

# *A Conversation on Reproductive Work and the University with Silvia Federici*

**Interviewed by Ylenia Olibet and Kerry McElroy**

Silvia Federici, currently Professor Emerita at Hofstra University, is a feminist philosopher and political activist. Her research on reproductive labour, feminist commons, and anti-capitalist struggles has always been coupled with political activism across different social movements. In January 2019, Federici introduced Astra Taylor's documentary *What is Democracy?* (2018) at Cinema Politica in Montreal, which explores the links between neoliberal capitalism and social possibilities in a way that mirrors Federici's own most notable work. Although the concept of 'democracy' might show its limits when deployed in liberal-individualistic terms, it is still a value worth fighting for if intended as an opportunity to foreground the process of *reproduction*. In this case, reproduction entails the idea of caring for one another, as well as building communities and new forms of cooperation against the logic of capital. Connecting this reflection prompted by Taylor's film to the topics of financialization of the university system, as discussed at The Labour of Media (Studies) conference held in November 2018 at Concordia University, and to the function of labour in the context of pedagogy that this issue of *Synoptique* specifically addresses, the medialabour collective chose to interview Silvia Federici on her experiences as an activist-scholar. Federici's historical

and theoretical work on reproductive labour is crucial to understanding knowledge work. In addition, her body of work on the broader economic and political infrastructure that sustains academic labour is vital. Ylenia Olibet and Kerry McElroy, both doctoral students and feminist scholars at Concordia University, met Silvia in her hotel room on a cold January morning and interviewed her about her embodied experiences in both academia and social movements.

**Ylenia Olibet and Kerry McElroy: Your experience as a feminist scholar and activist, demonstrates that your intellectual engagement has always been coupled with a praxis, as seen from participating in the struggles of the feminist campaign of Wages for Housework, to the most recent Occupy movement. Could you say something about your trajectory and your influences? How did you develop political work within and outside the university?**

Silvia Federici: In the 1960s, I was a young woman, but I was hearing a lot about the Congo, Lumumba, Algeria, Cuba, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, and then the Civil rights movement in the US. My town in Italy was very progressive, so the anticolonial struggle was alive. I remember going out with my class and participating in the protests, I remember the images of these revolutions. So, for me it was quite normal

to carry on my political activism within the university. Teaching has fundamentally been a job for me. It means that every place I have been, I also carried on my political activism. Yet, my political activism has never really started from the university, but from outside. Then, I would bring it into the university, responding to new issues and struggles. For example, I taught for three years in Nigeria, at the time in which the university system in Nigeria and other countries was being destroyed by the World Bank, the IMF, and the Structural Adjustment Programs. Thus, as many African countries were cutting subsidies to education and to students, major protests on different campuses were organized. The governments began to ban students' organizations. Along with other fellows, we began the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa. For a number of years, I was involved in this organization that used the notion of academic freedom in a very polemical way, defining it as the right to study, and using this concept to support the struggles of students and teachers. In this sense, there was never a conflict between political work within and outside the university. This is due to the fact that, on one hand, my teaching has always continued the kind of activism I was doing outside, while on the other, from the very beginning it was clear to me that the university is a field of struggle. As a student in the 1960s, I was protesting, and I continued to do so as a teacher in the US and in Nigeria. Those who see a conflict between political work and working in academia are often afraid to expose themselves in academia, to lose their jobs. But it's not impossible to reconcile the two. I have never thought of starting working in academia and keeping my mouth shut until I get tenure. I have never seen a person that started being vocal only after getting tenure. If you practice silencing yourself at the beginning of your career, you silence yourself afterward, too. So, my advice to those in academia is "liberate your tongue"!

**As you were saying, in the 1990s, you were on the frontlines in the formation of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA). CAFA was an organization formed**

**to support students and scholars struggling against the privatization of the educational system and for better conditions of academic work, following Structural Adjustment Programs in Africa that deeply transformed the academic infrastructure in the continent. CAFA represented a crucial cultural-political moment that contributed to the understanding of the university as a key space of class struggle, one where alliances between workers may be forged in order to organize contestations against the dismantling of public education by global capital. Can you tell us more about that experience?**

A major conference was held in Kampala, Uganda in 1990, that brought together a lot of teachers and students to discuss confronting the cuts to subsidies to education and to students. For the first time in that context, students were not the elite, they mostly came from the peasant community, so they really needed those subsidies for food and transport. At the conference in Kampala, the concept of academic freedom, which is at first an elitist concept, began to be used in a different way in order to express support to the struggles of students and teachers. Meanwhile, I came back to the US and my African colleagues were expatriating because they couldn't find ways of surviving in Africa. There was a lot of repression on the campuses. In 1986, students that were peacefully protesting against the Structural Adjustment Program were massacred on the campus of Ahmadu Bello University, in Zaria, Nigeria. The Nigeria Students Association had to live underground. The campus where I was teaching in Nigeria became a battlefield several times. We decided we needed to do something. We began a process of building support and we founded the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa. We published a bulletin that continued for 13 years. I think that our newsletter quite successfully carried on an analysis of Structural Adjustment Programs and connected continuous attacks on universities to the changes that were taking place in the global economy, and the international division of labour. We came to the conclusions that in the plans of international capital (the World Bank,

the IMF, etc.) Africans were supposed to provide manual labour. A consequence of the Structural Adjustment Programs was the elimination of any field of study that would enable the possibility of protest (ie. the Humanities, courses on Marx or anticolonial history, etc.).

We broadened this kind of analysis to other parts of the world, while we were documenting the struggles in Africa. We also published the book *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African University* with African World Press. Frankly, I don't think we succeeded in our goal, which was to mobilise the campuses in the US. We never saw that kind of mobilization. However, I think that our work was mostly important for African students and teachers, as we provided a broader perspective on those changes, and collected a lot of documentation. We drew connections between anti-colonial struggles and the students' struggles on their campuses. We thought and spoke of Structural Adjustment Programs as new forms of colonialism, as a process of re-colonization. Over the years, I have seen that our work was useful. Then, the more and more we were analyzing the situation in Africa, we discovered that similar structural changes were also happening in Latin America and in the US—the commercialization of education, the whole idea that education increasingly has to serve business, the introduction of fees, the very tight alliance between academia and business, the transformation of the university into a factory, what we call the university-enterprise.

**Upon moving back to the Western world, you encountered and agitated against problems not dissimilar to those you had found in Africa, in terms of the nexus of the university and society. Can you tell us about some of the movements that have most driven you in your life as a professor-activist in New York City?**

In recent years, I have been more peripherally involved in struggles around the university and education. The #occupy movement developed in the university, against paying student debts. Although it is not as strong as I would have wished, this movement, mostly organized around the

network of “Strike Debt,” declares student debt illegitimate and refuses to pay student loans. They fight against the commercialization of education. This movement came out of Occupy, when a lot of people who were getting together discovered that they all had student loans.

Finally, “Wages for Students” is a movement inspired by Wages for Housework. There is a connection between the two movements because just as we were fighting against unpaid labour in terms of housework, Wages for Students is fighting against unpaid labour imposed on students, particularly through internships. The whole fraud of unpaid internships is basically displacing a lot of workers with the excuse of giving students the possibility to train themselves. In Montréal, CUTE is very active in this struggle.

**Can you speak about the organization of alternative forms of education that challenge the nefarious collusion of higher education systems with conditions of working precarity characterized by unpaid internships, short term contracts, flexibility, and casualization?**

In New York, Jakob Jakobsen, a comrade from Denmark, has been involved with other people in organizing The Free University of NYC. This project responds to the idea of creating “commons of knowledge”—spaces for forms of knowledge production and circulation that are not dictated by the market. The concept of the commons extends to the question of knowledge production because knowledge is being contained and privatized. This is a very dramatic change and we have to fight against it. Until the 1900s there was a recognition that knowledge was for the common good: knowledge in the schooling system was organized to provide and satisfy a common interest. Since the 1980s the new ideology is exactly the opposite: knowledge is now considered a private thing that serves to get a better job, better wages. So the idea now is that education is for individual benefit, and not to serve a collectivity. The schooling system is very much integrated into the capitalist machine. This ethos of education as personal gain serves the imposition of fees. Knowledge is not

considered a common good, so, according to this ethos, you have to pay for education because you will be the great beneficiary. Knowledge is thus transformed into a commodity, and as such it can be exported. Your degree is a commodity that allows you to get the best job. This is very perverse, it's a fraud. The issue of unpaid internships is part of it: companies make students work as interns to lay off their workers. That is why you need to fight now: you could be one of those workers that are displaced. So, by fighting now against your exploitation as a student, and against the unpaid labour of students, you are also protecting your future position as a worker.

**Can you share an example of what you see as the relationship between struggles in the university and pedagogical practices?**

In Italy in the 1960s the student movement had enough power to impose collective grading and collective exams. The topic of the exam was prepared collectively. The professor would not grade the individual, but the whole student body. Teachers have a great power in their position of giving grades. They sometimes do not realize that the grading system is actually a selection system. Thus, collective grading is a way of defying the grading system. It is a practice that allows teachers to be radical. In this respect, it is very important that teachers are open to students' movements because they ultimately equally empower teachers as radical academic workers.

**With which theoretical approaches do you think the struggles within university should contend?**

I think that in the past, too much radical left energy has gone toward what is being taught in class: can we teach Marx or can't we? How we can restructure the curriculum? These initiatives have somehow lost sight of the broader issue of power relations: what is financing the university, what is the relation between the hierarchies and the overall purposes of the university, what seems to interest the university? In the US, university administrations are more and more enmeshed with the military. The military has a big presence and impact, which is made invisible be-

cause many researches are divided up in several components so that researchers don't know why they are studying specific problems and don't know how their results are going to be used.

**Your analysis has shown how capitalism creates a hierarchy between productive and reproductive work, relegating women to the sphere of reproduction, usually performed as unpaid labour. Re-evaluating reproductive work means recognizing women's work of nurturing, care, education, and providing comfort, as central in the creation of social relations, and acknowledging this work to be of concrete value. How can the concept of reproductive labour be helpful to understand the constant attacks on the working conditions of the 'precariat' in the university?**

First of all, intellectual work—whether studying or teaching—is part of the reproduction of the workforce. Thus, there is a clear continuity with reproductive work, and this is particularly evident in the case of women. When you look at the schooling system, from daycare, to elementary school, to the university, you will find that women teachers and students do have a completely different relation to intellectual work, to university, and to the other people they work with. For example, as a teacher in the university you come to know a lot of problems from students that will never, or rarely, be presented to a male teacher. There is a lot of mothering that is carried out by female teachers at all levels. This continuity between reproductive work and academic labour, is part of the same project of preparing and assuring a workforce that corresponds to particular needs of the global market. Affective labour comes into play here, too, because there is a constant use of the fact that all women have training in affectivity, that they are the affective workers of the world. I think that there is a very direct alliance, a continuity between the struggles of women over domestic work, sexual work, and affective labour, all of which are components of the same expectations on women in this society, and their work in academia, whether as a student or as a teacher. Schoolwork is reproductive work, no matter which side you sit

on. I would also add that the domestic work of women in relation to child-raising continues in the school: taking the kids to school, speaking with the teacher, following the kids in schooling. In this respect, the schooling system is a very important part of the reproductive system. It is thus a field of struggle in terms of students campaigning against fees, teachers fighting for better working conditions or for the creation of a different curriculum.

Yet, I wish that the struggles in the schooling system extended beyond all this. One of the things that I find often missing in the struggles made in the university is the relation between students, teachers, and other workers. I think that if we talk about reproduction we have to recognize that a large part of reproductive work within the university is carried out by people working in the cafeteria, or cleaning the rooms, for instance. There is a whole infrastructure—a reproductive infrastructure—that is necessary, indispensable, and very important. Unfortunately, the university itself makes those workers invisible. The university is considered a centre of knowledge, comprised of students and teachers. These other workers, who are often immigrants, are not seen as producers of knowledge, so they are dehumanized. Their reproductive work is devalued. So, when I talk about struggles in the university, my point has always been that we have to break down these hierarchies among workers in order to create a connection through an understanding of collective labour. There are moments of unity: for example, I have seen in the US that when students have gone on strike, the workers in the cafeteria have gone on strike too. Other than these moments of unity, however, on an everyday basis, there is a culture of invisibility, and it is very important to break that.

**We will end there for now. We would like to sincerely thank you, Silvia, for taking the time to answer our questions and share your generous reflections.**

You're welcome.