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ELISE THORBURN

“EVERY MOMENT OF OUR REPRODUCTION AS A MOMENT OF STRUGGLE” – THE NEW YORK WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK ARCHIVE

Book review: Silvia Federici and Arlen Austin (eds.), *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972-77: History, Theory, and Documents*, New York City, Autonomedia, 2017.

The international Wages for Housework campaign began in 1972 as a feminist movement that highlighted the role of gendered labour in the home and its connection to the production of surplus value under capitalism. The movement was founded by the International Feminist Collective, which included the feminist activists Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, Brigitte Galtier, and Selma James. In effect, what the Wages for Housework (WfH) campaign intended to do was become a movement within global feminism, and help chart its trajectory. WfH quickly spread from its founding location in Italy to the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and beyond, and expanded to encompass autonomous movements like Lesbians for Wages for Housework and Black Women for Wages for Housework.¹ Although officially dissolving a few years after its founding, the legacy of WfH has been enduring, and in the last decade a return to its foundational theorisations of domestic labour and “social reproduction” has been central to much feminist theorising, including within feminist critiques of media and technology.² US-based Marxist feminist Silvia Federici has remained the movement’s main thinker, historian, and activist, and along with Arlen Austin has

¹ Silvia Federici, “Introduction: Wages for Housework in Historical Perspective”, in Silvia Federici with Arlen Austin (eds.), *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972-77: History, Theory, and Documents*, New York City, Autonomedia, 2017, pp. 12-28, here: pp. 18-19 and p. 22.

² See for example, Helen Hester, “Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism”, *e-flux*, 2017. Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/artificial-labor/140680/promethean-labors-and-domestic-realism/> [accessed October 1, 2018].

compiled a collection of texts, documents, and writings that archive the New York component of the international movement. The collection, *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972-1977: History, Theory, Documents* is an archive of the movement, and a rejoinder to those who have throughout its history misread it.

On nearly every occasion that I have seen Federici speak, there is one person – usually a man, likely older, almost always white – who stands in the Q&A to challenge the central tenets of the Wages for Housework movement. Regardless of what her talk was about, the audience member tends to dismiss the legacy of WfH as merely subsuming ever greater spheres of labour to the wage relation and thus extending, rather than resisting, capitalism. Or they challenge the campaign’s assertion that domestic work is “productive” rather than “unproductive” labour (in traditional Marxian terms).³ WfH was – and in many ways remains – one of the most misunderstood of feminist political strategies. In this collection of WfH texts and documents, Federici notes that the movement has been: characterised by many feminists as merely a reformist demand to institutionalise women within the home; dismissed by Marxists as doing the work of capital to further “real subsumption”, marketizing social relations within the reproductive realm; and disregarded by organisers as an impossible demand for which the state would never pay.⁴

But the power of the WfH demand – and the power of recent re-theorisations of “reproductive labour” and “social reproduction”⁵ – is that they manifestly challenge Marxist orthodoxy from within the Marxian tradition, insist upon a more rigorous reading of the logic of capital, and offer up openings for broader-based resistances rooted in a feminism that is at once anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, and anti-colonial. It is this powerful reconsideration of capitalism, its antagonistic subjects, and their expansive strategies of refusal that is the legacy of the WfH movement. This is laid bare in the book at hand.

³ The following text was very influential within WfH: Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, “Women and the Subversion of Community”, in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (third edition), Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1975 [1971], pp. 21-56. Here they write: “[D]omestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value” (ibid., p. 33). In a footnote that was only added to the 1975 edition of the text, they clarify: “What we meant precisely is that housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value”. (Ibid., p. 53)

⁴ Federici, “Introduction”, p. 24.

⁵ See, for example, the 2015 issue (no. 5) of *Viewpoint* magazine on Social Reproduction. Available at: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/11/02/issue-5-social-reproduction/> [accessed October 1, 2018]. See also, Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, London, Pluto Press, 2017.

THE BOOK AND ITS GOALS

A collection of historical documents – including posters, pamphlets, conference agendas, and photographs – Federici and Austin’s book gives unique insight into the brief history of the New York WfH committee and the political challenges anti-capitalist feminist struggles faced in a moment of political and economic transition. The early and mid-1970s marked the beginning of a political economic shift, from the Keynesian economics and Fordist production methods that had held for decades, towards a prevailing neoliberalism with its focus on re-entrenching ruling class power. These years were also marked by a shift in political organising on the left. Feminism as a political movement was expanding and the question of “domesticity” and the revolt against it was in the air.

But while a feminist movement for women’s equality was ascendant, key strategic fault-lines also emerged. WfH, Federici notes, developed amidst a generalised loss of faith in capitalist development, and in the state as a guarantor of “reproduction” (or, of the meeting of basic needs).⁶ The movement was shaped profoundly by the convulsions of the anti-systemic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly feminist movements but also those connected to the political shifts and critiques invoked by anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles.⁷

The book is structured so that the materialism of the movement becomes clear. Laid out chronologically, the publications of WfH – whether poster, pamphlet, or essay – show the movement’s political development and where it placed its organising focus. The nexus of that focus was on welfare and the ways in which it exemplified broader struggles and crises in a patriarchal, racist, capitalist society. The book is made up of: an ‘Introduction’, which lays out some of the historical precursors to the movement;⁸ some ‘Foundational Documents’ that provided the ground for the NY WfH committee;⁹ and then a long series of fliers, posters, pamphlets, photographs and other archival materials associated with the movement – in New York, nationally, and internationally.¹⁰

The book also documents some of the other affiliated issues that emerged within the WfH network (again, both globally and within the United States). There are sections, for instance, on health and healthcare, sex and sexuality, and the rights of sex workers.¹¹ The book also contains

⁶ Federici, “Introduction”, p. 15.

⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸ Federici and Austin (eds.), *Wages for Housework*, pp. 12-28.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 29-39.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40 ff.

¹¹ On healthcare, see *ibid.*, pp. 126-132 and on sex, sexuality and sex work, *ibid.*, pp. 144-151.

what are likely two of the most well-known writings associated with this branch of social reproduction theory – the Falling Wall Press pamphlets “Wages Against Housework” and “Counter-Planning from the Kitchen”, both authored by Federici.¹²

But for as much that archival material fills the pages of this book, it is not merely an historical accounting of a movement. Rather it is presented as an urgent reconsideration of politics in the present moment.¹³ The key objective of the book, Federici writes, is to “rethink the political meaning of this [Wages for Housework] demand, clarify its claims, and reflect on what the passing of time and the transformations that the globalization of the world economy has produced have demonstrated concerning its possibilities”.¹⁴ Even today, with a resurgent interest in social reproduction, the focus of most who look to the movement for Wages for Housework centres on the most literal aspect of the struggle – its demand for a domestic wage. But as this collection of archival material shows, the movement was so much more than that. It pre-empted many of the conversations prevailing amongst left, Marxist, and feminist struggles today, and expands theories developed in the Italian Marxist current known as *Operaismo* or later, in the English-speaking world, “autonomism”. In particular, this book demonstrates how WfH carefully contemplated issues of racism and the necessity of autonomy in struggle; expanded notions of the refusal of work; questioned longstanding norms about leadership, collective organising and organisational forms; debated internationalism and/or localism in struggle; attended to intergenerational commitments to struggle; and deepened commitments to true reproductive justice.

The feminist movement, and left politics in general, would – I believe – look profoundly different today had the work of WfH been taken up more widely. We must ask ourselves why it was not.

THE WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK CAMPAIGN

In the first section of the book, Federici traces the history of feminist considerations of reproductive work and the demand for a wage, looking to 19th and early 20th century writers such as Dolores Hayden and Mary Inman. But the WfH movement departed substantially from these early considerations of waging women’s labour in the home – not imagining an industrial remodelling of domestic labour wherein the wage *affirmed* their work, but instead imagining the wage as invoking the capacity of *refusal*. Demanding a wage for housework was actually a demand that that

¹² Ibid., pp. 194-234.

¹³ Federici, “Introduction”, p. 28.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

work was recognized *as* work (rather than as a natural resource), so that the ends of that work – “the provision of cheap, docile, disciplined workers”¹⁵ – could then be rejected. WfH resisted women’s segregation and the ‘social identity’ of the housewife, instead transforming domestic work into a locus of struggle. In our present moment, we could learn a great deal from the ways in which WfH – as a feminist movement – mobilized not around *identity* but around the broadly shared *status* of ‘housewife’; and from the fact that they did so as a means of creating alliances and fomenting an anti-capitalist politics.

The WfH movement also departed from the more mainstream lines of the feminist movement in their own era. By the 1970s, Federici argues, most feminists had “abandoned reproductive work as a terrain of struggle”.¹⁶ Relatedly, the mainstream feminist movement also failed to attend to the state’s attacks on welfare; a failure that Federici argues deepened the divisions between Black and white women in feminist struggle.¹⁷ But, much as WfH recoded questions of identity and solidarity by tying together struggles around race, class, and gender, the organising work around welfare also opened up questions of autonomy – asking, how do we struggle together while attending to the differences that exist between and within us? WfH itself had built a movement that addressed questions of class power and economic exploitation while also insisting on the need for autonomous women’s organising, attending to their specific histories of (particularly unwaged) exploitation. Groupings such as Lesbians and Black Women for Wages for Housework emerged out of a similar political sentiment and logic.

Federici argues that WfH’s influence was limited partly due to the desire by mainstream liberal tendencies within feminism to rely on the state to guarantee rights, to resist critiques of capitalism, and to win influence within and access to structures of power and authority. Feminists and the left continue to be confronted by these tendencies, and must ask whether the organising of WfH played a role in producing its own marginality. Were there ways that the messages of WfH, the structure and organising of WfH, the leadership of WfH, could have contributed to its inability to seize political space from liberal tendencies? Today, radicals on the left who might take inspiration from WfH must ask not only what they did right, but also where they went wrong.

Today, as in the days of WfH, we appear to inhabit a similarly critical moment of political, economic and social transformation. As such, Federici’s short “Notes on Organization (1975)” chapter can be read as

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

a primer for successful organising.¹⁸ Make visible connections and circulate struggle, she argues. Learn from mistakes and grow. Take up physical space – get a storefront to increase visibility, accessibility, and community presence. Build internationally, organising movements in solidarity, but also make space for movements to be autonomous and organise separately. As many others have noted, a lack of structure can paralyse some organisations and, at worst, can prevent those in (informal) leadership positions being held to account. For the organisers of WfH, leadership must partly exist in order to ensure that other people can grow.¹⁹

In reimagining the possibilities for reproductive labour freed from capitalism, WfH reconceptualised the entirety of life. As this book shows, the NY WfH committee’s demands invoked localist challenges to life under capitalism, demanding changes to material culture and to the spatial design of homes, neighbourhoods, and cities. As a movement, they understood the inherent violence of capital, that wagelessness is a punishment, a special viciousness reserved for women and for those who cannot be disciplined through formal labour.

But alongside the above outlined implications for organisers and political militants, Federici and Austin’s collection offers much for academic and theory-driven readers too, particularly those interested in the feminist politics of class and reproduction, and in understanding one of the important origins of current scholarship on social reproduction and domestic labour. The book also offers us a moment to reflect on the necessity of documentation, of archiving movements, political processes, and discussions of strategy and tactics.

A relatively small movement in the long history of radical struggle, the archive that Federici and Austin present us with long outlives the New York committee’s actual time-frame. As Sharmeen Khan notes in an interview with the Canadian radical journal *Upping the Anti*, media archives like this can highlight the smaller struggles that rarely make it into ‘official’ history books, helping us deploy historical knowledges in order to chart our future paths.²⁰ Such movement histories and archives catalogue the small steps taken towards liberation, so that we can, as Khan says, not “replicate tactics or politics, but see how activists experimented with different approaches in particular times”.²¹ As

¹⁸ Silvia Federici, “Notes on Organization (1975)”, in Federici and Austin (eds.), *Wages for Housework*, p. 36-39.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁰ Chris Dixon, “Grassroots Theory: 10 Years of Upping the Anti: An Interview with Sharmeen Khan”, *Upping the Anti*, 18, 2016. Available at: <http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/18-grassroots-theory> [accessed October 1, 2018].

²¹ Ibid.

Federici points out, the documents collected in this book, addressing a short yet crucial moment in feminist history, invite us to think today of the “organizational implications of our critique of reproductive work, and rethink every moment of our reproduction politically as a moment of struggle”.²²

²² Silvia Federici, “Foundational Documents”, in Federici and Austin (eds.), *Wages for Housework*, p. 29.