Q: What is reproduction and why have you made it a central issue in your analysis?

Silvia Federici: It’s important politically to confront the question of reproduction because we are experiencing an unprecedented crisis of reproduction. When I speak of reproduction, I don’t speak only in the sense of procreation, although that is part of it, but of all the activities necessary for the reproduction of human life—from housework to subsistence agriculture, to the production of culture and care for the environment.

The policies brought in by the neoliberal agenda have, in fact, made reproduction a question for millions of people across the world. We’ve witnessed a tremendous attack on our means of reproduction—on every form of sustenance from wage employment to services to access to nature and the commons—land, water, and forests.

The struggle of domestic workers, of the mothers of Fukushima, of subsistence farmers across the world; the struggle in the public schools because they have been defunded and privatized; all these struggles together [are] what I mean by struggles of reproduction.

I’m very disappointed that Governor [Jerry] Brown of California decided not to sign the bill of rights that domestic workers have fought for for a long time. It represents a very important moment in the struggle for the redefinition of reproduction and puts some value on this work and gives power to the people [engaged in] reproductive labor.
Today, for millions of people, the question of whether they’ll be able to reproduce is answered in the negative. There’s hardly one basic service that has not been slashed, [affecting] children, older people, healthcare. Really basic necessities have all been decimated. So, clearly what’s needed is a new broad mobilization on the question of reproduction that connects all the different struggles.

**Women in the Waged Workforce**

**Q:** Feminist struggles for equality under capitalism from the 1960s through the ‘80s did actually move what had been unwaged women’s work into the paid economy, even if it was often as waged domestic labor, such as home care. Did that improve the condition of women and the working class as a whole?

**Federici:** If we look at the world, and not only the situation in the United States, Europe, or Japan, we see that, in fact, what we call globalization and the massive entrance of women into wage work is much less uniform than usually imagined. At the same time that millions of women were entering the labor force in the U.S., many in Europe were losing their jobs—for example, in the former socialist countries—which in fact, triggered a tremendous migration from Russia, Moldavia, Ukraine.

The same is true for much of Africa, parts of Asia, and Latin America, where the programs of structural adjustment really cut a lot of women’s jobs. That’s why so many women have had to migrate, seeking an income doing domestic work or sex work, or working as nurses across the globe.

Secondly, women entered the waged workforce in the United States at the very time—the 1980s—when that workforce and the workplace were under tremendous attack; when this massive attack on workers’ entitlement and workers’ rights was launched under Rea-

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**Birth Control and Women’s Labor**

By Shanelle Matthews

Among the myriad reasons why women use birth control, one of the most obvious is—we work. A recent study\(^1\) finds that women believe improved career outcomes are a direct result of access to contraceptives. Women make up almost half the workforce,\(^2\) so our contributions are integral to the economy.

In 1960, when Enovid, the first birth control pill, received FDA approval, U.S. women began weighing their options. Without unintended pregnancies, they could pursue higher education and improve their value in the job market—and they did just that. The pill revolutionized women’s ability to have successful careers outside the home.

Opponents of contraception—fundamentalist Christians, the Catholic Church hierarchy, and politicians like Rick Santorum—cite the sanctity of life as their justification. But it’s evident that they want to see women confined to antiquated gender roles and out of the workplace. The Christian fundamentalist “Quiverfull” movement is explicit on this point.\(^3\) Mary Pride’s *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality* quotes the Bible to maintain that women’s role is as “mothers, as bearers of children, and workers in the home under the authority of a husband.”\(^4\)

Many studies show that limiting access to birth control increases the likelihood of unintended pregnancies, which according to the Brookings Institution, account for over 50 percent of pregnancies every year.\(^6\) For women who can’t afford access to birth control and rely on federally funded programs like Planned Parenthood, a federal ban would be like telling them to not have sex at all.

Since no ban on birth control will curb our innate human need to have sex, we are likely to see a spike in pregnancies, which require working women to take leave, some of whom will never return. According to the Working Mother Research Institute, 35 percent of career-oriented moms stay home after giving birth because the cost of childcare is too high. Another 19 percent do not return because of the birth of additional children.\(^6\) Having a child, whether intended or unintended, increases the strain on family resources. This does not change for women who become pregnant because of limited
ganism. So, while women have gained more autonomy certainly from men, they’ve not gained autonomy from capital. Their life has become a life of permanent crisis. Women now have to juggle a paid job and work at home, in many cases also taking care of the family or sick family members.

Among working class women, life expectancy is beginning to decline, according to some recent reports. In the U.S., women can expect to live three to four years less than their mothers, which is a very telling sign of the crisis of reproduction. Also, because reproductive work is historically devalued in capitalist society, the wages and labor conditions that immigrant women in domestic work can look for are abysmally low in the great majority of cases.

The domestic workers’ struggle is very much conducted on all these fronts: reproductive work and the fact that society has yet to recognize the importance of it; the struggle around immigration; and [the struggle] against racial prejudices, [since] many are women of color, from an Asian or African background.

Q: Can you describe the evolution of your thinking, from the Wages for Housework campaigns of the 1970s to now?

Federici: The Wages for Housework campaign was extremely important. It was like a lever to undo and destabilize a certain sexual division of labor that was based precisely on the fact that this work was unpaid. It was never an ultimate goal but a strategy to change power relations and undermine the dependence of women on the male wage.

That it took women until the 21st century to argue for their right to birth control. But the truth is there has never been a time in history when women haven’t protected themselves from conception. We’ve always believed we deserve to enjoy life outside of being pregnant.

The concept of controlling fertility did not start with Margaret Sanger and the American birth control movement, but with indigenous women who, in the fight to preserve personal sovereignty, made the best, most practical decisions for themselves and their families. However, it benefits the patriarchal agenda of the religious right to question the morality and utility of contraception. And the more we debate, the further we are from normalizing it.

Endnotes
1. <guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/j.contraception.2012.08.012.pdf>
2. <economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/15-contraceptive-economics/?ref=contraception>
3. The Christian Quiverfull movement derives its name from Psalm 127:3–5, where many children are metaphorically referred to as the arrows in a full quiver. <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quiverfull>
5. <brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/07/unintended-pregnancy-thomas-monea>
6. <workingmother.com/research-institute/what-moms-choose-working-mother-report>
7. <naccrra.org/sites/default/files/default_site_pages/2012/cost_report_2012_final_081012_0.pdf>

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Often, women thought that we were asking the husband to pay a wage. No, we were asking the state for wages for housework, not wages for housewives, because this is work.

Think for a minute [of] the range of social services that the employer class would have to put into place if there hadn’t been a woman all this time at home, making sure that the next morning this person could go to the workplace restored, for another day’s work. [Imagine if] a woman had not done the washing, the cooking, [the taking] care of the kids, the consoling [of] the children and the husband; [or provided] emotional support and sexual services (which are very important part of the work expected of women). It took a long struggle for women to recognize rape in the family [and] the idea that the woman’s body is [hers].

Struggles that begin to reclaim the wealth [women produce in the home] are extremely important. But today I don’t see those struggles only as being at the monetary level. Lately I’ve been very interested in the question of the commons and [reclaiming] many forms of wealth that are not connected with the wage system.

We want to reclaim housing, land, the right to free education. These are all elements of what I would say is [part] of reproduction.

Power of Procreation

**Q:** Could you comment on the attacks on women’s right to control our bodies, and the drive to circumscribe the conditions under which we can relate, have children, and get services to support those children?

**Federici:** Well, I think it’s playing an enormous role because it really attempts to institute subordination of women to men. Within the family, the state expects women to pick up all the work—as they always did, but now more than ever—that is accumulating because of the cuts in services. For instance, in England, the Big Society program that Cameron has sponsored for some years is built on the mobilization of a lot of volunteer work—unpaid, mostly women’s labor—under the name of community building.

The state has always tried to control women’s bodies because they are the vehicle for the production of workers. From their point of view, we are machines for the production of labor power. There’s a direct connection between women’s reproduction of children and the dynamics of the labor market.

Now, they haven’t always wanted more children. In many cases, they have wanted women to be sterilized when the children they produced demanded more than the capitalist class was willing to concede. But the issue has always been the desire to control the female body, both in terms of the labor market and also of the discipline and the relationship between women and men.

As we learned in the feminist movement, [often] the first obstacle a woman encounters when she wants to make a fight is not directly the state but the man in the family. So, it has been very useful and productive for the state that men have this power over women and procreation. Sexuality has been part of their mechanism of surveillance and policing of women. We now have this situation where on one side, the right wing is sponsoring every military campaign so that children all over the world [are being] decimated, [while on the other], they are cutting the services that would allow children and families to thrive, leading to a continuous increase in the infant mortality rate.

Then, with a hypocrisy that has no limits, they want to tell us that if the children we carry in our womb are born badly, that is our responsibility. There’s a very complex set of disciplinary objectives that passes through control of our bodies.
Student Debt

Q: I know you’ve spoken about how education brings together this longstanding trajectory of austerity, privatization, and debt. Could you explain that more?

Federici: It’s a disgrace because education should not be something that is bought and sold. In fact, there’s now a movement against debt, which has taken off over the last year and is spreading across the country. It’s very important because it makes a key issue [of] the fact that the debt is illegitimate. The debt should not be paid because it comes out of an unjustified policy [that] basically says you can buy and sell ideas; buy and sell education. If you are a student, you’re told you have no future if you don’t have an education. There’s something fraudulent happening here. Students have been asked to do something that is really impossible. Education should not be a commodity—something that you put on the counter as if it’s a tube of toothpaste.

Q: You were talking about educational debt; I was thinking also about the level of credit card debt burdening the working class because employers have been increasingly unwilling to negotiate terms and conditions that will let people survive.

Federici: In New York, the movement began as students against the debt. That is still on, but it’s become part of a broader movement that is now struggling against debt as an instrument of discipline. We see more and more, debt becoming the tool through which people are exploited and the tool through which the capitalist class accumulates wealth. There’s a broad front, because when you are exploiting a person as a debtor rather than as a worker, you have a very different type of relation. The work involved becomes invisible. The exploitation relation becomes invisible.

Shape of Movement to Come

Q: What response do you see or would like to see to this?

Federici: I’d like to see a movement that reopens a mass struggle on that ground and connects all these different fronts. So, those who work in the home are not isolated and there’s a breakdown of the walls between the home and the community, the home and the neighborhood. [Then] we can begin to think of a more collective way of reproducing ourselves because when you have a person who’s not self-sufficient, or with young children, you can’t expect [them] to take on [reproduction], except at a tremendous cost.

Q: What is “commoning” exactly? What are some of the models for people trying to create more “commoning?”

Federici: Some of the models for commoning have come from countries in Latin America [and] Africa that were subjected to very devastating processes of economic liberalization in the ‘80s, [when] many communities found themselves completely deprived of access to money and land. So, women started coming together and organizing collectively out of necessity, to make common kitchens, shop together, cook together—breaking down that division between the home and the neighborhood.

At the same time, other women began to farm together, also breaking down the separation between country and town. So, in response to a crisis there [was] a big thrust towards the collectivization of reproduction.

Now this is happening in the U.S. For example, the proliferation of solidarity economies is very interesting. There [are] hundreds of time banks [with] people sharing services: I do so many hours of work for you cutting hair and for those hours, you may teach me how to manage a radio, for example. These are very important signs of a new form of sociality and a new economy coming into existence.

I think that the Occupy movement has two elements: the political [and] also sociality—wanting to be together, wanting to exchange, the organization of cooking, cleaning, and space shared. It’s moving in that direction. ■

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