with these 'rhetorics of care' that are emerging?

SF: What we see today is an escalation of what was already there, just intensified. The language of care that has become very popular in the feminist movement is not helpful. What we need is not a glorification of the tasks we do, but a change in the material conditions of our lives. We have to say, 'reproductive work is essential work'. But with nurses, retail workers, teachers, applauses and words of thanks are not enough. We need to see a change that liberates women's time, expands the resources to which they have access, creates more cooperative structures so that reproduction is not just a woman's job. Unfortunately, this work has been concealed, marginalised and degraded even in the rhetoric of the left. They always looked at housewives, women who only worked in the home, as backward women, that it would be impossible to organise them. We have to reappropriate the discourse of 'care' and reproduction to show who is benefiting from it and how much wealth is actually being accumulated at our expense.

What would the capitalist class do if they had to provide the infrastructure to enable millions of people to go to work outside of the home every day? How much investment would they have to make? They save billions because women are at home doing all this work – preparing people for their jobs, sending them out fresh to be consumed again by the labour process. They come home and they have to be patched together, emotionally, sexually, etc. And then they go and come back again, consumed, exhausted. I think it's time to break this cycle.

And, also to say, that hiring other women to do the work is not a solution. We should fight so that no woman has to leave a country and the people she loves to support herself and her family. Clearly, we need to struggle so that migrant domestic workers obtain better conditions of work, and to establish that their struggle is our struggle as well. But this cannot be a solution, as it also creates hierarchies among women and a situation of 'coloniality', given that many domestic workers today are migrant women, who come from countries which have been impoverished due to the expansion of capitalist relations and the recolonisation of their countries.

I look forward to a movement of women in which those who are doing work for pay and those who are doing work without pay struggle together for a common cause. The Covid crisis can be such an opportunity. We have to create spaces where women can come together and discuss what to do. To decide what we need and what kind of organisational effort to force a rechanneling of the social wealth, away from war, militarisation, prisons, for instance. We need to redirect what they are currently using for destructive objectives and put it at the service of our reproduction.

SBB: Indeed! My next question has to do with these movements of organised domestic workers that have emerged recently with great strength in different countries. We have seen you collaborating with some of these groups and supporting domestic and care workers. For example, in the recent event organised by Museo Reina Sofía, ¿Quién cuida a la cuidadora? Capitalismo, reproducción y cuarentena (Who Cares for the Carers? Capitalism, Reproduction and Quarantine), in which different representatives of these groups from Honduras, Colombia and Spain debated and exchanged within the scope of building up an international

network of domestic workers. What are the main challenges for these political organisations of care workers? And what alliances do you imagine for these movements?

SF: I've been very inspired by the organisation of domestic workers, beginning with *Territorio Doméstico* in Madrid. These are women I admire and always learn from. They show that without this work nothing else can take place. And in a way they have continued the feminist struggle over reproduction that many feminists abandoned in the 1980s to concentrate all their efforts on gaining access to male-dominated work sectors. The feminist movement then owes a great debt to domestic workers' organisations, because they are opening up a space that is crucial for every woman. They have reopened negotiations with the state and with the employer on the question of domestic work.

Ideally, the feminist movement will support their struggle and see it as our struggle; see it as an important moment for redefining domestic work, and turn the tables on the employers to show them just how much they owe all the women who have made it possible for them to continue their economic activity. I think this is fundamental for the feminist movement today: to join and support this struggle and to see how we can articulate a broad programme that revalues reproduction, not by words, but by changing its material conditions in such a way that increases our autonomy and breaks the isolation in which this work today is performed. We need to go beyond the symbolism of Mother's Day, which has never changed women's lives.

I must stress that when I speak of 'revaluing reproduction', I don't mean glorifying domestic work, especially as it is now. I mean that to place the focus on reproduction is to embrace a different logic from that which moves the capitalist system. It is a logic that places our well-being at the centre of our lives, at the centre of social action. It means to revalue our lives and refuse to subordinate them to the accumulation of capitalist wealth. It is a strategic move in a feminist struggle, which is not interested in equality with men or getting a better foot in the capitalist system. It is about changing power relations. And, most crucially, seeing that reproduction is far broader than domestic work. Reproduction connects the home to the fields, housework and agriculture, child-raising and caring for the environment, the work of healthcare and the work of fighting against the poisoning of the soil and the waters.

SBB: Finally, throughout this conversation you have addressed tangentially other ways of thinking. Degrowth thinking is a way of looking to the future of our society and its relationship with technology and nature. Do you think it is possible to look back into history/herstory to find other ways to inspire a progressive degrowth?

SF: There is no return to the past. At the same time, we need to confront some very important realities. For instance, when we look at the technology presently used, including the internet, we see it has an enormous cost for the natural environment, as well as the social environment. The massive programmes of land expropriation that are taking place across the world, especially in the so-called global south, is carried out by mining companies extracting minerals necessary for digital technologies. The coltan, the tungsten, etc. So, what are we going to do in terms of

transforming our society? Is it conceivable that we continue to have this kind of exploitation of nature in a non-capitalist world? Not to mention the inequalities it creates.

We have to redefine our needs, keeping in mind the cost of the activities we engage in for the natural environment and for other people across the planet. Marx imagined a day when much of the labour necessary for our reproduction would be done by machines, so that we could be free for higher types of activities: philosophy, poetry, music ... But, I ask, 'who will take care of the children? Machines?' The idea that the world expansion of technology will be a key element of a non-capitalist, socially just society is troublesome. We need technology, so the question is what type of technology? But we cannot imagine that we can mechanise all reproductive activities. We must also consider that many forms of work once liberated from the constraints that capitalism puts on them can actually be creative. The work of reproduction can be a creative activity, when it is not carried out in conditions of misery, of constant repetition, of total isolation. A debate on these questions has to be part of the process of social transformation.

SBB: And because the idea of sustainable development is no longer believable. It has become a contradiction in itself. There is no way development in capitalist terms can be sustainable. In relation to your considerations on connectivity, the Cloud as an immaterial space is a fiction. We only have to think of all the cables around the world and across the oceans and the immense storage and buildings of servers. They have a completely material existence, but are hidden from the general public.

SF: Yes, they're promising that we can have constant growth and green growth, and that's absurd.

SBB: L'Internationale has been working through different projections of this in the previous issue, *Austerity and Utopia*. And how the use of these terms is sometimes tricky.

SF: Yes, we don't want utopia to be a process of impoverishment. On the other hand, we must redefine what is 'wealth'. For instance, we see today in the US that the people dying from Covid-19 are mostly those who are breathing polluted air. An area of high Covid mortality in New York is the Bronx, which for years has been a disaster place in terms of air pollution. The children born there, most of them Black children, suffer from asthma. So, a pre-existing condition is racism; social inequality and the destruction of the environment are 'pre-existing conditions'. In fact, it's one-to-one between the places that are most polluted on Earth and the places where people who have been systematically devalued, degraded, are forced to live. In the Bronx, children have for years been suffering from asthma, and now people are dying because of Covid.

We can see the continuity between social injustice and environmental degradation. It cannot continue. Today so much of our technological development is made at the cost of what they call 'sacrifice zones'. They actually have the courage to speak of 'sacrifice zones', areas that have the highest rate of contamination, where life is consciously destroyed, sacrificed. But these are also areas in which people are living – it's not that the sacrifice zones are in the desert. They are highly inhabited. It is

the murderous nature of this system that forces people to live in places where their health is destroyed daily.

We need to make this moment a moment of change. There's no normality to go back to. We must fight for significant, qualitative change and create something opposed to the logic of capitalist relations, where, in different ways, the life of most people is considered 'sacrificable'.

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