

# REVOLUTION AT POINT ZERO

## HOUSEWORK, REPRODUCTION, AND FEMINIST STRUGGLE

Silvia Federici

PM



Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle  
Silvia Federici  
©2012 Silvia Federici  
This edition ©2012 PM Press



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

ISBN: 978-1-60486-333-8  
LCCN: 2011939663

Cover and interior design: Antumbra Design/[antumbradesign.org](http://antumbradesign.org)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

PM Press  
PO Box 23912  
Oakland, CA 94623  
[www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org)

Common Notions  
Brooklyn, NY  
[www.commonnotions.org](http://www.commonnotions.org)

Autonomedia  
PO Box 568 Williamsburgh Station  
Brooklyn, NY 11211-0568  
[www.autonomedia.org](http://www.autonomedia.org)

Printed in the USA on recycled paper by the Employee Owners of Thomson-Shore in Dexter, Michigan. [www.thomsonshore.com](http://www.thomsonshore.com)



**C**ommon Notions is an imprint that circulates both enduring and timely formulations of autonomy at the heart of movements beyond capitalism. The series traces a constellation of historical, critical, and visionary meditations on the organization of both domination and its refusal. Inspired by various traditions of autonomism in the United States and around the world, Common Notions aims to provide tools of militant research in our collective reading of struggles past, present, and to come.

Series Editor: Malav Kanuga  
[info@commonnotions.org](mailto:info@commonnotions.org) | [www.commonnotions.org](http://www.commonnotions.org)

**In the Common Notions series**

Selma James, *Sex, Race, and Class—The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952–2011*

Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*

George Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and Value in the Bad Infinity of Capitalism*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Political ideas come from movements but their journey to a book requires the work of many individuals. Among the people who have made this book possible I wish to thank two in particular, for their contribution to this project and the creativity and generosity of their political activism: Malav Kanuga, the editor of the Common Notions Series, who encouraged me to publish this work and assisted me through this process with enthusiasm and excellent advice; and Josh MacPhee whose design for the book cover is one more example of the power of his art and his conception of images as seeds of change.

I also want to thank Nawal El Saadawi, feminist, writer, revolutionary, whose work *Woman at Point Zero* has inspired the title of this book and much more.

*Revolution at Point Zero* is about the transformation of our everyday life and the creation of new forms of solidarity. In this spirit, I dedicate this book to Dara Greenwald who through her art, her political activism, and her fight against cancer brought into existence a community of care concretely embodying that "healing island" Dara constructed during her disease.

"Wages against Housework" was first published as *Wages against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975). Also published in *The Politics of Housework*, ed. Ellen Malos (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 1980) and *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, eds. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

"Why Sexuality Is Work" (1975) was originally written as part of a presentation to the second international Wages for Housework conference held in Toronto in January 1975.

"Counterplanning from the Kitchen" was first published as *Counterplanning from the Kitchen* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975). Also published in *From Feminism to Liberation*, ed. Edith Hoshino Altbach (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 2007).

"The Restructuring of Social Reproduction in the United States in the 1970s" was a paper delivered at a conference convened by the Centro Studi Americani in Rome on "The Economic Policies of Female Labor in Italy and the United States," December 9–11, 1980, sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Also published in *The Commoner* 11 (Spring–Summer 2006).

“Putting Feminism Back on Its Feet” first appeared in *The Sixties Without Apologies*, ed. Sohnya Sayres, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

“Reproduction and Feminist Struggle in the New International Division of Labor” first appeared in *Women, Development and Labor Reproduction: Struggles and Movements*, eds. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).

“War, Globalization, and Reproduction” first appeared in *Peace and Change* 25, no. 2, (April 2000). It was also published in *There Is an Alternative: Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization*, eds. Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicholas Faraclas, and Claudia von Werlhof (London: Zed Books, 2001); and in *Seeds of Hope*, eds. Matt Meyer and Elavie Ndura-Ouedraogo (Pan-African Peace Studies for the Twenty-First Century).

“Women, Globalization, and the International Women’s Movement” first appeared in a special issue of *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 22 (2001).

“The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution” was a paper presented at the UC Santa Cruz seminar “The Crisis of Social Reproduction and Feminist Struggle,” on January 27, 2009.

“On Elder Care Work and the Limits of Marxism” was first published in German as “Anmerkungen über Altenpflegearbeit und die Grenzen des Marxismus” in *Über Marx Hinaus*, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (Hamburg: Assoziation A, 2009).

“Women, Land Struggles, and Globalization” first appeared in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, special issue, *Africa and Globalization: Critical Perspectives* 39, no. 1–2 (January–March 2004).

“Feminism and the Politics of the Commons” first appeared in *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, ed. Team Colors (Baltimore: AK Press, 2010) and in *The Commoner* 14 (2011).

## CONTENTS

Preface	1
Introduction	5
<b>Part I: Theorizing and Politicizing Housework</b>	
Wages against Housework (1975)	15
Why Sexuality Is Work (1975)	23
Counterplanning from the Kitchen (1975)	28
The Restructuring of Housework and Reproduction in the United States in the 1970s (1980)	41
Putting Feminism Back on Its Feet (1984)	54
<b>Part II: Globalization and Social Reproduction</b>	
Reproduction and Feminist Struggle in the New International Division of Labor (1999)	65
War, Globalization, and Reproduction (2000)	76
Women, Globalization, and the International Women’s Movement (2001)	85
The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution (2008)	91
<b>Part III: Reproducing Commons</b>	
On Elder Care Work and the Limits of Marxism (2009)	115
Women, Land Struggles, and Globalization: An International Perspective (2004)	126
Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation (2010)	138
Notes	149
Bibliography	172

## PREFACE

The determining force in history is the production and reproduction of immediate life.

—Frederick Engels

This task . . . of making home a community of resistance has been shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies.

—bell hooks

**T**his book collects more than thirty years of reflection and research on the nature of housework, social reproduction, and women's struggles on this terrain—to escape it, to better its conditions, to reconstruct it in ways that provide an alternative to capitalist relations. It is a book that mixes politics, history, and feminist theory. But it is also one that reflects the trajectory of my political activism in the feminist and antiglobalization movements and the gradual shift in my relation to this work from “refusal” to “valorization” of housework, which I now recognize as expressive of a collective experience.

There is no doubt that among women of my generation, the refusal of housework as women's natural destiny was a widespread phenomenon in the post-World War II period. This was especially true in Italy, the country where I was born and raised, that in the 1950s was still permeated by a patriarchal culture consolidated under fascism, and yet was already experiencing a “gender crisis” partially caused by the war, and partially by the requirements of postwar reindustrialization.

The lesson of independence that our mothers learned during the war and communicated to us made the prospect of a life dedicated to housework, family, and reproduction unfeasible for most, and for some intolerable. When I wrote in “Wages against Housework” (1975) that becoming a housewife seemed “a fate worse than death,” I expressed my own attitude toward this work. And, indeed, I did all I could to escape it.

In retrospect, it seems ironic, then, that I should spend the next forty years of my life dealing with the question of reproductive labor, at least theoretically and politically if not in practice. In the effort to demonstrate why as women we should fight against this work, at least as it has been constituted in capitalism, I came to understand its importance not only for the capitalist class but also for our struggle and our reproduction.

Through my involvement in the women's movement I realized that the reproduction of human beings is the foundation of every economic and political system, and that the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving. But this theoretical realization grew on the practical and emotional ground provided by my own family experience, which exposed me to a world of activities that for a long time I took for granted, and yet as a child and teenager I often observed with great fascination. Even now, some of the most treasured memories of my childhood are of my mother making bread, pasta, tomato sauce, pies, liqueurs, and then knitting, sewing, mending, embroidering, and attending to her plants. I would sometimes help her in selected tasks, most often however with reluctance. As a child, I saw her work; later, as a feminist, I learned to see her struggle, and I realized how much love there had been in that work, and yet how costly it had been for my mother to see it so often taken for granted, to never be able to dispose of some money of her own, and to always have to depend on my father for every penny she spent.

Through my experience at home—through my relations to my parents—I also discovered what I now call the “double character” of reproductive work as work that reproduces us and “valorizes” us not only in view of our integration in the labor market but also against it. I certainly cannot compare my experiences and memories of home with an account like that of bell hooks, who pictures the “homeplace” as a “site of resistance.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the need to not measure our lives by the demands and values of the capitalist labor market was always assumed, and at times openly affirmed, as a principle that should guide the reproduction of our lives. Even today, the efforts that my mother made to develop in us a sense of our own value give me the strength to face difficult situations. What often saves me when I cannot protect myself is my commitment to protect her work and myself as the child to whom it was dedicated. Reproductive work is undoubtedly not the only form of labor where the question of what we give to capital and “what we give to our own” is posed.<sup>2</sup> But certainly it is the work in which the contradictions inherent in “alienated labor” are most explosive, which is why it is the *ground zero* for revolutionary practice, even if it is not the only ground zero.<sup>3</sup> For

nothing so effectively stifles our lives as the transformation into work of the activities and relations that satisfy our desires. By the same token, it is through the day-to-day activities by means of which we produce our existence, that we can develop our capacity to cooperate and not only resist our dehumanization but learn to reconstruct the world as a space of nurturing, creativity, and care.

Silvia Federici,  
Brooklyn, NY, June 2011

## INTRODUCTION

I have hesitated in the past to publish a volume of essays concerned exclusively with the question of “reproduction” as it seemed an artificial abstraction from the varieties of issues and struggles to which I have dedicated my work over many years. There is, however, a logic behind the concentration of writings in this collection: the question of reproduction, intended as the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labor are daily reconstituted, has been a thread that has run through all my writing and political activism.

The confrontation with “reproductive work”—understood, at first, as housework, domestic labor—was the defining factor for many women of my generation, who came of age in the aftermath of World War II. For after two world wars that in a space of three decades decimated more than seventy million people, the lures of domesticity and the prospect of sacrificing our lives to produce more workers and soldiers for the state had no hold on our imagination. Indeed, even more than the experience of self-reliance that the war bestowed on many women—symbolized in the United States by the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter—what shaped our relation to reproduction in the postwar period, especially in Europe, was the memory of the carnage into which we had been born. This is a chapter in the history of the international feminist movement still to be written.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in recalling the visits that as school children in Italy we made to exhibits on the concentration camps, and the tales told around the dinner

table of the many times we barely escaped being killed by bombs, running through the night searching for safety under a blazing sky, I cannot help wondering how much those experiences weighed on my and other women's decisions not to have children and not to become housewives.

This antiwar perspective, perhaps, is why unlike previous feminist critics of the home, family, and housework, our attitude could not be that of the reformers. Looking backward at the feminist literature of the early 1970s, I am struck by the absence of the type of concerns that preoccupied feminists into the '20s, when reimagining the home, in terms of its domestic tasks, technology, and space organization was a major issue for feminist theory and practice.<sup>2</sup> That for the first time, feminism implied a lack of identification with reproduction, not only when done for others but even when imagined for our families and kin, can possibly be attributed to the watershed that the war constituted for women, especially since its threat never ended, but escalated with the development of nuclear weapons.

While housework was crucial to feminist politics, it had a special significance for the organization I joined in 1972: the international Wages for Housework Campaign, in which I was active for the following five years. Wages for Housework (WfH) was rather unique, as it brought together political currents coming from different parts of the world and different sectors of the world proletariat, each rooted in a history of struggles and seeking a common ground that our feminism provided and transformed. While for most feminists the points of reference were liberal, anarchist, or socialist politics, the women who launched WfH came from a history of militancy in Marxist-identified organizations, filtered through the experiences of the anticolonial movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Movement, and the "Operaist" movement. The latter developed in Italy in the early 1960s as an outcome of the resurgence of factory struggles, leading to a radical critique of "communism" and a rereading of Marx that has influenced an entire generation of activists, and still has not exhausted its analytic power as the worldwide interest in the Italian autonomist movement demonstrates.<sup>3</sup>

It was *through* but also *against* the categories articulated by these movements that our analysis of the "women's question" turned into an analysis of housework as the crucial factor in the definition of the exploitation of women in capitalism, which is the theme running through most of the articles in this volume. As best expressed in the works of Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Frantz Fanon, the anticolonial movement taught us to expand the Marxian analysis of unwaged labor beyond the confines of the factory and, therefore, to see the home and housework as the foundations of the factory system, rather than its "other."

From it we also learned to seek the protagonists of class struggle not only among the male industrial proletariat but, most importantly, among the enslaved, the colonized, the world of wageless workers marginalized by the annals of the communist tradition to whom we could now add the figure of the proletarian housewife, reconceptualized as the subject of the (re)production of the workforce.

The social/political context in which the feminist movement developed facilitated this identification. Since at least the nineteenth century, it has been a constant in American history that the rise of feminist activism has followed in the footsteps of the rise of Black liberation. The feminist movement in the second half of the twentieth century was no exception. I have long believed that the first example of feminism in the '60s in the United States, was the struggle of welfare mothers who, led by African American women inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, mobilized to demand a wage from the state for the work of raising their children, laying the groundwork on which organizations like Wages for Housework could grow.

From the Operaist movement that stressed the centrality of workers' struggles for autonomy in the capital-labor relation, we learned the political importance of the wage as a means of organizing society, and, at the same time, as a lever to undermine the hierarchies within the working class. In Italy, this political lesson came to fruition in the factory struggles of the "hot autumn" (of 1969), when workers demanded wage raises inversely proportional to productivity and wages equal for all, signifying a determination to seek not sectorial gains but the end of the divisions based on wage differentials.<sup>4</sup> From my perspective, this conception of the wage—which rejected the Leninist separation of economic and political struggle—became a means to unearth the material roots of the sexual and international division of labor and, in my later work, the "secret of primitive accumulation."

Equally important for the development of our perspective was the Operaist concept of the "social factory." This translated Mario Tronti's theory, in *Operai e Capitale* (1966) according to which at a certain stage of capitalist development capitalist relations become so hegemonic that every social relation is subsumed under capital and the distinction between society and factory collapses, so that society becomes a factory and social relations *directly become relations of production*. Tronti referred here to the increasing reorganization of the "territory" as a social space structured in view of the needs of factory production and capital accumulation. But to us, it was immediately clear that the circuit of capitalist production, and the "social factory" it produced, began and was centered above all in the

kitchen, the bedroom, the home—insofar as these were the centers for the production of labor-power—and from there it moved on to the factory, passing through the school, the office, the lab. In sum, we did not passively receive the lessons of the movements I have mentioned, but turned them upside down, exposed their limits, using their theoretical bricks to build a new type of political subjectivity and strategy.

The definition of this political perspective and its defense against the charges leveraged against it by leftists and feminists alike is the unifying topic of the essays collected in Part One, all written between 1974 and 1980, the period of my organizational engagement in the campaign for Wages for Housework. Their main concern was to demonstrate the fundamental differences between housework and other types of work; unmask the process of naturalization this work had undergone because of its unwaged condition; show the specific capitalist nature and functioning of the wage; and demonstrate that historically the question of “productivity” has always been connected with the struggle for social power. Most importantly, these essays attempted to establish that the attributes of femininity are in effect *work functions* and to rebut the economistic way in which the demand for wages for housework was conceived by many critics, due to their inability to understand the function of money beside its immediate character as a form of remuneration.

The campaign for wages for housework was launched in the summer of 1972 in Padua with the formation of the International Feminist Collective by a group of women from Italy, England, France, and the United States. Its objective was to open a process of international feminist mobilization that would force the state to recognize that domestic work is work—that is, an activity that should be remunerated as it contributes to the production of the labor force and produces capital, thus enabling every other form of production to take place. WfH was a revolutionary perspective not only because it exposed the root cause of “women’s oppression” in a capitalist society but because it unmasked the main mechanisms by which capitalism has maintained its power and kept the working class divided. These are the devaluation of entire spheres of human activity, beginning with the activities catering to the reproduction of human life, and the ability to use the wage to extract work also from a large population of workers who appear to be outside the wage relation: slaves, colonial subjects, prisoners, housewives, and students. In other words, WfH was revolutionary for us because we recognized that capitalism requires unwaged reproductive labor in order to contain the cost of labor power, and we believed that a successful campaign draining the source of this unpaid labor would break the process of capital accumulation, and confront

capital and the state on a terrain common to most women. Finally, we also saw WfH as revolutionary because it put an end to the naturalization of housework, dispelling the myth that it is “women’s labor”; and instead of fighting for more work, it demanded that women be paid for the work we already do. I should stress here that we fought for wages for housework not for housewives, convinced that this demand would go a long way toward “degenderizing” this work. We also demanded wages for housework not from the husbands but from the state as the representative of collective capital—the real “Man” profiting from this work.

Today, especially among younger women, this kind of problematic may seem outdated, because you can escape much of this work when you are young. Moreover, compared to my generation, younger women today are more economically independent and autonomous from men. But domestic work has not disappeared, and its devaluation, monetarily and otherwise, continues to be a problem for most of us, whether it is unpaid or done for wages. Furthermore, after four decades of full-time employment outside the home, the assumption spread among feminists in the 1970s that a waged job is a path to “liberation” can no longer be sustained. This is why many elements of the WfH framework are now more easily accepted, as long as they remain on a theoretical level. A key factor in this acceptance has been the work of feminist activists/scholars such as Ariel Salleh in Australia and Maria Mies in Germany, who brought the analysis of reproductive labor to a new level from an eco-feminist perspective and the viewpoint of women in the “colonies.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, we have seen even classic WfH arguments discussed matter-of-factly by academic feminists, as if they had just invented them. But in the 1970s, few political positions aroused so much vehement opposition.

By the late 1970s, two decades of international struggles that shook up the foundations of the capitalist accumulation process came to an end, put on the defensive by the engineering of a still continuing global crisis. Starting with the oil embargo of 1974, a long period of capitalist experimentation in class “decomposition” began under the guises of the “Washington Consensus,” neoliberalism, and “globalization.” From “Zero Growth” (in 1974–75) to the debt crisis and then to industrial relocation and the imposition of structural adjustment on regions of the former colonial world, a new world was forced into existence, radically changing the balance of power between workers and capital worldwide.

I have discussed some of the effects of this change on the reproduction of the workforce in the articles contained in Part Two of this volume and the essays I contributed to *Midnight Notes*, especially in the issue titled “The New Enclosures.”<sup>6</sup> Here, I want to add that thanks to

the analysis we developed first in WfH and later in *Midnight Notes*, I could see that what was afoot was not an industrial reconversion but a restructuring of class relations starting from the process of social reproduction.<sup>7</sup> My understanding of the new world order was facilitated by two developments that profoundly affected my theoretical and political practice. First, there was my decision in the late '70s to begin a study of the history of women in the transition to capitalism, which culminated with the publication of *Il Grande Calibano* (1984), coauthored with Leopoldina Fortunati, and, later, of *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004).

Second, my work as a contract teacher at the University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria), in the mid '80s, provided the opportunity to observe the devastating social consequences of the austerity programs imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on "debtor nations" in exchange for new loans.

The historical work deepened my understanding not only of "women in capitalism" but of capitalism itself. It enabled me to draw a connection between the processes activated by "structural adjustment" (as a centerpiece of the emerging new global economy) and those which I describe in *Caliban and the Witch* as the "true secret" of "Primitive Accumulation," starting with the war that capitalism launched against women through three centuries of witch-hunts. Revisiting the rise of capitalism also expanded my concept of reproduction from housework to subsistence farming, "opening the door" (as Mariarosa Dalla Costa has put it in a recent essay) from the kitchen to the garden and the land.<sup>8</sup> My rethinking of reproductive work was also prompted by the situation in Nigeria. In a context where, despite the destructive impact of oil production, access to land was still a major condition of the reproduction of daily life, and most of the food consumed in the country was provided by subsistence farming mostly done by women, the concept of "domestic work" had to take on a broader meaning.

The articles contained in Part Two reflect these realizations and the broader scope of my analysis, which soon translated into new political practices. From my stay in Nigeria, I date the beginning of my activism in the antiglobalization movement, which in Africa was already taking shape in the early 1980s through the rise of feminist movements, such as Women in Nigeria and the movements against structural adjustment. As a whole, these essays are an attempt to understand the architecture of the new world economic order and to counter the reformist impulses within this movement, which became especially strong when it reached the "developed" world. In contrast to those who saw the movement's task

as reforming, humanizing, and "genderizing" the World Bank and IMF, these essays look at these institutions as the instruments of a new process of recolonization, and worldwide capitalist attack on workers' power. In particular, they examine the relation between the large migratory movements triggered by structural adjustment programs in the early '90s, and what Arlie Hochschild has termed the "globalization of care." They also investigate the connection between warfare and the destruction of subsistence farming and, most importantly, the motivations behind the new global economy's war against women.

A running theme throughout the essays of Part Two is also the critique of the institutionalization of feminism and the reduction of feminist politics to instruments of the neoliberal agenda of the United Nations. For those of us who for years had stubbornly insisted on defining feminist autonomy as autonomy not just from men but from capital and the state, the gradual loss of initiative by the movement and its subsumption under the wings of the United Nations was a defeat, especially at a time when this institution was preparing to legitimize new wars by military and economic means. Retrospectively, this critique was well placed. Four global conferences on women and a decade dedicated to women's rights have not produced any improvement in the lives of most women, nor a serious feminist critique or mobilization against the corporate takeover of the world's wealth and the United Nations itself. On the contrary, these celebrations of "women's empowerment" have gone hand in hand with the sanctioning of bloody policies that have taken the lives of millions, expropriated lands and coastal waters, dumped toxic poisons in them, and turned entire populations into refugees.

Inevitably, such a historic attack on people's lives eternalized by the politics of "permanent crisis" has led many of us to rethink our political strategies and perspectives. In my case, it has led me to reconsider the question of "wages for housework" and to investigate the meaning of the growing call in different international radical circles for the production of "commons."

The WfH movement had identified the "house-worker" as the crucial social subject on the premise that the exploitation of her unwaged labor and the unequal power relations built upon her wageless condition were the pillars of the capitalist organization of production. However, the return of "Primitive Accumulation" on a world scale, starting with the immense expansion of the world labor market, the fruit of multiple forms of expropriation, has made it impossible for me to still write (as I had done in the early 1970s) that WfH is the strategy not only for the feminist movement "but for the entire working class." The reality of entire

populations practically demonetized by drastic devaluations in addition to proliferating land privatization schemes and the commercialization of all natural resources urgently poses the question of the reclamation of the means of production and the creation of new forms of social cooperation. These objectives should not be conceived as alternatives to the struggles for and over the “wage.” For instance, the struggle of immigrant domestic workers fighting for the institutional recognition of “carework” is strategically very important, for the devaluation of reproductive work has been one of the pillars of capital accumulation and the capitalistic exploitation of women’s labor. Forcing the state to pay a “social wage” or a “guaranteed income” guaranteeing our reproduction also remains a key political objective, as the state is holding hostage much of the wealth we have produced.

The creation of common/s, then, must be seen as a complement and presupposition of the struggle over the wage, in a context in which employment is ever more precarious, in which monetary incomes are subject to constant manipulations, and in which flexibilization, gentrification, and migration have destroyed the forms of sociality that once characterized proletarian life. Clearly, as I argue in Part Three, reappropriating lands, defending forests from the loggers, and creating urban farms is only the beginning. What matters most, as Massimo De Angelis and Peter Linebaugh have so often stressed in their works and political activity, is the production of “commoning” practices, starting with new collective forms of reproduction, confronting the divisions that have been planted among us along the lines of race, gender, age, and geographical location. This is one of the issues that has most interested me during these last years and to which I intend to dedicate a good part of my future work, both on account of the current reproduction crisis—including the destruction of an entire generation of young people, mostly of young people of color, now rotting in our jails—and on account of the recognition growing among activists in the United States that a movement that does not learn to reproduce itself is not sustainable.<sup>9</sup> In New York, this realization has for some years inspired a discussion about “self-reproducing movements” and “communities of care” side by side with the development of a variety of community-based structures. Expanding the notion of the commons and giving it a more broad political meaning also shapes the horizon of the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring and the many enduring antiausterity struggles worldwide. For their transformational powers stem from their ability to appropriate spaces that are controlled by the state and commodified by the market and turn them once again into common lands.

Brooklyn, NY, March 2011

## I THEORIZING AND POLITICIZING HOUSEWORK

## WAGES AGAINST HOUSEWORK (1975)

*They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.*

*They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.*

*Every miscarriage is a work accident.*

*Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions . . . but  
homosexuality is workers' control of production, not the end of work.*

*More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying the  
healing virtues of a smile.*

*Neuroses, suicides, desexualization: occupational diseases of the housewife.*

**M**any times the difficulties and ambiguities that women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the fact that they reduce wages for housework to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective. The difference between these two standpoints is enormous. To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society.

When we view wages for housework in this reductive way we start asking ourselves: what difference could more money make to our lives? We might even agree that for a lot of women who do not have any choice except for housework and marriage, it would indeed make a lot of difference. But for those of us who seem to have other choices—professional work, an enlightened husband, a communal way of life, gay relations or a combination of these—it would not make much of a difference. For us there are supposedly other ways of achieving economic independence, and the last thing we want is to get it by identifying ourselves as housewives, a fate that we all agree is, so to speak, worse than death. The problem with this position is that in our imagination we usually add a bit of money to the wretched lives we have now and then ask “so what?” on the false premise that we could ever get that money without at the same time revolutionizing—in the process of struggling for it—all our family and social relations. But if we take wages for housework as a political

perspective, we can see that struggling for it is going to produce a revolution in our lives and in our social power as women. It is also clear that if we think we do not need that money, it is because we have accepted the particular forms of prostitution of body and mind by which we get the money to hide that need. As I will try to show, not only is wages for housework a revolutionary perspective, but it is the only revolutionary perspective from a feminist viewpoint.

### "A Labor of Love"

It is important to recognize that when we speak of housework we are not speaking of a job like other jobs, but we are speaking of the most pervasive manipulation, and the subtlest violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class. True, under capitalism every worker is manipulated and exploited and his or her relation to capital is totally mystified. The wage gives the impression of a fair deal: you work and you get paid, hence you and your boss each get what's owed; while in reality the wage, rather than paying for the work you do, hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit. But the wage at least recognizes that you are a worker, and you can bargain and struggle around and against the terms and the quantity of that wage, the terms and the quantity of that work. To have a wage means to be part of a social contract, and there is no doubt concerning its meaning: you work, not because you like it, or because it comes naturally to you, but because it is the only condition under which you are allowed to live. Exploited as you might be, you are not that work. Today you are a postman, tomorrow a cabdriver. All that matters is how much of that work you have to do and how much of that money you can get.

The difference with housework lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it was destined to be unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage. In turn, the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it, except in the privatized kitchen-bedroom quarrel that all society agrees to ridicule, thereby further reducing the protagonist of a struggle. We are seen as nagging bitches, not as workers in struggle.

Yet, how natural it is to be a housewife is shown by the fact that it takes at least twenty years of socialization, day-to-day training, performed by an unwaged mother, to prepare a woman for this role, to convince her that children and husband are the best that she can expect from life. Even so, it hardly succeeds. No matter how well trained we are, few women do not feel cheated when the bride's day is over and they find themselves in front of a dirty sink. Many of us still have the illusion that we marry for love. A lot of us recognize that we marry for money and security; but it is time to make it clear that while the love or money involved is very little, the work that awaits us is enormous. This is why older women always tell us, "Enjoy your freedom while you can, buy whatever you want now." But unfortunately it is almost impossible to enjoy any freedom if, from the earliest days of your life, you are trained to be docile, subservient, dependent and, most importantly, to sacrifice yourself and even to get pleasure from it. If you don't like it, it is your problem, your failure, your guilt, and your abnormality.

We must admit that capital has been very successful in hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women. By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone. First of all, it has gotten a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life (the magic words: "Yes, darling, you are a real woman"). At the same time, it has also disciplined the male worker, by making "his" woman dependent on his work and his wage, and trapped him in this discipline by giving him a servant after he himself has done so much serving at the factory or the office. In fact, our role as women is to be the unwaged but happy and most of all loving servants of the "working class," i.e., those strata of the proletariat to which capital was forced to grant more social power. In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally, and sexually, to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible. It is not an accident, then, if most men start thinking of getting married as soon as they get their first job. This is not only because now they can afford it, but also because having somebody at home who takes care of you is the only condition of not going crazy after a day spent on an assembly line or at a desk. Every woman knows

that this is what she should be doing to be a true woman and have a "successful" marriage. And in this case too, the poorer the family the higher the enslavement of the woman, and not simply because of the monetary situation. In fact capital has a dual policy, one for the middle class and one for the working class family. It is no accident that we find the most unsophisticated machismo in the latter: the more blows the man gets at work the more his wife must be trained to absorb them, the more he is allowed to recover his ego at her expense. You beat your wife and vent your rage against her when you are frustrated or overtired by your work or when you are defeated in a struggle (but to work in a factory is already a defeat). The more the man serves and is bossed around, the more he bosses around. A man's home is his castle and his wife has to learn: to wait in silence when he is moody, to put him back together when he is broken down and swears at the world, to turn around in bed when he says, "I'm too tired tonight," or when he goes so fast at lovemaking that, as one woman put it, he might as well make it with a mayonnaise jar. Women have always found ways of fighting back, or getting back at them, but always in an isolated and privatized way. The problem, then, becomes how to bring this struggle out of the kitchen and the bedroom and into the streets.

This fraud that goes under the name of love and marriage affects all of us, even if we are not married, because once housework is totally naturalized and sexualized, once it becomes a feminine attribute, all of us as women are characterized by it. If it is natural to do certain things, then all women are expected to do them and even like doing them—even those women who, due to their social position, can escape some of that work or most of it, because their husbands can afford maids and shrinks and enjoy various forms of relaxation and amusement. We might not serve one man, but we are all in a servant relation with respect to the entire male world. This is why to be called a female is such a putdown, such a degrading thing. "Smile, honey, what's the matter with you?" is something every man feels entitled to ask you, whether he is your husband, or the man who takes your ticket on a train, or your boss at work.

### The Revolutionary Perspective

If we start from this analysis we can see the revolutionary implications of the demand for wages for housework. *It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us.*

To ask for wages for housework will by itself undermine the expectations that society has of us, since these expectations—the essence of our

socialization—are all functional to our wageless condition in the home. In this sense, it is absurd to compare the struggle of women for wages for housework to the struggle of male workers in the factory for more wages. In struggling for more wages, the waged worker challenges his social role but remains within it. When we struggle for wages for housework we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role. In the same way, there is a qualitative difference between the struggles of the waged worker and the struggles of the slave for a wage against that slavery. It should be clear, however, that when we struggle for a wage we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them. We struggle to break capital's plan for women, which is an essential moment of that division of labor and social power within the working class through which capital has been able to maintain its hegemony. Wages for housework, then, is a revolutionary demand not because by itself it destroys capital, but because it forces capital to restructure social relations in terms more favorable to us and consequently more favorable to the unity of the class. In fact, to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do this work. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want wages for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity.

Against any accusation of "economism" we should remember that money is capital, i.e., it is the power to command labor. Therefore to reappropriate that money which is the fruit of our labor—of our mothers' and grandmothers' labor—means at the same time to undermine capital's power to extract more labor from us. And we should not distrust the power of the wage to demystify our femininity and making visible our work—our femininity as work—since the lack of a wage has been so powerful in shaping this role and hiding our work. To demand wages for housework is to make it visible that our minds, our bodies and emotions have all been distorted for a specific function, in a specific function, and then have been thrown back at us as a model to which we should all conform if we want to be accepted as women in this society.

To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking. At the same time, it shows that we have cooked, smiled, fucked throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice. Our faces have become distorted from so much smiling, our

feelings have got lost from so much loving, our oversexualization has left us completely desexualized.

Wages for housework is only the beginning, but its message is clear: from now on, they have to pay us because as women we do not guarantee anything any longer. We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create our sexuality, which we have never known. And from the viewpoint of work, we can ask not only one wage but many wages, because we have been forced into many jobs at once. We are housemaids, prostitutes, nurses, shrinks; this is the essence of the "heroic" spouse who is celebrated on "Mother's Day." We say: stop celebrating our exploitation, our supposed heroism. From now on we want money for each moment of it, so that we can refuse some of it and eventually all of it. In this respect nothing can be more effective than to show that our female virtues have already a calculable money value: until today only for capital, increased in the measure that we were defeated, from now on, against capital, for us, in the measure that we organize our power.

### The Struggle for Social Services

This is the most radical perspective we can adopt because, although we can ask for day care, equal pay, free laundromats, we will never achieve any real change unless we attack our female role at its roots. Our struggle for social services, that is, for better working conditions, will always be frustrated if we do not first establish that our work is work. Unless we struggle against the totality of it we will never achieve any victories with respect to any of its moments. We will fail in the struggle for free laundromats unless we first struggle against the fact that we cannot love except at the price of endless work, which day after day cripples our bodies, our sexuality, our social relations, and unless we first escape the blackmail whereby our need to give and receive affection is turned against us as a work duty, for which we constantly feel resentful against our husbands, children and friends, and then guilty for that resentment. Getting a second job does not change that role, as years and years of female work outside the home have demonstrated. The second job not only increases our exploitation, but simply reproduces our role in different forms. Wherever we turn we can see that the jobs women perform are mere extensions of the housewife's condition in all its implications. Not only do we become nurses, maids, teachers, secretaries—all functions for which we are well trained in the home—but we are in the same bind that hinders our struggles in the home: isolation, the fact that other people's lives depend on us, and the impossibility to see where our work begins and ends, where our work ends and our desires begin. Is bringing coffee to your boss and chatting

with him about his marital problems secretarial work or is it a personal favor? Is the fact that we have to worry about our looks on the job a condition of work or is it the result of female vanity? (Until recently airline stewardesses in the United States were periodically weighed and had to be constantly on a diet—a torture that all women know—for fear of being laid off.) As is often said when the needs of the waged labor market require her presence there, "A woman can do any job without losing her femininity," which simply means that no matter what you do you are still a "cunt."

As for the proposed socialization and collectivization of housework, a couple of examples will be sufficient to draw a line between these alternatives and our perspective. It is one thing to set up a day care center the way we want it, and then demand that the State pay for it. It is quite another thing to deliver our children to the State and then ask the State to control them not for five but for fifteen hours a day. It is one thing to organize communally the way we want to eat (by ourselves, in groups) and then ask the State to pay for it, and it is the opposite thing to ask the State to organize our meals. In one case we regain some control over our lives, in the other we extend the State's control over us.

### The Struggle against Housework

Some women say: how is wages for housework going to change the attitudes of our husbands towards us? Won't our husbands still expect the same duties as before and even more than before once we are paid for them? But these women do not see that men can expect so much from us precisely because we are not paid for our work, because they assume that it is "a woman's thing" which does not cost us much effort. Men are able to accept our services and take pleasure in them because they presume that housework is easy for us, and that we enjoy it because we do it for their love. They actually expect us to be grateful because by marrying us, or living with us, they have given us the opportunity to express ourselves as women (i.e., to serve them). "You are lucky you have found a man like me," they say. Only when men see our work as work—our love as work—and most important our determination to refuse both, will they change their attitude towards us. Only when thousands of women will be in the streets saying that endless cleaning, always being emotionally available, fucking at command for fear of losing our jobs is hard, hated work that wastes our lives, will they be scared and feel undermined as men. But this is the best thing that can happen to them from their own point of view, because by exposing the way capital has kept us divided (capital has disciplined them through us and us through them—each other, against each

other), we—their crutches, their slaves, their chains—open the process of their liberation. In this sense wages for housework will be much more educational than trying to prove that we can work as well as them, that we can do the same jobs. We leave this worthwhile effort to the “career woman,” the woman who escapes from her oppression not through the power of unity and struggle, but through the power of the master, the power to oppress—usually other women. And we don’t have to prove that we can “break the blue collar barrier.” A lot of us have broken that barrier a long time ago and have discovered that the overalls did not give us any more power than the apron—quite often even less, because now we had to wear both and had even less time and energy to struggle against them. The things we have to prove are our capacity to expose what we are already doing as work, what capital is doing to us, and our power to struggle against it.

Unfortunately, many women—particularly single women—are afraid of the perspective of wages for housework because they are afraid of identifying even for a second with the housewife. They know that this is the most powerless position in society and they do not want to realize that they are housewives too. This is precisely our weakness, as our enslavement is maintained and perpetuated through this lack of self-identification. We want and must say that we are all housewives, we are all prostitutes, and we are all gay, because as long as we accept these divisions, and think that we are something better, something different than a housewife, we accept the logic of the master. We are all housewives because, no matter where we are, they can always count on more work from us, more fear on our side to put forward our demands, and less insistence that they should be met, since presumably our minds are directed elsewhere, to that man in our present or our future who will “take care of us.”

And we also delude ourselves that we can escape housework. But how many of us, in spite of working outside the home, have escaped it? And can we really so easily disregard the idea of living with a man? What if we lose our jobs? What about ageing and losing even the minimal amount of power that youth (productivity) and attractiveness (female productivity) afford us today? And what about children? Will we ever regret having chosen not to have them, not having even been able to realistically ask that question? And can we afford gay relations? Are we willing to pay the possible price of isolation and exclusion? But can we really afford relations with men?

The question is: why are these our only alternatives and what kind of struggle will take us beyond them?

## WHY SEXUALITY IS WORK (1975)

**S**exuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process. It is the necessary complement to the routine and regimentation of the workweek. It is a license to “go natural,” to “let go,” so that we can return more refreshed on Monday to our job. “Saturday night” is the irruption of the “spontaneous,” the irrational in the rationality of the capitalist discipline of our life. It is supposed to be the compensation for work and is ideologically sold to us as the “other” of work: a space of freedom in which we can presumably be our true selves—a possibility for intimate, “genuine” connections in a universe of social relations in which we are constantly forced to repress, defer, postpone, hide, even from ourselves, what we desire.

This being the promise, what we actually get is far from our expectations. As we cannot go back to nature by simply taking off our clothes, so cannot become “ourselves” simply because it is time to make love. Little spontaneity is possible when the timing, conditions, and the amount of energy available for love, are out of our control. After a week of work our bodies and feelings are numb, and we cannot turn them on like machines. But what comes out when we “let go” is more often our repressed frustration and violence than our hidden self ready to be reborn in bed.

Among other things, we are always aware of the falseness of this spontaneity. No matter how many screams, sighs, and erotic exercises we

make in bed, we know that it is a parenthesis and tomorrow both of us will be back in our civilized clothes (we will have coffee together as we get ready for work). The more we know that this is a parenthesis which the rest of the day or the week will deny, the more difficult it becomes for us to try to turn into "savages" and "forget everything." And we cannot avoid feeling ill at ease. It is the same embarrassment that we experience when we undress knowing that we will be making love; the embarrassment of the morning after, when we are already busy reestablishing distances; the embarrassment (finally) of pretending to be completely different from what we are during the rest of the day. This transition is painful particularly for women; men seem to be experts at it, possibly because they have been subjected to a more strict regimentation in their work. Women have always wondered how it was possible that after a nightly display of passion, "he" could get up already in a different world, so distant at times that it would be difficult to reestablish even a physical connection with him. In any case, it is always women who suffer most from the schizophrenic character of sexual relations, not only because we arrive at the end of the day with more work and more worries on our shoulders, but additionally because we have the responsibility of making the sexual experience pleasurable for the man. This is why women are usually less sexually responsive than men. Sex is work for us, it is a duty. The duty to please is so built into our sexuality that we have learned to get pleasure out of giving pleasure, out of getting men aroused and excited.

Since we are expected to provide a release, we inevitably become the object onto which men discharge their repressed violence. We are raped, both in our beds and in the streets, precisely because we have been set up to be the providers of sexual satisfaction, the safety valves for everything that goes wrong in a man's life, and men have always been allowed to turn their anger against us if we do not measure up to the role, particularly when we refuse to perform.

Compartmentalization is only one aspect of the mutilation of our sexuality. The subordination of our sexuality to the reproduction of labor power has meant that heterosexuality has been imposed on us as the only acceptable sexual behavior. In reality, every genuine communication has a sexual component, for our bodies and emotions are indivisible and we communicate at all levels all the time. But sexual contact with women is forbidden because, in bourgeois morality, anything that is unproductive is obscene, unnatural, perverted. This has meant the imposition of a true schizophrenic condition upon us, as early in our lives we must learn to draw a line between the people we can love and the people we just talk to, those to whom we can open our body and those to whom we can only

open our "souls," our lovers and our friends. The result is that we are bodiless souls for our female friends, and soulless flesh for our male lovers. And this division separates us not only from other women, but from ourselves as well, in term of what we do or do not accept in our bodies and feelings, the "clean" parts that are there for display, and the "dirty," "secret" parts which can only be disclosed (and thereby become clean) in the conjugal bed, at the point of production.

The same concern for production has demanded that sexuality, especially in women, be confined to certain periods of our lives. Sexuality is repressed in children and adolescent as well as in older women. Thus, the years in which we are allowed to be sexually active are the very years in which we are most burdened with work, when enjoying our sexual encounters becomes a feat.

But the main reason why we cannot enjoy the pleasure that sexuality may provide is that for women *sex is work*. Giving pleasure to man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman.

Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly it is important that we are not stoned to death if we are "unfaithful," or if it is found that we are not 'virgins.' But "sexual liberation" has intensified our work. In the past, we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. For women the right to have sex is the duty to have sex and to enjoy it (something which is not expected of most jobs), which is why there have been so many investigations, in recent years, concerning which parts of our body—whether the vagina or the clitoris—are more sexually productive.

But whether in its liberalized or its more repressive form, our sexuality is still under control. The law, medicine, and our economic dependence on men, all guarantee that, although the rules are loosened, spontaneity is ruled out of our sexual life. Sexual repression within the family is a function of that control. In this respect, fathers, brothers, husbands, pimps all have acted as agents of the state, to supervise our sexual work, to ensure that we would provide sexual services according to the established, socially sanctioned productivity norms.

Economic dependence is the ultimate form of control over our sexuality. This is why sexual work is still one of the main occupations for women and prostitution underlines every sexual encounter. Under these conditions there cannot be any spontaneity for us in sex, and this is why pleasure is so ephemeral in our sexual life.

Precisely because of the exchange involved, sexuality for us is always accompanied by anxiety and it is undoubtedly the part of housework

most responsible for our self-hatred. In addition, the commercialization of the female body makes it impossible for us to feel comfortable with our body regardless of its shape or form. No woman can happily undress in front of a man knowing that not only she is being evaluated, but there are standards of performance for female bodies to be reckoned with, that everyone, male or female, is aware of, as they are splashed all around us, on every wall in our cities and TV screen. Knowing that, in some way, we are selling ourselves has destroyed our confidence and our pleasure in our bodies.

This is why, whether we are skinny or plump, long or short nosed, tall or small, we all hate our bodies. We hate it because we are accustomed to looking at it from the outside, with the eyes of the men we meet, and with the body-market in mind. We hate it because we are used to thinking of it as something to sell, something that has become alienated from us and is always on the counter. We hate it because we know that so much depends on it. On how our body looks depends whether we can get a good or bad job (in marriage or out of the home), whether we can gain some social power, some company to defeat the loneliness that awaits us in our old age and often in our youth as well. And we always fear our body may turn against us, we may get fat, get wrinkles, age fast, make people indifferent to us, lose our right to intimacy, lose our chance of being touched or hugged.

In sum, we are too busy performing, too busy pleasing, too afraid of failing, to enjoy making love. The sense of our value is at stake in every sexual relation. If a man says we make love well, we excite him, whether or not we like making love with him, we feel great, it boosts our sense of power, even if we know that afterwards we still have to do the dishes. But we are never allowed to forget the exchange involved, because we never transcend the value-relation in our love relation with a man. "How much?" is the question that always governs our experience of sexuality. Most of our sexual encounters are spent in calculations. We sigh, sob, gasp, pant, jump up and down in bed, but in the meantime our mind keeps calculating "how much"—how much of ourselves can we give before we lose or undersell ourselves, how much will we get in return? If it is our first date, it is how much can we allow him to get: can he go up our skirt, open our blouse, put his fingers under our brassiere? At what point should we tell him "stop!?" How strongly should we refuse? How soon can we tell him that we like him before he starts thinking that we are "cheap"?

Keep the price up—that's the rule, at least the one we are taught. If we are already in bed the calculations become even more complicated, because we also have to calculate our chances of getting pregnant, which

means that throughout the sighing and gasping and other shows of passion we also have to quickly run down the schedule of our period. But faking excitement during the sexual act, in the absence of an orgasm, is extra work and a hard one, because when you're faking it, you never know how far you should go, and you always end up doing more for fear of not doing enough.

Indeed, it has taken a lot of struggle and a leap of power on our side to finally begin to admit that *nothing was happening*.

# COUNTERPLANNING FROM THE KITCHEN (1975)

(With Nicole Cox)

[This article was originally written in reply to an article that appeared in the magazine *Liberation*, entitled "Women and Pay for Housework" by Carol Lopate.<sup>1</sup> Our reply was turned down by the editors of the magazine. We publish it now because Lopate articulates with more openness than most the assumptions of the Left and its relation to the international feminist movement at this moment in time. By the publication of this document we are not opening a sterile debate with the Left but closing one.]

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage laborer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage laborer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it . . . *where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.*<sup>2</sup>

It is no accident that in the last few months several journals of the Left have published attacks on Wages for Housework. Whenever the women's movement has taken an autonomous position, the Left has felt threatened. The Left realizes that this perspective has implications that go beyond the "women question" and represents a break with their politics, past and present, both with respect to women and to the rest of the working class. Indeed, the sectarianism the Left has traditionally shown in relation to women's struggles is a consequence of their shallow understanding of the way capitalism rules and the direction class struggle must take to break this rule.

In the name of "class struggle" and "the unified interest of the working class," the Left has always selected certain sectors of the working class as revolutionary subjects and condemned others to a merely supportive role in the struggles these sectors were waging. The Left has thus

reproduced in its organizational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class that characterize the capitalist division of labor. In this respect, despite the variety of tactical positions, the Left has been strategically united. When it comes to the choice of revolutionary subjects, Stalinists, Trotskyites, Anarcho-Libertarians, old and new Left, join hands with the same assumptions and arguments for a common cause.

## They Offer Us "Development"

Since the Left has accepted the wage as the dividing line between work and non-work, production and parasitism, potential power and powerlessness, the immense amount of unwaged labor that women perform for capital in the home has escaped their analysis and strategy. From Lenin through Gramsci to Juliet Mitchell, the entire leftist tradition has agreed on the marginality of housework to the reproduction of capital and the marginality of the housewife to revolutionary struggle. According to the Left, as housewives, women are not suffering from capital, but are suffering from the absence of it. Our problem, it seems, is that capital has failed to reach into our kitchens and bedrooms, with the twofold consequence that we presumably remain at a feudal, precapitalist stage, and whatever we do in our kitchens and bedrooms is irrelevant to social change. Obviously, if our kitchens are outside of capital, our struggle to destroy them will never succeed in causing capital to fall.

Why would capital allow so much unprofitable work, so much unproductive labor time to survive is a question the Left never asks, forever confident of capital's irrationality and inability to plan. Ironically, they have translated their ignorance of the specific relation of women to capital into a theory of women's political backwardness to be overcome only by our entering the factory gates. Thus, the logic of an analysis that sees women's oppression as caused by their exclusion from capitalist relations inevitably results in a strategy for us to enter these relations rather than destroy them.

In this sense, there is an immediate connection between the strategy the Left has for women and the strategy it has for the "Third World." In the same way as they want to bring women to the factories, they want to bring factories to the "Third World." In both cases they presume that the "underdeveloped"—those of us who are unwaged and work at a lower technological level—are backward with respect to the "real working class" and can catch up only by obtaining a more advanced type of capitalist exploitation, a bigger share of factory work. In both cases, the struggle which the Left offers to the wageless, the "underdeveloped," is not a struggle against capital, but a struggle for capital, in a more rationalized,

developed, and productive form. In our case, they offer us not only the "right to work" (this they offer to every worker), but the right to work more, the right to be further exploited.

### A New Ground of Struggle

The political foundation of Wages for Housework is the refusal of this capitalist ideology that equates wagelessness and low technological development with political backwardness, lack of power and, ultimately, with a need for capital to organize us as a precondition for our getting organized. It is our refusal to accept that because we are wageless or work at a lower technological level (and these two conditions are deeply connected) our needs must be different from those of the rest of the working class. We refuse to accept that while a male autoworker in Detroit can struggle against the assembly line, starting from our kitchens in the metropolis, or from the kitchens and fields of the "Third World," our goal must be the factory work that workers all over the world are increasingly refusing. Our rejection of leftist ideology is one and the same as our rejection of capitalist development as a road to liberation or, more specifically, our rejection of capitalism in whatever form it takes. Inherent in this rejection is a redefinition of what capitalism is and who the working class is—that is, a new evaluation of class forces and class needs.

Wages for Housework, then, is not one demand among others, but a political perspective that opens a new ground of struggle, beginning with women but for the entire working class.<sup>3</sup> This must be emphasized, since the reduction of Wages for Housework to a demand is a common element in the attacks of the Left upon it, as a way of discrediting it that enables its critics to avoid confronting the political issues it raises.

Lopate's article, "Women and Pay for Housework," is exemplary of this trend. Already the title—"Pay for Housework"—misrepresents the issue, for a wage is not just a bit of money, but is the expression of the power relation between capital and the working class. A more subtle way of discrediting Wages for Housework is to claim that this perspective is imported from Italy and bears little relevance to the situation in the United States where women "do work."<sup>4</sup> Here is another example of misinformation. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*—the only source Lopate refers to—acknowledges the international dimension of the context in which Wages for Housework originated. In any case, tracing the geographical origin of Wages for Housework is beside the point at the present stage of capital's international integration. What matters is its political genesis, which is the refusal to see work, exploitation, and the power to revolt against it only in the presence of a wage. In our case, it is the end

of the division between women "who do work" and women "who do not work" (they are "just housewives"), which implies that unwaged work is not work, that housework is not work and, paradoxically, that only in the United States do most women work and struggle because many hold a second job. But to not see women's work in the home is to be blind to the work and struggles of the overwhelming majority of the world's population that is wageless. It is to ignore that American capital was built on slave labor as well as waged labor and, up to this day, it thrives on the unwaged labor of millions of women and men in the fields, kitchens, and prisons of the United States and throughout the world.

### The Hidden Work

Beginning with ourselves as women, we know that the working day for capital does not necessarily produce a paycheck, it does not begin and end at the factory gates, and we rediscover the nature and extent of housework itself. For as soon as we raise our heads from the socks we mend and the meals we cook and look at the totality of our working day, we see that while it does not result in a wage for ourselves, we nevertheless produce the most precious product to appear on the capitalist market: labor power. Housework is much more than house cleaning. It is servicing the wage earners physically, emotionally, sexually, getting them ready for work day after day. It is taking care of our children—the future workers—assisting them from birth through their school years, ensuring that they too perform in the ways expected of them under capitalism. This means that behind every factory, behind every school, behind every office or mine there is the hidden work of millions of women who have consumed their life, their labor, producing the labor power that works in those factories, schools, offices, or mines.<sup>5</sup>

This is why to this day, both in the "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries, housework and the family are the pillars of capitalist production. The availability of a stable, well-disciplined labor force is an essential condition of production at every stage of capitalist development. The conditions of our work vary from country to country. In some countries we are forced into an intensive production of children, in others we are told not to reproduce, particularly if we are black or on welfare, or tend to reproduce "troublemakers." In some countries we produce unskilled labor for the fields, in others we produce skilled workers and technicians. But in every country our unwaged work and the function we perform for capital are the same.

Getting a second job has never released us from the first. Two jobs have only meant for women even less time and energy to struggle against

both. Moreover, a woman, working full-time in the home or outside of it as well, married or single, has to put hours of labor into reproducing her own labor power, and women well know the tyranny of this task, for a pretty dress and hairdo are conditions for their getting the job, whether on the marriage market or on the wage labor market.

Thus, we doubt that in the United States, "schools, nurseries, day-care and television have taken away from mothers much of the responsibility for the socialization of their children," and that "the decrease in house size and the mechanization of housework has meant that the housewife is potentially left with much greater leisure time" and she is just "kept busy buying, using and repairing the devices . . . which are theoretically geared towards saving her time."<sup>6</sup>

Day care centers and nurseries have never liberated any time for ourselves, but only our time for additional work. As for technology, it is in the United States that we measure the gap between the technology socially available and the technology that trickles down into our kitchens. And in this case too, it is our wageless condition that determines the quantity and quality of the technology we get. For "if you are not paid by the hour, within certain limits, nobody cares how long it takes you to do your work."<sup>7</sup> If anything, the situation in the United States proves that neither technology nor a second job can liberate women from housework, and that "producing a technician is not a less burdensome alternative to producing an unskilled worker, if between these two fates does not stand the refusal of women to work for free, whatever might be the technological level at which this work is done, the refusal of women to live in order to produce, whatever might be the particular type of child to be produced."<sup>8</sup>

It remains to be clarified that by saying that the work we perform in the home is capitalist production, we are not expressing a wish to be legitimated as part of the "productive forces," in other words, it is not a resort to moralism. Only from a capitalist viewpoint being productive is a moral virtue, if not a moral imperative. From the viewpoint of the working class, being productive simply means being exploited. As Marx recognized, "to be a productive laborer is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune."<sup>9</sup> Thus we derive little "self-esteem" from it.<sup>10</sup> But when we say that housework is a moment of capitalist production we clarify our specific function in the capitalist division of labor and the specific forms that our revolt against it must take. Ultimately, when we say that we produce capital, we say that we can and want to destroy it, rather than engage in a losing battle to move from one form and degree of exploitation to another.

We must also clarify that we are not "borrowing categories from the Marxist world."<sup>11</sup> Yet, we admit that we are less eager than Lopate

to discard Marx's work, as it has given us an analysis that to this day is indispensable for understanding how we function in capitalist society. We also suspect that Marx's apparent indifference to housework may be grounded in historical factors. We do not refer only to the dose of male chauvinism that Marx certainly shared with his contemporaries (and not only with them). At the time when Marx was writing, the nuclear family and housework had yet to be fully created.<sup>12</sup> What Marx had before his eyes was the proletarian woman, who was employed along with her husband and children in the factory, and the bourgeois woman who had a maid and, whether or not she also worked, was not producing the commodity labor power. The absence of the nuclear family did not mean that workers did not mate and copulate. It meant, however, that it was impossible to have family relations and housework when each member of the family spent fifteen hours a day in a factory, and neither the time nor the physical space were available for family life.

It was only after epidemics and overwork decimated the workforce and, most important, after waves of proletarian struggles, in the 1830s and 1840s, brought England close to a revolution, that the need for a more stable and disciplined labor force led capital to organize the nuclear family as the center for the reproduction of labor power. Far from being a precapitalist structure, the family, as we know it in the "West," is a creation of capital for capital, as an institution that is supposed to guarantee the quantity and quality of labor power and its control. Thus, "like the trade union, the family protects the worker but also ensures that he and she will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial."<sup>13</sup>

### **Our Wagelessness as a Discipline**

The family is essentially the institutionalization of our unwaged labor, of our wageless dependence on men and, consequently, the institutionalization of an unequal division of power that has disciplined us as well as men. For our wagelessness and our dependence have kept men tied to their jobs, by ensuring that whenever they wanted to refuse their work they would be faced with the wife and children who depended on their wage. Here is the basis of those "old habits—the men's and ours" that Lopate has found so difficult to break. It is no accident that it is difficult for a man "to ask for special time schedules so he can be involved equally in childcare."<sup>14</sup> A reason why men cannot arrange for part-time hours is that the male wage is crucial for the survival of the family, even when the wife brings in a second wage. And if we "found ourselves preferring or finding less consuming jobs, which have left us more time for house care"

it is because we were resisting an intensified exploitation, being consumed in a factory and then being consumed more rapidly at home.<sup>15</sup>

Our lack of a wage for the work we do in the home has also been the primary cause of our weakness in the wage labor market. Employers know that we are used to work for nothing, and we are so desperate for some money of our own that they can get us at a low price. Since female has become synonymous with housewife, we carry this identity and the "homely skills" we acquire from birth wherever we go. This is why female employment is so often an extension of housework, and our road to the wage often leads us to more house care. The fact that housework is unwaged has given this socially imposed condition an appearance of naturality ("femininity") that affects us whatever we do. Thus we don't need to be told by Lopate that "the essential thing to remember is that we are a 'sex.'"<sup>16</sup> For years capital has told us that we're only good for sex and making babies. This is the sexual division of labor and we refuse to eternalize it, as inevitably happens when we ask: "What does being female actually mean; what, if any, specific qualities necessarily and for all time adhere to that characteristic?"<sup>17</sup> To ask this question is to beg for a sexist reply. Who is to say who we are? All we can know now is who we are not, to the degree that through our struggle we gain the power to break with our imposed social identity. It is the ruling class, or those who aspire to rule, who presuppose a natural and eternal human personality—it is to eternalize their power over us.

### Glorification of the Family

Not surprisingly Lopate's quest for the essence of femaleness leads her to a blatant glorification of unwaged work in the home and unwaged labor in general:

The home and the family have traditionally provided the only interstice of capitalist life in which people can possibly serve each other's needs out of love or care, even if it is often also out of fear and domination. Parents take care of children at least partly out of love. . . . I even think that this memory lingers on with us as we grow up so that we always retain with us as a kind of utopia the work and caring which come out of love, rather than being based on financial reward.<sup>18</sup>

The literature of the women's movement has shown the devastating effects that this love, care and service have had on women. These are the chains that have tied us to a condition of near slavery. We refuse then

to retain with us and elevate to a utopia the misery of our mothers and grandmothers and our own misery as children! When capital or the State does not pay a wage, it is those who are loved, cared for, also wageless and even more powerless, who must pay with their lives.

We also refuse Lopate's suggestion that asking for remuneration for domestic work "would only serve to obscure from us still further the possibilities of free and unalienated labor,"<sup>19</sup> which means that the quickest way to "disalienate" work is to do it for free. No doubt President Ford would appreciate this suggestion. The voluntary labor on which the modern State increasingly rests is based on such charitable dispensations of our time. It seems to us, however, that if, instead of relying on love and care, our mothers had had a financial remuneration, they would have been less bitter, less dependent, less blackmailed, and less blackmailing to their children, who were constantly reminded of their sacrifices. Our mothers would have had more time and power to struggle against that work and would have left us at a more advanced stage in that struggle.

It is the essence of capitalist ideology to glorify the family as a "private world," the last frontier where men and women "keep [their] souls alive," and it is no wonder that this ideology is enjoying a renewed popularity with capitalist planners in our present times of "crisis" and "austerity" and "hardship."<sup>20</sup> As Russell Baker recently stated in the *New York Times*, love kept us warm during the Depression and we had better bring it with us on our present excursion into hard times.<sup>21</sup> This ideology that opposes the family (or the community) to the factory, the personal to the social, the private to the public, productive to unproductive work, is functional to our enslavement to the home, which, in the absence of a wage, has always appeared as an act of love. This ideology is deeply rooted in the capitalist division of labor that finds one of its clearest expressions in the organization of the nuclear family.

The way in which the wage relation has mystified the social function of the family is an extension of the way capital has mystified waged labor and the subordination of our social relations to the "cash nexus." We have learned from Marx that the wage hides the unpaid labor that goes into profit. But measuring work by the wage also hides the extent to which our family and social relations have been subordinated to the relations of production—they have become relations of production—so that every moment of our lives functions for the accumulation of capital. The wage and the lack of it have allowed capital to obscure the real length of our working day. Work appears as just one compartment of our lives, taking place only in certain times and spaces. The time we consume in the "social factory," preparing ourselves for work or going to work, restoring

our "muscles, nerves, bones and brains"<sup>22</sup> with quick snacks, quick sex, movies, all this appears as leisure, free time, individual choice.

### Different Labor Markets

Capital's use of the wage also obscures who is the working class and keeps workers divided. Through the wage relation, capital organizes different labor markets (a labor market for blacks, youth, women and white males), and opposes a "working class" to a "non-working" proletariat, supposedly parasitic on the work of the former. Thus, as welfare recipients we are told we live off the taxes of the "working class," as housewives we are pictured as the bottomless pits of our husbands' paychecks.

But ultimately the social weakness of the wageless has been and is the weakness of the entire working class with respect to capital. As the history of the "runaway shop" demonstrates, the availability of unwaged labor, both in the "underdeveloped" countries and in the metropolis, has allowed capital to leave those areas where labor had made itself too expensive, thus undermining the power that workers there had reached. Whenever capital could not run to the "Third World," it opened the gates of the factories to women, blacks, and youth in the metropolis or to migrants from the "Third World." Thus it is no accident that while capitalism is presumably based on waged labor, more than half of the world's population is unwaged. Wagelessness and underdevelopment are essential elements of capitalist planning, nationally and internationally. They are powerful means to make workers compete on the national and international labor market, and make us believe that our interests are different and contradictory.<sup>23</sup>

Here are the roots of sexism, racism and welfarism (contempt for the workers who have succeeded in getting some money from the State), which are the expressions of different labor markets and thus different ways of regulating and dividing the working class. If we ignore this use of capitalist ideology and its roots in the wage relation, we not only end up considering racism, sexism and welfarism as moral diseases, products of "false consciousness," but we are confined to a strategy of "education" that leaves us with nothing but "moral imperatives to bolster our side."<sup>24</sup>

We finally find a point of agreement with Lopate when she says that our strategy relieves us from relying on "men's being 'good' people" to attain liberation.<sup>25</sup> As the struggles of black people in the 1960s showed, it was not by good words, but by the organization of their power that they made their needs "understood." In the case of women, trying to educate men has always meant that our struggle was privatized and fought in the solitude of our kitchens and bedrooms. Power educates. First men will

fear, then they will learn because capital will fear. For we are not struggling for a more equal redistribution of the same work. We are struggling to put an end to this work and the first step is to put a price tag on it.

### Wage Demands

Our power as women begins with the social struggle for the wage, not to be let into the wage relation (for we were never out of it) but to be let out of it, for every sector of the working class to be let out. Here we have to clarify what is the nature of the wage struggle. When the Left maintains that wage demands are "economistic," "union demands," they ignore that the wage, as well as the lack of it, is the direct measure of our exploitation and therefore the direct expression of the power relation between capital and the working class and within the working class. They also ignore that the wage struggle takes many forms and it is not limited to wage raises. Reduction of work-time, obtaining better social services, as well as obtaining more money—all these are wage gains that determine how much labor is taken away from us and how much power we have over our lives. This is why the wage has historically been the main ground of struggle between workers and capital. And as an expression of the class relation the wage has always two sides: the side of capital that uses it to control workers, by ensuring that every wage raise is matched by an increase in productivity; and the side of the workers, who increasingly are fighting for more money, more power, and less work.

As the history of the present capitalist crisis demonstrates, fewer and fewer workers are now willing to sacrifice their lives at the service of capitalist production and to listen to the calls for increased productivity.<sup>26</sup> But when the "fair exchange" between wages and productivity is upset, the struggle over wages becomes a direct attack on capital's profit and its capacity to extract surplus labor from us. Thus the struggle for the wage is at the same time a struggle against the wage, for the power it expresses and against the capitalist relation it embodies. In the case of the wageless, in our case, the struggle for the wage is even more clearly an attack on capital. Wages for Housework means that capital will have to pay for the enormous amount of social services employers now save on our backs. Most important, to demand Wages for Housework is to refuse to accept our work as a biological destiny, which is an indispensable condition to struggle against it. Nothing, in fact, has been so powerful in institutionalizing our work, the family, and our dependence on men, as the fact that not a wage but "love" has always paid for this work. But for us, as for waged workers, the wage is not the price of a productivity deal. In return for a wage we will not work as much or more than before, we will work

less. We want a wage to be able to dispose of our time and our energies, to make a struggle, and not be confined by a second job because of our need for financial independence.

OUR STRUGGLE FOR THE WAGE OPENS FOR THE WAGED AND THE UNWAGED ALIKE THE QUESTION OF THE REAL LENGTH OF THE WORKING DAY. UP TO NOW THE WORKING CLASS, MALE AND FEMALE, HAD ITS WORKING DAY DEFINED BY CAPITAL—FROM PUNCHING IN TO PUNCHING OUT. THAT DEFINED THE TIME WE BELONGED TO CAPITAL AND THE TIME WE BELONGED TO OURSELVES. BUT WE HAVE NEVER BELONGED TO OURSELVES, WE HAVE ALWAYS BELONGED TO CAPITAL EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES AND IT IS TIME THAT WE MAKE CAPITAL PAY FOR EVERY MOMENT OF IT. IN CLASS TERMS THIS IS TO DEMAND A WAGE FOR EVERY MOMENT WE LIVE AT THE SERVICE OF CAPITAL.

### Making Capital Pay

This is the class perspective that has shaped the struggles in the 1960s in the United States and internationally. In the United States the struggles of blacks and welfare mothers—the “Third World” of the metropolis—expressed the revolt of the wageless and their refusal of the only alternative capital offers: more work. These struggles, which had their center of power in the community, were not for development, but for the reappropriation of the social wealth that capital has accumulated from the wageless as well as from the waged. They challenged the capitalist organization of society that imposes work as the only condition for our existence. They also challenged the leftist dogma that only in the factories can the working class organize its power.

But you don't need to enter a factory to be part of a working class organization. When Lopate argues that “the ideological preconditions for working class solidarity are networks and connections which arise from working together” and “these preconditions cannot arise out of isolated women working in separate homes,” she writes off the struggles these “isolated” women made in the 1960s (rent strikes, welfare struggles etc.).<sup>27</sup> She assumes that we cannot organize ourselves if we are not first organized by capital; and since she denies that capital has already organized us, she denies the existence of our struggle. But to confuse capital's organization of our work, whether in the kitchens or in the factories, with the organization of our struggle against it is a sure road to defeat. To struggle for work is already a defeat; and we can be sure that every new form of organization of work will try to isolate us even more. For it is an

illusion to imagine that capital does not divide us when we are not working in isolation from each other.

In opposition to the divisions typical of the capitalist organization of work, we must organize according to our needs. In this sense, Wages for Housework is as much a refusal of the socialization of the factory as it is a refusal of a possible capitalist “rationalization” of the home, as proposed by Lopate: “We need to look seriously at the tasks which are ‘necessary’ to keep a house going . . . We need to investigate the time and labor saving devices and decide which are useful and which merely cause a further degradation of housework.”<sup>28</sup>

It is not technology per se that degrades us, but the use capital makes of it. Moreover, “self-management” and “workers’ control” have always existed in the home. We always had a choice of Monday or Saturday to do the laundry, or the choice between buying a dishwasher or a vacuum cleaner, provided we could afford either. Thus, we should not ask capitalism to change the nature of our work, but struggle to refuse reproducing ourselves and others as workers, as labor power, as commodities; and a condition for achieving this goal is that this work be recognized as work through a wage. Obviously, as long as the capitalist wage-relation exists, so too does capitalism. Thus we do not say that winning a wage is the revolution. We say that it is a revolutionary strategy because it undermines the role we are assigned in the capitalist division of labor and consequently it changes the power relations within the working class in terms more favorable to us and the unity of the class.

As for the financial aspects of Wages for Housework, they are “highly problematical” only if we take the viewpoint of capital, the viewpoint of the Treasury Department, which always claims poverty when addressing workers.<sup>29</sup> Since we are not the Treasury Department and have no aspiration to be, we cannot imagine planning for them systems of payment, wage differentials and productivity deals. It is not for us to put limits on our power, it is not for us to measure our value. It is only for us to organize a struggle to get what we want, for us all, on our terms. Our aim is to be priceless, to price ourselves out of the market, for housework and factory work and office work to become “uneconomic.”

Similarly, we reject the argument that some other sector of the working class would pay for our eventual gains. According to this logic, we could say that waged workers are now paid with the money that capital does not give us. But this is the way the State talks. In fact, to claim that the demands for social welfare programs made by blacks in the 1960s had a “devastating effect on any long-range strategy . . . on white-black relations” since “workers knew that they, not the corporations, ended

up paying for those programs" is plain racism.<sup>30</sup> If we assume that every struggle must end up in a redistribution of poverty we assume the inevitability of our defeat. Indeed, Lopate's article is written under the sign of defeatism, which means accepting capitalist institutions as inevitable. Lopate cannot imagine that were capital to lower other workers' wages to give us a wage, those workers would be able to defend their interest and ours too. She also assumes that "obviously men would receive the highest wages for their work in the home"—in short, she assumes that we can never win.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Lopate warns us that if we obtained wages for housework, capital would send supervisors to control our work. Since she sees housewives only as victims, incapable of a struggle, she cannot imagine that we could organize collectively to shut our doors in the face of a supervisor if they tried to impose this control. She further assumes that since we don't have official supervisors then our work is not controlled. But even if being waged meant that the state would try to control more directly our work, this would still be preferable to the present situation; for this attempt would expose who commands our work, and it would be better to know who is our enemy than blaming and hating ourselves because we are compelled to "love or care" "out of fear and domination."<sup>32</sup>

## THE RESTRUCTURING OF HOUSEWORK AND REPRODUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE 1970S (1980)

[The following is the text of a presentation at a Conference held in Rome on December 9–11, 1980, on "The Economic Policies of Female Labor in Italy and the United States," cosponsored by the Centro Studi Americani and German Marshall Fund of the United States.]

If women wish the position of the wife to have the honor which they attach to it, they will not talk about the value of their services and about stated incomes, but they will live with their husbands in the spirit of the vow of the English marriage service, taking them "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honor, obey." This is to be a wife. —"Wives' Wages," *New York Times*, August 10, 1876.

The most valuable of all social capital is that invested in human beings and of that capital the most precious part is the result of the care and influence of the mother, so long as she retains her tender and unselfish instincts. —Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (1890).

While it is generally recognized that the dramatic expansion of the female labor force is possibly the most important social phenomenon of the 1970s, uncertainty still prevails among economists as to its origins. Technological advancement in the home, the reduction of family size and the growth of the service sector are offered as likely causes of this trend. Yet, it is also argued that these factors may be an effect of women's entering the labor force and that looking for a cause would lead us into a vicious circle, a "chicken or egg" problem. This uncertainty among economists stems from their failure to recognize that the dramatic increase of the female labor force in the 1970s reflects women's refusal to function as unwaged workers in the home, catering to the reproduction of the national workforce. In fact, what goes under the name of "home-making" is (to use Gary Becker's expression) a "productive consumption" process,<sup>1</sup> producing and reproducing "human capital," or in the words of

Alfred Marshall, the laborer's "general ability" to work.<sup>2</sup> Social planners have often recognized the importance of this work for the economy. Yet, as Becker points out, the productive consumption that takes place in the home has had a "bandit-like existence in economic thought."<sup>3</sup> For the fact that this work is not waged, in a society where work and wages are synonyms, makes it invisible as work, to the point that the services it provides are not included in the Gross National Product (GNP) and the providers are absent from the calculations of the national labor force.

Given the social invisibility of housework, it is not surprising that economists have failed to see that through the 1960s and 1970s this work has been the main battleground for women, so much so that even their opting for market jobs must be seen as a strategy that women have used to free themselves from this work. In this process, women have triggered a major reorganization of social reproduction that is putting into crisis the prevailing sexual division of labor and the social policies that have shaped the reorganization of reproduction in the postwar period. However, despite much evidence that women are breaking away from unpaid domestic labor, today more than 30 percent still work primarily as homemakers, and even those who hold a market job devote a considerable amount of their time to work that entitles them to no pay, no social security or pension. This means that housework is still the major source of employment for American women, and that most American women spend most of their time doing work that affords them none of the benefits that come with a wage.

It is also becoming clear that, in the absence of monetary remuneration, women face serious obstacles in their attempt to gain "economic independence," not to mention the heavy price they often pay for it: the inability to choose whether to have children or not, low wages and the burden of a double shift when they enter the labor market. The problems that women are facing appear particularly serious given the economic perspectives we are currently offered, as they emerge from the current debate on the "energy crisis" and the feasibility of a growth versus a non-growth economy. It appears that no matter which path will prevail, women will be the main losers in the "battle to control inflation" and energy consumption. The recent experience of Three Mile Island has shown what might be the likely effects on women's lives of the type of economic growth sponsored by the "business community" and the government, which is based on the expansion of nuclear power, the deregulation of many economic activities, and increased military spending. Equally unappealing, however, is the no-growth alternative which, as currently articulated, promises to women an unlimited intensification of domestic work to compensate for the reduction and increasing cost of services it proposes.

### The Revolt against Housework

Although rarely recognized, the first signals of women's refusal to function as unpaid workers in the home did not come from Betty Friedan's best-seller *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), but from the struggles of "welfare mothers," that is women receiving AID for Dependent Children, in the mid 1960s. While developing in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and usually perceived as a minority issue, the struggle of welfare mothers actually gave voice to the dissatisfaction that many American women felt with a social policy that ignored the work they did in the home, stigmatized them as parasites when they demanded public assistance, while reaping enormous benefits from the wide variety of services that they provided to the maintenance of the national workforce. Welfare mothers, for example, denounced the absurdity of the government policy that recognizes childcare as work only when it involves the children of others, thus paying the foster parent more than the welfare mother, while devising programs to "put the welfare mother to work." The spirit of the welfare struggles is well expressed in the words of one of its organizers: "If the government was smart it would start calling AFDC [Aid For Dependent Children] 'Day and Night Care,' create a new agency, pay us a decent wage for the service work we are doing now and say that the welfare crisis has been solved, because welfare mothers have been put to work."<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, discussing the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) proposal presented in 1971 by the Nixon administration, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan recognized that this demand was far from extravagant: "If American society recognized homemaking and child rearing as productive work to be included in the national economic accounts . . . the receipt of welfare might not imply dependency. But we don't. It may be hoped that the Women's Movement of the present time will change this. But as of the time I write it had not."<sup>5</sup>

Moynihan was soon proven wrong. At the very time when he was recalling the legislative adventures of FAP, a Wages for Housework Movement was emerging in the United States, strong enough to cause the National Women's Conference held in Houston in 1977 to recommend in its Plan of Action that welfare should be called a wage.<sup>6</sup> Not only did the welfare mothers' struggle place the question of housework on the national agenda, though disguised as a "poverty issue," it also made it clear that the government could no longer hope to regulate women's work through the organization of the male wage. A new era was beginning in which the government would have to deal with women directly, without the mediation of men.

That refusal of housework has become a widespread social phenomenon was further dramatized by the development of the Feminist Movement. Women protesting bridal fairs and Miss America contests were an indication that fewer and fewer accepted "femininity," marriage, and the home as their natural destiny. By the early '70s, however, women's refusal of housework had taken the form of a migration into the waged labor force. Economists explain this trend as the result of technological advancement in the home and the spreading of birth control, which presumably "liberated women's time for work." Yet, with the exception of the microwave oven and the food processor, little technological innovation has entered the home in the 1970s, not enough to justify the record growth in the female waged labor force.<sup>7</sup> As for the decline of fertility rates, past trends indicate that family size is not *per se* a determinant factor in the decision of women to search for a market job, as proven by the example of the 1950s when, in the presence of a baby boom, women, particularly married ones and with young children, began returning in record numbers to the waged labor force.<sup>8</sup> How little women's time has been liberated from domestic work was also shown by the results of several studies, like the one Chase Manhattan Bank conducted in 1971, showing that, at the end of the '60s, American women were still spending an average of forty-five hours per week doing housework, a number that easily escalated in the presence of young children.

If we also consider that the highest rates for women entering the labor force have been among women with preschool children, we can hardly conclude that it is work *per se* that women have been missing, particularly since the jobs most women find are extensions of housework. The truth, as Juanita Kreps points out, is that women "are eager to trade (housework) for a market job that is equally routine and repetitive (because) the difference is that the job pays a salary."<sup>9</sup> Another crucial reason for the record expansion of the female labor force, particularly after 1973, has been the extensive cuts of welfare benefits in the course of the '70s. Starting with the Nixon administration, a daily campaign has been carried out in the media blaming all social problems on the "welfare mess." Meanwhile, across the nation, eligibility rules have been tightened, cutting the number of women who qualify, while the benefits themselves have been reduced, despite the steady increase in the cost of living.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, while Aid to Families with Dependence Children (AFDC) benefits were higher than the median female wage until 1969, by the mid seventies the opposite was true, even though the median real wage had fallen compared with that of the '60s. Faced with the assault on welfare, women seem to have followed the advice of the welfare mother

who once commented that if the government is willing to pay women only when they take care of the children of others then women should "swap their children." Given that in the labor market women are concentrated in service sector jobs involving reproductive labor, it can be argued that women have traded off unpaid housework for their families for paid housework in the marketplace.

That the growth of the female labor force reflects women's refusal of housework also explains the seeming paradox whereby at the very moment when women were entering the labor market in record numbers, housework began surfacing as a worthwhile ground of economic investigation. The 1970s saw a boom in studies on housework. Then, in 1975, even the government decided to measure the contribution that housewives' chores make to the GNP. Again, in 1976, researchers at the Social Security Administration, studying the impact of illness on national productivity, included in their figures the dollar value of housework.<sup>11</sup> Based on a market-cost approach, the estimates reached were extremely conservative. Yet, the very fact that an attempt was made to make these calculations demonstrates the government's rising concern with the "family-housework crisis." Indeed, behind the sudden interest for housework lies the old truth that this work remains invisible only as long as it is done. Other reasons as well made the "housework crisis" worrisome for policymakers. First and foremost there has been the threat to "family stability," as a correlation has been made between the increasing earning capacity of American women, the escalating divorce rate, and the concomitant increase in the number of female-headed families. By the mid '70s, the government was also becoming concerned that the expansion of the female waged labor force was growing beyond projected accounts, revealing an autonomous character that thwarted its plans for it.<sup>12</sup> For example, far from providing a "solution" to growing welfare rates, the increase in the number of women seeking a waged job created a buffer for welfare benefits, for the disparity between the number of women looking for a job and the jobs available continually blocked the government's attempts to "put welfare women to work." Equally worrisome for government and employers, in the context of the severest recession since the Depression, and in the face of prolonged unemployment, has been the seeming "rigidity" of female participation in the waged labor market.

Would women accept to go back to the home empty handed, as they did in the postwar period, after experiencing the financial benefits of a wage?<sup>13</sup> It is in this climate that a revaluation of housework has taken place. Yet, despite much lip service little has been done. The economic value of housework has been recognized in minor legislative proposals. For

example, a government authorized retirement plan passed in 1976 (as part of the Tax Reform Act) has allowed husbands to make contributions to an Individual Retirement Plan (IRA) also on behalf of their non-employed wives. The wife's contribution to the family's welfare is also recognized, at least formally, in the no-fault divorce laws that several states have passed in recent years, which allow for a division of the family property on account of the services the wife provided. (Recent court cases, however, have turned down the demands some women have made for a division of the male wage). Finally, the Tax Reform Act of 1976 has allowed parents to deduct childcare expenses from their taxes up to a maximum of \$400 per child (but parents must spend \$2,000 to qualify for that sum). As for the possibility of a remuneration for housework, the only suggested proposal, so far, has been a symbolic price tag functional to its calculation into the GNP. The assumption is that this would give women a heightened sense of their value and increase their satisfaction with this work. Typical of this approach is the recommendation made by a task force studying work in America:

The clear fact is that keeping a house and raising children is work, work that is, on average, as difficult to do well and as useful to the larger society as almost any paid job involving the production of goods and services. The difficulty is . . . that we have not, as a society, acknowledged this fact in our public system of values and rewards. Such an acknowledgement may begin by simply counting housewives in the labor force, assigning a money value to their work.<sup>14</sup>

In reality, the only response to women's revolt against housework has been the continuing growth of inflation, that has increased women's work in the home and their dependence on the male wage. Yet, despite the absence of supportive legislation and the growth of inflation, women's refusal of unpaid labor in the home has continued through the '70s, producing significant changes in the organization of housework and the general process of social reproduction.

### The Reorganization of Social Reproduction

Women's relation to housework in the '70s is a good example of what economists call the "income effect," that is, the tendency of workers to reduce their work in the face of increased earnings, although in the case of women what has been reduced has been exclusively their unpaid work in the home. Three trends have emerged in this respect: reduction,

redistribution (otherwise known as "sharing"), and the socialization of housework.

The reduction of housework has come primarily through the reorganization of many housework services on a market basis and the reduction of family size, beginning with a dramatic reduction in the number of children. By contrast, labor saving devices have played a minor role in this process. Few technological innovations have entered the home in the '70s. Moreover, the persistent stagnation in the sales of household appliances<sup>15</sup> shows a tendency towards the dis-accumulation of capital in the home, in line with the reduction of family size and the dis-accumulation of the services the household provides. Even the apartment and furniture designs—the virtually nonexistent kitchen, the trend towards modular units and knock out furniture—are indicative of the tendency to expel from the home large slices of its previous reproductive functions. Indeed, the only true labor saving devices women have used in the '70s have been contraceptives, as indicated by the collapse of the birth rate, which in 1979 plummeted to 1.75 children per 1,000 women aged fifteen to forty-four. As we are often told, the baby boom of the '50s has turned into a baby bust that is deeply affecting every area of social life: the school system, the labor force, which, if the present trend continues, will see a progressively aging population, industrial production, which is readjusting its priorities to address the needs of a more adult population.<sup>16</sup>

Despite predictions that a new baby boom is on the way, this trend is likely to continue. In contrast to the 1950s, American women today are willing to forego motherhood, even to the point of accepting sterilization in order to keep a job, rather than submitting to the work and sacrifices that having children entails.<sup>17</sup>

A reduction of the work done in the home is also evidenced by the increasing number of women who delay marriage or do not marry (living alone or in same-sex couples, or in communal settings), as well as the escalating rate of divorces (still primarily filed by women) that, in the '70s, has marked a new record every year. It seems marriage is no longer a "good bargain" for women or a necessary one, and while refusal of marriage is still not on the agenda, women have clearly gained a new mobility with respect to men and can now establish part-time relations with them, where the work element is substantially reduced. To what extent women are refusing to serve men for free is also reflected in the continuous growth of female-headed families.

Here, however, some clarification is needed since too often this trend has been interpreted as a "broken home syndrome" caused by the current welfare policies that prevent the payment of Aid to Families with

Dependent Children (AFDC) in the presence of a husband in the home. In other words, too often the growth of female-headed families is seen in a perspective of victimization that ignores women's attempt to reduce the work and the discipline that come with a male presence in the home. That the impact of welfare policies has been overrated is shown by a recent experiment conducted in Seattle where welfare benefits were given to intact couples. After one year, these couples had the same rate of marital dissolution as other welfare families. This shows that families do not break up to qualify for welfare, rather, welfare buys women more autonomy from men and the possibility of terminating relationships predicated on monetary concerns.<sup>18</sup>

Not only have women reduced housework, they have also changed the conditions of this work. For example, women have challenged the right of the husband to claim sexual services from his wife independently of her consent. The 1979 trial of a man charged with raping his wife was a landmark in this respect, as never before had forcing one's wife to have sex had been considered a crime. Equally significant has been women's revolt against battering, that is to say, corporal punishment in the home, traditionally condoned by the courts and the police that implicitly legitimized it as a condition of being a housewife. Based on the power that women have gained and their determination to refuse the traditional "hazards" of housework, the courts have increasingly recognized the battered wife's right to self-defense.

Another growing trend in the '70s has been "sharing the housework" which has long been supported by many feminists as the ideal solution to the housework problem. Yet, precisely when we consider what has been achieved in this area, we realize the obstacles that women face when they try to enforce a more egalitarian division of labor in the home.

Undoubtedly, men are more likely today to do some housework, particularly among couples where both partners have a job. Many new couples even stipulate a marriage contract establishing the division of labor in the family. In the '70s a new phenomenon has also begun to appear: the *househusband*, possibly more widespread than it is acknowledged, as many men are reluctant to admit that their wives support them. Yet, despite a trend towards a desexualization of housework, as a recent survey indicates, most of the work done in the home is still done by women, even when they have a second job. Even couples that establish more egalitarian relations face a true turn of the tables when a child is born. The reason for this change is the wage benefits that a man forfeits when he takes time off from work to take care of his children. This suggests that even such innovations as flextime are not sufficient to guarantee that housework

will be equally shared, given the decline in the standard of living that the absence of the men from waged work involves. It also suggests that women's attempt to redistribute housework in the family is more likely to be frustrated by the low wages they command in the labor market than by entrenched male attitudes towards this work.

Yet, the clearest evidence that women have used the power of the wage to reduce their unpaid labor in the home has been the explosion of the service sector in the '70s.<sup>19</sup> Cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, even problem solving and companionship have been increasingly "taken out of the home" and organized on a commercial basis. It is calculated that, at present, Americans eat half of their meals away from home, and the fast food industry has grown in the '70s at a yearly 15 percent rate, despite the fact that inflation has encouraged the revival of the "do it yourself" habits. Equally significant has been the explosion of the recreation and entertainment industry that are picking up the traditionally female task of making one's family happy and relaxed. In fact, as wives and mothers have "gone on strike," many of their previously invisible services have become saleable commodities around which entire industries have been built. A typical example is the novel growth of the body industry—ranging from the health club to the massage parlor, with its multiple—sexual, therapeutic, emotional—services, and the industries that have been created around jogging (the popularity of jogging is by itself an indication of the new general awareness that you have to "take care of yourself" because nobody else may be doing it). Further evidence of the trend towards the dis-accumulation of services in the home has been the growth of daycare centers and the dramatic increase in the number of children enrolled in preschool (194 percent for age three between 1966 and 1976).<sup>20</sup>

Taken as whole, these trends indicate a major transformation in the organization of social reproduction, in the sense that this work is increasingly desexualized, taken out of the home and, most important, waged. Thus, while the home remains the center for the reproduction of labor power (or "human capital" from a business viewpoint), its importance as the backbone of reproductive services is waning. The organization of reproduction that prevailed in the Keynesian economic model of the postwar period has entered into crisis. Within it, housework was commanded and regulated through the organization of the male wage that functioned both as direct investments in human capital and as a stimulus to production through its demand-consumption role. In this model, not only did women's work in the home become hidden in the male wage, while the only activity recognized as work was the (waged)

production of commodities, women became appendages, dependent variables of the changes and transformations in the workplace. Where your husband lived, what job he had and what wages he made directly dictated the intensity of women's work and their required levels of productivity. However, in refusing to work for free, women have broken with this deal. They have broken with the home/factory, male wage/housework cycle, posing themselves as "independent variables" that government and employers must confront directly even at the point of reproduction. *With this development we see the reproduction of labor power assume an autonomous status in the economy with respect to the production of commodities*, so much so that the productivity of reproductive work is no longer measured (as it used to be) by the productivity of the male worker on the job, but directly at the point where the services are delivered.

Undoubtedly, throughout the 1970s, government and business have used this reorganization of reproduction to dismantle the social welfare programs that sustained the "human capital development" policy that characterized the postwar period up to the Great Society, and to contain the male wage that had been climbing through the '60s. Claiming that social welfare spending has failed to produce the expected results, the government has encouraged the reorganization of reproduction on a market basis, for it seems to guarantee (despite its low productivity level, at least measured in conventional terms) immediate returns, independent of the productivity of the labor-power to be produced. Yet, while succeeding in reducing welfare spending and creating a climate where welfare is blamed as one of the main problems of American society, the government has failed to eliminate what can be considered the first "wages for housework." Most important, while the "female welfare wage" has fallen and women and poverty are still synonyms, the total wage in the hands of women has decisively increased. As for the attempt to use women's demand for market jobs to contain male wages (through a reorganization of production that underdevelops the manufacturing sectors while encouraging the development of the service sector) this too has failed to provide the expected results.

It has been noticed that despite the high rates of unemployment, we have not witnessed in the 1970s the backlash against women's employment (particularly married women's employment) that was so pronounced in the 1930s and '40s.<sup>21</sup> Men seem to have recognized the benefits of a double income, as indicated by the continued reduction of male participation in the labor force. It is even claimed that men are behaving increasingly like women as far as their work patterns are concerned. Not only is the husband-breadwinner-wife-homemaker model breaking

down (according to the statistics by the Department of Labor this applies today to only 34 percent of men of working age), but husbands with wives holding a market job are less likely to accept job transfers (often turning down job promotions rather than face a move that would disrupt their wives' employment), they also change jobs more frequently, prefer jobs that entail shorter hours to higher salaries, and retire earlier than in the past. Moreover, the double paycheck in the family has provided a crucial buffer against unemployment and inflation, as shown by the experience of the last few years when a predicted recession would not precipitate because consumer demand (and consumer debt) kept expanding. Cushioned by the prospect of a double income, families were less afraid of borrowing and spending, to the point that inflation has had the opposite effect that it has had traditionally: it increased spending rather than diminishing it.

### Conclusions

It is clear that women's refusal to be unpaid workers in the home has caused important changes in the organization of reproduction and the conditions of women's work. What we are witnessing is the crisis of the traditional sexual division of labor that confined women to (unwaged) reproductive labor and men to the (waged) production of commodities. All the power relations between men and women have been built on this "difference," as most women have had no alternative but to depend on men for their economic survival and submit to the discipline that comes with this dependence. As already indicated, the main change in this respect has been accomplished by women's increasing migration into the waged labor force which, in the '70s, has been the main contributor to women's growing social-economic power. This strategy, however, has many limits. While men's work has decreased during the last decade, women today work even harder than in the past. This is particularly true for women heads of families and women with low wages, who are often forced to moonlight to make ends meet.<sup>22</sup> The burden women are still carrying is well reflected in their medical history. Much is made of the fact that women live longer than men. Yet, medical records tell a different story. Women, particularly in their early thirties, have the highest rate of suicide among the young population, as well as the highest rates of drug use, mental breakdown and mental treatment (inpatient and outpatient), and they are more likely to report stress and discomfort than men.<sup>23</sup> These statistics are a symptom of the price that women are paying for either their life as full-time homemakers, or the burden of a double shift, that is, the burden of a life built exclusively on work. Clearly, no positive

change can occur in women's lives unless a profound transformation occurs in social and economic policies and social priorities.

However, if what the newly elected Reagan presidency has promised comes true, women will have to fight a hard battle even to defend what they have gained in the '60s and '70s. We are told that welfare spending will be cut, that the military budget will be increased, and that new tax cuts are planned that will certainly benefit business while giving thin relief to low-income people and none to people with no income. Furthermore, the kind of economic growth that the supply-side economists of the Reagan entourage are promoting threatens women with the nightmare of a continuously growing pollution, brought about by accumulating nuclear waste and industrial deregulation. This means more Three Mile Islands, more Love Canals, more diseases in the family, more day-to-day worrying about one's health and the health of one's children and relatives, more work to cope with it.

At the same time, it is doubtful that a slower rate of economic growth, based on reduced energy consumption, "could have a beneficial effect on women's role in society."<sup>24</sup> The slow-growth economic model usually proposed is the model of a society based on intensive labor, intensifying in particular that component of it that is not waged: housework. What "creative personal activities" the soft technological path opens for women is indicated in the words of one of its supporters, the English economist Amory Lovins: gardening, canning, weaving, do-it-yourself carpentry, making preserves from your own fruits and vegetables, sewing clothes, insulating windows and attics, recycling materials.<sup>25</sup> In exalting the return to "do-it-yourself habits" as a victory of quality over mediocrity, individualism over the System (the emotions such activities release—we are told—are "powerful, lasting, and contagious"), Lovins complains that: "We have substituted earning for an older ethics of serving and caring, as the only legitimate motivation for work. Thus, alienation in the place of fulfillment, inner poverty."<sup>26</sup>

Along the same lines Nancy Barrett envisions that in a slow-growing economy:

The line between work and leisure may become blurred . . . the person who stays at home would not feel useless, if he or she were contributing to fuel conservation and increasing the food supply. To the extent that non-market activity is felt to be socially useful, it is much more likely that non-working people (predominantly women given the prevailing patterns of behavior) will feel more content with staying out of the labor force than in the recent past.<sup>27</sup>

But—it is legitimate to ask—is this idyllic picture of a life built entirely around reproducing oneself and others not the life that women have always had? Are we not hearing again the same glorification of housework, which has traditionally served to justify its unpaid status, by contrasting this "meaningful, useful, and more importantly unselfish activity," with the presumably greedy aspirations of those who demand to be paid for their work? Finally, are we not facing again a variety of the old rationale that has been used to send women back to the home?

However, if the changes women have made over the past decade are any indication of the direction in which American women are moving, it is unlikely that they will be satisfied with an increased in their workload in the home, though accompanied, as it may be, by a universal, but purely moral, recognition of the value of homemaking. In this context, we agree with Nancy Barrett that women:

May find it necessary to center their interest on financial support for non-market activities (and) Wages for Housework, Social Security . . . and other fringe benefits for housework will be matters of increased concern.<sup>28</sup>

## PUTTING FEMINISM BACK ON ITS FEET (1984)

**A**lmost fourteen years have passed since I first became involved in the women's movement. At first it was with a certain distance. I would go to some meetings but with reservations, since to the "politico" that I was, it seemed difficult to reconcile feminism with a "class perspective." Or this at least was the rationale. More likely I was unwilling to accept my identity as a woman after having for years pinned all my hopes on my ability to pass for a man. Two experiences were crucial in my becoming a committed feminist. First my living with Ruth Geller, who has since become a writer and recorded in her *Seed of a Woman* (1979) the beginning of the movement, and who in the typical feminist fashion of the time would continually scorn my enslavement to men. And then my reading Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1970), a pamphlet that was to become one of the most discussed feminist documents of the era. By the time I read the last page, I knew that I had found my home, my tribe and my own self, as a woman and a feminist. From that also stemmed my involvement in the Wages for Housework campaign that women like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James were organizing in Italy and Britain, and my decision to start, in 1973, Wages for Housework groups in the United States.

Of all the positions that developed in the women's movement, Wages for Housework was likely the most controversial and often the most antagonized. I think that marginalizing the struggle for wages for

housework was a serious mistake that weakened the movement. It seems to me now, more than ever, that if the women's movement is to regain its momentum and not be reduced to another pillar of a hierarchical system, it must confront the material condition of women's lives.

Today our choices are more defined because we can measure what we have achieved and see more clearly the limits and possibilities of the strategies adopted in the past. For example, can we still campaign for "equal pay for equal work" when wage differentials are being introduced even in what have traditionally been the strongholds of male working class power? Or can we afford to be confused as to "who is the enemy," when the attack on male workers, by technological unemployment and wage cuts, is used to contain our demands as well? And can we believe that liberation begins with "getting a job and joining the union," when the jobs we get are at the minimum wage and the unions only seem capable of bargaining over the terms of our defeat?

When the women's movement started in the late '60s we believed it was up to us women to turn the world upside down. Sisterhood was a call to build a society free from existing power relations, where we would learn to cooperate and share on an equal basis the wealth our work and the work of other generations before us have produced. Sisterhood also expressed a massive refusal to be housewives, a position that, we all realized, is the first cause of the discrimination against women. Like other feminists before us we discovered that the kitchen is our slave ship, our plantation, and if we wanted to liberate ourselves we first had to break with our identification with housework and, in Marge Piercy's words, refuse to be a "grand coolie damn." We wanted to gain control over our bodies and our sexuality, put an end to the slavery of the nuclear family and to our dependence on men, and explore what kind of human beings we would want to be once we would begin to free ourselves from the scars that centuries of exploitations have left on us. Despite emerging political differences, these were the goals of the women's movement, and to achieve them we battled on every front. No movement, however, can sustain itself and grow unless it develops a strategic perspective unifying its struggles and mediating its long-term objectives with the possibilities open in the present. This sense of strategy is what has been missing in the women's movement, which has continually shifted between a utopian dimension posing the need for a total change and a day-to-day practice that has assumed the immutability of the institutional system.

One of the main shortcomings of the women's movement has been its tendency to overemphasize the role of consciousness in the context of social change, as if enslavement were a mental condition and liberation

could be achieved by an act of will. Presumably, if we wanted, we could stop being exploited by men and employers, raise our children according to our standards, come out and, starting from the present, revolutionize our day-to-day life. Undoubtedly some women already had the power to take these steps, so that changing their lives could actually appear an act of will. But for millions of us these recommendations could only turn into an imputation of guilt, short of building the material conditions that would make them possible. And when the question of the material conditions was posed, the choice of the movement was to fight for what seemed compatible with the structure of the economic system, rather than for what would expand our social basis and provide a new level of power for all women.

Though the "utopian" moment was never completely lost, increasingly, feminism has operated in a framework in which the system—its goals, its priorities, its productivity deals—is not questioned and sexual discrimination can appear as the malfunctioning of otherwise perfectible institutions. Feminism has become equated with gaining equal opportunity in the labor market, from the factory to the corporate room, gaining equal status with men, and transforming our lives and personalities to fit our new productive tasks. That "leaving the home" and "going to work" is a precondition for our liberation is something few feminists, already in the early '70s, ever questioned. For the liberals the job was coated in the glamour of the career, for the socialists it meant that women would "join the class struggle" and benefit from the experience of performing "socially useful, productive labor." In both cases, what for women was an economic necessity was elevated into a strategy whereby work itself seemed to become a path to liberation. The strategic importance attributed to women's "entering the workplace" can be measured by the widespread opposition to our campaign for wages for housework, which was accused of being economic and institutionalizing women in the home. Yet, the demand for wages for housework was crucial from many viewpoints. First it recognized that housework is work—the work of producing and reproducing the workforce—and in this way it exposed the enormous amount of unpaid labor that goes on unchallenged and unseen in this society. It also recognized that housework is the one problem all of us have in common, thus providing the possibility of uniting women around a common objective and fighting on the terrain where our forces are strongest. Finally it seemed to us that posing "getting a job" as the main condition for becoming independent of men would alienate those women who do not want to work outside the home, because they work hard enough taking care of their families, and if they "go to work" they do it because they need the

money and not because they consider it a liberating experience, particularly since having a job never frees you from housework.

We believed that the women's movement should not set models to which women would have to conform, but rather devise strategies to expand our possibilities. Once getting a job is considered necessary to our liberation, the woman who refuses to exchange her work in a kitchen for work in a factory is inevitably branded as backward and, beside being ignored, her problems are turned into her own fault. It is likely that many women who were later mobilized by the New Moral Majority could have been won to the movement if it had addressed their needs. Often when an article appeared about our campaign, or we were invited to talk on a radio program, we received dozens of letters by women who would tell us about their lives or at times would simply write: "Dear Sir, tell me what I have to do to get wages for housework." Their stories were always the same. They worked long hours, with no time left and no money of their own. And then there were older women, starving on SSI (Supplementary Security Income), who would ask us whether they could keep a cat, because they were afraid that if the social worker found out they had an animal their benefits would be cut. What did the women's movement have to offer to these women? Go out and get a job so that you can join the struggles of the working class? But their problem was that they already worked too much, and eight hours at a cash register or on an assembly line is hardly an enticing proposition when you have to juggle it with a husband and kids at home. As we so often repeated, what we need is more time, more money, not more work. And we need daycare centers, not just to be liberated for more work, but to be able to take a walk, talk to our friends, or go to a women's meeting.

Wages for housework meant opening a struggle directly on the question of reproduction, and establishing that raising children and taking care of people is a social responsibility. In a future society free from exploitation we will decide how this social responsibility is best absolved and shared among us. In this society where money governs all our relations, to ask for social responsibility is to ask that those who benefit from housework (business and the state as the "collective capitalist") pay for it. Otherwise we subscribe to the myth—so costly for us women—that raising children and serving those who work is a private, individual matter and that only "male culture" is to blame for the stifling ways in which we live, love and congregate with each other. Unfortunately the women's movement has largely ignored the question of reproduction or offered individual solutions, like sharing the housework, which do not provide an alternative to the isolated battles many of us have already been waging.

Even during the struggle for abortion most feminists fought only for the right not to have children, though this is just one side of control over our bodies and reproductive choice. What if we want to have children but cannot afford to raise them, except at the price of not having any time for ourselves and being continuously plagued by financial worries? For as long as housework goes unpaid, there will be no incentives to provide the social services necessary to reduce our work, as proved by the fact that, despite a strong women's movement, subsidized day care has been steadily reduced through the '70s. I should add that wages for housework never meant simply a paycheck. It also meant more social services and free social services.

Was this a utopian dream? Many women seemed to think so. I know, however, that in several cities of Italy, as a result of the student movement, in the hours when students go to school, buses are free. In Athens, until 9 a.m., the time when most people go to work, you do not pay on the subway. And these are not rich countries. Why, then, in the United States, where more wealth is accumulated than in the rest of the world, should it be unrealistic to demand that women with children be entitled to free transportation, since everybody knows that at three dollars a trip, no matter how high your consciousness is raised, you are inevitably confined to the home? Wages for housework was a reappropriation strategy, expanding the famous "pie" to which workers in this country are considered entitled. It would have meant a major redistribution of wealth from the rich in favor of women and male workers as well, since nothing would so quickly de-sexualize housework as a paycheck for it. But there was a time when money was a dirty word for many feminists.

One of the consequences of the rejection of wages for housework is that little effort was made to mobilize against the attack on welfare benefits that have unfolded since the beginning of the '70s, and thus the struggle over welfare has been undermined. For if it is true that housework should not be paid, then women on ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) are not entitled to the money they receive, and the state is right in trying to "make them work" for their checks. Most feminists had the same attitude towards women on welfare as many have towards "the poor": compassion, but not identification, though it was generally agreed that we are all "a husband away from a welfare line."

An example of the divisions the politics of the movement has fostered is in the history of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). Feminists mobilized when CLUW was formed in 1974, and by the hundreds participated in the founding conference held in Chicago in March of that year. But when a group of welfare mothers led by Beulah Sanders

and the wives of the miners on strike at Harlan County asked to participate, claiming they too were workers, they were turned down (with the promise of a "solidarity dinner" on that Saturday) because, they were told, the conference was reserved to card carrying union members.

The history of the last five years has shown the limits of these politics. As everybody admits, "women" has become synonymous with "poverty," as women's wages have been continuously falling both in absolute terms and relative to male wages (in 1984, 72 percent of full-time working women made less than \$14,000, the majority averaging \$9,000-\$10,000, while women with two children on welfare made \$5,000 at best). Moreover, we have lost most subsidized forms of childcare, and many women now work on a cottage-industry basis, at piecework rates often below the minimum wage, because it is the only possibility they have to earn some money and take care of their children at the same time.

Feminists charged that wages for housework would isolate women in the home. But are you less isolated when you are forced to moonlight and have no money to go any place, not to mention the time to do political work? Isolation also means being forced to compete with other women for the same jobs, or with a black or white man over who should be fired first. This is not to suggest that we should not fight to keep our jobs. But a movement that purports to struggle for liberation should have a broader perspective, particularly in a country like the United States, where the level of accumulated wealth and technological development make utopia a concrete possibility.

The women's movement must realize that work is not liberation. Work in a capitalist system is exploitation and there is no pleasure, pride or creativity in being exploited. Even the "career" is an illusion as far as self-fulfillment is concerned. What is rarely acknowledged is that most career-type jobs require that you exert power over other people, often other women and this deepens the divisions between us. We try to escape blue collar or clerical ghettos in order to have more time and more satisfaction only to discover that the price we pay for advancing is the distance that intervenes between us and other women. However there is no discipline we impose on others that we do not at the same time impose on ourselves, which means that in performing these jobs we actually undermine our own struggles.

Even holding a position in the academic world is not a road to becoming more fulfilled or creative. In the absence of a strong women's movement working in academia can be stifling, because you have to meet standards you do not have the power to determine and soon you begin to speak a language that is not your own. From this point of view it does not

make any difference whether you teach Euclidean geometry or women's history, though women's studies still provide an enclave that, relatively speaking, allows us to be "more free." But little islands are not enough. It is our relation to intellectual work and academic institutions that has to be changed. Women's Studies are reserved to those who can pay or are willing to make a sacrifice, adding a school day to the workday in continuing education courses. But all women should have free access to school, for as long as studying is a commodity we have to pay for, or a step in the "job hunt," our relation to intellectual work cannot be a liberating experience.

In Italy in 1973, the metal mechanic workers won 150 hours of school on paid work-time as part of their contract and shortly after many other workers began to appropriate this possibility, even if it was not in their contract. More recently in France a school reform proposed by the Mitterrand government opened access to the university to women, independently of any qualifications. Why hasn't the women's movement posed the question of freeing the university, not simply in terms of what subjects should be studied, but in terms of eliminating the financial cost of studying?

I am interested in building a society in which creativity is a mass condition and not a gift reserved to the happy few, even if half of them are women. Our story at present is that of thousands of women who are agonizing over the book, the painting or the music they can never finish, or cannot even begin, because they have neither the time nor money. We must also broaden our conception of what it means to be creative. At its best, one of the most creative activities is being involved in a struggle with other people, breaking out of our isolation, seeing our relations with others change, discovering new dimensions in our lives. I will never forget the first time I found myself in a room with 500 other women, on New Year's Eve 1970, watching a feminist theatre group: it was a leap in consciousness few books had ever produced. In the women's movement this was a mass experience. Women who had been unable to say a word in public would learn to give speeches, others who were convinced they had no artistic skills would make songs, design banners and posters. It was a powerful collective experience. Overcoming our sense of powerlessness is indispensable for creative work. It is a truism that you cannot produce anything worthwhile unless you speak to what matters in your life. Bertolt Brecht said that what is produced in boredom can only generate boredom and he was right. But in order to translate our pains and pleasures into a page or a song or a drawing we must have a sense of power, enough to believe that our words will be heard. This is why the women's movement saw an explosion of creativity. Think of journals from the early

'70s like *Notes from the First Year* (1970) and *No More Fun and Games* (1970), such powerful language, almost all of a sudden, after we had been mute for so long.

It is power—not power over others but against those who oppress us—that expands our consciousness. I have often said that our consciousness is very different depending on whether we are with 10,000 women in the streets, or in small groups, or alone in our bedrooms. This was the strength the women's movement gave to us. Women who ten years earlier may have been subdued suburban housewives called themselves Witches and sabotaged bridal fairs, dared to be blasphemous, proposing, as in the *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), suicidal centers for men, and from the vantage point of our position at the bottom declared that we had to shake the entire social system off its foundations. But it is the moderate soul of the movement that has prevailed. Feminism now is winning the Equal Rights Amendment, as if the objective of women's struggles were the universalization of the male condition. Let me clarify, since criticism of the ERA is usually taken as a betrayal of the feminist movement, that I am not against a legislative act stating that we are equal to men. I am against concentrating all our energies on fighting for a law that at best can have a limited effect on our lives. We should also decide *in what respect we want to be equal to men*, unless we assume that men are already liberated. One type of equality we should refuse is equality in the military, i.e., winning women's right to have a combat role. This is a goal organizations like NOW have campaigned for in the '70s, so much so that the defeat of Carter's proposal to draft women could paradoxically be represented as a defeat for feminism. But if this is feminism I am not a feminist, because I don't want to assist the U.S. imperialistic politics and perhaps die in the process. To fight for equal rights in this case undermines the struggle that men are waging to refuse the draft. For how can you legitimize your struggle when what you refuse is presumably considered a privilege by the other half of the population? Another example is protective legislation. There is no doubt that protective legislations were always instituted with the sole purpose of excluding women from certain jobs and certain unions, and not out of concern for our well-being. But we cannot simply demand that protective legislation be struck down in a country where every year 14,000 people on an average die in work-related accidents, not to mention those who remain maimed or die slowly of cancer or chemical intoxication. *Otherwise the equality we gain is the equality of black lungs, the equal right to die in a mine, as women miners have already done. We need to change working conditions for both women and men, so that everybody is protected.* The ERA, moreover, does not even begin to address the

question of housework and child-raising, although as long as children are our responsibility any notion of equality is doomed to remain an illusion.

I am convinced that these are the issues the women's movement must confront if it wants to be an autonomous political force. Certainly, there is now a widespread awareness of feminist issues. But feminism risks becoming an institution. There is hardly a politician who dares not to profess eternal devotion to women's rights, and wisely so, since what they have in mind is our "right to work," for our cheap labor is a true cornucopia for the system. Meanwhile feminist heroines are no longer Emma Goldman or Mother Jones, but Sally Ride, the first woman in space, the ideal symbol of the self-reliant, highly skilled woman capable of conquering the most secluded male territories, and Mrs. Wilson, the head of the National Caucus who, despite her pregnancy, decided to run for a second term.

There are however signs today that the paralysis the women's movement has suffered from may be coming to an end. A turning point has been the organization of the Seneca Women's Encampment, which has marked the beginning of a *feminist-lesbian antiwar movement*. With this our experiences are coming full circle. The first feminist groups were formed by women who had been active in antiwar organizations but had discovered that their "revolutionary brothers," so sensitive to the needs of the exploited of the world, would blatantly ignore their concerns, unless they took their struggle into their own hands. Now, fourteen years later, women are building their antiwar movement starting directly from their needs.

Today the revolt of women against all types of wars is visible across the world: from Greenham Common to Seneca Falls, from Argentina, where the mothers of the *desaparecidos* have been in the forefront of the resistance to military repression, to Ethiopia, where this summer women have taken to the streets to reclaim their children the government has drafted. A women's antiwar movement is particularly crucial in the United States, a country that seems bent on asserting, by the power of its bombers, its domination over the planet.

In the '60s, we were inspired by the struggles of the Vietnamese women, who showed to us that we too could fight and change the course of the world. Today we should be warned by the despair we see on women's faces, cast every night on our screens as they crowd into refugee camps or wander with their children among the wrecks of their homes destroyed by the bombs our wage cuts have paid for. Unless we regain our impulse to change this society from the bottom up, the agony they currently suffer may be soon our own.

## II GLOBALIZATION AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION