

“Introduction” to *L'imposture du travail*: *Désandrocenter le travail pour l'émanciper* (10/18, 2024)

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In 1975, Silvia Federici, an Italian feminist living in the United States, wrote one of her most famous texts, “Wages Against Housework,” beginning with the sentence: “They say it is love, we say it is unwaged work” (Federici 1975). This line by Federici is now taken up on placards during feminist strikes in Argentina and Spain. It has undoubtedly become one of the slogans of the new global feminist dynamic (Delage and Gallot 2019). But it can also be found reworked, rewritten, and reappropriated in contemporary struggles, in different parts of the world and across different segments of the labor market – struggles in which people denounce, through the question of unpaid labor, the invisibilization and appropriation of their work by the capitalist system. One can think of the struggles of Quebec students against the non-remuneration of internships and, more broadly, of student labor, who launched a strike by interns in 2016 (CUTE 2021) based on the feminist analysis, and with the support, of Silvia Federici. One can also think of the denunciation of the capture of our online activities and their transformation into value and profit by plat-

form capitalism, as expressed in the manifesto *Wages for Facebook*, which, forty years later, draws inspiration from both the title and the content of Federici’s pamphlet. One can think as well of the many current mobilizations, in different European countries, against unpaid labor in the art world, and of the struggles emerging here and there for recognition of artists as workers (Zortea 2022). Today, many collectives draw on, and explicitly or implicitly claim, a feminist perspective to build their demands, analyze their exploitation, and engage – more or less radically – in struggles against the capitalist definition and appropriation of work.

This “feminist perspective on unpaid labor” is embodied in the work of Silvia Federici, but it is not exhausted by it. In reality, these feminist analyses of unpaid labor that emerged in the 1970s around the issue of domestic work were plural from the outset, traversed by debates and even controversies, sometimes quite harsh. Each of us today is free to prefer one or another of these approaches, to change our minds in light of the authors’ publications on particular social issues, and perhaps also to allow ourselves to combine them. But taking them into account in contemporary scientific and political debates on work and its value, on exploitation and emancipation, is not an option.

In these approaches to domestic work conceived as unpaid labor – and particularly in their controversies, in the questions that feminist theorists unfolded, and in these “stakes of value” that they brought to light, within the household but also far beyond it – another perspective on work was in fact elaborated. A perspective that requires thinking of paid work together with unpaid work, visible work with invisible work, and activities recognized as work with those denied such recognition because they are valued as

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something else: love, training, passion, commitment... And a perspective that requires thinking of them together by analyzing from the outset their hierarchies and assignments, and the way social relations – of gender, certainly, but also of class, race, and generation – structure them. Not only are paid and unpaid labor not distributed equally among everyone, but the un-

paid labor of some – retired women volunteering in social associations – is not, objectively or subjectively, the same as the unpaid labor of others – unpaid interns on the path to professional integration, or recipients of social assistance put to work in order to “earn” social integration, or even to redeem their “dignity” as citizens.

Thus, a feminist perspective on work does not invite a simple expansion of the definition of work that would consist in adding invisible work to visible work, or in adding unpaid labor to paid labor. Of course, such an addition can in itself be instructive – for example, when, as Céline Bessière and Sibylle Gollac (2019) do, one reconstructs this sum of labor (here, professional and domestic) to show that women work more than men while being paid much less than them. In families with children, the researchers point out, drawing on INSEE data, women work on average a few hours more per week than men (54 weekly hours compared to 51), but only one-third of their work is paid, compared to two-thirds for men. But what this feminist analysis of work proposes by making this inequality visible is also, and perhaps above all, another way of conceiving work and its boundaries. Feminist theorists of domestic work in the 1970s all insisted on this point: Unpaid work is not a simple subtraction (work minus remuneration); it is a political operation of denial of work (“it’s not work, it’s love!”) that legitimizes its appropriation by others and makes its theft acceptable. The scientific, but also political, stake is therefore less about shifting the boundaries of work to include this or that activity than about calling those boundaries into question, deconstructing them, mistrusting them, and denouncing them. We must be wary of the instituted boundaries of work, of definitions of work (and of “non-work”), and of the representations of the worker that accompany them; we must denounce them because they are the embodied product of existing power relations. And I write here “worker” (*travailleur* in French) in the masculine neutral intentionally, because the androcentric character of these definitions and representations – that is, their construction around a male subject – has not yet been overcome, despite all the feminist struggles that have been undertaken. “The very concept of the worker,” as the American philosopher Nancy Fraser underlined already ten years ago, “always has an implicit gendered subtext” (2013, 38). “Value is male!” wrote the German social theorist Roswitha Scholz in 1992 (Scholz 2019).

To extract the question of work in all its abstraction – from the figure of the worker to the measurement of value – from this masculine neutral in which it is stuck, I therefore propose here to think of work in the feminine neutral. Not to add women to the mass of workers, nor even simply to acknowledge the sexual

division of labor and its gendered order, but rather to overturn the universal for a time and to think of all workers, men and women alike, as women workers. By accepting to de-androcenter work, we would give ourselves the means to rethink the mechanisms and terrains of exploitation, but also the modalities and stakes of emancipation “from” labor.

This is first and foremost why adopting a feminist perspective on work is today unavoidable. It is the condition for catching up with the head start that capitalism has on our analyses, in its modes of exploitation – both in putting people to work and in capturing value. Rethinking these processes in light of feminist analyses of domestic work, unpaid labor, and more broadly of the denial of work in the name of values, does not only make it possible to better understand the exploitation of women. It also makes it possible to better grasp certain forms and stakes of the exploitation of all workers. “The proletarian is dead, long live the housewife!” wrote the German feminist Claudia von Werlhof as early as 1984, emphasizing how the housewife – an unpaid worker, always available, without the right to strike, without fixed working hours, without contractually stipulated leave or breaks, isolated and atomized, but “working out of love, and whose love becomes work” – embodied an ideal figure of the worker in contemporary capitalism. If unpaid labor – labor-as-love, labor-as-passion – is today at the heart of (new?) processes of exploitation, which perhaps affect some more than others, if what is commonly considered “non-work” has become a central site of value capture, is it really the reduction of working time or the end of work that we must demand? What work, and therefore which workers, are we talking about?

With an equally emancipatory but perhaps more optimistic aim, one could choose to reverse the relationship between the dynamics of capitalism and the struggles that take place within it. One would then assert loud and clear that “first comes the struggle,”¹ and that we must take seriously the feminist lineage at work in all these mobilizations against unpaid labor unfolding around the world today.

Finally, we must collectively assume that to de-androcenter work is a political and democratic necessity – if we still wish to give meaning to that term – that pushes us not only to call false neutrality into question but to go beyond it. We must unmask the imposture of the (masculine) neutral in order, ultimately, to sweep away deeply entrenched dichotomies and other binaries. Thinking of work in the feminine neutral is therefore only the first step of a scientific and political revolution that consists in overturning the universal in order to neutralize it, in the double sense of the term.

Endnote

1 This formula, taken up by Silvia Federici in her preface to Leopoldina Fortunati's work *The Arcane of Reproduction*, condenses a key principle of operaismo, an Italian Marxist current from which these Italian feminists originated and which considers workers' struggles as the driving force behind the development of capitalism and therefore its possible overthrow.

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