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„Commons will become increasingly important for feminists movements in Europe“

Interview mit Silvia Federici

Silvia Federici, geboren 1942 im italienischen Parma, lebt und arbeitet seit vielen Jahren in New York City. Sie ist feministische Aktivistin, Autorin und emeritierte Professorin für politische Philosophie und internationale Politik. 1972 war sie Gründungsmitglied des International Feminist Collective, das die internationale „Lohn für Hausarbeit“-Kampagne initiierte. Sie hat zahlreiche Bücher und Essays zu marxistischer und feministischer Theorie und zur Globalisierungskritik und neuerdings zum Konzept der Commons (Gemeingüter) veröffentlicht. 2012 erschienen ihre Bücher „Aufstand aus der Küche. Reproduktionsarbeit im globalen Kapitalismus und die unvollendete feministische Revolution“ und „Caliban und die Hexe. Frauen, der Körper und die ursprüngliche Akkumulation“ in deutscher Übersetzung.¹ Magdalena Freudenschuss und Alexandra Scheele haben sie gebeten, für diesen Schwerpunkt schriftlich einige Fragen zu beantworten.

***Femina Politica:** Since the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, we've heard about many different justifications and criticisms of the global system, coming from li-*

*berals, from Marxists and other critics on the Left. But we haven't heard a lot of feminist explanations for what occurred. What does a feminist critique of finance capitalism look like?*²

Silvia Federici: Finance capitalism is not very different in nature from capitalism, in general. The idea that there is something more wholesome about production-based capitalism is an illusion we must abandon. It ignores the fact that finance capitalism is also based on production, and unequal and exploitative class relations, although in a more circuitous way. A feminist critique of financial capitalism, then, cannot be substantially different from a critique of capitalism in every other form. Nevertheless, looking at finance capitalism from the viewpoint of women, we can gain insights into some of the ways in which our everyday reproductive labor and the relations between women and capital have changed. We see, first, that financial transactions – whether they are based on credit cards, student loans, or mortgages – have become part of our everyday means of subsistence. Like male workers, many women have come to rely on them to make ends meet and to satisfy their desires. This by itself indicates that the world of finance is not a fictitious sphere of capitalist relations but reaches deeply into our day-to-day lives. It also indicates that, increasingly, women now confront capital directly, rather than through the mediation of the male wage, as had been the case for women who worked exclusively in the home, or through the mediation of the state, as was and remains the case for women on welfare and other forms of social assistance. Indeed, through the entanglement of finance capital in the working of our daily lives, financialization has become one of the main reasons for confrontation between women and capital, and this is an international phenomenon.

We see the same dynamics arising with the development of micro-credit in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. Micro-finance has become one of the main tools by which international agencies have attempted to bring a whole population of women formerly engaged in subsistence economies under the control of global monetary relations, that is, by encouraging them to see themselves as market entrepreneurs and to take out loans for small enterprises. While these programs have been heavily promoted by investors, banks and “development” professionals in the global North, they have proven to be one of the most contested policies directed towards women worldwide, since far from “empowering” women (as the rhetoric goes), they are turning them into debtors and, in this way, transforming their daily micro-reproductive/marketing activities into sources of value-creation and accumulation for others. In some cases (e.g., in Bolivia in 2002), women have besieged the banks to protest their debts and the extortionist policies banks and lenders have enforced. There have also been cases of women who have hanged themselves because they could not pay back their debts.

This situation shows that when we speak of a “financial crisis,” we must be very careful not to assume that we are speaking of one reality alone. For surely the massive

indebtedness that women have incurred both in the North and the South, through credit cards, loans or micro-credit, is a financial crisis in itself!

As for the other financial crisis, the one which capital declared began in 2008 and which continues to this day, we can see that it amounts to one more twist and turn in a process that has been unfolding now for 35 years, starting in the mid 1970s, when I wrote my first paper on women and the crisis. At the time, the economic crisis could have been interpreted as a contingent phenomenon caused by the sudden hike in the price of oil, in the wake of the oil embargo imposed in 1974, which then triggered an inflationary spiral affecting all prices, especially agricultural and energy prices. To many of us, however, it was clear that this was but the first salvo of a war against workers that has lasted to this day, attempting to regain at the pump and the supermarket what employers had been forced to concede on the factory floor or in the welfare office. As I wrote at the time, to a large extent, capital's crisis was artificially created to restore work-discipline and adequate profit-rates, which the struggle of the 1960s and 1970s in the colonies and the metropolitan area had undermined.³

Since then, we have been living in a state of permanent crisis, insofar as global capitalism has been waging a continuous attack on people's means of subsistence, and on women's, in particular. This has been especially devastating for women in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The difference today is that the crisis has been unleashed on populations that by now have nothing left; the attack has also been extended to once relatively affluent people in Europe and North America. Its objectives, and the effects it has on women, are predictable, however. Not surprisingly, the reports on this subject stemming from international institutions (like the United Nations) are increasingly formulaic. Once again, we hear that "the conventional conceptual frameworks used to design macro-economic policies are gender blind." We nonetheless hear about "the disproportionate burden women bear in the financial crisis," and the negative impact this will have on their access to education and healthcare. We are told that the crisis "threatens women's meager gains" and will lead to a further expansion of women's unpaid and "informal" labor. How many times have we heard these laments, often from women themselves (self-described feminists included) who are totally complicit with the institutional system responsible for the policies that have caused the crisis in the first place, over which now they shed crocodile tears?

Clearly, employers and the state once again expect women to absorb the cost of the new austerity programs being introduced and to compensate both for the cuts in social services and for the increased costs of food, fuel and housing with extra labor, both in the home and outside the home. This is what British Prime Minister David Cameron's "Big Society" program is about: downloading the costs of reproduction from society and government onto women – never mind demanding a greater share from corporations and capital, despite the fact that they depend on that reproduction. The financial crisis is an excuse to extend these policies.

FP: You promote the concept of the commons very strongly. We have the impression that so far this concept has rather been marginal within current feminist debates. In what respects would you consider the politics of the commons an appropriate way for feminists to intervene in the political economy?

S.F.: Outside Europe, the question of the commons has already become a key issue for feminists, inspired, on the one hand, both by the neo-liberal drive to enclose lands, waters, forests and, on the other hand, by the many forms of collective reproduction (e.g., collective kitchens, urban gardens) that women have created in response to economic liberalization and the austerity programs it has imposed. I am thinking here of the work of feminists like Vandana Shiva, who for years has fought against the material and spiritual impoverishment that new land and water “enclosures” have produced. Among others, Shiva has argued that women are those most negatively affected by the destruction of the existing “commons”; for the same reason, they are the people most interested in their preservation, having a more precarious relation to monetary income and being directly responsible for the reproduction of their families and communities. Shiva has also documented some of the struggles that women are undertaking to prevent the logging of forests, like the battle of the Chikpo Movement in India, and the many campaigns in which she has herself participated against the privatization and commercialization of natural resources and knowledge systems. Her work, “Earth Democracy” (2005) is dedicated to the question of the commons.

I am convinced that the question of the commons will become increasingly important for feminist movements in Europe as well, since it is the main vehicle through which we can imagine an alternative to capitalist society as well as to the crisis involving our reproduction. Because waged work is becoming more precarious and all forms of state investment in pensions, healthcare, education are quickly vanishing, the construction of new forms of co-operations providing for our needs and forming a base from which to confront the state is becoming an urgent necessity in Europe, too. Solidarity economies (time banks, urban gardens, community-run nurseries and daycares) are already proliferating. As the crisis intensifies, these initiatives will increase, as appears to be happening today in Spain and Greece. Most importantly, the principle of the commons expresses our aspiring to become a society governed by cooperation rather than by competition, a society in which decisions concerning our lives are made collectively and from the ground up, and in which we have access to the wealth we produce, rather than having it expropriated from us. For feminists the principle of the commons also represents a foundation for rethinking the organization of domestic work and the home, enabling more collective forms of reproduction and less isolating ways of organizing everyday life.

FP: Given the scarcity of feminist uptakes of the politics of the commons, which theoretical and activist trajectories do you consider central for introducing feminist currents within the debates on commoning?

S.F.: Several theoretical and activist trajectories are important for building a feminist politics based on the principle of the commons. The first is the eco-feminist trajectory, represented by the work of Vandana Shiva, Ariel Salleh, and Maria Mies, who stress the contributions that women have made to the defense of our eco-systems and bio-diversity, as well as to the preservation and creation of systems of reproduction (e.g., subsistence farming) not governed by the logic of the market. A second trajectory draws on the work of Dolores Hayden, a North American historian of urban planning who has inspired much feminist thinking concerning the reconstruction of domestic and urban space, in addition to expanding our knowledge of the efforts feminists have undertaken in the past to re-imagine the home and overcome the isolation in which domestic work is performed. However, feminist visions of the commons are also shaped today by the initiatives and experiments that women are conducting on the ground, like the hundreds of kitchen, shopping or gardening committees that women have formed in many South American countries to cut the cost of reproductive family labor, stretch their budgets and gain more strength through collective action. Indeed, there is a silent revolution taking place in many parts of the world in which women are the protagonists; in response to the collapse of family wages and often their marriages, they are forming new communities, new cooperative relations, and revolutionizing the conditions of reproduction. With the men abroad or unable to support their families, women have stepped forward, joining with other women to create new extended families; as squatters, they are occupying farm lands and urban spaces, negotiating and fighting with the state to obtain services, organizing networks of micro-trading, bartering activities. What matters in these developments is not only the economic dimension but the transformation of everyday life and the social relations they generate.

A new society is being created amidst the crisis in which women, as well as men, are learning to structure their lives in common; I believe this is a precondition for the success of any other struggle and, in particular, for the reclamation of the wealth that generations have produced which is now being held hostage in the hands of the state. We cannot construct new social relations, or even a new mode of production over time, unless we have access to farmlands, fisheries, houses, buildings for schools, and means of transport. This is why we need to defend our “public” wealth, prevent its privatization.

But the “public” remains a factor in defining the private. The management of public wealth is a function of the state’s organization of social reproduction, which aims to guarantee capital a sufficiently disciplined workforce and adequate rates of labor exploitation. Thus, we do not control it. At any point, this can be taken away from us, as so often happens today. This means that even as we defend our access to the

“the public sphere” we need to develop forms of struggle whose horizon focuses on commonly shared wealth, built and cared for from the ground up, through grassroots structures and organizations, on the basis of equal access, fair use and collective decision making.

Naturally one precondition for this development would be the construction of a common interest, and collective subject, against the many ways in which we have been divided.

FP: Looking at the recipes governments world-wide have chosen to combat the outcomes of the financial and economic crisis, one gets the impression that they are more or less following the old neo-liberal strategy of further deregulation, increased flexibility and the further privatization of care work. Do you see any chance that the ideals and concepts of the commons will receive more attention or are even being discussed within the official political arenas?

S.F.: The idea of “the commons” is already amply used and manipulated by neo-liberal governments, both in order to respond to the social reproduction crisis that their policies have generated and to create new areas of “social investment” and new sources of accumulation. Of course, the idea of the commons used in government and financial circles is the opposite of that which inspires radical politics and shapes grass roots practice at present, but it does pretend to be motivated by the desire to enhance social cohesion and cooperation. One example is the “Big Society”-Program already mentioned, which the British Government has promoted since 2010. In the name of “empowering” the community and boosting communitarian values, it legitimizes cuts in social services and mobilizes our unpaid labor. According to this program, banks will invest, on a competitive basis in social activities and organizations that replace government-provided services; the activities and associations likely to be selected will be those that promise the biggest cuts. In this way, as with micro-finance – to which I will return – we have a shift in the direction of financializing our reproduction, in the sense that reproduction becomes a terrain of financial investment and accumulation. We also see an expansion of voluntary/unwaged reproductive labor, masquerading as community involvement, community autonomy, and community control over reproductive activities. But as Emma Dowling has put it, in an article on this issue, “The ‘Big Society’ is about increasing the huge amount of work we do in its unwaged form (...). Using the affectively enticing discourses of mutualism, cooperation, collectivity and empowerment, the state off-loads the cost of the crisis directly onto all of us (...) in the name of caring directly for one another as opposed to asking the State to do so – the Government is drastically reducing the social wage and making us work more for less and, in many cases, for free.”⁷⁴ Needless to say, the targets here are primarily women, who are still the main subjects of reproductive work and who continue to perform most of the world’s unpaid labor. The introduction of “micro-finance” also feeds on the model of the commons but

as with the “Big Society” actually uses the commons to commercialize and privatize social relations. Micro-finance programs are patterned on the various systems that women across the world have created in order to pool their resources, like the tontines system⁵ widespread in many parts of Africa and beyond. In fact it is now spread also among women immigrants in the US. As we know, loans are given to individuals who are part of a group, but each group member is made responsible for repayment, so that the group itself ceases to be a support system, becoming instead a policing mechanism at the service of the banks and the NGOs that administer the loans. We have to be very careful, then, in our discussions of the commons and commoning practices to ensure that they actually expand the wealth available for reproduction and represent genuine forms of self-government, but do not become vehicles for further privatizations and institutionally manufactured social forms.

FP: Nancy Fraser argued some years ago that feminist ideas have been taken up over time by neo-liberal ideologies, thereby “helping” these kinds of politics to persist. Your argumentation sounds similar: If the idea is taken up in a perverted way by current policies, how can feminist movements (or other social movements) avoid this dilemma?

S.F.: This is not an easy question to answer, yet it is an essential one. Nancy Fraser is right. Starting with the mid 1970s, the Feminist Movement was increasingly institutionalized through the intervention of the United Nations in feminist politics and subsequently used as a prop for the neo-liberal agenda, at the very time when the agencies that were part of the UN system began adopting economic policies that devastated the lives of millions of women worldwide. How do we prevent our ideas, our slogans, and our principles from being distorted or co-opted? We cannot prevent economic and political planners from trying to appropriate our language. Think of what has happened to democracy and, as we mentioned, feminism. What we can do, however, is to gain clarity as to the social relations we are creating. One simple method is to question, at all points, whether the commons we create do, in fact, give us the power, or at least more power, to resist exploitation, whether or not they undermine the hierarchies and divisions among the world’s proletariat, and extend the control we have over our lives. From this vantage point, we have to reject the gated communities that are sprawling across the world built on the principles of exclusion and the homogeneity of their members. We must also distance ourselves from commoning projects that claim to better the lives of people but lack interest in broader processes of social transformation, envisioning the collectivity only as a means to exercise more power with regard to the market. The commons should not become happy islands in a sea of exploitative relations but rather autonomous spaces from which to challenge existing relations.

We avoid co-optation when we pursue commoning as a means for building alternatives to the existent order of things; we need to be clear about its essential guidelines,

regardless of what forms our commons may take. First, “no commons without a community” consisting of not only users of shared wealth but also of persons bearing responsibilities with regard to it. This is why I, among others, oppose the notion of “the global commons”, not surprisingly promoted by the World Bank, which would like to appear as a representative of humanity. No such global community exists or can exist. Thus, while we should be concerned with the quality and treatment of the world’s waters, airs and forests, we should not advocate our right to decide what happens in localities in which we are not present, for which we have no responsibility, and to which we have not contributed our care and our work. While we should be concerned about the destiny of the Amazon or the Arctic, we should not pretend that we have claims over these regions. Another essential requirement (already noted) should be the refusal to reduce commoning to schemes for mobilizing unpaid labor. The challenge we face is to build a commons that must necessarily be transitional in form, thus to some extent they must be of an experimental nature, existing as they do in a society where private property relations, for now, remain hegemonic.

FP: Thank you very much for your reflections.

Anmerkungen

- 1 Federici, Sylvia: *Aufstand aus der Küche. Reproduktionsarbeit im globalen Kapitalismus*. Münster 2012; *Dies.: Caliban und die Hexe. Frauen, der Körper und die ursprüngliche Akkumulation*. Wien 2012.
- 2 The first question and answer have been taken from an interview with Silvia Federici conducted by Max Haiven, titled “Feminism, Finance, and the Future of #Occupy.” Friday November 25, 2011. Communications | Feminism, Finance and the Future of #Occupy ...www.zcommunications.org/feminism-finance-and-the-future-of-occupy-an-interview-with-silvia-federici-by-max-haiven
- 3 Silvia Federici, „Wages For Housework And The Crisis,” paper presented at the Second Conference of the International Wages For Housework Campaign, held in Montreal (Canada) in February 1975.
- 4 Emma Dowling, „Capital’s Other Possible World: Harnessing Social Value(s) On the Path To Recovery. The Case Of The .Big Society’ In The UK.” Transcript of the talk given at the workshop “State, Crisis and the Refusal of Recovery”, Istanbul Bilgi University, July 2011. For further discussions by Emma Dowling on the .Big Society’ program see: www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/authors/tag/Emma+Dowling.
- 5 The “tontines” is a popular, grassroots, saving system widespread in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean Islands. Participants are informal women’s groups who periodically (on a weekly or monthly basis) contribute a stipulated sum to a common fund, that is later redistributed at the end of a cycle or when a member needs to draw from it.