

# “OUR STRUGGLE WILL NOT SUCCEED UNLESS WE REBUILD SOCIETY”

• *Interview with Silvia Federici* •

By Alana Moraes e Maria A.C. Brant

*Silvia Federici was born in 1942 in Parma, Italy. While she was too young to have direct memories of World War II, she says that the impacts of the war “profoundly shaped” her political views. “Very early in life, I realised I had been born into a dangerous world in which people did not trust the state and authorities and in which men and women lived the war in a very different way”, she said in an interview with Sur Journal during her stay in São Paulo last September. By the time Federici was in her teens, the war had been over for a while, but the fascist, patriarchal culture continued to survive. “Fascism did not end overnight. That was very clear”, she affirmed. She rebelled against the moral dictates at the time, which determined what girls could or could not do. She also absorbed the news on the civil rights movement in the United States of America (U.S.), the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria and the communist policies of Mao Tse-tung in China with great interest. “By the time I was 15, I considered myself a little revolutionary.”*

*Silvia recognises, though, that home was where she found one of the pillars of her political background: her mother, a typical housewife who often said that she did not know how women could take care of their families and work outside the home at the same time, but constantly complained about the lack of recognition for her work. “For years”, she explained, “what I wanted the most was not to be like my mother”.*

*At the age of 25, Federici received a bursary to finish her PhD in the U.S. Her arrival coincided with the beginning of the main feminist movements in the U.S. “I realised I had been a feminist all along. I did not need any convincing.”*

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*It was while participating in these movements that Silvia came into contact with the work of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. These authors identified domestic work not only as a labour of love or personal service, but as reproductive work (as opposed to productive work): the work that enables the working class to reproduce and that makes it possible for workers to go back to work after being consumed in factories or offices.*

*“I had had that immediate experience of housework with my mother and knew that there was something not right about that work”, Federici recalled. “I grew up in a communist town, so I had the communist jargon, the language of socialism. I would look at my mother and I knew that it was work that did not give any political power, that was socially undervalued. When I read these analyses, they made sense because they connected my childhood experience with my mother, with my notion of class struggle and anti-capitalism.”*

*A few years later, Federici joined Dalla Costa and James in founding the International Feminist Collective, which launched the “Wages for Housework” movement. She set up offices for the movement in the U.S. and gave classes for many years at Hofstra University in New York, where she is a professor emeritus. She has never abandoned feminist activism and talks spiritedly about the new women’s movements emerging recently, especially in Latin America.*

*Read below the main excerpts from the Sur Journal’s conversation with Federici on the movement she helped create, feminism, her relations with young feminists and her version of utopia.*

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**Conectas Human Rights • How did Wages for Housework start and why did you pick that as an issue?**

**Silvia Federici •** I got in touch with Mariarosa Della Costa and Selma James [when] I was in the United States of America (U.S.), in 1972, looking at materials from the Italian New Left. I also encountered “Women and the Subversion of the Community”, an article by Mariarosa Della Costa [and Selma James] centred on the analysis of housework. It is a very revolutionary analysis that says housework is, in capitalist societies, the root of the exploitation of women, because it is very convenient for the capitalist class to make millions of women reproduce the workforce for nothing. Had capitalism not been able to impose this work on women and to make it seem a natural thing, and therefore keep them unpaid, it would have had to provide all these services. When I read this analysis, I was really inspired.

That summer, I went back to Italy to see my family. I went to visit Maria Rosa Della Costa in Padova, where there was a large meeting with a lot of other women. That gathering launched the International Feminist Collective, which was the collective that launched the campaign for Wages for Housework.

Wages for Housework was a very attractive idea because it was very logical. If the exploitation of women and women's economic dependence on men is built on this unpaid labour, the first thing we have to do is to refuse this unpaid labour. And how do we refuse it? A lot of feminists said, "Well, you go out and get a job outside the home" and indeed many women were already doing that. We said, "No, the first thing is to really fight about this work, then we can take a job outside the home."

For us, the path to women's liberation should not be working outside the home. The first step is to deal with this work because we are not working for ourselves, we are working for them. So we started saying that this work, housework, is so bad because it's not organised for our happiness. It is not organised for our well-being and the well-being of our families. It is really organised for the benefit of the labour market. It is not the production of human beings for happiness. It is production of human beings for exploitation. We have to work in conditions that we do not choose and that are very constraining, that limit our lives and that limit the lives of our children and the people we love. So, the first thing we need to do is to stop giving this labour to capital for free, because they have been growing fat at our expense, and it has made us dependent. That is why we decided to defend wages for housework.

It was very misunderstood. It was often interpreted that we were happy to stay at home, to work as we did before and just wanted to get some money at the end of the month – which, actually, for many women, would not have been bad at all. But this was not our vision. The vision was that this motto was a strategy that would enable us to put a whole lot of issues on the table, to make it clear to many women what this work was about, to show that this is an issue we had in common and to try to understand what this work had done to us. Then we would be able to start claiming rights. It didn't even have to be the wage. We began saying: "We work in our home. We're paying rent on our houses. The home is a workplace and we pay rent for it." Wages for Housework was really a way to transform our relationship with capital and our relationship with men and to say that we refused to relate to capital and to the state through men, via the mediation of men. And we refused the idea that as women, as houseworkers, we could not fight in our own name. We said that we could engage in an autonomous struggle of our own, beginning from our own exploitation. We refused to continue being the support workers or the support troops for the struggles that men were engaging in.

For us, that is what Wages for Housework meant. It was a strategy to change power relations. It was never meant to be an end point. It was meant to be an instrument to create a different relationship of power among women, by bringing women together, as well as doing away with the dependency between women and men, and also between women, capital and the state.

**Conectas** • This is still a very current issue. Even for women who work outside the home, and many do now, the housework is still in their hands. After working outside, you have to come back...

**S. F.** • And do all the work. Yeah! And then, that work is immense when you have someone that gets sick, when you have elder people to take care of or when you have young children. And that is the condition of most women. Younger women don't see it because they think, "Oh, I'm not going to get married". Well, I didn't get married, I didn't have children, but I still have parents, and they get sick. You still have friends who get sick. I find it very interesting that the first issue of housework that feminists began to look at was children. So it was all childcare, childcare, childcare. Now that our generation is older, a lot of women are in their 60s and their parents are getting older, there is a boom of the issue of elderly care.

**Conectas** • You said recently that feminism is not a matter of fighting for equality. Can you talk a little more about this?

**S. F.** • I think there is a general conception of equality now. It's like democracy: how can you be against democracy? How can you be against equality? These are the great liberal myths: equality, democracy, right? But, in reality, when the women's movement put equality on its banner, that was really problematic. First of all, ok, you want to be equal to men, but to which men? Do you want to be equal, for example, to the black men in Rio or in New York who are being killed by the police? Who have no power? Do you want to be equal to the working class man, who goes every morning to the factory and gets a little wage? So we [the International Feminist Collective] said, "No, we don't want to be equal to men because, first of all, we don't believe that men are liberated. We want to change our position. We want to refuse exploitation. We don't want to exchange one type of exploitation for another. We do not want to propagate the idea that the state of man is a good, ideal state because we recognise that men too are exploited."

Also, capitalism has constructed femininity and masculinity, and the way it has constructed masculinity has not been very positive. So, we don't want to be men. We realised that, actually, the road to liberation that was offered to us by the institutions was to become like men. When women fight for particular jobs or for equal pay for comparable work it is different: it's very specific, very concrete. Yes, we want equal pay for equal jobs. But the notion of equality in general, we felt is very mystified, for the reasons above and because the condition of women is not the condition of men. There is the whole issue of procreation, the relationship to children, to our own bodies. So, to say we fight for equality is to presume that men are liberated and that they are the model, and also, to declare that you are ready to forget a whole set of very specific women's issues. That's why we couldn't fight for equality.

**Conectas** • There is another debate among feminists in Brazil about prostitution. You have a very interesting reflection on this issue.

**S. F.** • It was the feminist movement that began the analysis of sexuality that has given the power to prostitutes to say, "I am a sex worker" and to come out of the shadows and to struggle and say, "my struggle is also a feminist struggle." It was the women's movement that started analysing sexuality as part of housework, as part of the services that women

are expected to give to men, as part of the marriage contract that women are obliged to give. Until the 1970s or 1980s, the crime of rape in the family did not exist in the United States, because it was understood that when you get married, the man acquires the right over your body and has the right to get sexual services from you at any time. It was understood – and the feminist movement has analysed it – that men always sell themselves, or try to sell themselves, in the wage labour market. We also sell ourselves in the marriage market. For many women, getting married is an economic solution, because the division of labour has been organised in such a way that it is much more difficult for women to get access to wage jobs. So, many women marry not because they want to, but as an economic solution for their lives. And you have sex because that is part of your job. We performed this deconstruction of sexuality, of the family, of the relationship between men and women, and we said that marriage is prostitution. In many cases, you can have a good relationship with your husband, but it doesn't matter. The reality is that the way the state has constructed marriage has forced women to rely on marriage for survival and therefore, to offer sex in exchange for subsistence. The state has put us into the situation of prostitution. This is an old theme - even in the 1900s we had anarchist feminists like Emma Goldman talking about it. So we have insisted that there is a continuity between the housewife who at night, after washing dishes and the floor, has to open her legs and have sex, whether she wants it or not, whether she's tired or not - and many women have been beaten up because they refuse sex – and the woman who sells sex on the street. One sells it to one man and another sells it to many men, but there is a continuity between the two. I think that this kind of analysis has given power to prostitutes.

There was a famous event in July 1975, when in Lyon, France, prostitutes occupied the Church of Saint Nizier because the city had passed legislation that forbid them to be in the streets. They had to go out of the city to places that had no light and many of them were murdered. Then, one day, after another prostitute was murdered, all the prostitutes occupied the church. That was a major spark. A lot of feminist women went there and that occupation lasted one month or more. It became a place of debate, a place of discussion about feminism, about prostitution. It was a very liberating moment. That occupation started the sex workers movement in Europe. Within a month, you had a big meeting of sex workers in Paris, prostitutes occupied the highways, there was a meeting in Holland. It gave them power. It was then that they started calling themselves sex workers. They called press conferences. They openly denounced the hypocrisy and the way women are divided between good women who are married - that many times don't like being married - and the bad women. And feminists too - we too had denounced this division. So this, for me, this is the position around sex work.

I am aware that there are some sex workers and some feminists who celebrate sex work as liberation. “We are the ones who don't give it away for free.” I think that every woman, in a way, has felt a bit of pride in that. But it is exploitation – which does not mean that it is much more degrading than many other jobs. I have little patience, to tell you the truth, with feminists who are very scandalised by the existence of prostitution because

they see prostitution as a particularly violent job and, above all, a job that is particularly degrading for women. To women who say that prostitution is so degrading, I say that if we have to decide that there are certain jobs that are so degrading that women should not do them, then let's start with women who work in jails, let's start with women who work in the police, let's start women who are in the army. Let's start from there and then we can discuss prostitution. It's very hypocritical to think there is something worse about selling your vagina in the street than working in the police and beating people up or working in the jail and being part of the system of oppression.

If we really want to say “no, these jobs, we, as women, refuse to take them”, if we want to be coherent, let's start from them. Let's not be moralistic and select prostitutes in particular and make prostitutes feel like their existence is a shame for other women. I think that that's very unjust.

**Conectas** • How is your relationship with the younger feminist movements and what do you think are the main challenges for them today?

**S. F.** • I have a very good relationship with younger women. I have been teaching women's studies for many years and I went through a period in which I was shaking my head because so many women - at least in the United States, or in my classes - were saying “I don't need feminism any longer. I am liberated. I can do this, I can do that.” Looking at these women, particularly women coming from the middle class, I could see that they had much more social power [than older generations]. The women's movement has opened up new spaces and many women have gained some autonomy from men - but not from capital. I think there is an important distinction: one thing is gaining autonomy from men and another is gaining autonomy. You can work three jobs, and, that way, you do not have to depend on a man, but that doesn't mean you are free or autonomous.

I think it is a very, very difficult moment now for younger women. Fundamentally, I think it is difficult because there is not a new strong women's movement yet. It is also more difficult for younger women now because neoliberal globalisation means for many women - and also for men - that work and the possibility of supporting yourself is more precarious. And, at the same time, you are given the idea that you have infinite possibilities, mobility - today, you are in New York and then, you go to...wherever. There is a lot of confusion about what is possible and what is not possible. Increased mobility has made it more difficult for younger people, younger women to commit themselves to something, to see clearly what is possible, what they want. So there is the illusion of many choices and the reality of an actual precarisation of existence.

And because of all the ideology that women should be emancipated and not depend on men, you are much more confused about what are the values that you should put at the centre of your life. Should you still give a lot of space to passion, love? What is love? Sexuality? Should you still think about having children? Right now, there are many younger women who can

no longer follow their mother's model, but, at the same time, they are not clear about the alternative. Because the alternative through wage work, or any kind of work that gives you an income, is very precarious. It's a moment of confusion. What matters in this life?

I think [my generation] had less social power, but we were luckier because for us the choices were clearer. We had our mother's model of what women should be. We knew we didn't like it and we had the model of what we wanted: to be able to decide on our own. We had some very clear demands: if I do not want to have children, I have the right to not have children; if I don't want to do housework, I should have the right to be able to support myself; I do not want to depend on a man. These were all very clear objectives. Because we were coming from a society that had such a defined, rigid model about women, in a way, it was easier for us to defend where we wanted to go.

On the other hand, the relationship of women to the state and capital is now much clearer. I think this is positive. There's less of a chance of one thinking "I'm battling against my husband, my children or just men." Now we can see more clearly that behind man, there is also the state; there is capitalism. Now we are in a situation where, for a lot of younger women, the idea of liberation through a job, through work, is totally in crisis. This is because of the continuing intensification of neoliberal policies - the cuts in jobs, precarisation of work, rising tuition fees. In fact, I've been surprised by how much interest there is now in *Wages for Housework*, in the discussion about care and care work.

This is one part of the story. At the same time, I see younger women are now beginning to reappropriate some of the themes, to realise that some of the issues that the old women's movement was fighting for are still open, that in fact we are not beyond the mountain. They are going back to them, but in a new way: with more consciousness of intersectionality, diversity, different types of women, the whole issue of trans\* etc. I am looking forward to the growth of this new women's movement. Whenever I've been in Europe, and especially in Latin America, I've been amazed by the enthusiasm of younger women. I've been in Argentina, in Ecuador, in Mexico and I see that there is a whole new generation of younger women who are really very, very eager to read, comment and understand. Now, they're also eager to understand what we have done, where we came from, what kind of solutions we thought of and how us, the older women, conceive their situation.

**Conectas** • Do you think that the struggle of women is the same in the North and in the South?

**S. F.** • North and South are very limited concepts at this moment because there is a South in the North and a North in the South. When you look at a city like New York, it is full of immigrants, of black communities that are as poor as the ones here in São Paulo. In the United States there are 53 million people who don't have enough to eat. There is huge, intense poverty, and there is an incredible amount of police and military repression against these communities that is not much different to what you have in Rio or São Paulo. Perhaps in the United States, you don't have 60,000 people killed every year, but you have thousands

and thousands and thousands. Recently, we see almost every day a black youth killed in the United States and in many cases, execution style. There is a huge amount of poverty in Europe too, and it is growing. In addition, the expansion of capitalist relations has created, in Europe and the U.S., new populations without rights: refugees, immigrants, the undocumented. At the same time, you come to São Paulo and you go into neighbourhoods where you see a very clear middle class style. It is very important to not flatten whole countries, to think that one is poor and the other is wealthy.

The South does have a specific condition because it is in many countries of the South that you have the greatest depository of mineral wealth and of natural wealth – and, unfortunately, this is a curse. The areas we call the South in general have been the richest. It is no coincidence that they are also the object of war and the object of desire because that's where you find most of the timber, the oil, the diamonds, the carbon, the copper, the lithium etc. The South is the source of our computers. The destruction of the South happens so that we can have computers and labour.

And there is still a difference [between North and South] because, starting in the early 1980s, the IMF and the World Bank systematically implemented a process of recolonisation. This process has come into being through the structural adjustment programmes that have been applied globally and also with the change in private property laws, convincing governments to change the law to privatise land, destroy community relations, which means attacking indigenous peoples' land, allowing the companies to exploit them. Neoliberalism basically allows taking down all limits to the unlimited exploitation of the soil, the seas and the forest. All these treaties for free trade mean free exploitation of the world, free exploitation of labour without recognising any rights, any limits, opening up the earth, squeezing it, like they're doing with fracking, so you can take everything out of it without any concern for human life or the environment. Then, of course, there is the war on drugs. You cannot squeeze a population without using immense violence and some sort of justification, and the war on drugs and the war on terrorism have been the kind of material support to the violence needed to impose these very brutal austerity economic programmes and these dispossession programmes that are really at the service of the big corporations.

**Conectas** • We are living a very dramatic political situation in Brazil now. And elsewhere, right-wing and fascist movements are growing all over the world. We had a recent wave of struggle that was important: Occupy, 15-M and *Podemos* in Spain, Greece. But at the same time, the Left has no real project of society today. Can you talk more about this crisis of the anti-capitalist movement? What is your utopia? What would be the alternative to what we have, because it is very difficult to see one.

**S. F.** • First of all, I never had any hope in these so-called progressive governments. Going around and speaking with different women's groups I never met much enthusiasm. Years ago in Bolivia I spoke with *Mujeres Creando*, and they have been super critical of Morales from the beginning. They used to laugh about the fact that he goes around the world talking about Pacha Mama

and the *naturaleza* and then he wants to build the *carretera* that cuts into indigenous lands. I have also been reading a lot about the Workers Party in Brazil. They did the *Bolsa Familia*, but it did not change the structure. It's like a band-aid, and they gave 10 times more to finance, agribusiness etc. I never had any illusions about *Syriza* or *Podemos* either, none of them.

But it is no accident that you have these extremes because parties are in crisis and they have to attract people, and people are becoming more and more sick of parties.

I think what the last 20 years of these progressive governments have demonstrated is that you don't change the world by taking over the state. There is now a field of forces, which is shaped by the big corporations, by huge interests – military and economic – and you elect the so-called progressive parties and there is a field of bad energy in the state that they will work with. We have seen it over and over and over again.

In Bolivia, for example, in the early 2000s, you had practically a revolution because the entire population said they did not want their water privatised. They did not want their gas to be exploited. And they began to create spaces where people came together to discuss what they want and make demands: we want this and this and this and where you could begin to see shaping up a self-government. Then, Morales is elected and people think, "Oh, our interests are in government now". And then things start happening. There is an interesting study that shows how this movement was dismantled: Morales began to hire this one and this one, put them in government, give them a little budget etc. We have seen it over and over and over. And I understand a lot happened here too. There was MST. They had regained a lot of land. Under the PT, land occupations were finished - they had promised land reform, but there was no land reform.

Conclusion? Let's give up the idea of electing the right person and let's work on building forms of resistance and alternative forms of production from below. That is the road to creating a new world and not wasting time delegating to the state, even to the progressive state.

It is very important to abandon the illusion that the government is going to be the solution. Obviously, this does not mean that you separate yourself completely from the government. You have to continue to negotiate and fight with the government because the government today has the control of much of the wealth that exists in society and that people have produced. So the issue is how to recuperate those spaces and that wealth, because you cannot reconstruct our society, the world, unless we also recuperate land, buildings, unless we have a broader material basis. That is where the struggle is. It is not entering the government, but creating resistance.

It is a double process. You have to create enough resistance on the ground to be able to reappropriate things from the state and you have to begin to connect the struggles happening on the ground, the urban struggle, the struggle about the forest, the indigenous struggle, women, students etc. That is the utopia. That is the road.

There are many battlefields. There is education, health, war, but they are all connected. Each of us has to decide where we can give our best contribution, which movement, which struggle. But the challenge is to bring the struggles together. Not only protest.

I don't think you can have a successful struggle unless you reconstruct society. The struggle is to begin to construct new forms of being, new structures – even if they are small. For example, the *comedores populares* in the neighbourhood – a space where people come together to debate, once a month, or once a week– whatever is possible – to discuss what are the health needs of the community, what are the education needs, what problems our children are facing, which kind of workers can help us to push our struggle... Maybe we can get together with nurses in the hospital, maybe they can help us figure out how to struggle in the hospital to make it better and to get some services in the community. So, it is not just the state on one side and you struggling with your own power.

The main thing is how do you broaden your basis. How do you go out from your own struggle and begin to formulate, “Ok, what is it that we need? What is our objective now? What is most important?” Not because this is all, but because this is where we start. No matter how modest a start it is, but a start that begins to bring people together, to give us the confidence that in my problem, I am not completely alone. I think being alone is the worst. Being alone is a defeat. And, as they say, the real defeat is the struggle you didn't make.

Transforming communities of reproduction into communities of resistance: how to translate that into every day life is the challenge. There's not one rule. It depends on the neighbourhood, it depends on the possibilities. You don't start with a big slogan “the anti-capitalist revolution”, but it is important that you keep your mind on the long term too. In the reproduction of the politics, or the micro politics of production, you begin to ask: “What is the kind of society we want? How is what I am doing actually going to make things better not only for myself, but bring me more into contact with community and with people around me and give me more power tomorrow?” I think that is the vision - my vision.

**Conectas** • Do you know examples of groups of people who have been doing that?

**S. F.** • Oh, yeah. A lot of them. I think that Latin America is the place that has gone further into doing this - the women in Latin America: *Mujeres Creando*, their headquarters, La Virgen de los Deseos, and what they are doing in Bolivia. They started with a *guardería* (kindergarten). They figured out that daycare is not parking children while the mother goes to work, but it's about raising a new generation. What do we want the children to learn? How do we want them to relate to each other? To their sexuality? Soon, they realised that in order to deal with the children, they had to talk with the mothers. So they started having meetings with the mothers. Then, the fathers said, “Why not us?” So they started having meetings with the fathers. It began a whole discussion about childhood, about growing up. Now, they also have a restaurant, which is very cheap, a place for meetings, and the archives with the journals and they produce the beautiful *Mujeres publicas*. And then they decided it

was important to have a bathroom because a lot of women who used to work at home now work in the street, but they have no place to go. And then they do all this cultural stuff, they have all these slogans. They use satire and humour. They ridicule Evo [Morales]. They say: “*No somos originárias, somos originales*” (“We’re not native. We’re original.”)

And then in Argentina, in this favela, women have built their communities with their hands and with the help of the men. It is a huge area of 50,000 people. It began in the 1950s with migrants from Bolivia, from Paraguay and still has a lot of migrants. Collectively, they took over the land and began to build things. And everything is done through communal decision. They showed me the area where they are trying to build spaces where women can get health advice so they don’t always need to go to a doctor. Now they are building gardens so they can grow food. They are using the Theatre of the Oppressed to discuss political issues, which is very powerful. I thought this was really brilliant.

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*Interview conducted in September 2016 by Alana Moraes  
and Maria A.C. Brant for Conectas Human Rights*



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