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On reproduction as an interpretative framework for social/gender relations

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript is a response to the articles that Sutapa Chattopadhyay has collected in this themed section, which takes different pathways to analyze ‘reproduction’ as the analytic category best fit to think a complex web of social and gender relations that have been at the center of my work. Already, in her introduction Sutapa Chattopadhyay describes how the authors of the essays she has selected to interact with my theorization of reproductive activities especially in *Caliban and the Witch* and *Revolution at Point Zero*. In this response, I limit myself to comment on some of the questions the contributed articles raise which, I believe, are of particular significance and open new lines of investigation.

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It is with great appreciation that I draft this response to the articles that Sutapa Chattopadhyay has collected in this themed section which, in different ways, take ‘reproduction’ as the analytic category best fit to think a complex web of social/gender relations that have been at the center of my work.

In doing so, Chattopadhyay validates one of the main outcomes of the theoretical and political revolution that feminism has produced in the field of the social sciences and especially of Marxist studies. It was, in fact, the feminist movement that uncovered the sphere of reproductive activities as the main ground on which, in capitalism, gender relations are constructed and the exploitation of women’s labor is realized. Already, in her introduction she underlines the issues that the feminist movement posed with regard to reproduction and the different ways in which the authors of the essays she has selected interact with my theorization of reproductive activities especially in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and *Revolution at Point Zero* (2012). In this response, therefore, I will limit myself to comments on some of the

questions that the articles raise which, I believe, are of particular significance and open new lines of investigation.

A case in point is Rosemary Collard's and Jessica Dempsey's "Anthropocene Stories," which presents an eco-feminist argument connecting the persecution of the 'witches' to the capitalist destruction of nature, past and present. This is a theme not fully developed in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004). But, as Collard and Dempsey recognize, the book documents the epochal transformation which the advent of capitalism produced in the relation between human beings and nature that, continuing into the present, threatens to depopulate the world of our non-human companions. In other words, the witch hunts were not isolated phenomena; like the land enclosures, they were the outcome of the same desacrating logic that today is poisoning the earth and emptying the skies and the seas. What Collard and Dempsey implicitly add to this vision is that the destruction of the 'rebel subjects' who in different ways stood in the way of capitalist development also facilitated what Caroline Merchant has called the 'death of nature.' In sum, Collard and Dempsey show that the persecution of the 'witches' – a term which includes all those who were insurgents against the rise of capitalism – may very well be connected to the 'anthropocene,' the planetary decline of resources and living presences.

While Collard and Dempsey re-imagine the witch-hunts in the context of the capitalist destruction of the natural world, Caitin Henry, re-imagines the space of reproductive work, so as to connect waged and unwaged housework – that is connecting the home with the hospital, with the school, the cafeteria – in a continuum revealing its ubiquity in every articulation of capitalist society. Most important in Henry's analysis is her mapping of the work that women perform in the university, which is essential to sustain and reproduce the institution. Not only, as Henry points out, can teaching assistants be properly considered "academic housewives," and on the basis of my academic experience, I can verify that female teachers as well add much mothering to their regular workload. Indeed, many essential elements of housework – awareness of and readiness to respond to other people's needs, anticipating and resolving emotional, psychological crises, to name a few – are part [unrecognized] of a female teacher's work-day.

Henry is not alone in acknowledging that reproductive work occurs in multiples spaces and that the arguments in "Wages against housework" can be extended to other areas of work and social/cultural activity. An interesting development, in recent years, has been the appropriations of this 1975 essay by artists, who realize that they are subjected to the same emotional blackmail once reserved for housewives as justification for their unpaid labor. Why should you want to be paid for your art-work? Isn't art a reward in itself? Shouldn't you be grateful that you are given the possibility to show your

work? Along similar lines, a New York based artist-teacher, Laurel Ptak, has adapted "Wages Against Housework" to an attack on the digital exploitation of friendship in her manifesto "Wages Against Facebook," while in Montreal students organizing under the banner of CUTE (Comites Unitaire Sur le Travail Etudiant) are turning to Wages for Housework for arguments against unpaid schoolwork and internships. Forty years after we launched it, we find that our battle-cry – "wages for housework is the strategy not only for women's liberation but for the whole working class" – in its essential meaning as refusal of unpaid labor, is being recognized.

An inevitable condition of work that is not remunerated and imposed with various forms of coercion, is violence, psychological and otherwise. James A. Tyner's article on forced marriages in Cambodia under the rule of the Khmer Rouges is particularly striking example of it. Here too Caliban and Witch (2004) provides a useful background as, like with the 16th/17th century witch-hunts, the unspeakable cruelty of the Khmers' actions is described as functional to a process of primitive accumulation, achieved through the brutal exploitation of agricultural labor, carried to the point of death. 'Gender violence' contains many interesting observations that indicate the peculiarity of the exploitation regime the Khmer put in place, such as a rigid division of the exploited by age.

It also shows that for all their destructive power their policies re-enacted elements of the traditional family and society, such as its absolute ban on non-marital sexual relations. The article also raises important questions – though requiring in my view further theorization. A crucial one concerns the concept of 'collectivity'. Can the objectives the Khmer pursued be conceived as constructing a society based on 'collective' relations? Can we use the same concept to define 'commoning' social relations, i.e. relations communally decided, and relations based on slave labor? A further question is why the Khmer's separation of the workers from the means of subsistence required such forced marriages, whereas in the 16th and 17th century the marriage of the expropriated was almost forbidden? Were forced marriages an attempt to prevent promiscuousness in the labor camps to which the Khmer destined their subjects? And what were the Khmers' policies towards procreation? Were the women, subjected to multiple rapes, also forced to conceive? Or was the purpose of marriage simply to satisfy male desire not only among the male elite but among male workers as well? All these questions are crucial to establishing a causal correlation between gender violence and processes of primitive accumulation and I look forward to Tyner providing a sequel to the article in this section.

As Tyner's article demonstrates, the concept of 'collectivity' can be realized in very different ways and so can the notions of 'commoning', 'communing' that in recent years have become so central in the literature of social

movement and my work as well. In this context, the aim of Di Mauro's article is to warn against conceiving the 'commons' as a patchwork of small projects, such as (for instance) urban gardens, for commons, as principles of social organization have a broader extension. The point is well taken. But the examples cited in *Revolution at Point Zero*, which are Di Mauro's reference point, show the significance of the phenomenon of urban farming, which took off in many African and US cities in the '90s, by the initiative of migrant women, who would appropriate plot of lands and grow some food to escape total dependence on the market. Di Mauro's fears concerning the class composition of the 'gardeners' are misplaced in the contexts cited in my work. While the concept of the 'commons' has been used by a wide range of 'profiteers' – from real-estate agents to World Bankers and university administrators – those who initiate and carry on urban gardening in the US and other countries are overwhelmingly migrants women and low income people. Well-to-do individuals are not likely to dirty their hands with soil or rely on zucchini they have cultivated for their lunches and dinners. I must add that urban gardens stand out not only as farming initiatives, but as spaces for social encounters, and places of knowledge production, often utilized by schools to teach urban children the pleasure of seeing things grow and the origin of the food they consume.

Last, but not for importance, I wish to comment on Pierpaolo Mudu's discussion of the relations between my representation of women's refusal of housework and the concept of 'refusal of work' promoted by the Italian extra-parliamentary left in the 1970s, following the introduction of this concept in the vocabulary of Marxist analysis by Mario Tronti, in his now classic *Operai e Capitale* (1966). As Mudu points out, there is undoubtedly a continuity between these otherwise different conceptions of refusal, in that both signify a dissociation from capitalist development plans, and recognition of the exploitative character of the work imposed. There is, however, a profound difference between these articulations of the concept that must be mentioned, especially as it has an immediate relevance for the forms of struggle that the new feminist movements are developing, especially in the global South. I refer to the call, launched by feminist organizations for a women's strike on International Women's Day, to be carried out not only at the formal point of production but also in the home.

As we know, such a call has generated an animated discussion, among women touching on issues relevant for Mudu's thesis. What does it mean to strike against domestic work, when in several cases such a strike would jeopardize the lives of people entrusted to our care? This is a dilemma that does not admit of a general solution. In the case of this year's International Women's Day, when the call was made, women realized they could not to adopt the classical model of strike forged by waged workers. Refusal to

work, sabotage, absenteeism - all the classic forms of factory workers' struggles stop being effective, or practicable, when, at the other end, there are living beings, and beings we care for. Refusal then, in this case, must refer to the overall conditions of work - its unremunerated character, its invisibility as work, the ideology of self-sacrifice by which it is maintained and justified rather than the interruption of the services provided. No general rule, in any event, can be applied to such a complicated situation, not to mention that the question of responsibility for other peoples' well-being should be a factor also in our relation to the work of production. In this sense, as mentioned in the beginning of my comments on Mudu, 'refusal' must apply to the logic of the system, to the objectives of capitalist development, it must apply to the sacrifice of our lives for it, and must be carried out in cooperation with those who - not being self-sufficient - must depend on our work.

Moving towards a conclusion my final comments are for Chattopadhyay's introduction and Jeffries' *Reading Caliban and the Witch Politically*. With these two essays the perspective that animates my work and the articles in this volume comes full circle, reflecting on itself rather than being applied to a reading of specific social realities. A central theme in both essays is the continuity between the past and the present - the witch-hunts and the violence unleashed against women at the beginning of capitalism appearing therefore as structural elements of a social system that requires the constant production of populations without rights. Few questions today are as important as how to break free from the logic of this system. Thus making visible the violence on which its economic operations - as Jeffries and Chattopadhyay have done -demonstrating that the space of capital is a 'space of death' - is ever more important, and it is rewarding to know that my work has in some way contributed to it.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Silvia Federici is scholar-activist and teacher from the radical autonomist Marxist tradition. She is a professor emerita at Hofstra University. She has previously taught at University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She co-founded Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, International Feminist collective and Radical Philosophy Association (RPA) anti-death penalty project. She is a member of Midnight Notes Collective and an organizer of Wages for Housework movement in Italy (1973) and later on in the United States (1975) which motivated feminist scholarly and radical campaigns, research, organizations all over the world. Federici is best known for *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, expands on the work of Leopoldina Fortunati investigating the reasons for the witch hunts of the early modern period, giving a feminist interpretation to the

interlinkages across accumulation of bodies, capitalism and rebel subjects. She is also known for *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, Feminist Struggle*. This book covers her reasons for organizing Wages For Housework movement, international restructuring of reproductive work, sexual division of labor, the globalization of care work and sex work, and commons as an alternative to capitalist repression.

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