

MOUVEMENT COMMUNISTE/KOLEKTIVNE PROTI
KAPITALU

**ON THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN OVER
THOUSANDS OF YEARS, THEIR
CONDITION UNDER CAPITALISM AND
THEIR ROLE IN THE PROLETARIAN
REVOLUTION**

9

MARCH 2025

PAMPHLET

2 €

1 £

2 US\$

60 CZK

150 Rs

NOTE TO THE READER

We thank Mr. G. Bouvin who, as the editor responsible, makes it possible for us to legally publish and distribute this publication. We wish to point out that Mr. G. Bouvin is not responsible for the political content of the articles and, more generally, for the programmatic positions defended in our press.

PRESENTATION

This document is simultaneously published in three languages: Czech, English and French. This is not because we are such efficient translators but because it is the result of a common work by speakers of these three languages since its very conception. It is a work jointly performed by comrades from KpK, MC and others. We hope that this first step of common political work will be confirmed and amplified in a way which tends towards the unification and centralization of communists..

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

To make it easier to read, certain common abbreviations appear in the text without being spelled out in full. The reader can therefore refer to the table below.

Abbreviations	In English	In other languages	In French	In existence
BRCA1/2	Breast Cancer 1 and 2		Cancer du sein, 1 et 2 ¹	
CNRS	French National Centre for Scientific Research		Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique	1939-
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization		Organisation des Nations-Unies pour l'Alimentation et l'Agriculture	1949-
INSEE	National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies		Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques	1946-
INSERM	National Institute for Health and Medical Research		Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale	1964-
WLM/MLF	Women's Liberation Movement		Mouvement de libération des femmes	1970-
CMP	Capitalist Mode of Production		Mode de production capitaliste	
PCI	Italian Communist Party	Partito Comunista Italiano	Parti communiste italien	1926-1991
UDI	Union of Women in Italy	Unione Donne in Italia	Union des femmes en Italie	1945-

¹ Two human genes which protect the body from cancerous tumours.

THE WOMAN QUESTION

*"To sum up: the most important thing becomes precisely this explosion of the women's movement as an expression of the specificity of female interests hitherto castrated from all its connections by the capitalist organization of the family. This has to be waged in every quarter of this society, each of which is founded precisely on the suppression of such interests, since the entire class exploitation has been built upon the specific mediation of women's exploitation. And so as a women's movement we must pinpoint every single area in which this exploitation is located, that is, we must regain the whole specificity of the female interest in the course of waging the struggle." – Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 1972, *The power of women and the subversion of the community*².*

*"Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overthrows the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all natural premises as the creatures of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals." – Marx & Engels, 1845, *The German Ideology*³*

At every stage in the development of the productive forces, women have been subjected to restrictions, limitations and violence imposed on their sex. This has been accompanied by naturalising ideologies, most often sacralised by religion, based on male superiority and the supposed female personality. Women endure, right down to their bodies and consciousnesses, their reification under the sexual dictatorship of males. If women are first and foremost sexed beings endowed with specific reproductive capacities, they are women socially because they suffer a specific oppression, itself rooted in the tasks of reproducing life in the absence of a socially organised separation between childbirth and childrearing, and a socialisation of domestic tasks.

Following our method of analysing the material bases of this oppression, we can see that the fundamentals of the woman question are deeply ingrained in human society from its origins. The oppression of women is the oldest and most enduring of oppressions. It is rooted in the reproduction of the species, which is the basic terrain of relations between the sexes. Since the origins of humanity, women's specific activity has been to produce and reproduce life, whether by giving birth to it or by carrying out the tasks and care it requires, in particular bringing up children and providing sexual services to men.

This particularity has reduced and confined women to the sphere of the family. Their reproductive labour has been monopolised by men within marriage – ownership of women, the first commodity, compulsory heterosexuality – and more widely within the family – the first form of slavery, the first unit of production – in the service of the transmission of the family line. Moreover, the first organic and functional division of the species found a social extension in the sexual division of labour. All social activities are not only specialised, but also hierarchized according to sex. Women are confined to reproductive activities, and the tasks performed by women (and by extension women themselves) are systematically placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

By revolutionising social organisation, the CMP has disintegrated, but not abolished, the pre-capitalist family, and with it the domestic economy. Alongside the emergence of a productive sphere outside the family we can see the perpetuation of a so-called private sphere in which women perform the activities by which human life is produced and reproduced, and, by extension, labour power. This includes cleaning and cooking, bringing up children, caring for the elderly and providing emotional care and sexual services to the husband. In the CMP, the sexual division of labour serves the production of value. On the one hand, domestic work makes a major contribution to the reproduction of labour power, and since it is very poorly paid, it makes it possible to reduce the value of labour power. On the other hand, as a reserve army, female labour – weakened in its relationship with capital because of the burden of children – plays a role in increasing competition between proletarians and therefore also in driving down wages.

² See: <https://libcom.org/article/power-women-and-subversion-community-mariarosa-dalla-costa-and-selma-james>

³ Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, "Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook, D. Proletarians and Communism": <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm>

Today, half the women in the world are still unwaged in a society dominated by waged employment. Most are confined to the narrow sphere of the family, dependent on their husband's income and very often carrying out the tasks of bringing up children and running the household alone. When women enter socialised labour, they gain economic independence – albeit relative – but they are exploited under more unfavourable conditions than men. While women are no longer as dependent on their husbands' wages as they once were, they often do not earn enough to detach themselves from him, especially if they have children. High unemployment and low wages (or no wages at all) reinforce the sexual appropriation of women by men, whether in marriage or in prostitution. Women suffer long second shifts once they return home, as the burdens of domestic work have little or no socialisation. Women are still sexual slaves, when they have to surrender their bodies to the males within the sacred framework of the family, and serfs, when they feed, wash and care for the males and children of both sexes.

Women “as women”, their specific situation in capitalist social organisation, is the subject of this text. And we don't just mean women as a supposed fraction of the proletariat, because proletarian women are an integral part of the proletariat, even if their conditions of exploitation by capital differ significantly from those of men. Capitalism is no more sexed than it is racist, immoral, nationalist and so on. It is all of the above and its opposite. Capitalism is a social relationship, not an ideology, and even less a kind of moral person. Capitalism makes use of the divisions and oppositions that still and always run through its civil society. It puts them, when the need arises and its interpreters perceive it, at the service of its domination and the transformation of every productive, indirectly productive and reproductive social relation into a relation of exchange, into the production and circulation of commodities. The bodies of human beings follow this process of reification and commodification, including when human beings see themselves as economic agents of commodity exchange – buyers and sellers.

In the advanced capitalist countries - despite both the integration of women into social production *and* feminist struggles, with significant variations depending on the context – male domination persists. And while it may be weakening somewhat in some respects, it is also taking on new forms, such as the systematic display of the female body. The material basis of women's subordination, inscribed in the sexed nature of the reproduction of the species and in the organisation of the social relations of reproduction, makes them a political subject, indispensable allies of the working class. Women aspire to a reunited world where men cease to be a threat to them and where their sexuality and feelings can unfold. That's why they must look to the revolutionary proletariat and, without compromise, found a solid alliance for the complete liberation of humanity.

SOME IMPORTANT POINTS

These points were first set out in 2016, after attacks carried out on the night of 31 December 2015, in Cologne – but also in other cities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Groups of men attacked hundreds of women, stealing their possessions and sexually assaulting them. These points, formulated on a very general level, are presented here as an introduction to the long text which follows and develops them.

The oppression of women closely depends on the natural division of labour of the reproduction of the species. Childbirth is its founding objective. This division is one of the premises of the social division between manual and intellectual labour, of the formation of social hierarchy.

The natural division of labour in the reproduction of the species is frozen in the elementary social structure of reproduction (then production) which is the family, the clan, the tribe, etc. The means to reproduce the family is the same as for any other social structure: violence. It is a violence exercised on women, the first “treasure” of men, the first manifestation of the reification of the human being. A violence most often sacralised by religion.

Women have almost always exercised two kinds of activity: concrete and non-socialised labour, within the framework of the family, of the reproduction of the species (childbirth, childrearing, sexual and emotional object of man; domestic labour to maintain the home) and social labour beside men, her husband or not.

Capitalism has taken the first steps towards the destruction of the family by mobilising women into social labour on a scale incomparable with the other class societies which preceded it. Capital has transformed part of domestic labour into social labour (mechanisation and externalisation of many of the elements entering into the natural reproduction of the species; explicit socialisation of women as a sexual object through prostitution and implicitly by the assimilation of the sexual lives of women to that of alienated men; rearing of children in part delegated to the state).

But capitalism does not destroy the hard core of women's oppression: the subordination of childbirth to the labour of reproduction of the species and the reification of the female body by men. Although shaken, the single-parent, blended, dispersed family, etc. is constantly reforming and restructuring itself on these foundations. As capitalism matures, the family gradually ceases to be a productive structure, and is robbed of certain reproductive functions. But the natural division of the labour of reproduction of the species continues in the negation of the female body, its reification and its transformation into a commodity for men, as well as in the raising of children.

The socialisation of women by wage labour is not, in itself, a guarantee of emancipation from male domination. On the other hand, this socialisation reinforces quantitatively and qualitatively the ranks of the proletariat. Qualitatively, because it introduces within itself the question of the relation of men to women (or more correctly of women to men). But to pose the question of women's oppression within the framework of wage labour does not necessarily imply its resolution. Women are a long way from experiencing the same conditions as men, including as wage earners, and, of course, the demand for equality between women and men as wage earners can take the alienated form of reward for attachment to wage labour (with, for example, the objective of having a presence in the management hierarchy).

The qualitative and quantitative reinforcement of the proletariat within capitalism is only useful to the cause of women if it manifests itself in an independent struggle against capitalism, thus against all societies divided into classes AND against male domination. This cannot be taken for granted, given the history of the modern proletariat.

The proletarian revolution will not magically solve the woman question. It must be coupled with a social revolution in relations between individuals which is capable of frontally attacking the hard core of women's oppression by definitively isolating childbirth from the raising of children entrusted to society and by freeing female feelings and bodies from male sexual dictatorship.

Women therefore have every interest in the advent of the proletarian revolution. But their liberation depends on them alone, their strength and their capacity as a sex to impose their interests, including in the revolution. There's nothing obvious or inevitable about the dialectic that will emerge. On the contrary, there's every chance that it will be red with blood, since men have so much to lose as individuals who are not yet fully socialised. The new man will be born of the struggle of women, of all women.

The struggle of women is a constant in class-divided societies. For too long confined to the home, women's resistance has not been weak, and has often taken the radical form of a permanent war of the sexes⁴.

⁴ See: MC/KpK, February 2016, *Cologne: attacks against women are the product of patriarchal domination and play into the hands of anti-immigrant racists*: <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT1602ENVF.pdf>

THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IS SPECIFIC AND FOUNDED ON MATERIAL BASES

Natural division in the work of procreation

“The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children.” (Engels, 1884, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*)⁵

“The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the relation of man to woman. In this natural species-relationship man’s relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature – his own natural destination.” (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*)⁶

Women/men relations find their historic and objective foundation in the natural division of labour of reproduction, which is irreducibly inscribed in the bodies of women by reason of their specific role in pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding. Thus, the first natural-social relation of the human being, corresponding to the imperative to its own reproduction, this elementary relation, devoid of a social mediation, is that of woman and man, corresponding to the state of nature.

“Nature exists independently of all philosophy. It is the foundation upon which we human beings, ourselves products of nature, have grown up. Nothing exists outside nature and man, and the higher beings our religious fantasies have created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence.”⁷

In the early stages of human development, our nature is immediately social, albeit expressed in a narrow sociality that coincides with our survival as a species. At the same time, this social nature can only be rooted in its determination as a being of nature. Nature is its primary determination, its obvious dimension, its unsurpassable horizon. Nature is not therefore something other than the human being. It is the human being.

“[W]e must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men[*sic*] must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history.” But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed, this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.

... The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act.

(...) The third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the family. The family, which to begin with is the only social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one ... and must then be treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to “the concept of the family” ... The production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a “productive force.” Further, that the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence, that the “history of humanity” must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange.” – Marx & Engels, 1845, *The German Ideology*⁸.

The family, marriage, private property

The division between men and women, established on the basis of the reproductive sexual act, became fixed in a normalised and oppressive relation, the family – the clan, the tribe – based on an

⁵ Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02d.htm>

⁶ Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>

⁷ Engels, 1888, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch01.htm>

⁸ Marx & Engels, 1845, *The German Ideology*:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>

internal hierarchy. The family then became the first stabilised form of social polarisation. It does not necessarily lead to the development of private property, but it is the inevitable presupposition of it, since the concentration of wealth is most often based on collective property within the narrow circle of the family.

“It was the first form of the family to be based, not on natural, but on economic conditions – on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. The Greeks themselves put the matter quite frankly: the sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family, and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own”⁹.

“The first form of ownership is tribal [*Stammeigentum*] ownership. It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which a people lives by hunting and fishing, by the rearing of beasts or, in the highest stage, agriculture. In the latter case it presupposes a great mass of uncultivated stretches of land. The division of labour is at this stage still very elementary and is confined to a further extension of the natural division of labour existing in the family. The social structure is, therefore, limited to an extension of the family; patriarchal family chieftains, below them the members of the tribe, finally slaves. The slavery latent in the family only develops gradually with the increase of population, the growth of wants, and with the extension of external relations, both of war and of barter. ... With the division of labour, in which all these contradictions are implicit, and which in its turn is based on the natural division of labour in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property, but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others. Division of labour and private property are, moreover, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity.”¹⁰

The means of establishing the family, that is, controlling the procreative capacity and reproductive labour of women, is the same as for any other social structure: violence. It is violence exercised on women, man’s first property, the first manifestation of the reification of the human being, whom he exchanges with other men, therefore expropriating them from themselves and specialising their entire social being in devotion to others. Marriage fulfils this function. Most often *forced* throughout history, it establishes a bond of personal dependence and forces women into sexual service. The family is woman’s slavery, the first manifestation of it. And marriage is the juridical act which constitutes the family. It is the prison which isolates and encloses the woman in the cage of a perpetual relation of complete despotic subordination to her male master. As Marx explained: “Private property of that form always implies at least slavery for the members of the family, who are used and exploited to the full by the head of the family”¹¹ And Engels summarises it too:

“Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others. It is the cellular form of civilized society, in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied. ... Thus, when monogamous marriage first makes its appearance in history, it is not as the reconciliation of man and woman, still less as the highest form of such a reconciliation. Quite the contrary. Monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout the whole previous prehistoric period.”¹²

⁹ Engels, 1884, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Marx & Engels, 1845, *The German Ideology*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Marx, 1867, *Draft chapter 6 of Capital*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch03.htm>

¹² Engels, 1884, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* *op. cit.*

THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE CMP

The capitalist family, a prison for women

With the transformation of all social production into commodities, social relations from before capitalism disintegrated. Buying, selling and the supposedly free contract replaced hereditary customs. What's more, with the advent of manufacturing and globalised trade, domestic products, mainly made by women, which had a use value in a context of subsistence production, acquired an exchange value. Particularly in the towns and cities, the family was gradually dispossessed of certain productive functions (and reproductive ones, to a lesser extent). Family members became more individualised with regard to community ties, as proletarians were led to cooperate ever more closely in socialised labour. In the family of the industrial age, kinship relations are no longer relations of production, since socialised labour now takes place outside the family.

In the end capitalism has instituted its own family structure by dissolving pre-existing forms of family and conjugal unions. In advanced capitalist societies, the family and marriage have undergone further disintegration, as shown by the decline in marriages, the rise in divorces and separations, and the growth in the number of single-parent families. Yet the character of necessity of marriage has remained, even in second-class forms (civil partnerships, legal cohabitation, etc.), formalising the bond of appropriation and dependence of women, as shown, for example, by the fall in divorce rates in times of economic crisis.

As for the family, it does not disappear completely with capitalism and remains the bearer of links of economic solidarity between its members, at the same time as being a source of alienation and servitude. In the transition to the CMP, women remained assigned and even more entrenched in the subaltern reproductive role – in the form of unsocialised, individualised labour – which has always been the *raison d'être* of the family, the political institution of domestic labour. This is the material basis of women's situation in the CMP. Domestic labour defines women's place in the family and, by extension, in society. This emerges from the entire female role, as created by the capitalist division of labour. All women are first and foremost housewives. As the Padua Collective said: "*Women are housewives since adolescence: first they work in their father's house, then their husband's house (sometimes also in their brother in law's). Housework is a burden shared by all women, married or single, mothers or workers, housewives or typists, nurses or teachers etc.*"¹³

For sure, today, women in the advanced capitalist countries no longer devote half their lives to making and raising children. On the other hand, in many countries on the periphery of capital, it is common for women to have a large number of children, in appalling conditions, with mortality rates for mothers and babies that remain relatively high. All the time devoted to the reproduction of the species, combined with periods of reduced mobility, contributes to confining women to the home, depriving them of all or part of their social being, of their full social life. No or less social life means subalternity to those, men, who have it. No or less social life means fewer resources to carry out socially recognised labour.

¹³ Padua Collective, 1974, "Smash the system, power to women!": <https://journals.openedition.org/grm/833> (our translation)

Domestic labour and capital

Capitalism has separated the role of housewife from the rest of social production. At best, the development of the productive forces during the period of capital's domination of society has made it possible to reduce domestic labour time and eliminate some of its arduous aspects. In no case, however, does the movement of capital go beyond the necessity of women's work for the reproduction of the species. Capitalism, although it has seriously attacked the family, has not destroyed it, and it is not in its interest to do so.

Domestic labour is put at the service of the valorisation of capital in so far as it maintains and reproduces labour power at a very low cost, which reduces its value translated into its wage equivalent. The function of domestic labour for capital is the reproduction of labour power. But it is primarily because women reproduce life, the human being, that they maintain and reproduce labour power. Once reproduced, labour power is not yet a commodity. It only becomes a commodity when the individual who possesses it rents it out to an employer for a wage and uses it in the productive process.

Domestic work is included in the wage, up to the value of the reproduction of labour power on the household level, including children. In this case, it is literally free and the labour of reproduction is considered as a natural productive force by capital. The absence of a wage contributes to its mystification, in other words, masks the fact that it is taken on by the working class. The work of the housewife, creator of use value, is fundamentally invisible work, and is not socially considered as work. This concealment of women's work in the home is not just an ideological given. It is the capitalist organisation that denies household activity the character of labour.

That the labour of the housewife is carried out in precapitalist or proto-capitalist forms does not mean that today it is not capitalist or that it is not perfectly functional to a phase in the development of capital. In this phase, the central aspect is not the productivity of the factory as such, that is to say the direct extorsion of surplus value, but average social productivity. Banking on this enormous quantity of unpaid labour – unpaid precisely because it appears as non-productive to the point of not being considered as work – allows capital to enormously reduce the costs of production of labour power, which is the fundamental commodity.¹⁴

Or domestic work is socialised outside the family, in the form of wage labour exploited in a directly capitalist manner, and producing profits for the individual capitals engaged in these activities. In addition, wages in the social care and maternity care sectors are often very low, and these tasks are performed primarily by women. What used to be done in the home is now paid very stingily. Most often in the advanced capitalist countries, the state ensures the reproduction of labour power: childcare, education and training, health care, retirement homes, home help, etc. But this socialisation is reversible. Each time the state withdraws from these sectors, it transfers responsibility to the home, and therefore to women. This is clearly visible in countries where the state is undergoing a fiscal crisis.

Housework is unproductive from the point of view of the functioning of capital in its entirety because accumulation rests on labour which produces new value in the general process of valorisation. In the CMP the end of production is the re-transformation of surplus value into capital and that rests on a “social relation of production, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus-value”.¹⁵

Productive labour is only an abbreviated expression for the whole relation, and the manner in which labour capacity and labour figure in the capitalist production process. Hence if we speak of productive labour, we speak of socially determined labour, labour which implies a very definite relation between its buyer and its seller. Productive labour is exchanged directly for money as capital, i.e. for money which is in itself capital, has the quality of functioning as capital, and confronts labour capacity as capital. Productive labour is therefore labour which for the worker only reproduces the previously posited value of his labour capacity; but as value-creating

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Marx, 1867, *Capital* vol.1, Chapter 16: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch16.htm>

activity it valorises capital, and counterposes the values created by labour to the worker himself as capital. The specific relation between objectified and living labour, which makes the former capital, makes the latter productive labour.

The specific product of the capitalist production process, surplus value, is only created through exchange with productive labour. What forms its specific use value for capital is not its particular useful character, any more than it is the particular useful qualities of the product in which it is objectified, but its character as the element that creates exchange value (surplus value).

The capitalist production process is not merely a process of the production of commodities. It is a process which absorbs unpaid labour, making the means of production into means for the absorption of unpaid labour.

It emerges from what has been said so far that to be productive labour is a quality of labour which in and for itself has absolutely nothing to do with the particular content of the labour, its particular usefulness or the specific use value in which it is expressed. Labour with the same content can therefore be both productive and unproductive.¹⁶

Exploitation or oppression

With marriage and the institution of the family, the natural division of labour inscribed in the reproductive sexual act is transformed into a permanent and implacable opposition between women and men. An opposition which, in today's society, is *akin* to the class antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

“Within the family he [the husband] is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat. ... The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.”¹⁷

However, it is hardly comparable to class-based social determination. In the case of the family, it is a matter of domestic slavery, suffered within the walls of the conjugal home without any direct connection with any given mode of production, any society divided into opposing classes. Conversely, the social relation of capital is both the product and the only specific motor of modern economic and social formation. It is identified with it, and society is shaped by it. This is the difference between the family and the factory. The family pre-exists capital, whereas the factory is the pure product, the quintessence of the social relation of capital.

From this it also follows that, within the family, women are not exploited by men, they are not the proletarians of men, since men do not appropriate their (surplus) labour in the service of the valorisation of their (in fact non-existent) capital. Money in the hands of men, in the form of wages, is quite simply not capital. Marriage is certainly a contract of appropriation that formalises the reification of women, a contract in which the “me” is sold for eternity, the person, but not the labour power. In situations where the only income in the household comes from the man, he does not pay wages to his wife. He does not exchange part of his income for a service. He consumes his income in exchange for commodity equivalents and/or it is transformed into useful use values by women's domestic labour.

I am a worker, I get my wage at the end of the month. Good, then immediate consumption – in his time Marx said that it was so – now if I spend it immediately... then I go to the caterer to buy food already prepared, I go to the laundry to clean my clothes and iron them etc. At the end of the day, in other words, this salary is enough for me for three days because it's all very expensive. The only way for a worker to survive is to marry a housewife and give her the money. And through her work, the housewife transforms that money into ready-made steaks, into clothes washed and ironed at home, into a clean house.¹⁸

¹⁶ Marx, 1867, *Draft chapter 6 of Capital*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02b.htm>

¹⁷ Engels, 1884, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Interview with Leopoldina Fortunati, Charlène Calderaro and Andrea Zanotti, “Between feminism and operaism: thinking about social reproduction”, *Contretemps*, 8 March 2023: <https://www.contretemps.eu/feminisme-operaisme-reproduction-sociale-entretien-leopoldina-fortunati/> (our translation)

In passing, this underlines that domestic labour is not an independent, parallel, non-capitalist mode of production at the heart of capital. This is contrary to what Christine Delphy said, in *The main enemy* (1970)¹⁹, about the “domestic mode of production”, which designates the patriarchal system, where women’s labour is exploited by men in exchange for their maintenance.

On the other hand, when women work at home (or are very poorly paid), they find themselves in a relationship of economic dependence on men, a source of domination/oppression given the reduced capacity for negotiation within the couple, but also the reduced economic possibilities of leaving the couple.

In reality, men benefit from domestic work, which is still very unevenly distributed, even in the countries at the heart of capital. The apparent historical equalisation of domestic labour time is based on the slight reduction in women’s time devoted to chores due to the massive introduction of household appliances. In France, for example, the average contribution of men in couples to domestic labour “grew” by 17 minutes between 1986 and 2010. The gap between the sexes is doubled if we compare the time spent by fathers and mothers. In 2006, in the EU²⁰, women aged 20 to 74 spent (much) more time on domestic labour than men, ranging from 50% more in Sweden to 200% more in Italy and Spain. In France, for example, the average duration of domestic labour per year for women and men is (in hours/day):

Year	Women	Men
1966	7.3 hours per day	1.7 hours per day
1975	5.7 (not working) 4.0 (working full time)	2.4 (working full time)
1986	5.07	2.07
1998	4.7	2.1
2010	3.14 (living alone) 4.86 (couple with children)	2.43 (living alone) 2.57 (couple with children)

Sources collated ourselves, mostly from INSEE²¹

Women taking responsibility for physical and mental health, of social life outside work, and emotional support in the service of men, all that contributes to making men satisfied with the status quo. On the contrary, the demographic tendency, notable in the USA, is the growth in the number of economically active single women: “45% of prime working age women (ages 25-44) will be single by 2030 ... more women are delaying marriage, choosing to stay single or divorcing in their 50s and 60s.”²²

¹⁹ Published in English in the journal *Feminist Issues*, 1980: <https://libcom.org/article/main-enemy-christine-delphy>

²⁰ Eurostat, *Comment se répartit le temps des Européennes et des Européens?* [How is time divided up between female and male Europeans?], Numéro 4/2006:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/fr/web/products-statistics-in-focus/-/ks-nk-06-004>

²¹ INSEE, *Enquêtes Emploi du Temps*, 25 February 2025: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/source/serie/s1224>

Alain Chenu, “Les horaires et l’organisation du temps de travail” [The schedules and organisation of working time], *Économie et statistique* 352-353, 2002:

https://www.persee.fr/doc/estat_0336-1454_2002_num_352_1_7397

Alain Chadeau and Annie Fouquet, “Peut-on mesurer le travail domestique?” [How do we measure housework?], *Économie et statistique* 136, 1981:

https://www.persee.fr/doc/estat_0336-1454_1981_num_136_1_4521

INSEE, *Le travail domestique: 60 milliards d’heures en 2010* [Housework: 60 billion hours in 2010], N° 1423, 21 November 2012:

<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2123967>

²² Morgan Stanley, 2019, “Rise of the SHEconomy”, 2019:

<https://www.morganstanley.com/ideas/womens-impact-on-the-economy>

This was anticipated by Alexandra Kollontai back in 1918:

Who, then, are these new women? They are not the pure, "nice" girls whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage, they are not wives who suffer from the infidelities of their husbands, or who themselves have committed adultery. Nor are they old maids who bemoan the unhappy love of their youth, just as little as they are "priestesses of love," the victims of wretched living conditions or of their own depraved natures. No, it is a wholly new ... type of heroine, hitherto unknown, heroines with independent demands on life, heroines who assert their personality, heroines who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the state, the family, society, who fight for their rights as representatives of their sex. Single women are the ones who more and more determine this type.²³

The ideology of motherhood

Women take charge of household chores, a tendency which is reinforced when they become mothers because they do domestic labour not just for themselves, but for others and always "*in the name of nature, love and maternal duty*".²⁴ This also means that "*motherhood is the most effective ideological instrument for controlling women. It is the key to obtaining their greatest adhesion to the system.*"²⁵

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, maternity was not seen in terms of choice. It constituted a supposedly natural vocation for a woman, sacralised and legitimated by religions as the culmination of marriage and its *raison d'être*. This precept has been internalized by most women since the dawn of time. "*There's no girl who doesn't want to become a woman, no woman who doesn't want to become a mother*" said the popular saying from the end of the Middle Ages²⁶.

Becoming a mother was therefore a prerequisite for becoming a full-fledged woman, who had to be fertile and give birth to at least one male to perpetuate the lineage and make him the heir to the family inheritance. For Christianity, sexual relations other than for this purpose constituted a sin of the flesh. Sterility could be punished by annulment of the marriage. A childless woman was condemned to a vulnerable social status. Even more so for the nobility when the *dauphin* was overdue.

The status of children has changed greatly in the first circle of capitalist countries. It was a slow process, but one that eventually led to children being considered as individuals in their own right, and to the introduction of legislative measures to protect them. From the eighteenth century onwards, the trend among the ruling classes was to recast the family around the child, thus building a wall between society and private life, to paraphrase Philippe Ariès²⁷.

The ideology of the "good mother" or "intensive maternity"²⁸ means that the first preoccupation of the mother is the raising of the child, before everything else, and to the sacrifice of herself. A good mother is one who knows what is good for her children, and can be called upon at any time of the day or night. The child must receive unconditional maternal love that translates into constant attention and affection.

²³ Kollontai, 1918, "The New Woman": <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1918/new-morality.htm> , part of *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*

²⁴ Danièle Kergoat, "The sexual division of labour and social relations of sex", in Jeanne Bisilliat and Christine Verschuur, *Genre et économie: un premier éclairage* [Gender and economy: a first look], Graduate Institute Publications: <https://books.openedition.org/iheid/5419>

²⁵ Padua Collective, "Smash the system...", *op. cit.*

²⁶ Emmanuelle Berthiaud, "Pregnancy wanted, pregnancy imposed: the personal experience of pregnancy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in France in women's private writings", *Histoire, économie & société*, 4/2009, 35-49, Armand Colin: <http://www.revues.armand-colin.com/histoire/histoire-economie-societe/histoire-economie-societe-42009/grossesse-desiree-grossesse-imposee-vecu-grossesse-aux-xviiie-xixe-siecles-france>

²⁷ Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* [The child and family life under the *Ancien Régime*], 1960, republished by Points, 2014.

²⁸ Sharon Hays, *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*, Yale University Press, 1998.

Since 1980, motherhood has become one of the media's greatest obsessions: magazines, blogs, websites, TV shows and books on the qualities a good mother should concentrate on are legion. As a result, the child's needs are always more important than those of the mother. All this at the cost of trying days and anxiety fuelled by the fear of the slightest misstep caused by exhaustion²⁹. The feeling of having failed, leading to the anathema of the "bad mother", is a very real fear that often leads to depression and other psychological problems. This new ideology represents a modern form of the imposition of motherhood and child-rearing on women, despite the relatively greater involvement of fathers, depending on the social strata.

This evolution in the place of the child within the family sphere and in the ideology of motherhood was concomitant with the decline in the birthrate in Europe. For example, after the First World War, with the rise in power of natalist movements promoting large families, several European countries adopted measures restricting women's reproductive freedom in order to increase the population, considered a strategic asset.

In 1920, France passed a law prohibiting the promotion and sale of contraceptives, reinforced in 1923 to include sanctions against anti-conception and pro-abortion propaganda. Similarly, in 1923, Belgium amended Article 383 of the Penal Code to punish contraceptive and abortive propaganda. In Germany, under the Nazi regime, aggressive pro-natalist policies were implemented, including financial incentives for large families and campaigns valorising motherhood.³⁰

These days, the average fertility rate in the EU is 1.46 children per woman, well below the replacement rate for a population (2.1 children per woman)³¹. Various public policies aim to encourage the birthrate while maintaining the active workforce through proposals for "work-life balance".

Against a backdrop of a course towards war, the concept of "demographic rearmament" introduced by President Emmanuel Macron aims to counter the falling birth rate in France, which in 2023 reached its lowest level since World War II (when the fertility rate was 1.68 children per woman)³². Several measures have been announced, such as the introduction of six months paid parental leave for both parents, or the launch of a national program including fertility check-ups and a campaign in favour of preservation of a woman's eggs³³. In short, Macron's demographic rearmament aims to revitalise the French birthrate through incentive measures, while adhering to a historical tradition in which demography is considered a pillar of national strength.

²⁹ Eleanora Bianchinin, "Mamma che hai appena partorito, ti vogliamo sul pezzo: Così la maternità intensiva consuma corpo e psiche" ["Mum whose just given birth, we want you to be on form". It is thus that intensive maternity exhausts the body and spirit], *Il fatto quotidiano*, 23 January 2023: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/01/23/mamma-che-hai-appena-partorito-ti-vogliamo-sul-pezzo-così-la-maternità-intensiva-consuma-corpo-e-psiche/6945204/>

³⁰ Camille Fauroux. "La politique familiale nazie: une lecture croisée des ouvrages de Michelle Mouton et Lisa Pine", *Rivue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande*, tome 42 n°1, January-March 2010. Les politiques de la famille dans l'espace germanophone. p. 115-122:

https://www.persee.fr/doc/reval_0035-0974_2010_num_42_1_6105

³¹ In 2022, the minimum was 1.08 in Malta and the maximum 1.79 in France. More average were 1.46 in Germany, 1.53 in Belgium, 1.56 in Hungary and 1.64 in Czechia. Eurostat *Fertility statistics*, 15 February 2024: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fertility_statistics

³² Solène Cordier, "Emmanuel Macron annonce un congé de naissance et un plan contre l'infertilité en vue du "réarmement démographique" du pays", *Le Monde*, 10 May 2024: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/01/17/emmanuel-macron-annonce-un-conge-de-naissance-et-un-plan-contre-l-infertilité-pour-le-rearmement-démographique-du-pays_6211291_3224.html

³³ Iris Deroeux, "Six questions sur l'autoconservation d'ovocytes, une pratique de plus en plus demandée en France" [Six questions about self-conservation of women's eggs, a practice more and more requested in France], *Le Monde*, 10 May 2024: <https://www.espace-ethique-azureen.fr/2024/05/19/six-questions-sur-lautoconservation-dovocytes-une-pratique-de-plus-en-plus-demandee-en-france/>

At war since February 2022, with its birthrate falling for the past 20 years, Russia's birth rate forecasts are on a downward curve compared with the United States. In addition, the loss of men in Ukraine is between 120,000 and 150,000³⁴, and 500,000 soldiers have returned from the front wounded³⁵. Another reason for the country's depopulation is that 980,000 people packed their bags between the start of the invasion of Ukraine and June 2023. While some of them eventually returned to Russia, this brain drain is an additional problem for the economy. Finally, the annexation of Crimea (2.4 million inhabitants) was not enough to reverse the trend, as the birth rate is also falling on that peninsula.

Russia has therefore been hit by a demographic crisis that has been exacerbated by the conflict with Ukraine. The lack of manpower and cannon fodder is a real thorn in the side of the state. The shortage of manpower to meet wartime needs is hampering arms production and industry more generally.

As a result, the government, all departments in unison, took measures to stimulate the birth rate and put pressure on women and families: men with four children were exempted from the front line; the practice of abortion was stopped in private clinics in several regions at the request of the authorities. In November 2024, the Duma voted unanimously to ban "propaganda for a childless lifestyle". Also targeted are same-sex couples and young women pursuing higher education. The state is prepared to provide 5.57 billion euros in funding for various bonuses and allowances that must cover over a million people³⁶ (birth bonuses for female students and increased maternity allowances, particularly for a second child).

Women at work

The less the skill and exertion of strength implied in manual labour, in other words, the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women. Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex.³⁷

While creating "indoor women", capitalism mobilised women into social labour on a scale incomparable with other class societies that preceded it. Women workers (and children) were conscripted into wage labour from the very beginnings of industrialisation, while still being handcuffed by the state to their husbands and children. In France, the Civil Code of 1804 (known as the Napoleonic Code in 1807) asserted the total legal incapacity and subordination of married women. They were forbidden to work without their husband's permission, forbidden to collect their own wages, forbidden to sign contracts, forbidden to manage their own property, forbidden to travel abroad without permission, forbidden to attend secondary schools and universities, excluded from political rights etc.

Let's recall a few dates in the recent history of women in France on the plain of economic, political and sexual rights³⁸:

1944, 21 April, women's right to vote is legally established. They get to vote, for the first time, in the municipal elections of April-May 1945;

1965, 13 July, a law authorises women to manage their own property and engage in professional activity without the agreement of their husband in the framework of the legal definition of marriage without a contract;

1967, 19 December, the Neuwirth law allows contraception;

1970, 4 June, the law substitutes mutual parental authority for paternal authority;

³⁴ Pjotr Sauer, "End justifies the means': high Russian death toll fails to shift opinion on Ukraine war", *The Guardian*, 22 Oct 2024: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/22/high-russian-death-toll-fails-shift-opinion-ukraine-war>

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ "Russia to Raise Maternity Subsidies in 2025 Amid Population Crisis", *The Moscow Times*, 14 October 2024:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/14/russia-to-raise-maternity-subsidies-in-2025-amid-population-crisis-a86676>

³⁷ Marx & Engels, 1847, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive Marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>

³⁸ *L'évolution des droits des femmes : chronologie, Vie Publique* [The evolution of women's rights : chronology, Public Life], 23 September 2024: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/19590-chronologie-des-droits-des-femmes>

1972, 22 December, law on equal pay for women and men;
1975, 17 January, the Veil Law allows for voluntary termination of pregnancy;
1975, 11 July, the law allows divorce by mutual consent;
1975, 11 July, the law forbids making an offer of employment restricted to one sex, refusing to hire someone or dismissing someone on the grounds of sex or marital status;
1980, 23 December, the law defines rape and recognises it as a crime.

And in Belgium³⁹:

1948 Right to vote for women in both parliamentary and provincial elections;
1949 First participation of women in legislative elections;
1958 Law on equality between spouses, removal of the husband's legal authority and the legal incapacity of the married woman;
1969 The law on employment contracts forbids employers to sack women for pregnancy or marriage;
1971 The principle of equality is applied to unemployment benefits;
1973 Lifting of the ban on distributing or publicising contraceptives;
1974. The law on parental equality gives fathers and mothers the same responsibilities in the upbringing of children and in the management of their children's property;
1976 The law imposes equality between men and women in the exercise of matrimonial property rights and enshrines the equality of men and women in marriage. Women are allowed to open a bank account without their spouse's permission.

Women's employment rates have varied over time⁴⁰. Claudia Goldin's work⁴¹ on women's participation in the US labour market shows that women worked more in the nineteenth century than in the early twentieth. We can distinguish three periods:

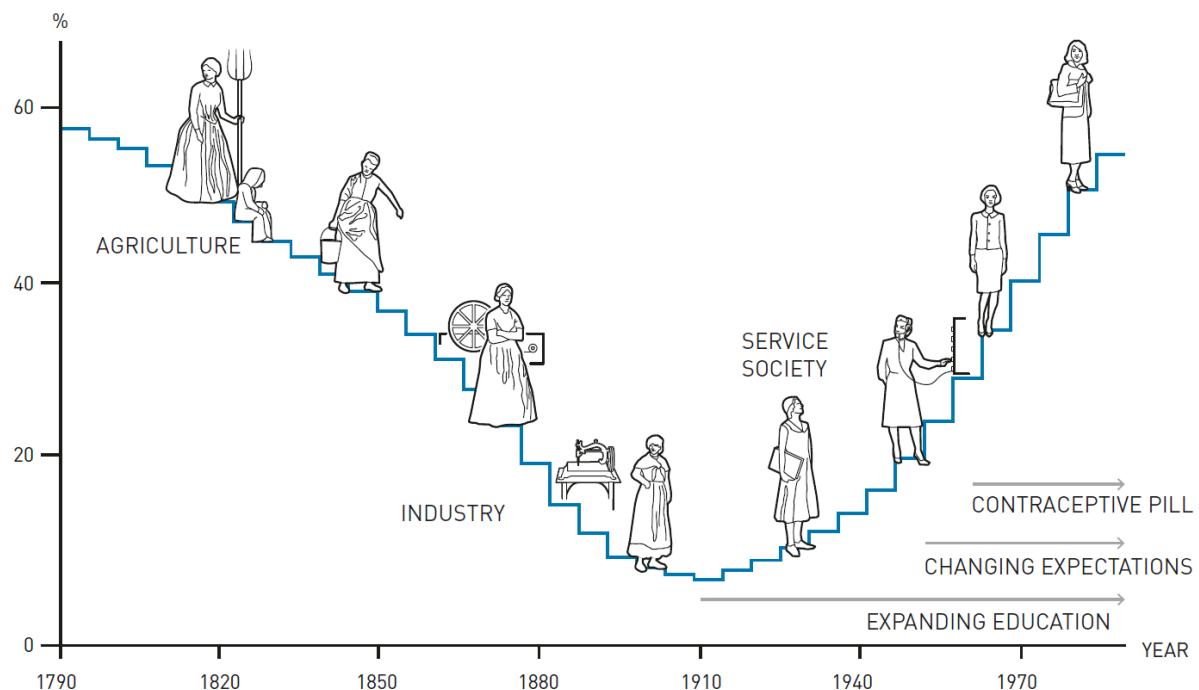
1. From 1800 to 1910, women's participation rate fell from almost 60% to 10%. The transition from an agrarian to an industrial society reduced the demand for female labour on family farms. Women devoted more time to housework and bringing up children, while men became the main breadwinners.
2. From 1900 to 1960, the rate of participation of women grew from 10% to 30%, but essentially in lower-paid jobs.
3. From 1960 to 1990, the rate of participation of women exploded, going from 30% to 60%, and they massively entered better-paid sectors.

³⁹ "Chronologie du statut des femmes en Belgique" [Chronology of the status of women in Belgium], Wikipedia: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronologie_du_statut_des_femmes_en_Belgique

⁴⁰ For example, during the First World War, women were taken on in numerous sectors (armaments, mechanical engineering, transport) which had previously ignored them. Yet, in the 1920s, with the return of the men, the majority of those women were expelled from the labour market.

⁴¹ Claudia Goldin, "The U-shaped Female Labor Force function in Economic development and Economic history": https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/goldin/files/the_u-shaped_female_labor_force_function_in_economic_development_and_economic_history.pdf

Percentage of married American women in work since 1790⁴²



From the 1960s onwards, in the countries at the heart of capital, the new phase of expansion of wage labour strongly affected women, more so those who had not yet been proletarianised (farmers, shopkeepers, artisans). Today, around 50% of women worldwide participate in the labour market⁴³, compared with 80% of men. In France, 60% of women are wage earners (this figure rises to 80% for younger women), compared with 40% in 1945. For capital, the female workforce acts as a reserve army (and an adjustable variable – such as the massive productive employment of women in wartime already mentioned), helping to drive down the price of labour.

At the present time, women are being hired in great numbers in the Fiat factories at Mirafiori, Giggotto and Rivolta. They work together with men on the assembly lines, in the preparation department and stock rooms, executing tasks which had previously been done by men. These women are used by Fiat as a reserve army of labour in extreme need of work at a time when workers coming from the South are beginning to refuse to work at Fiat. Since January, 1969, 11,000 men have quit work there, and the supply of labour from the South has decreased considerably ... Most of the women are recently hired and many are still in a trial period. As with most recently hired people, they are afraid to be fired and feel themselves to be in a very precarious position. Only a restricted minority among them went through the struggles of Summer and Autumn 1969, and they therefore generally lack experience, unity, and organization in opposition to the boss. However, the reasons that make them less disposed to fight derive ultimately from their condition as women.⁴⁴

⁴² English-language graphic from Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences:

<https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2023/10/popular-economicsciencesprize2023.pdf>

⁴³ World Bank Group, "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modelled ILO estimate)", 2024: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>

⁴⁴ Turin Collective, in Lotta Continua Feb 1970, "Italy: Women in the FIAT factory": <https://libcom.org/article/italy-women-fiat-factory>

Women are exploited under worse conditions than men

Ever since its beginnings, capitalism has had to manage this contradiction between its need for domestic labour and its need for a workforce, particularly a female one. The differentiated situation between men and women on the labour market is linked to the asymmetry of marital and parental roles. Given the low level of socialisation of domestic labour, and the fact that they are responsible for children, women are weakened in the confrontation with employers and, more often than men, are forced to accept lower wages, flexible working etc. This burden is also an obstacle to women entering and remaining in the productive sphere, and therefore an impediment to their autonomy.

High unemployment among women is an indicator of this, as is the prevalence of part-time work. Capital imposes part-time work, particularly on women, as a form of flexible labour management. The state also plays its part in the work-family “reconciliation” equation, whether through a public policy of encouraging part-time work or by allocating supplementary income (family allowances, parental benefits, etc.). These policies are aimed solely at women, making gender roles even more “natural”. Finally, the sex division of social labour persists on a global scale, both horizontally and vertically⁴⁵. Women are still concentrated in certain strongly feminised, less remunerated and socially devalued sectors (education, health, social work, administration, commerce).

⁴⁵ ILOSAT, *Where women work: female-dominated occupations and sectors*, 7 November 2023:
<https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog/where-women-work-female-dominated-occupations-and-sectors/>

Sector of activity in France in 2020 (as %)	Women	Men	% of women in sector
Agriculture	1.4	3.2	29.7
Industry	7.6	18.1	28.5
Construction	1.5	11.5	11.1
Service sector	88.1	65.7	55.9
<i>Retail</i>	12.1	13.0	46.7
<i>Transport</i>	2.7	7.4	25.8
<i>Hotels and restaurants</i>	3.7	3.6	49.3
<i>Information and communication</i>	2.2	4.6	31.1
<i>Finance, insurance, property</i>	5.5	4.1	56.1
<i>Services principally to businesses</i>	9.8	10.1	47.7
<i>Public administration</i>	10.3	8.4	53.6
<i>Teaching</i>	11.0	4.8	68.5
<i>Health</i>	11.5	3.7	74.7
<i>Medico-social accommodation, social services</i>	12.0	2.4	82.7
<i>Household services</i>	7.2	3.6	65.5

Source: INSEE, *Caractéristiques des emplois (Job characteristics)*⁴⁶.

Only women with a degree have gradually been able to enter fields hitherto reserved for men (essentially scientific, technological, engineering and mathematical professions). Some of them have even been able to break through the “glass ceiling” and gain a place in the management hierarchy. This strengthens the commitment to wage labour and companies’ “commitment to women”, blunting, without really undermining, the sexed segregation and hierarchisation of the labour market and male hegemony in the professions at the heart of economic and political power.

We are seeing the appearance, for the first time in the history of capitalism, of a layer of women whose direct interests (not mediated as before by men: fathers, husbands, lovers...) are frontally opposed to the interests of those affected by the generalisation of part-time work, badly paid and socially unrecognised service jobs, and more generally by casualisation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ INSEE, *Caractéristiques des emplois, INSEE Références*, 3 March 2022: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6047735>

⁴⁷ Kergoat, 2001, “Sex division of labour and social relations of sex”, *op. cit.*

The ten professions which are the most feminised in France

Percentage of women	1982-1984	2017-2019	Change
Office workers in banks and insurance	17.0	48.4	31.4
Law professionals	24.0	55.1	31.0
Administrative, accounting and financial service workers	21.6	52.5	30.9
Bank and insurance technicians	39.8	68.1	28.4
Administrative, accounting and financial service workers technicians	45.7	73.7	28.1
Civil servants	23.4	51.2	27.8
Technicians and managers in agriculture	5.7	30.9	25.2
Engineers and technical managers in industry	3.1	26.8	23.7
Commercial and technical-commercial managers	9.2	32.4	23.2
Transport, logistics and flight crew managers	5.9	28.7	22.7

Source: Observatoire des inégalités (Observatory of Inequalities)⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Observatoire des inégalités, *La mixité des métiers progresse, mais bien lentement* [Jobs are becoming more mixed, but very slowly], 4 March 2022: <https://www.inegalites.fr/La-mixite-des-metiers-progresse-mais-bien-lentement>

SEXUALITY, THE HARD CORE OF THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

Sexual liberation, year zero

In the societies at the centre of capital, the work of reproduction has been partially socialised and the majority of women have gained access to income from work, however low. This growing and then massive entry into wage labour has coincided with the rise in power of the women's movement. The combination of women's integration into social production and feminist and workers' struggles contributed to a major transformation of their situation: greater economic, political, social and sexual independence. Witness their entry into higher education, the legalisation of divorce, or the decriminalisation of contraception and abortion.

Yet oppression remains in one fundamental area: women are more than ever reified, commodified and put at the sexual service of males, whether in relations of marriage, cohabitation or prostitution. The role assigned to women is to satisfy the needs of men, within the framework defined by men. This service is taken to its extreme in prostitution, where the appropriation, however temporary, of the individual is total. With prostitution, capitalism has pushed the sexual socialisation of women to its highest historical level.

The body is sexualised because it is the object and the commodity of multiple industries – fashion, dieting, sport, cosmetics – which regiment the body through its sexualisation. And the expansion of these industries is through the sexualisation of the body. The sexualised body is therefore a considerable source of revenue for many industries. The aim is to make the body not exactly beautiful, but sexually attractive, which is not necessarily the same thing. [...] Capitalism has managed to make subjectivity work through pleasure and desire like no other economic system. [...] Capitalism strongly aestheticises the space of interactions by sexualising them. From my point of view, it certainly doesn't mean that the control of women's bodies through modesty has fallen away, but nor does it mean that women have been liberated from it.⁴⁹

What's more, even though the introduction of effective contraception has radically strengthened the conditions for a sexuality uncoupled from reproduction⁵⁰, the social imperative to have children continues to haunt women's sexual freedom, particularly at a time when the ageing of populations hampers the valorisation of capital and reduces the pool of cannon fodder in the course to war. Sexuality is channelled towards reproduction within the heterosexual conjugal framework, and women who deviate from this are exposed to interpersonal violence and social sanctions backed by the state, whether murder, "corrective" rape or the stigma of the whore. In many parts of the world, celibacy and homosexuality are treated as deviances in terms of the obligation to found a family and sexed roles.

It is a social fact, socially managed: it is natural to produce children, but there are means of compelling women to have them. It is possible to regulate births, to impose reproduction. To put it very briefly, ovulation is biological, sexual intercourse is a social fact. Sexuality among humans is the object of various types of intervention. Many societies take care to study women's fertility cycles, how to manage them so as to eventually impose intercourse "when the woman is fertile". They don't all do it, nor do they all do it in the same way. There are enormous differences, but it is a real issue. In addition, we only need to look at what has been stirred up by the possibility of legal abortion and contraception in the hands of women in our own societies to see how it is still, even now, a terrain of struggle⁵¹.

Not only do all social formations organise the objective, physical and sexual appropriation of women by men, but even more so, their subjectivity is defined in relation to men, whether in relation to desire, pleasure, self-esteem or self-expression. Their work in the home, their place in the family, their

⁴⁹ Eva Illouz, "In neoliberalism, all the intimate skills of the self are exploited on the market", *Marianne* magazine, 14 November 2023:

<https://www.marianne.net/societe/eva-illouz-dans-le-neoliberalisme-toutes-les-competences-intimes-du-moi-sont-exploitees-sur-le-marche> (our translation)

⁵⁰ The human species does not have a periodic reproductive cycle which chains sexual activity to procreation, unlike other mammals (as in the case of the rutting season, for example).

⁵¹ Paola Tabet, "Creuser des évidences toutes naturalisées" [Digging into the naturalised facts], *Nouvelles questions féminines*, 2008/3: <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-nouvelles-questions-feministes-2008-3-page-127> (our translation)

sexuality with their partners, even the way they see themselves, none of this belongs to them under the reign of male domination and slavery.

The housewife therefore does not have financial independence and here economic dependence renders her equally dependent from a psychological and emotional point of view⁵²

The body of woman does not exist. It is simply the extension of man's desire as expressed in private behaviour and socio-cultural structures, in practice and in its representation. The woman's body is a text dictated by men. It is a screen on which are projected, violently or courteously, directly or indirectly, male fantasies.⁵³

The relationship of domination that runs through the relationship between women and men significantly inhibits erotic and affectionate intimacy. In fact, sexuality – above all heterosexuality – can only be satisfying with great difficulty in a context where women are appropriated, used, worn down and abused, even killed, by men.

Pleasure is rarely the main reason that we have sexual relations with men. I say jokingly in the text that 'straight men are a lousy shag', but that is not completely false: statistically there is a blatant discrepancy in access to orgasm between men and women in sexual relations, the "orgasm gap"⁵⁴. If you have one, good for you. If you don't, too bad, better luck next time. Women's pleasure is optional. We endure sexual activity which ends systematically after ejaculation because we expect things in return: compliments, love, marital peace, possibly material goods and financial stability.⁵⁵

The INSERM study of sexualities in France in 2023 however showed recent counter-tendencies in favour of the retreat of compulsory and penetrative heterosexuality. In other words, "*a growing tendency to equality between sexes and sexualities in French society*"⁵⁶. In fact, the repertoire of sexual practices has diversified, and the data show a decrease in the frequency of sexual activities accepted by women in order to please their partner without them really wanting it themselves – from 50.9% in 2006 to 43.7% in 2023. For men, it has remained stable at around 24%. This reveals "*a context where the sexual availability of women is called into question*"⁵⁷. In the same vein, the idea that men have naturally greater sexual needs than women, the majority view in 2006, was no longer such in 2023.

Finally, sexual relations with a partner of the same sex have grown over the course of time. More than one woman in five (22.6%) and one man in seven (14.5%) is not strictly heterosexual. Women report for the first time in 2023 more experiences with people of the same sex than men do.

The calling into question of heterosexuality is also more marked among women: there is more for them to gain in orienting themselves to other sexual possibilities, notably because of inequalities and violence persistent in the heterosexual couple (and which are more and more documented via the growing diffusion of feminist ideas). ... In a social context marked by growing diffusion of feminist ideas, these young women seem to orient themselves more and more towards other sexual trajectories in which violence and inequalities are less present.⁵⁸

⁵² Padua Collective, 1974, "Smash the system, power to women!", *op. cit.*

⁵³ Françoise Collin, "Le corps v(i)olé" [The body raped/stolen], *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 1974/3: https://www.persee.fr/doc/grif_0770-6081_1974_num_3_1_911 (our translation)

⁵⁴ Franki Cookney, "When 'sex' only means penetration, of course there's a huge orgasm gap between men and women", *The Guardian*, 14 August 2024: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/14/sex-orgasm-gap-men-women>

⁵⁵ Ovidie, *Sphères* magazine no. 12, (<https://spheresmagazine.com/numeros/les-libertins/>). "We've been brought up to please, to think about what we could do to please the other person, and sometimes even to fuck out of politeness. We have not been taught to take pleasure. What's more, society makes us understand that our life's goal is to find a man, make a couple and do everything we can to maintain it. I think there's a fear in us that we're no longer wanted and that the other person will go elsewhere, so we accept bad sex, that our pleasure is optional and worse, we make the other person believe that we like it to flatter their ego. It's in this sense that I say we're accomplices, that women are in voluntary servitude." (our translation) "Ovidie: "Sex with men is too restrictive and disappointing, some women no longer want to force themselves to do it", Ophélie Ostermann, *madame Figaro*, 23 March 2023: <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/bien-etre/psycho/ovidie-le-sexe-avec-les-hommes-est-trop-contraint-et-decevant-certaines-femmes-ne-veulent-plus-se-forcer-20230323>

⁵⁶ First results of the study CSF-2023 Inserm-ANRS-MIE, Context of Sexualities in France, 13 November 20: https://presse.inserm.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/rapp_CSF_web.pdf

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

This recalls the practical critique of male and heterosexual domination in the lesbian movement since the 1970s.

In this sense we can explain to what extent the degraded relationships between men and women are determined by the fracturing that society has imposed between man and woman, subordinating woman as object, the "complement" to man. And in this sense, we can see the validity of the explosion of tendencies within the women's movement in which women want to conduct their struggle against men as such and no longer wish to use their strength to sustain even sexual relationships with them, since each of these relationships is always frustrating. A power relation precludes any possibility of affection and intimacy. Yet between men and women power as its right commands sexual affection and intimacy. In this sense, the gay movement is the most massive attempt to disengage sexuality and power. ... a movement of gay women which asserts the possibilities of a relationship free of a sexual power struggle, free of the biological social unit, and asserts at the same time our need to open ourselves to a wider social and therefore sexual potential.⁵⁹

But if gay movements have been – alongside feminist movements – the avant-garde of a transformation of sexualities, “*what has happened in contemporary society, is that the possibilities of economic valorisation of the body, of beauty and sexuality have grown unbelievably, notably in the big industries 'of looking' – publishing, fashion, cinema. ... The barriers have fallen one after the other, and transgression has ended up leading to a movement of normalisation, starting in the nineteen eighties.*”⁶⁰

Love and violence

The dominant conception of love is a mystification of relations between the sexes. In its modern form, the emotional dimension predominates in relations. There is certainly a historic advance on the level of personal choice.

Our sexual love differs essentially from the simple sexual desire, the Eros, of the ancients. In the first place, it assumes that the person loved returns the love; to this extent the woman is on an equal footing with the man, whereas in the *Eros* of antiquity she was often not even asked. Secondly, our sexual love has a degree of intensity and duration which makes both lovers feel that non-possession and separation are a great, if not the greatest, calamity; to possess one another, they risk high stakes, even life itself. In the ancient world this happened only, if at all, in adultery.⁶¹

But the movement of individualisation of social relations that is characteristic of the CMP, in relation to the “free market” of seduction, is also the source of individual fragility when the value of the monadic subject is measured, even evaluated, by the yardstick of recognition by the other. Failures, separations and frustrations all put the self to the test. In this game, women are the losers, because despite a relative autonomy they have acquired politically and historically, they are still emotionally subjugated.

Male domination takes the form of an ideal of autonomy to which women, through the mediation of the struggle for equality in the public sphere, have themselves subscribed. But when transposed to the private sphere, autonomy stifles women's need for recognition. For, it is indeed a characteristic of symbolic violence that one cannot oppose a definition of reality that is to one's own detriment. My point is not that women do not want autonomy. Rather, it is that they are in a position fraught with tension because they carry simultaneous ideals of care and autonomy, and, more critically, because often they view themselves as having to worry about their own and the man's autonomy. ... I would contend that men can follow the imperative for autonomy more consistently and for a longer part of their lives and, as a result, they can exert emotional domination over women's desire for attachment, compelling them to mute their longing for attachment and to imitate men's detachment and drive for autonomy. It follows that women who are not interested in heterosexual domesticity, children, and a man's commitment will find themselves more likely to be the emotional equals of men.⁶²

Everywhere in the world⁶³, submission is obtained above all by violence. One in three women aged 15 and over has experienced sexual and/or physical violence at least once by an intimate partner,

⁵⁹ Mariarosa Dalla Costa., *The power of women and the subversion of the community*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Simon Brunfaut, Xavier Flament, “*Eva Illouz*, sociologist: “Today Madame Bovary would be on Tinder””, *L'Echo*, 18 December 2024:

<https://www.lecho.be/opinions/general/la-sociologue-eva-illouz-sur-l-amour-l-intime-est-economique/10579441.html>

⁶¹ Engels, 1884, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, *op. cit.*

⁶² *Why Love Hurts - A Sociological Explanation* by Eva Illouz, Polity Press, 2012

⁶³ UN Women, “Facts and figure: ending violence against women”, 25 November 2024:

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>

sexual violence outside the couple, or both. On average, five women or girls are killed every hour by an intimate partner or other family members. Most violence against women is perpetrated by the husband or a present or previous intimate partner. This does not mean that every man is individually actively and permanently violent, but that this violence is committed on a large scale by men.

This violence, in a wide variety of forms, including watered down in the banality of everyday attitudes of domination, serves to discipline and maintain women in a subordinate position, socially and sexually. The (fear of) violence restricts their activity and mobility, and further ties them to supposedly protective men in a marital setting.

Since its origins, the Feminist Movement has charged that the relation between men and women in capitalist society is one based on violence. In fact, this was the first issue around which the movement developed both a wide-ranging debate and a high level of organized struggle [...] Male violence against women was certainly not born with capitalism, but rather has a long history behind it. But even if some aspects of this form of violence remain basically unchanged (women were beaten, raped, killed, genitally mutilated, forced to abort pregnancies or bear children, long before capitalism), under capitalism male violence against women has been re-established and endowed with a function [...] entirely internal to the work which women are destined to perform: housework.⁶⁴

At the heart of this hierarchical relationship, rape, past or future, is a wedge driven into women's consciousness. “*From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear*”⁶⁵. Rape, from its massively ordinary character in friendship and family circles to its planned deployment in contexts of military confrontation or communal massacres (as in India, for example), pursues the intention, and often succeeds, even temporarily, of suppressing the subject.

The long history of sexual violence is accompanied by alienating representations that make aggression an extraordinary event, caused by a stranger who is deviant and “to be punished”, on victims often considered responsible, or not having sufficiently demonstrated their refusal, or as a crime which happens in particular circumstances (a deserted place, with the use of violence or threats). Yet, what characterises the overwhelming majority of these situations is the closeness or even intimacy with the aggressor. The result: some rape scenarios are considered credible; others are not⁶⁶, always so as to exonerate the men.

“*In most cases the rapist comes to an agreement with his conscience — there was no rape, just a little slut who didn't know what she wanted, and for whom a little persuading was all that was needed.*”⁶⁷

“*If I did wrong, I really want to apologise, but I am not a rapist.*”⁶⁸

“*I recognise the material facts, but not the intention.*”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa., *Un Lavoro d'Amore, La Violenza Fisica Componente Essenziale del "Trattamento" Maschile nei confronti delle Donne* [A labour of love, physical violence is an essential component of men's 'treatment' of women], edizioni delle donne, 1978:

<https://mega.nz/file/fdw0TRjZ#7JKlex-TERwlIIn4kYCpPzSpj5XmoWdZg5avBy1LjQ7M> (our translation)

⁶⁵ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will – men, women and rape*, Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1975.

⁶⁶ Alexane Guérin, “Enquête sur le viol ordinaire” [Inquiry into ordinary rape], The Conversation, 8 October 2024: <https://theconversation.com/enquete-sur-le-viol-ordinaire-239121>

⁶⁷ Virginie Despentes, 2010, *King Kong Theory*

⁶⁸ Catherine Le Magueresse, “Rape and consent in French criminal law. Reflections starting from Canadian criminal law”, Archives de politique criminelle, 2021/1 no. 34: <https://droit.cairn.info/revue-archives-de-politique-criminelle-2012-1-page-223#re1no1>

⁶⁹ During the Mazan trial, one of the accused, Dominique D., claimed that he believed it was “couple madness” and that he had been pestered by Dominique Pelicot “to return again and again”. He said that he only grasped that something was wrong after the sixth visit. Pascale Robert-Diard and Henri Seckel: “Who are the 51 prosecuted at the trial of the Mazan rapes?”, *Le monde*, 25 November 2024: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/visuel/2024/11/25/proces-des-viols-de-mazan-je-n-accepte-pas-qu-on-me-traita-de-violeur-c-est-un-truc-trop-lourd-a-porter-le-grand-deni-des-accuses-d-un-proces-historique_6412800_3225.html

The intentional element was at the heart of the 50 defendants' lines of defence in the so-called mega-trial of the Mazan rapes between September and December 2024, combining arguments concerning Dominique Pelicot's alleged control – here we see the transfer of responsibility – and Gisèle Pelicot's implied consent, or consent by proxy allegedly given by her husband. In other words, using the commodification of women to explain their actions. More prosaically, Dominique Pelicot's lawyer, Béatrice Zavarro, put forward this hypothesis: “*Isn't the truth: I'm looking for a quick fuck and I'm not thinking?*”⁷⁰ On the other hand, the prosecution asserted the impossibility of accidental or involuntary rape. For the magistrate Laure Chabaud, “*we can no longer say in 2024 [that] 'since she said nothing, she agreed to it', it is from another age.*”⁷¹

The abuse inflicted, which objectively constitutes the concrete, real victim, is thus superimposed on the conditioning of women's subjectivity. And “*the total success of this transfer of responsibility is demonstrated by countless examples that seem to have no link between them. But there is a terrifying one: the desire for women to retain a victim mentality. [...] We discover this passive image of ourselves, sometimes with astonishment, in the smallest details of our upbringing.*”⁷²

As Eva Illouz says it: “*Women are constituted as objects of the gaze of another, and ... in this position where the woman becomes the spectator of herself, she reifies herself. That has psychological consequences: seeing herself or taking herself as a thing, that is to say passive, habituated to being an object and not a subject, devaluing herself.*”⁷³

Rape and state justice

Feminist battles against sexual domination, renewed since 2017 with the #MeToo wave, express and, in return, produce effects in the consciousness of individuals. In France, incidents of sexual violence reported in 2023 by respondents to the enquiry on sexualities significantly increased with time. In 2006, 15.9% of women aged 18-69 reported having been subjected to sexual assault or attempted assault, and this figure reached 29.8% in 2023. Among men the figures rise from 4.6% in 2006 to 8.7% in 2023. A number of these violent acts happened when the person was a minor. The research stresses that “*the growing social mobilisation against all forms of sexual violence has modified the normative frameworks of sexual consent. The rise in reported incidents therefore reflects, at the same time, that the respondents are counting events which were not previously considered as violent, and a greater willingness to denounce them.*”⁷⁴

The treatment of rape by the state and its judicial apparatus has undergone major changes since the last movement began in 1968, when the women's movement made some of its arguments heard, notably by moving into the legal arena. Contrary to criminal law, which historically protects the presumption of innocence, civil law protects family ties. Starting in the 1980s, in the countries at the heart of capital, rape became a crime and marital immunity along with sex obligations (for the victim as well as for the aggressor) was removed. “*The very definition of sexual violence has been modified over time. Let's remember for example that marital rape has only been recognised in law since 1992. Acts formerly considered as 'normal' can thus from now on be described, quite rightly, as sexual assault.*”⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Henri Seckel, “At the trial of the Mazan rapes, the closing argument of Béatrice Zavarro, lawyer for Dominique Pelicot...”, *Le monde*, 28 November 2024: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/11/28/au-proces-des-viols-de-mazan-la-plaidoirie-sur-un-fil-de-l-avocate-de-dominique-pelicot-c-est-vous-et-moi-contre-le-monde-entier_6417644_3224.html

⁷¹ “Fin des réquisitions au procès des viols de Mazan...”, *Le monde*, 27 November 2024: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/11/27/proces-des-viols-de-mazan-peines-de-4-a-20-ans-demandees-contre-les-51-accuses_6416698_3224.html

⁷² Benoîte Groult, quoted in Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, *op cit.*, preface to the French edition.

⁷³ Eva Illouz, *Why love hurts..., op. cit.*

⁷⁴ First results of the study CSF-2023 Inserm-ANRS-MIE, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*

Yet patterns of domination resist the law, and the ineffectiveness of the application of the law is plain to see. Rape cases are hidden to a considerable extent, almost everywhere they are studied: between 10% and 15% of rapes and sexual assaults are reported to the police. Of those reported in France (for example), a third of complainants lead to judicial processing, and of these cases, 20% go to trial and around 10% of trials result in a conviction⁷⁶. The women's movement, now largely institutionalized and integrated into the dynamics of the state, has thus continued to push for legislative change.

In France, very recent modifications to the penal system envisage notably a lengthening of the statute of limitations in a series of cases⁷⁷. *“Sliding statutes of limitation and interruptive acts from one procedure to the next suggest a system in which the statute of limitations has become almost non-existent. Extending the statute of limitations is a legal technique that leads victims to believe that they will be able to obtain a criminal response even at a very late stage, which is unrealistic in practice.”*⁷⁸

The presumption of innocence is also being shaken by the discussion on consent and by the attacks made by active fringes of feminism behind the slogan “Victim, we believe you”. In February 2024, a draft European directive to combat violence against women sought to include the notion of consent in the legal definitions of rape in the twenty-seven European countries. France refused to adopt this regulation. To date, French criminal law emphasises the primary responsibility of the perpetrator of the crime of rape through the collection of evidence relating to the use of violence, coercion, threats or surprise. The victim's consent is not at the heart of the burden of proof – the victim's lack of consent and the perpetrator's intent are deduced from the circumstances surrounding the facts – even though the victim is constantly questioned on this subject and bears the burden of proving that she refused, including in situations of moral duress that are difficult to objectively assess, thus undermining the examination of coercion.

Hence the calls for the introduction into French law of the notion of effective consent, as is the case in other jurisdictions where the suspect will be questioned on whether he ensured that he had obtained the victim's consent. For example, in Canada, rape is defined exclusively in terms of non-consent, and it is therefore the existence and validity of the consent expressed that is central in criminal cases⁷⁹. The risk is that it becomes the victim's behaviour that constitutes rape, and not that of the aggressor.

⁷⁶ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Le Viol redéfini Vers l'égalité, contre le consentement* [Rape redefined – towards equality, against consent], Flammarion, 25/10/2023.

⁷⁷ Six years for crimes such as spousal violence, sexual assaults other than rape (touching, forced kissing, etc.), moral harassment, threats of murder, rape or sexual assault. The statute of limitations for felonies has been extended to 20 years for rape, spousal violence resulting in permanent mutilation or disability, murder, kidnapping and false imprisonment. For underage victims, the statute of limitations has been raised to 30 years.

Law of 27 February 2017, “reform of the statute of limitations in criminal matters”; Law of 3 August 2018 strengthening “the fight against sexual and sexist violence”; Law of 21 April 2021 aimed at “protecting minors from sexual crimes and offences, and incest”.

⁷⁸ “Macron's five-year term: what has changed in the fight against sexual assault?”, Audrey Darsonville, Marie Dosé and Jean-Pierre Rosenczveig, *Dalloz Actualité*, 11 March 2022: <https://www.dalloz-actualite.fr/interview/quinquennat-macron-quelle-evolution-de-lutte-contre-violences-sexuelles>

⁷⁹ Catherine Le Magueresse, “Viol et consentement en droit pénal français...”, *op. cit*

Sexual violence does not result from misunderstandings or problems in communicating consent, but from the fact that men believe they have or should have the right to impose sexual activity. It is an illusion to believe that simply defining rape in terms of non-consent will put an end to it. Rape is not sex without consent; it is a violation inflicted by a criminal on a victim that has little to do with sexual “relations”: an activity joined and shared by partners. [...] The courts fail to take into account the way in which gender norms prevent women from expressing their desires and allow men to ignore them, or even knowingly ignore them. But this is not a legal problem, it’s a judicial one. What is at stake is not the text of the law, but the sexist representations of judges and juries, and their extremely limited conception of threat and constraint⁸⁰.

In cases of alleged sexual violence, it is a projection from the male point of view, putting the victim on trial, attributing the victim’s mental state rather than assessing the perpetrator’s behaviour and [their] reliance on inequalities to force sex. ... Sexual coercion utilizing inequalities to force sex on people with less power by people with more is integral to the dominant structural sexual model.⁸¹

More fundamentally, women’s consent is marked by their oppression. While verification of consent has become an obligatory part of the contemporary legal system, this only scratches the surface of the asymmetry of relations between the sexes. By analogy, employment contracts are signed “freely” but within the framework of a given social balance of power, which is generally unfavourable to the worker.

The concept describes an asymmetric interaction between two parties ... In an unequal society, many sad routine resignations – or worse – pass for “voluntary” in the sexual context. Consent then covers countless forms of [male] hegemony, which are generally evaded so that it cannot be seen that they influence or even undermine [women’s] freedom.⁸²

To put it another way, giving in is not consenting:

In fact, what the notion of consent implies is a vision of politics in the classical sense, the model of the contract, of “representativity”, whether it is a matter of authoritarian or democratic regimes. And for sure, this is the model on which many women in our societies imagine their relations with men and their husband. But it’s because they don’t see (they’re prevented from seeing) that this is not a contract between equals. (...) The oppressor and the oppressed are not subjects with identical consciousness, because they are in opposed situations.⁸³

One dangerous and worrying effect of these transformations in the law and in justice is the constant strengthening of punitive measures to the detriment of the generic rights of the defence and of the accused – reversal of the burden of proof – and of the institution of the statute of limitations – suspension of the time limit, extension, interruption, postponement of its starting point, and so on. In fact, with just a few more steps in this explicit attack on the statute of limitations, very little will be escapable in a lifetime.

With regard to the deepening and broadening of sanctions, and the elimination of the time-linked “right to punish”, it should be noted that, in the final analysis, this is a purely political question, which brings us back to the inevitable preliminary reflection that must accompany any struggle, namely the relationship between ends and means, and their “wise” management. We do not want the material application of feminist action to rely solely on recourse to the repressive apparatus of the state.

⁸⁰ Manon Garcia, “It is an illusion to believe that simply defining rape in terms of non-consent will put an end to it.”, *Le monde*, 12 December 2023: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2023/12/12/manon-garcia-philosophe-croire-qu-il-suffit-de-definir-le-viol-par-le-non-consentement-pour-y-mettre-fin-est-illusoire_6205429_3232.html (our translation)

⁸¹ Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Consent is the main legal and social excuse for doing nothing about sexual coercion” [in English], *Le Monde*, 20 Nov 2023, <https://archive.ph/Smo2a>

⁸² Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Le Viol redéfini. Vers l'égalité, contre le consentement* [“Rape redefined. Towards equality, against consent”], Catharine A. MacKinnon, Flammarion, 2023 (our translation)

⁸³ Nicole-Claude Mathieu, “When giving in is not consenting”, *L'anatomie politique, catégorisations et idéologies du sexe*, Chapter 5, Éditions Côté-Femmes, 1991: https://remuernotremerde.poivron.org/uploads/2020/05/quandceder_ppp.pdf

Let's remember that, for a long time, the victim was a marginal figure in criminal proceedings, and that, as late as the 1980s and 1990s in France, plaintiffs and civil parties were essentially deprived of any rights. In practice, they were excluded from the investigation process, except for an, often, rapid consultation of the case file. Their word was easily discredited, with negative consequences for the production of judicial truth.

Today, after a progressive – and perhaps excessive – attention to and understanding of the victim, we have arrived at a kind of sacralisation of the victim's word and suffering, which are almost impossible for the accused to criticise or challenge, a complete credibility of their statements and requests to punish, whatever the cost in terms of repression and a “fair” trial.

So nowadays, in many Western European countries, the victim is often centre stage, and this is accompanied, often under the blind impulse of victims' associations and the media, by legislative inflation that is increasingly repressive in terms of quality – ever heavier accusations and penalties – and quantity – ever more extensive judicialization of punishable behaviour.

But the obsession with the victim does not necessarily mean that the victim's interests are served and certainly does not mean that the social reasons for their victimisation are addressed. The victim – of crime, sexual or otherwise, or of state incompetence or corporate “greed” – has become central to European bourgeois politics, with political parties competing to use victims to further their agendas. In the UK, there is even a “Victims Commissioner” (a post created in 2010), and even bourgeois commentators understand that there is a problem with this fixation⁸⁴.

As a recent article in the Economist put it very well: “Allowing victims a hallowed status in British politics ignores the fact that state failures are collective scandals. Hillsborough [a football crowd crush disaster which happened in 1989] could easily have happened at another stadium to other fans. Grenfell was not the only tower caked in flammable material. Grooming gangs were so widespread that any vulnerable girl could have been dragged in. When victims play such a large role, what should be society's problem becomes an individual one. What is left is a mangled Thatcherite philosophy: there is no such thing as society, only victims and their families.”⁸⁵

In the end, victimisation, the creation of “victim status”, is a complex mechanism in which emotion in all its forms is deliberately exploited for political and penal ends. Its existential message is one of passivity, of withdrawal into the denunciation of injuries endured and their perpetrators to be punished by others, as well as the demand for social recognition of one's suffering, a relative and singular truth that is dressed up as an absolute and indisputable value precisely because it is experienced by the individual who is at the same time its witness. While, on the contrary, humanity has always been characterised by its social nature, by its own capacity to act, by its refusal to passively suffer misfortune and to entrust its salvation to self-interested third parties.

In fact, the “victim identity”, as an expectation of legitimisation, recognition, protection and reparation for the harm suffered, all acted upon by someone other than oneself and represents a heteronomous existential choice. It is a subjectivation via another – in this case, the state and its institutions – which is exactly the opposite of that autonomy, that constant commitment to the *in itself and for itself* which alone can guarantee a subject who is not submissive, not resigned, not servile. In short, an autonomous subject.

⁸⁴ See: <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/>

⁸⁵ The Economist, 29 October 2025, “The idolatry of victimhood - An obsession with victims leads to bad policy, dire politics and more pain”. See: <https://archive.ph/uKUQK>

AGAINST CERTAIN DOGMAS OF CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

Setting out the problem

Today an intense theoretical debate opposes feminists who define themselves as materialists against trans feminists on an axis of “sex against gender”, around the question “what is a woman?” The discussion exists on university campuses, but has consequences on the legal and judicial plane, particularly in the UK, around themes such as prison, sport, and welfare entitlements.

Without posing the question in these terms, the present text provides a certain answer, which collides, *de facto*, with elements of theorisation that are at odds with the analysis of the roots of women’s oppression. These convolutions, which can be described as post-modern, have emptied the woman question of all material substance, with oppression rooted in the body and social relations giving way to a struggle now absorbed by fragmented identities and separated subjectivities.

The negation of material sex, subsumed under gender – unlimited subjectivity, in the register of the discursive – produces an inability to understand male/female relations. In other words, considering trans women as women does nothing to change the division of labour – biological and therefore necessary, or social and therefore contingent – of reproduction within the family, nor, even less, the details of capitalist production.

What we’re talking about is material necessity (sex) and how to reduce that necessity socially to the minimum possible in order to liberate individuals. While the dominant ideology of gender has the function of maintaining male domination and the subjugation of women, new ideological forms, adapted to sociological changes, unfortunately remain compatible with the continuity of the alienated realities of the reproduction of life and capital.

A reminder concerning the materialist method and ideology

The postulate on which the materialist method rests is that there exists a reality, an objective reality, which is independent of the perception and consciousness – forms, conceptions or discourse – that human beings can have. The materialist method also suggests that individual subjectivity is conditioned by the objective reality experienced by each person, without the subjective being the linear or immediate result of these objective conditions.

Ideas carried by individuals therefore have material bases. If these material foundations ultimately remain the matrix of an ideology, the ideology can develop partly independently of the objective causes of its appearance. Nevertheless, should the causes undergo a lasting transformation – notably as a result of human action, and social labour in particular – the ideology has to change, to find a new *raison d'être*, or else disappear.

But an ideology can just as easily, by guiding human action, have the effect of strengthening the material foundations on which it was constructed. Thus, ideologies in turn become material forces, forces that go beyond individuals and transform the world in which they live. Social relations between individuals are conditioned as much by objective reality as by the ideologies that express it.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch,

it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus, their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. For instance, in an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an “eternal law”.⁸⁶

For the individuals who subscribe to an ideology, its material foundations may remain more or less mysterious. The ambition of the materialist method is precisely to lay bare the material bases of ideologies and thus their effects on society. Today, within several active components of contemporary feminism, two elements intertwine to obscure the condition of women. Firstly, an understanding of the relationship between sex and gender that reifies the patriarchal ideology of gender roles. Secondly, there is a preponderance given to the expression of the subjectivity of the so-called oppressed, with little or no concern for the social-material conditions in which and from which this subjectivity is expressed.

Let us emphasise from the outset that, as with universalism and secularism, a materialism limited to the articulation of the concepts of sex and gender is now being used by reactionary tendencies within society. Rhetoric is thus deployed to limit the freedoms of queer or trans people, i.e. those who do not correspond to socially instituted gender norms or who attempt to secede from them. It is obviously desirable for every individual to be able to express themselves freely in all aspects of life, without fear of coercion or violence⁸⁷. But individual expression, whether or not it is protected by the state, will never be enough to understand or criticise, let alone combat, social relationships that have existed for thousands of years.

Sex and gender

Let's start by emphasising our understanding of sex as primary sexual characteristics AND the dichotomy of biological roles functional to sexual reproduction: conception, pregnancy, possibly breastfeeding. Nothing more.

During the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, male domination was called into question through the perspective of overturning the social and cultural expectations imposed on women – gender – in the name of their nature – their sex. There was no reason that women had to remain at home, keep themselves busy with children, marry men, or appear “feminine”. This is nothing other than what Simone de Beauvoir wrote in the formula of the Second Sex (1949): “*One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an Other.*”⁸⁸

The following wave of feminism, starting in the 1990s – here we might refer to the philosophers Judith Butler and Paul B. Preciado – progressively reversed the subject and predicate. It was no longer sex which was the material basis of gender by reason of social organisation, but gender which created sex. Part of the contemporary feminist movement thus peddles ideas according to which social gender, in one way or another, takes precedence over sex.

⁸⁶ Marx & Engels, 1845, *The German Ideology*, “Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook. Ruling class and ruling ideas”: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>

⁸⁷ The INSERM survey on sexuality in France in 2023 shows that opinions on trans identity are much less favourable than those on homosexuality, with only 41.9% of women and 31.6% of men considering it to be an identity like any other. *Op. Cit.*

⁸⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books, 2010

Various discursive strategies are used to fuel theories that subsume the concept of sex to that of gender. For example, since only gender is socially visible, to the naked eye, then sex, which is covered by clothing, plays no role in social space. Or else, a thesis challenges the existence of two sexes by placing them on a continuum that can be modulated *ad infinitum*⁸⁹, which is only reduced to a binary by the power of gender. Or yet again, an argument begins with the obvious, that the concept of sex cannot be properly detached from that of gender, because the border between the two is blurred, and concludes that only gender exists. No theory of sex could therefore be developed in isolation from the concept of gender.

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature”, natural sex, is produced and established as “predisursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. [...] At this juncture it is already clear that one way the internal stability and binary frame for sex is effectively secured is by casting the duality of sex in a predisursive domain. This production of sex as the predisursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*.⁹⁰

This last piece of logic could be applied to the relationship between any element of ideology and its material bases. Talking about and criticising, in practice or in theory, only the idea of gender, useful and laudable though this may be, reveals nothing about the history of this idea, its material bases, or their mutual reinforcement. Because, whether we like it or not, the radical cause – the root – of gender binarity remains the control and repression of female bodies during sexual reproduction and its corollary, child-rearing.

Certainly, violence and control are also imposed on queer people because gender ideology circumscribes and punishes deviations from heterosexual female and male roles within the framework of the family. At the same time, gender ideology becomes autonomous from its material bases: among queer individuals, or for those physiologically incapable of pregnancy, this violence cannot have the effect of subjugating the individual to a biological female reproductive role.

On the other hand, for women capable of giving birth, patriarchy presents the social roles of mother and wife as an escape from some of the ideological norms weighing on sexually mature bodies. For some women, marriage and the role of wife, which are part of traditional gender norms, can appear as a relief from another part of gender norms, while encouraging them to give birth. In addition, the economic solidarity of a couple represents a reduction in the economic pressure which single women is under. Gender ideology thus strengthens its material base, while reproducing the capitalist formation.

If we can discuss similarities or differences between female and male people, in relation to a performance of feminine gender, for all elements outside sexual reproduction, it is by contrast clear that within sexual reproduction only the females are subjected to both gender AND sex. What's more, the reappearance of sex in this moment has immediate and far more serious consequences. For example, single mothers may or may not be queer, but they are first and foremost a female parent, and they have to look after their offspring on their own. To see, criticise and take political hold of gender only outside of sexual reproduction is tantamount to mistaking the shadow of the thing for the thing itself.

⁸⁹ See, for example: Fausto-Sterling, 1993, “The five sexes: why male and female are not enough”: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anne-Fausto-Sterling/publication/368714235_The_Five_Sexes_Why_Male_and_Female_are_notEnough/links/63f69c77574950594536cb5e/The-Five-Sexes-Why-Male-and-Female-are-not-Enough.pdf

⁹⁰ Judith Butler, 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990

At best, it is a fetishism of certain aspects of the feminine gender. In the same way that commodity fetishism conceals the relations of production and obscures the relationship of the collective worker to the system of machines, this gender fetishism has the effect of obscuring the material basis of gender ideology: the division of reproductive labour. In so doing, it obscures the workings of the reproduction of capitalist society.

At worst, it can be a matter of reification of certain aspects of the feminine gender, which are then no longer constructed as the consequence of some nature common to human females, but rather appear as a timeless, ahistorical, incorporeal invariant, an idea to which certain people will be called and subjugated to (in reference to Butler) as a result of a predisposition that has more to do with inner experience than with social relations.

In both cases, a new ideology of gender is established, better adapted to present social transformations.

In total, one person in a thousand (0.1% of the population) says they have taken steps to change their gender. In addition, 2.3% of women and 2.4% of men aged 18-89 say they have already thought about changing their gender, which may include experiences of being non-binary and/or questioning their femininity/masculinity. People aged 18 to 29 are the most numerous in this case (6% of women and men in this age range). These statements do not indicate that a gender transition will be undertaken, but they testify to a growing reflection on the part of younger generations on the subject of their gender belonging.⁹¹

This new gender ideology nevertheless maintains its primary social function, because it does not call into question the sexual division of reproductive labour. In this respect at least, the new gender ideology remains compatible with patriarchy and may even reinforce it. Among other effects, it socially legitimises the adherence of males to an expression of feminine gender – and vice versa for the other sex – and thereby their submission to norms of desire imposed under patriarchy.

Patriarchy uses the social body, gendered but not sexed, to regiment female bodies as a reproductive function. Within this framework, queer individuals and their affections and feelings suffer the collateral damage of patriarchy. Their liberation is necessary, but this struggle becomes reactionary when, by remaining partial, it obscures the material basis of oppression.

To radically fight against gender, we need to first and foremost attack the division of labour in the reproduction, care and raising of children. Without this, there is no liberation for women. It is also necessary to liberate all children from the structure of the family, which remains one of the main sites, alongside other social institutions, for the reproduction of gender ideology.

Subjectivism and oppression

In the twentieth century the workers' movement gave birth to totalitarian ideological monsters: Stalinism and Fascism. The October Revolution of 1917 was born from the fusion between an activist party and a liberatory workers' movement. The ideas expressed by the revolution progressively transformed into a justification for repression and the bureaucratic regime. Among other causes, the incapacity to understand the complexity of the relation between, on the one side constant capital (means of production, organisation of labour, technology) and, on the other, the experience, the subjectivities and the conditions of the workers, allowed the change from a liberating ideology towards an ideology justifying and reinforcing capitalism in its organisational bureaucratic form. The dominant ideology of the supposedly "communist" countries rested on a reified worker figure: disciplined at work, ready to kill themselves for it, whose only ambition is to increase productivity. What this ideological figure scarcely

⁹¹ First results of the study CSF-2023 Inserm-ANRS-MIE, *op. cit*

hides is the fact that the increase in labour productivity leads to an increase in the extraction of surplus value, and therefore an increase in the capital formally owned by the so-called communist state.

A contrario, starting in 1961 in Italy, some heterodox militants coming out of the Left gathered around the paper *Quaderni Rossi*, and reappropriated the method of workers' enquiry. According to the leading light of the paper, Raniero Panzieri:

According to Marx, considering labour power as a simple element of capital can only limit the theoretical vision and distort the system being constructed from within. Socialist sociological analysis (understood as a political science, since it is an observation that claims to go beyond this unilaterality and deal with social reality as a whole) is characterised, on the contrary, by the fact that it considers each of the two classes that fundamentally constitute it while respecting their specificity. I emphasise once again the sociological character of Marx's thought, which refuses to define the working class on the basis of the movement of capital, and which asserts that it is not possible to trace back automatically from this movement to the study of the working class. The working class operating as a conflictual, and therefore capitalist, element of conflict or as an element of opposition and therefore as an anti-capitalist element, requires an absolutely specific scientific observation.⁹²

And then: “*Such are, I believe, the two principal aspects of enquiry: on the one side, it is a question of verifying the position and level of the two adversaries at the moment that they confront each other, and on the other it is necessary to study the new tendencies that the transformations in their status have brought about in the class consciousness of the working class and the technicians.*” It is no longer a matter of setting up an abstract figure of the worker, and demanding that real proletarians conform to it, but of starting from the real subjectivity of proletarians to understand how “*conflicts can transform themselves into antagonism and no longer be a function of the system*”⁹³

In an analogous manner, within the feminist movement during the revolutionary wave following 1968, the emphasis on women's subjectivity was necessary to emphasise their interests within a revolutionary movement which was still very male. As the revolutionary wave ebbed away, these practical/concrete experiences subsequently gave rise to theorisations that became autonomous from social struggles, materialism and the body itself, with the idea that the subject is an act of consciousness.

While the study of the “point of view” of individuals suffering specific oppression is necessary to understand it and therefore fight against it, it cannot in itself be enough either for an understanding of subjective conditions at the social level – that is to say, going beyond those of a collection of individuals – nor for the development of practical tools for intervening in objective conditions, for the following reasons:

- The insistence on the particularities of the elements of subjectivity, each considered as specific and impermeable to the others, does not allow for a critical confrontation between these fragmentary elements – which may contain contradictions – and, by the same token, even less between these elements, taken as a whole, on the one hand, and, on the other, the general social conditions.
- This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to transform individual conflicts, however justified, into a generalised antagonism against capitalist society. On the contrary, it has to be said that demands rooted in subjectivity and limited to a given framework, only find their place in the field of integration, representativity and the demand for their defence by the state.

⁹² Raniero Panzieri, “The Socialist Conception of Workers' Enquiry”, *Quaderni rossi* no. 5, April 1965: https://www.marxists.org/francais/panzieri/works/1965/00/panzieri_enquete.htm (our translation)

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

“Stand point theory” was born in American universities after the great wave of contestation, and aimed to inject subjectivity into the scientific field. Over the course of time, this theory underwent a regression, going in a direction where only the oppressed are legitimate authorities on the subject of truth concerning their oppression. What’s more, the subjectivity put forward can no longer be related to dialectical objective conditions.

Conversely, workers’ enquiry consists in understanding the subjectivity of the class in the context of a radical struggle. A subjectivity which is not limited to the individual – nor transferable to management by the state – but which places itself in the social field. Our method serves to go from a situation of opposition to oppression to a situation of antagonism to the totality of the social field.

The absence of the will to generalise what can be generalised leads to the following pitfalls:

- First of all – because history in particular, and complexity in general, have a strong tendency to be compressed, on the level of individual subjectivities – several confusions between what is contingent and what is necessary, between what is possible and what would be desirable; and a lack of understanding of the state of society and the power relations that run through it.
- Secondly, as demands for protection by the state increase, these demands are pitted against each other, most often in the form of competition for victimhood, where the proof of oppression, firstly, and then the oppression itself, are reduced to suffering, always individual, always specific, thus opening the way to agonistic mediation and negotiation⁹⁴ of oppression.
- Thirdly, because the subjectivities put forward are rarely open to criticism and because the method used to record them is rarely exhaustive. On the contrary, we are seeing the emergence of self-declared spokespeople who pose as experts and bearers of the subjectivity of a group identified by a common oppression.

This last phenomenon deserves attention, because it not only regenerates the dominant ideology, but also the low-level personnel of the dominant classes, making capitalist domination more effective. From then on, these same spokespersons stand against the real voices of those they claim to represent.

In the WLM, we have seen a certain mistrust towards intellectuals (those “petty bourgeois-es” always quick to recuperate a mobilisation), thus towards theory – bound to be male, therefore patriarchal. Admittedly, some women with brilliant academic backgrounds and quite famous names had been involved in the movement from the outset (Christine Delphy and Jacqueline Feldman were already known for their work at the CNRS [National Centre for Scientific Research], Monique Wittig for her novel *L'Opomonax...*). But they were exceptions. Many other women knew nothing about the University; or, if they did attend its lecture halls as students, their experience of feminism was so concrete and so exciting that they hardly cared about their professional future, in one of its institutions or not. The view of the university changed in France in the early 1980s, when the contestation of all institutions ceased. Young students (who grew from 500,000 in 1968 to 3 million today) no longer saw it as an ideological apparatus used to shape minds in the interests of the powerful, but once again as the source of Knowledge – which, moreover, was supposed to promote social advancement. The media and (later) social media have done their bit to restore the reputation of academics and other “experts” and, until recent years, it was often through their theoretical productions that students got to know feminism. The interest shown by universities in this subject (and the political reasons for that) does not seem to attract their attention, nor the importance that the content of their thinking may have for the feminist struggle.

The University is above suspicion... because it holds knowledge that is supposedly detached from political authorities? Or is it because, although it produces inequality, it is (like the *grandes écoles*) a machine for legitimising inequality. If you succeed in getting in, it's “normal” that you should benefit? Whatever the case, the way it works is intended to create a caste of “specialists”. And whatever their gender or whether they're queer, they're hardly keen to lose the benefits of the social status that comes with their position, so they're not exactly inclined to concoct some seditious piece of writing. Similarly, the fact that such “specialists” are more often philosophers or psychologists than sociologists does not seem to raise many questions, including among young politicised

⁹⁴ It is a question here of the critical appropriation of the concept of agonism popularised by Chantal Mouffe, to better be able to fight it.

people. No field of university study will ever give birth to a social movement, especially one devoted to dissecting individual behaviour.⁹⁵

To continue, let's refer once again to *Quaderni Rossi*:

For my part, it seems to me that bourgeois sociology has even developed itself to the point of presenting the characteristics of a scientific analysis that goes beyond Marxism. We could hazard a hypothesis in Marxian terms, and say that capitalism, having lost, as it has, its classical thinking in political economy (through the crisis of the modern economy, the crisis of the subjective economy etc., more or less shaky attempts to pick up the thread of the classical tradition in economics), has conversely found its non-vulgar science in sociology. A hypothesis of this kind also makes it possible to find the objective roots of this fact. Very roughly speaking, we could say that capitalism, which must first of all discover its own operating mechanism, must, as it matures, organise the study of consensus, of the social reactions that are grafted onto this mechanism. This is all the more urgent as capitalism moves into the higher phase, that of planning, and frees itself from property relations as a determining factor, basing its stability and power ever more firmly on the growing rationality of accumulation.

I am absolutely not saying that sociology is a bourgeois science. On the contrary, I'm saying that we can use, treat, and criticise sociology in the same way as Marx did classical political economy, and thus see in it a limited science. Besides, the type of enquiry we are planning clearly shows that sociology contains all the hypotheses that go beyond the framework of current sociology. What it concerns itself with is true (it is not false in itself), but it is precisely limited, and thereby causes internal deformations. Nevertheless, it retains what, according to Marx, characterised science, an autonomy founded on the demand for rigorous and logical knowledge.⁹⁶

If the tools produced by the universities are not ontologically flawed, they need to be extracted from the ideological factory, to be reappropriated by militants, so that they can be turned against the capitalist system. As long as this doesn't happen, these tools will continue to be used to divide the oppressed and exploited by focusing on their particularities, without ever returning to general social questions.

⁹⁵ Vanina, *Les leurre postmodernes contre la réalité sociale des femmes*, [Postmodern illusions against the social reality of women], Acratie, Autumn 2023: <https://editionsacratie.com/les-leurre-postmoderne-contre-la-realite-sociale-des-femmes-vanina/> (our translation)

⁹⁶ Raniero Panzieri, "The socialist conception...", *op. cit.*

ON THE NECESSITY OF THE STRATEGIC ALLIANCE BETWEEN WOMEN AND THE PROLETARIAT

A revolution of social relations

It's true that capital is pulling more and more women out of domestic slavery by inserting them *en masse* into social production. But, at the same time, it socialises only part of domestic labour, and only in the service of accumulation. Capitalism will not resolve the antagonism between men and women in this way, because it makes use of the unpaid labour of the housewife. The family is functional, necessary, to the social relation of capital, including for the working class. The struggle for women's liberation must necessarily attack and overturn the sphere of the reproduction of the species.

The working class family is the more difficult point to break because it is the support of the worker, but as worker, and for that reason the support of capital. On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class - but at the woman's expense against the class itself. The woman is the slave of a wage-slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. 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.⁹⁷

The communist movement opens up the possibility of radically suppressing the material bases of the oppression of women and creating the conditions for their liberation. The conscious destruction of the family will give women back complete control over their bodies and the conditions of childbirth. By socialising the transmission of knowledge and humanity to children, women will be relieved of a task that bourgeois society still imposes on them to a large extent, and which now constitutes the main lock that confines them to the cage of domestic labour.

If communism cannot be envisaged without the liberation of women, their oppression will not automatically disappear with the destruction of capitalism. The class in movement will have to overcome, in a fully consciousness way, in particular, male resistance, because men have something to lose as individuals who are not yet fully socialised. The proletarian revolution must therefore be coupled with a social revolution in relations between individuals which is capable of attacking the hard core of oppression by definitively separating childbirth from the raising of children entrusted to society, and by liberating women's feelings and bodies from all dependence on males. The humanisation of the relationship between women and men will involve overcoming socially the natural division of labour enshrined in the procreative sexual act, by putting an end to the family and domestic work.

Abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists. On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution. The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital. Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty. But, you say, we destroy the most hallowed of relations, when we replace home education by social. And your education! Is not that also social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention direct or indirect, of society, by means of schools, &c.? The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention, and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class.⁹⁸

When the first vital need of the human being becomes the human being itself, their nature becomes integrally human, loses its animal and passive character, and finally opens up to freedom for the social individual. Their generic being asserts itself without trampling on anyone else's personality. On the contrary, it nourishes itself from it and enhances it socially.

⁹⁷ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The power of women and the subversion of the community*, *op. cit.*

⁹⁸ Marx & Engels, 1847, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "Chapter II. Proletarians and Communists".
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>

It will be seen how in place of the wealth and poverty of political economy come the rich human being and the rich human need. The rich human being is simultaneously the human being in need of a totality of human manifestations of life – the man in whom his own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as need. Not only wealth, but likewise the poverty of man – under the assumption of socialism – receives in equal measure a human and therefore social significance. Poverty is the passive bond which causes the human being to experience the need of the greatest wealth – the other human being. The dominion of the objective being in me, the sensuous outburst of my life activity, is passion, which thus becomes here the activity of my being.⁹⁹

The woman/man relation contains the entire potential for overcoming the reification of the other, purely functional to the reproduction of the species. In the woman/man relationship is expressed the tension towards the generic singularisation of the human being, the fully socialised being. By the same token, the woman/man relation is the primordial vehicle for the progressive emancipation of the human being from the bundle of needs purely dictated by their state of nature. The woman/man relation is the key and the lever for the humanisation of human needs.

In the approach to woman as the spoil and handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its unambiguous, decisive, plain and undisguised expression in the relation of man to woman and in the manner in which the direct and natural species-relationship is conceived. [...] From this relationship one can therefore judge man's whole level of development. From the character of this relationship follows how much man as a species-being, as man, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man's natural behaviour has become human, or the extent to which the human essence in him has become a natural essence – the extent to which his human nature has come to be natural to him. This relationship also reveals the extent to which man's need has become a human need; the extent to which, therefore, the other person as a person has become for him a need – the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being.¹⁰⁰

Only the communist perspective enables the individual and collective liberation of all humans. Women will never again be an object for the particular male or the masculine gender. This is the only realistic way to put an end to prostitution, the collective ownership of women by men. To put an end to explicit, monetised, professionalised prostitution, as well as to trivialised prostitution, concealed by the bond of marriage and bourgeois morals, in the form of the monogamy of women, the private ownership of a woman by a single man.

It will transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved and into which society has no occasion to intervene. It can do this since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of traditional marriage – the dependence rooted in private property, of the women on the man, and of the children on the parents. And here is the answer to the outcry of the highly moral philistines against the “community of women”. Community of women is a condition which belongs entirely to bourgeois society and which today finds its complete expression in prostitution. But prostitution is based on private property and falls with it. Thus, communist society, instead of introducing community of women, in fact abolishes it.¹⁰¹

Women's organisation

Women have an interest in the coming of the proletarian revolution. But their liberation depends on them, their strength and their capacity to impose their interests, including inside the revolution and in a struggle which goes beyond the horizon of the domestic space. A struggle which embraces that of the working class for the complete liberation of human beings.

Within the feminist movement, we refuse the subordination of class struggle to feminism, as well as the subordination of feminism to the class struggle. Class struggle and feminism are for us one and the same because feminism expresses the rebellion of a component of the class without which the class struggle cannot be generalised and deepened. [...] We do not want capitalism to socialise domestic labour as it has socialised factory

⁹⁹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Third Manuscript, "Private Property and Communism": <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰¹ Friedrich Engels, *The Principles of Communism*, 1847, Point 21, “What will be the influence of communist society on the family?”. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm>

work and as it socialises the education of children. We fight to socialise domestic labour on our conditions for us and not to have another job outside the home. Free time belongs to us¹⁰².

Our struggle is against the factories, [...] the offices, against having to sit in front of a cash register all day [...]. We do not fight for some or other organisation of work but against it. [...] We women must reject the conditions of survival that the state wants to impose on us, we must always demand more [...], we reappropriate the wealth taken from our hands every day to have more money, more power, more free time to be with others, women, the elderly, children, not as appendages but as social individuals.¹⁰³

The end of private property in women will come about through revolutionary action by women, all women. For all women are subject to a common oppression that transcends class situations in capitalist production. They will definitively cease to be objects for men when they play a crucial role in the general class fight against value, the commodity, money, the state and male supremacy. When they inscribe their practical critique of patriarchy in the struggle for communism.

The bourgeois sees his wife as a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production.

For the rest, nothing is more ridiculous than the virtuous indignation of our bourgeois at the community of women which, they pretend, is to be openly and officially established by the Communists. The Communists have no need to introduce community of women; it has existed almost from time immemorial.

Our bourgeois, not content with having wives and daughters of their proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives.

Bourgeois marriage is, in reality, a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalised community of women. For the rest, it is self-evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private.¹⁰⁴

Women will leave the prison of the family together. They will put an end to the slavery of domestic labour by taking part, as fully socialised human beings, in the most exciting collective work ever undertaken by humankind: the construction of a society that is finally in keeping with the specific nature of humans. A society generated by the free creative activity of associated human beings.

Women, perhaps even more than men, have a world to gain from communism. First of all, by freeing sexual love from the cage of marriage. Sexual liberation presupposes a general liberation of the species in its relation to reproduction, to the bodies of others, and against the reification that is the basis of slavery. The constrained relation between sexuality and marriage, between love and family, must be broken once and for all, because it is in no way a strictly natural determination, but a product of societies divided into classes.

For human beings, love is not confined to sexuality. The expressed, humanised, love relationship is founded on two pillars: reciprocity and total freedom, emancipation from any drive to possess the other. The humanisation of sexual acts, sexual love, is an act of extreme freedom by a fully socialised human being. It corresponds to the overcoming of economic determination and of the elementary sexual impulse, the expression of its initial state of non-humanised nature.

So far, the women's movement has exposed the physical mechanism that allowed women's sexual potential to be strictly defined and limited by men, most notably by destroying the myth of the vaginal orgasm. Now we can begin to reintegrate sexuality with other aspects of creativity, to see that sexuality will always be constrained unless the work we do does not mutilate us and our individual capacities and unless the persons with whom we have sexual relations are not our masters and are not also mutilated by their work. To explode the vaginal orgasm myth is to demand female autonomy as opposed to subordination and sublimation. But it is not only the clitoris versus the vagina. It is both versus the uterus. Either the vagina is primarily the passage for the

¹⁰² Padua Collective, "Smash the system, power to women!", *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ Comitato per il salario al lavoro domestico, "Lavoro domestico e salario" [Domestic labour and wages]. *Rosso*, n° 11, June 1974, p. 33-34: <https://archivioautonomia.it/argomenti/lavoro-domestico-e-salario-der-app/> (our translation)

¹⁰⁴ Marx & Engels, 1847, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 'Chapter II. Proletarians and Communists': <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>

reproduction of labour power sold as a commodity, the capitalist function of the uterus, or it is part of our natural powers, our social equipment. Sexuality after all is the most social of expressions, the deepest human communication. It is in that sense the dissolution of autonomy. The working class organizes as a class to transcend itself as a class; within that class we organize autonomously to create the basis to transcend autonomy.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Women and the subversion of...*, *op. cit.*

ANNEX - THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN ITALY

Introduction

We don't claim that what follows is an exhaustive history of feminism in Italy in the period from 1968 to 1978. These are some fragments which show the richness of that feminism, whether or not we share the ideas expressed in their entirety.

In Italy in the 1970s, around 15% of women worked and abortion was illegal. Although divorce was legalised in 1971, it was still very difficult for women to formalise separation from their spouse if they wanted to. The legal process could take more than five years. In 1974, there was a referendum aimed at repealing the law (i.e. making divorce illegal again). Left-wing parties enthusiastically participated in the referendum (Marco Pannella's Radical Party, in particular) and the vote was overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining the right to divorce¹⁰⁶. This was despite a call for abstention from the PCI, the ultimate crutch of the Vatican and the Catholic right.

At the beginning of the decade, the women politically involved in *operaismo* felt the need to forge a specifically female position and struggle, not only because the situation of women was so unfavourable, but also and above all because the existing political offer, whether feminist or class struggle, did not satisfy them. In so doing, they elaborated a new chapter in women's political autonomy.

We must first of all put forward a small idea of what the situation was at the time: the world was totally male, mediated by men, that is to say that women were at the side of men, they participated in everything... But they participated: that is to say that they did not have first person responsibility, direct responsibility and direct initiative, in political action. This was the reality. Let us say also that there were women who were extremely courageous, very strong, like the women who were in the resistance, women who participated in workers' struggles, peasant struggles and who made [these struggles] happen. But always, at a given moment, there was a man. The men denied the relation that women had with the public world, with the social world, with the political world. Secondly, in Italy, we had the Communist Party, the strongest in Europe that meant a power and a tradition of struggles and worker knowledge. Because, in fact, there was a whole organisational experience on the level of agricultural workers, labourers etc. We had always said the Italy was half left and half right. The half represented therefore an enormous support, and we had a very strong CP. And what was happening at the end of the 1960s? There was the student movement, there were political experiences, above all social movements, which opposed that hegemony of the Communist Party, they detached themselves and took back spaces of autonomy, self-determination, help, autonomous analysis above all.

And let's say that they began to undermine what was the hegemony of the CP. *Potere Operaio*, *Lotta Continua*, etc. were born from the student movement, obviously, because at one given moment, the student movement had not succeeded in connecting with the struggles of workers, shop assistants, secretaries etc. The student movement remained therefore somewhat closed in on itself, and thus lost its capacity to act on everyday life. So there too, we participated, along with many women who later became feminists, in the student movement, then in the Communist Party or in *Potere Operaio*. In particular, we, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, myself, Silvia Federici and other comrades, came from this tradition, the tradition of *operaismo*. We were also identified with a certain theory and political methodology. When the feminist movement was born, that is to say that we also became conscious of it, within that organisation [*Potere Operaio*], that its members were all men, or almost. And above all, the problem was that they did not see, did not understand, the problems of women. Then the feminist movement was born... As the men could not even pose the question of women? Then we posed it ourselves, and we left. Mariarosa Dalla Costa left first, she published a pamphlet to begin the discussion. First of all, she founded *Lotta Femminile*. Me, I arrived later, I arrived at the second or third meeting because I was ... yes, I was very young as an activist: I was the youngest of them all... I had just begun. She, on the other hand, had a lot of experience, on the plain of politics as well as in theoretical discussions within *operaismo*. Me, I was still someone learning and trying to understand. I left *Potere Operaio* and I joined *Lotta Femminile* because it was the only thing to do. *Lotta Femminile*, which later became *Lotta Femminista*, did not start from nothing, it began from two traditions: it began starting from the operaist tradition and the feminist tradition. It did not start from zero, and that is important. A large part of the feminist movement did start from zero: there were obviously women who started from there, from their own experience. That is excellent, very important, etc. But it is politically, strategically, organisationally limited, because no one can start from zero.

¹⁰⁶ Participation rate: 87.7% of those entitled to vote. 59.3% voted against the repeal, 40.7% voted in favour:
<https://www.firstonline.info/en/accadde-oggi-53-anni-fa-la-legge-sul-divorzio-veniva-approvata-in-italia-una-vittoria-per-i-diritti-civili-che-cambio-il-costume/>

That is to say that it is necessary always to start from where others have arrived to be able to advance. And therefore, we said: we use this operist tradition because it's valid from so many points of view, but we apply it to the issues we're interested in, and therefore to the world of women and the situation of women. That's kind of the path we took together, it's one of isolationism from the male discourse... in the sense that we needed to take an autonomous path, because we needed to break this scary and male social mediation that existed. We had taken this path to regain degrees of freedom in autonomy and the capacity for self-determination, of proactivity... of everything, otherwise we could have done nothing. This was also a mental and psychological process, as well as a political process, which was important because otherwise... that is to say that at that time men had more experience, they had read more books, they always knew one more book, you see? Obviously, because we, women, had participated in a world which was mediated by men. Certainly, men had plenty of advantages. And therefore, the only way to construct something, was simply to say: let's go it alone, make mistakes, decide for ourselves and build for ourselves what we can do.¹⁰⁷

Some dates

1970: legalisation of divorce, Law 898 of 1 December 1970 relating to "Regulation of the dissolution of marriage"¹⁰⁸;

1974: 12-13 May, defeat of the referendum to abolish the divorce law of 1970;

1975: new family law, in two parts: Law 39 of 8 March 1975 bearing on "Attribution of majority to citizens who have reached the age of 18 and modification of other norms relating to the capacity to act and to the right to vote"¹⁰⁹ and Law 151 of 19 May 1975 on "Reform of Family Law"¹¹⁰;

1975: 18 January, first big demo in Rome on the theme of abortion, with 20,000 participants;

1975-1977: between 30,000 and 50,000 mobilise on a national scale on the theme of legalising abortion;

1976: 3 April, the UDI (linked to the PCI) and feminist organisations of other parties unite in Rome, in a separatist demonstration which gathers 50,000 participants¹¹¹;

1978: legalisation of abortion Law 194 of 22 May 1978, on "Norms for the social protection of maternity and on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy"¹¹²;

1981: 17 May, defeat of the referendum to repeal the right to abortion;

1981: proposal of the law against sexual violence;

1996: the proposal of the 1981 law against sexual violence is finally adopted as Law 66 of 15 February 1996, on the "norms against sexual violence"¹¹³.

¹⁰⁷ Extracts from: Leopoldina Fortunati, 2023, "Between feminism and operaism: thinking about social reproduction", *Contretemps*, 8 Marc 2023:

<https://www.contretemps.eu/feminisme-operaisme-reproduction-sociale-entretien-leopoldina-fortunati/> (our translation)

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1970-12-01;898>

¹⁰⁹ See: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1975-03-08;39>

¹¹⁰ See: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1975;151>

¹¹¹ See: <https://www.infoaut.org/storia-di-classe/3-aprile-1976-roma-corteo-femminista-per-l-aborto>

¹¹² See: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1978-05-22;194>

¹¹³ See: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1996-02-15;66>

The International Feminist Collective, 1972-1977

In 1972, Mariarosa Dalla Costa (Padua), Selma James (London), Silvia Federici (New York) and Brigitte Galtier (Paris) set up the *Collettivo Internazionale Femminista* to promote the debate on the labour of reproduction and to coordinate action in various countries. As for Leopoldina Fortunati, she was first in *Potere Operaio*, and from there she joined *Lotta Femminista* (born under the name *Lotta Femminile*).

In July 1972, some twenty activists met for two days in Padua. The majority were from Italy, but some came from the new women's liberation movement that had emerged from the heterodox Marxist current in England, the United States, and France, fed by the activism of the decolonization, civil rights, student, and Italian operaist movements. In a manifesto, they laid the foundation for the future international Wages for Housework network, which was to expand to different countries in the years that followed. The International Feminist Collective/Collettivo internazionale femminista/Collectif féministe international was born.¹¹⁴

In 1974, during the national conference of Italian feminist groups organised by the Milan collective Via Cherubini (at Pinarella di Cervia, 10,000 participants), the group *Lotta femminista* proposed wages for housewives as the main objective. The question was also presented during the second conference in 1975. Already in 1974 part of the *Lotta Femminista* group became the *Gruppo per il salario al lavoro domestico* (Group for wages for housework). Its first big demo was in Mestre, on 8, 9 and 10 March 1974. From 1973, the Triveneto Committee of "Wages for Housework" had begun to act in an independent way in relation to *Lotta Femminista*.

From 1972, the campaign for a domestic wage was both local and international, based on contacts in the US (Silvia Federici), in the UK (Selma James) etc. The organisation of feminist groups was decentralised with centres of decision/intervention in each local group. As is confirmed by this testimony:

[T]he movement in every city was different and had its own peculiar identity [...] in Bergamo they had a strong anti-State characterization [...] they never accepted State funding for the self-managed clinics [...] these still exist today thanks to the women of Autonomia [...] they were self-financed [...] the leadership is still the same people [...] they were characterized by their concern for women's health and a strong antagonism against the State [...] in other cities they were more concerned in shutting down pornographic film theatres [...] They came from the struggle against rape [and] organized self-defence courses against rape [...] then they became an armed vanguard against pornography and pimping [...] they didn't practice armed struggle as such, but they used violent direct action against pornography cinemas, smashing windows etc. [...] other groups used more violent methods of struggle, above all those who struggled against lavoro nero [...] they burnt down the *covi di lavoro nero* [dens of illegal work], but they were not armed [...] these actions were carried out exclusively by women alone, no men were present.¹¹⁵

In 1976, there was the first publication of the journal *Le operaie della casa* (The House Workers) by the committee for wages for housework of Padua. The editors presented it as a newspaper-collage made up of words, drawings and photographs. It carried news of women's struggles in their homes, factories and schools, against work and exploitation.

Wages against housework

The current organised around wages for domestic labour was criticised by other feminist currents who saw it as a way of keeping women at home and increasing state control over individuals. At that time, the dominant struggle for both feminists and the CP was that of "emancipation through work" and the funding of "social services".

¹¹⁴ Louise Toupin, "Un 'embryon d'Internationale des femmes' : le Collectif féministe international, 1972-1977" [An "embryo of a women's international": The International Feminist Collective, 1972-1977], *Comment S'en Sortir?* [How to get out?], n° 5, Winter 2017. It was incorporated in English into: *Wages for Housework, A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972-77*, Pluto Press, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Interview with a comrade from Milan, from "Italian feminism, workerism and autonomy in the 1970s. The struggle against unpaid reproductive labour and violence", Patrick Cuninghame, *Amnis*, n° 8/2008: <https://doi.org/10.4000/amnis.575>

In fact, the demand that would follow, namely, “pay us wages for housework,” would run the risk of looking, in the light of the present balance of power in Italy, as though we wanted further to entrench the conditions of institutionalized slavery that are produced with the condition of housework, and therefore such a demand could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilizing goal. [...] And it is clear in any case that the demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploitation. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand of wages for housework. This gives at once an indication for struggle, a direction in organizational terms in which oppression and exploitation, situation of caste and class, find themselves insolubly linked. The practical, continuous translation of this perspective is the task the movement is facing in Italy and elsewhere.¹¹⁶

Dalla Costa clarifies her conception in another text:

We wanted money for housework primarily in response to the serious problem of women’s lack of money, but also as a lever of power with respect to services [...]. This claim was combined with another for a drastic reduction in external work for all women and men (demanding a working week of 20 hours) so that the time necessary for reproduction could be freed up without always having to look for solutions (very partial anyway) in additional layers of work, as is also happening today through the great migrations. On the other hand, there was the typical emancipationist position that aimed only at working outside [of the home] and called for a strengthening of social services. This was the position of the institutional left but also of other feminist strands¹¹⁷.

It should rather be read as “wages AGAINST housework” than “wages FOR housework”. Against, because from the point of view of destroying capitalist social relations and work, and with the aim of reinforcing women’s power to act. Bosses or the state must pay as dearly as possible for the unlimited servitude of domestic labour. As the Padua Collective said:

In the fight for wages, what drives us in the first instance are certain considerations suggested by the immediate reality of women’s condition: The right to be paid for the work we do immediately affects all women, including those who do not appear in the statistics as housewives, those who are neither wives nor mothers (...).

A demand for a wage corresponds to a demand for autonomy: however many services we manage to extract, however much time we gain by doing so (and all this is very important), until we manage to break the link of economic dependence on men – husbands or fathers – by earning a wage ourselves, how will we be able to form the relationships we want, decide whether we want to get married or not, whether we want to bring children into the world or not, what we will do with ourselves?

The demand for a wage also has great anti-ideological power in itself: we had been taught that our femininity had to be expressed through domestic work, and the mere fact of seeing it as a socially necessary activity that has to be paid for, in the same way as work outside the home, was already a big step towards the conquest of an attitude that something was alien to us, towards destroying the “natural” fixity of the role that society assigns to us.¹¹⁸

And they added:

We reply that our proposal is not simply propaganda in favour of a wage for domestic labour, however ambitious that may be in itself. If we want and demand a wage, we do not expect it to be given to us. To get it, we will have to fight hard and, above all, create an organisation. Creating an organised feminist movement will give women much more power. It will serve as a chain linking the high points and low points of the struggle within the perspective of wages, and it will enable us to start from where we are from.¹¹⁹

While the theoretical and political work of Dalla Costa concentrated on unpaid domestic labour as the centre of the reproduction of labour power, another feminist current influenced by operaismo looked into the critique of the Welfare State made by Alisa del Re. “*According to the former’s theory, there is a hierarchical division between waged/productive labour (the industrial working class) and unwaged/reproductive labour (women, students, the unemployed).*”¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Women and the subversion...*, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁷ Cuningham, *op. cit.*, point 8.

¹¹⁸ Padua Collective, “Smash the system, power to women!”, point 11, *op. cit.* (our translation)

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, point 14. (our translation)

¹²⁰ Cuningham, *op. cit.*, point 7.

On the part of Lotta Continua,

The principal areas of intervention for Lotta Continua's Women's Collective were the factory and the practice of the refusal of work, along with the problems of discrimination in the workplace, deregulated labour (*lavoro nero*), prisons, sexual violence and machismo within the "Movement" in general, and struggles around the body and health. Action was taken in hospitals, over the unequal doctor-patient relationship and the denunciation of those medical centres that refused to carry out abortions, and of the health service in general which victimised women and did not meet their particular health needs.¹²¹

At the same time, the current *Rivolta femminile* created by Carla Lonzi, published a text in 1970 entitled "Sputiamo su Hegel ..."¹²². The group referred to psychoanalysis, practised "consciousness raising" and advocated separatism. In 1970, *Scritti di Rivolta femminile* editions was founded in Milan within this collective and, with the same perspective, the Women's Bookshop came into being in 1974, also in Milan. Finally, there was also a "moderate" feminism coming from the institutional left, which agitated for access to wage labour and equal rights between women and men. They also worked on the body and health, and were active for abortion. The "Free University of Women" of Lea Melandri united housewives and intellectuals on an inter-classist basis and worked on the representation of women in capitalist society. Let's conclude provisionally with Leopoldina Fortunati:

Many feminists felt that this was not an important issue, because they thought they could build a feminist culture from themselves alone. On the contrary, it seemed to us to be completely naive. It was a Milanese feminism, very bourgeois, very intellectual, which above all fed on itself. A feminism that broke with the philosophers, with whoever, with everyone, because it had to put the woman-being first. Us, we had never believed in that. We had been brought up by the operaists in our first political life. There was a wealth of reflection there about society, movements, politics, the economy, the workings of the state. Why did we have to rid ourselves of all that culture in the name of being women? If, as feminists, we can't articulate all these points at the same time to put forward a vision of society, we have to take an interest in all those who have thought about these things. We wanted to reflect on the sphere that fell to us, that of reproduction. But the analysis of the factory, the state etc. is necessary as well. So, we said to them: these are some instruments. Let's seize them and use them to our advantage, trying of course not to be fooled by all the gender and cultural biases that these instruments necessarily have. It was from this point of view that the Arcano was born.¹²³

¹²¹ Cuningham, *op. cit.* point 19.

¹²² Carla Lanzi *Sputiamo su Hegel La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* [We spit on Hegel. The clitoral woman and the vaginal woman and other writings], *Scritti di Rivolta femminile* 1, 2, 3, 1970:
<https://archive.org/details/sputiamosuhegel/page/n1/mode/2up>

¹²³ "L'Arcane du capitalisme et de la famille" [The mystery of capitalism and the family], interview with Leopoldina Fortunati, *Trou noir*, numéro printemps 2023 - 24 April 2023: <http://trounoir.org/L-Arcane-du-capitalisme-et-de-la-famille>

The Gateway to the Garden

We reproduce below the translation¹²⁴ of the intervention of Mariarosa Dalla Costa, during the seminar organised at *Rialto occupato*¹²⁵ in Rome, 1-2 June 2002, to launch the book *Futuro anteriore*¹²⁶.

It's often said that the most typical languages of femininity are silence and emotions. I will not use the first one because our political movement doesn't yet have the tools to understand it. On the other hand, you will have to put up with me using a bit of the second one. This said, I'm grateful to the authors of *Futuro Anteriore* for taking on successfully the hard work of clearing the path of remembrance for many thinkers coming from the tradition of *operaismo*, myself included. I did not contribute to the book, not for lack of interest but because at that moment I didn't have the time to do so. I was, in fact, in the process of defining a strategy for what I consider, after birth and abortion, to be the third big battlefield between women's bodies and the medical body: the overuse of hysterectomy. I will later briefly talk about this and give it precedence over the other issues, because it is the one that most closely interfered with my possibility to contribute to this book. It required, in fact, all my attention and prevented me from confirming my intention to contribute in due time. First of all, though, I need to explain where I come from. By the way, I just finished reading the book the other day. It had been presented to me as a study of subjectivity but obviously it ended up including, in the course of its development, other important themes that I didn't have the time to think about as much as I would have liked. I'm sorry then if my lecture will be out of focus regarding some of the issues that I find very important for the school of feminism that derived from *operaismo*.

However, I'm very happy to participate in this conversation. How come I'm still here after 30 years? The answer is simple: this is my home. I was born here. Here is where I was first politicized and, most importantly, this is the experience I had been looking for, the one capable of answering my urge for understanding as well as for action. You can't ever forget your roots and I never even wanted to. This is where my thinking fits. Here I find the people who speak my language, even though it is a language I had to modify slightly, in order to be able to communicate with different kinds of people. After this, there was no other home for me. After this, there was only a long road, along which I identified the few issues that I will present to you today and where I fought a few battles. Besides its successes and its failures (personally I participated in *Potere Operaio Veneto*), *operaismo* has had the considerable power to determine my life journey and not only mine, it seems, since many of us are gathered here today. It would be therefore useful to investigate further this profound sense of belonging that *operaismo* originated in so many of us. I have the feeling, in fact, that we would have at our disposal more tools than we think, if we only took into consideration the efficacy of the political discourse of the past. First of all, *operaismo* gave us a method, together with the determination and the passion to act so as to engender a transformation into the existing structure. These are only three of the foundational elements I can identify in that experience, but I relied on all of them when traversing other territories in the following years. From 1967 to 1971, I was active in *Potere Operaio* and then in the Feminist Movement. The area of the Feminist Movement that I contributed to promoting and organising, *Lotta Femminista* or the committees for wages for housework, is no doubt, therefore, the child of *Potere Operaio*.

Mixing together my memories with the current conversation, I would like to call your attention to three topics, all pertaining to the sphere of reproduction:

- the overuse of hysterectomy, which I consider a form of devastation of the garden of reproduction, inside women's bodies: the destruction of the places for life and pleasure;
- the work of reproduction meant as that work capable to produce and maintain life: a problem that was left with no answer;
- the exploitation of the land and the destruction of its reproductive powers, seen as the devastation of the garden of reproduction outside our bodies, because the land is not only our source of nourishment, but from the land bodies gather meaning, sensations, collective imagination. Here too, then, exploitation and destruction of the land are equivalent to the devastation of the places for the creation of life and its pleasures. This issue becomes central in the radical fringes of the political debate during the '90s and has its origins in the struggles that were organized in Third World countries during the '80s. Of course, those struggles have a story that spans across five centuries of capitalism. It is an ancient story.

Let's start then with the devastation of the garden inside the female body through the abuse of hysterectomy, traditionally performed together with the ovariectomy of healthy ovaries. It has been not easy at all to deal with

¹²⁴ The original in Italian, *La Porta dell'Orto e del Giardino* [The door to the kitchen garden and the garden], can be found on Generation: <https://generation-online.org/p/fpdallacosta.htm> . An English translation is in *Viewpoint Magazine*, 20 June 2017: <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/06/20/the-door-to-the-flower-and-the-vegetable-garden-2002/> - we have largely used this version but modified it for clarification here and there.

¹²⁵ The Rialto occupato is an old occupied building in the centre of Rome, in the Portico d'Ottavia neighbourhood.

¹²⁶ *Futuro anteriore – Dai ‘Quaderni rossi’ ai movimenti globali: ricchezza e limiti dell’operaismo italiano* [Future Perfect - from “Quaderni rossi” to global movements: richness and limits of Italian operaismo], Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, Gigi Roggero (eds) DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2002.

this issue, since I had to dig through it alone and build for myself a knowledge of the relative pathologies, together with their possible remedies, the plausible as well as the implausible ones. However, I have an inclination for the act of solitary introspection and for the full contact fight with whatever monster comes out. A confrontation with doctors shortly followed.

Delving into an issue, even by themselves, if there's nobody else available at that moment, uncover it and build new knowledge to then circulate it and inform the public: this, I think, is the method that more and more *Vittattivisti*, those who operate in the sphere of the production and reproduction of life, will have to undertake. At stake is the ability to stand up against the multiplying attacks that, in the grip of a pressing siege, are jeopardizing the integrity and the well-being of our bodies, by undermining the powers and the inner workings that regulate the reproduction of life. Of course I'm available to discuss this issue more deeply, to which I have been committed for years, together with women and doctors, if the occasion arises. I decided to provide today at least a few numbers, considering the extreme seriousness of the abuse, one that both women and men should be aware of. When a man needs surgery, in fact, there are usually women to help him gather information, advise him and assist him. In the case of this procedure, on the other hand, women are often left alone to decide together with the doctor. When their partners give them any advice, it is often, due to misinformation or in the attempt to appease them, the wrong one: "*Come on, get rid of that uterus. You don't need it anymore anyway!*"

In Italy the rise of hysterectomies goes from 38,000 in 1994 to 68,000 in 1997, so that one in every five women, one in every four in some regions like Veneto, are at risk of being subjected to it. Not even the black plague had so many fatalities. In 1998 and 1999 we are almost at 70,000.

This procedure has serious negative consequences on the physical, emotional and relational level. In 50% of the cases there are complications that can be fatal to one or two women (depending on the procedure) out of every 1000 (a considerable risk therefore). For these reasons, it should be taken into consideration only for those few pathologies that do not allow an alternative healing approach. It is also very important to have full knowledge of the different procedures available today, because the safeguarding of a woman's body and her future quality of life might depend on that relative choice. If we compare the statistics on the use of hysterectomy in Italy with that of our neighbour France, and analyse closely the instances in which this procedure is used, even for those pathologies that present the possibility of an alternate route, 80% of them, as I reported to the Department of Public Health, seem to be unfounded. In France one woman out of every twenty is at risk of being subjected to a hysterectomy, one out of every twenty-five in Paris and its surroundings, and the tendency is toward a further decrease of its use. Therefore, in Italy and other countries, the USA first of all, we are witnessing a gratuitous and massive amputation of women's bodies. It is essential to defend the integrity of our bodies (many relationships, inside the family or the couple, are damaged or even destroyed as a consequence of this procedure), and campaigning, within our movement as well, could contribute to creating awareness, knowledge, and a support network. What is at stake is the scientific ideology we embrace, the interests of the medical associations, the further deformations produced in the field of public health by the pressure of big financial corporations that, in alignment with the neoliberal paradigm, commodify our life and the physical and social body that contains it. Reclaiming basic medical knowledge is essential in order to resist and oppose, not only this particular procedure, but an array of aggressive medical practices that generate morbidity, disability, and unhappiness, as well as poverty, as a result of the increasing dependency on the market-laboratory and to the detriment of our vital creative energies and economical resources. Hence the scarcity of health and the privatization of the mechanisms that reproduce it, operated as they are by our medical system.

It is important that I take advantage of this venue in order to raise awareness around what is happening to women's bodies. Let's look at what's going on with the practice, which is also widespread in Italy, of prophylactic surgery, the preventive amputation of both healthy breasts and the removal of healthy ovaries, performed on those women who, as carriers of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 chromosomes, are considered at high risk of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer: even doctors recognize that there is no certainty that these women would indeed develop those forms of cancer or that they won't anyway, in spite of such mutilations.

The second topic concerns the work of reproduction, also referred to as domestic work, even though reproductive work includes a lot more than what we commonly think of as domestic. On the subject, I'd like to call attention to thirty years of literature produced by operaist feminists or derived from their work. It is worthwhile here to recall a few key points. During the 1970s in Italy there were two different schools of feminism: the feminism of self-awareness and the operaist feminism of *Lotta Femminista*, which later evolved into the groups and committees of Wages for Housework. *Lotta Femminista* spread nationally, especially in the regions of Veneto and Emilia, while less so in cities like Milan, where self-awareness feminism was predominant, or Rome, where we had two groups anyway. We were even present as far south as Gela, in Sicily, where we had one group. Most importantly, starting in 1972, when we founded the *Collettivo Internazionale Femminista* in order to promote both debate and actions in other countries, we created a large international network, especially in the USA and Canada, were also present in a few European countries, particularly Britain, Germany, and Switzerland. We often held international conferences so that we could organize actions in concert. Afro-American women were also part of our circuit. They would say that the presence of Italian women made it conceivable for them to join the network because Italian women have little power (sort of like women from the Third World in their eyes). Had there been only American or English white women, they would not have participated. I remember traveling, starting at the beginning of the 70s, a few times through the United States and through some major cities in Canada, to spread our view on housework from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts (I was even robbed of the little money I had in El Paso). My travel budget, either by plane but also, often, by bus, was made up of one-dollar contributions given by our American comrades. At the same time, various universities, many of which

would then adopt *Potere Femminile e Sotversione Sociale* [Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community]¹²⁷ as a feminist classic, invited me to talk. In this way I was able to make some more money to travel. One particular university in New York offered me a teaching position and I even had an interview with a board of professors so that I could start teaching right away at the beginning of the new semester. Once back in Italy though, I wrote them turning down the offer. I could not possibly give up my political work (*Lotta Femminista* was still small and I couldn't abandon it). They did not understand my position and got really angry. To this work and political research, I subordinated all my other life choices. In this also I bore the mark of *Potere Operaio*: I have always been a militant.

How was it that some women left *Potere Operaio* to form *Lotta Femminista*?

When I joined *Potere Operaio*, an older comrade, Teresa Rampazzo, asked me “What made you join *Potere Operaio*?” and then answered her own question: “*You also had an urge for justice, right?*” “Yes,” I said. She had guessed. The answer seemed obvious to me as well.

If, on the other end, I had to say why I left *Potere Operaio*, putting together in June 1971 that group of women who would then form the first core of *Lotta Femminista*, I would have to say: “*An urge for dignity.*” The relationship between men and women at that time, especially among our intellectual comrades, was on a level that I did not consider sufficiently dignified. So, I wrote and circulated a pamphlet that later, with a few revisions, would become *Potere Femminile e Sotversione Sociale*, the little book that the international feminist movement basically adopted right away and translated into six languages.

Thus, I started the first chapter of an autonomous organization with women coming from the tradition of operaismo. Soon, others with different backgrounds joined us, some with no political background, evidently because things between men and women were not going well at any level.

Another reason had to do with what was then called the need for self-identification. Women were starting to define themselves through a process of the construction of their own identity, and no longer through the eyes and expectations of men. I remember a document coming from the US with an odd title, “*The Woman Identified Woman*,”¹²⁸ and many more with the same tone. After we saved our dignity and our identity (in more of an emotional rather than a temporal sequence), we started reasoning and wondering about the evil origin of our discomfort, of our condition, the origin of the exploitation and oppression of women. We found it in the work of reproduction, the unpaid domestic work that was ascribed to women during the capitalistic division of labour. This doesn't mean that some of us, driven by the need to go further back and track the ancient origins of the misfortunes of women, didn't also study the relationship between men and women in prehistory, focusing on matriarchal vs. patriarchal societies, and these studies are still around. The urgency, however, to provide an analysis that would be useful for immediate action (in perfect operaist tradition) made us focus almost exclusively on the capitalist era. We unveiled the mystery of reproduction, investigating how the production and reproduction of the labour force constituted the hidden phase of primitive accumulation. We unveiled the mystery but not the secret. In fact, I must say, all respectful reproduction hides a secret. We expanded the concept of class so that it would include women, as producer and reproducer of labour-power. We were mostly interested in working class and proletarian women.

Behind the closed doors of their houses, women work without a wage, a schedule, or time off, at a job that occupies all of their time. It is a job made up of material and immaterial tasks and it conditions all their choices. We defined the family as one of the places of production, because of its daily production and reproduction of labour-power. Up until then, others had maintained or continued maintaining that the family was exclusively a place for consumption and the production of use value or a mere reservoir of labour-power. We declared that a job outside the house cannot eliminate or substantially transform domestic work; that it merely adds a new master to the existing one: the job the husband already has. For this reason, entering the job market was never our goal. Neither was equality with men. To whom are we to be equal, burdened as we are with work men do not have to do? Besides, in a moment when the conversation around the refusal of work took centre stage, why should we have aimed for something that men were rejecting? From within the Fordist society of those years, we revealed that production sprang essentially from two sources, the factory and the house, and that women, precisely because their work produces the most important merchandise for capitalism, labour-power, had at their disposal a key factor to leverage social power: they could refuse to continue producing. Because of this, women are a central figure in the process of “social subversion,” as we called it back then, a struggle that could potentially end in the radical transformation of society.

Despite the profound transformation in production, the core of women's responsibility of women for reproduction and the impervious nature of the work of reproduction remain unsolved problems, bringing back the persistence of a fundamental duplicity. This duplicity however, especially between the masculine and the feminine, is, I think, inscribed in the universe. Maybe we should observe it in order to understand it better, rather than considering it as a phenomenon that is dying out, while, at the same time, we invest ourselves in trying to fix its inner injustice.

We recruited working class women, as I was saying, but the work of reproduction is the foundational aspect of the female condition in general. Fighting against this condition required first of all the refusal of this work, as

¹²⁷ *Women and the Subversion of the Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, PM Press, 2019:

<https://archive.org/details/womensubversiono0000dall/page/n3/mode/2up>

¹²⁸ Radical Lesbians, *The Woman Identified Woman*, May 1970: <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/wlmpc/wlmms01011>

unpaid and as primarily ascribed to women. It also meant opening up a negotiation with the state, in order to obtain part of the wealth produced, both in the form of financial reparation and services made available. It meant demanding that the work of reproduction be destined to a specific space and time, instead of pretending that it was an option, that it could be easily combined with a job outside the house. The refusal, of course, concerned both the material and the immaterial work of reproduction. Essentially women were replacing a femininity characterized by the care of others, by the enormous willingness to live in the service of others, with a femininity in which all of this took second place and made room for the reproduction of oneself. Besides, the issue of domestic work was closely connected to that of a sexuality that had been distorted by the function of procreating/reproducing. Struggles around work, sexuality, health, and violence were then closely intertwined. Some of our comrades completed very incisive works of research about this, which, of course, are still around. Bodies are in question in the work of reproduction and therefore relationships and emotions.

We took our struggle to the neighbourhoods (a beautiful campaign for housing, our first one and the only one that was not documented), to hospitals, schools, and factories. In Padua on June 5, 1973, we started a campaign for abortion rights, jump-starting a political mobilization out of a trial against a woman for having an abortion. After years of mobilization, in 1978 we obtained, along with the entire Feminist Movement, the approval of Law 194, a law that recognized women's right to terminate any pregnancy and to do so in proper medical facilities. Again, in Padua, in 1974, we organised the Centre for Women's Health, a self-managed feminist clinic, the first in Italy, followed by many more similar ones in other cities. This experience was meant to set an example and, at the same time, to gain momentum for the redefinition of the relationship between women and medicine, particularly in the field of gynaecology, considering also that the law for the institution of family clinics, Law 405, was about to be approved and went into effect in 1975. We led important campaigns inside hospitals, in many obstetrics departments, the so called "maternity camps" (I remember mostly Padua, Milan and Ferrara).

Among the campaigns organized inside the factories, an exemplary one was that at Solari (which then became a model for the struggle in other factories), where the women workers demanded paid time off and medical coverage for routine gynaecological care, so that they did not have to choose between losing work days and taking care of themselves. We even organised an important campaign in a town in Veneto against a factory that released terrible fumes and polluted the water.

As I was saying, we had a national and an international network, but the amazing thing was that we could do all of it with such an extremely small budget. Our means of communication were basically flyers and a newspaper that was called, in true operaist fashion, "*Le Operaie della Casa*" ["The House Workers"]. The rhythms of so much activism were so intense and totalizing that there was no room left for anything else in our lives. Our attitude towards militancy certainly derived from the experience of militancy in *Potere Operaio*, but, I suspect, in other groups the situation was very similar and even more extreme for those of us who had a leading role.

At the end of that decade, we were worn-out. All our reproduction margins had been erased and they were already notoriously much smaller than those that men normally enjoyed, including our comrades. After so many struggles and so much time spent organizing, we couldn't detect even the outline of a transformation of our society. Not one radical enough to meet the demands for which we had struggled, or able to contain the sweeping change of female individuality that our political journey had induced. We could no longer fit into the mould for relationships and in the organisation of society offered by capitalism.

It's important to also keep in mind that the women who participated in the Feminist Movement at the beginning were not young girls. Often in their thirties or even older, they were women who had left crippling marriages in order to reclaim the right to feel again (I remember many of them telling me that what they were mostly missing with their husbands and pre-school children was not so much sexual freedom but rather the possibility of falling in love. Thinking back, I realize that the premarital youth of those women had probably been too miserable). Really, at that point, we would have needed to come up with a strategy capable of generating an effective transformation of our society, as well as the resources necessary to carry it out, since it would have been impossible for us to do so on our own. However, this had always been the feeblest part of our discourse, the one we couldn't even pinpoint, because the strategy was to be determined by the power of our struggle in itself. In the end, it didn't happen that way and we didn't have the strength to fight anymore. I remember, however, that the problem of identifying an outlet, "the Transition," had been on my mind for years, since *Potere Operaio*, but when I mentioned it to one of my comrades, Guido B¹²⁹, his answer had been vague, as if it were impossible to even outline a solution. I just thought that maybe I didn't have enough experience, that I wasn't yet ready to tackle such an important problem. The reason I posed the question in the first place was, however, that I couldn't even imagine spending the rest of my life getting up at 4:00 in the morning to canvass Porto Marghera or the Montedison in Crotone, in the attempt to generalize the struggle. Until when, until where? And then what? I would, of course, encounter the same dilemma in the Feminist Movement, again unable to find anybody to share it with.

After about ten years, the biological clock in our bodies, even militants have a body, as negated as it often is, started ticking. There were women who wanted a child and felt that it was already late. They had to decide with whom they wanted it and in what kind of context they wanted to raise it.

In the absence of a transformation of our society radical enough to integrate the new subjectivity of women, we started giving up. Many had to capitulate. To what extent depended on how much money these women had at

¹²⁹ They are talking about Guido Bianchini (1926-1998), one of the founders and leading lights of *Potere Operaio*.

their disposal, on how much free time they could count on, and on what kind of job they were able to find. The old problem of the lack of financial means, around which we had organized so much, came to light in all its gravity.

Right then the repression started and, with it, the total erasure, accomplished mostly by leftist women in the fields of sociology and history, of our feminist current, its struggles and its accomplishments. Polda [Leopoldina Fortunati] and I, however, documented all the struggles and all the campaigns, as well as the issues that came to light during our debates, in booklets meant for activists, in pamphlets, and in the newspaper, sacrificing Saturdays, Sundays, and many holidays. All that material is still around. During the 1980s, years of repression and normalization, the feminism of the great struggles was replaced by a fundamentally cultural current of feminism, with the function of controlling and filtering demands and voices. We were blacklisted. With great difficulty, considering the circumstances, some of our comrades completed works of theory or historical research. These works had been conceived in the 70s as parts of an overall project that was never realized. Their circulation was ostracised, to use a euphemism. They basically disappeared (except for when I used them in my teaching), submerged by a hostile political climate and by the proliferation of studies on the female condition with a different approach. What we had produced was also co-opted and domesticated. Institutions turned up to be very supportive of the study of the female condition, investing money, creating networks and research grants, which were all carefully managed. They created sham foundations and projects. The problem of the work of reproduction remained unanswered. The discourse on wages for housework blacklisted as well. The issue would eventually find a partial and false solution with the introduction of migrant workers who would themselves leave behind tragedies of reproduction (for instance young children who, left with their grandparents, don't want to go back to live with parents who they don't recognize anymore, and grandparents who go crazy with grief when, left to raise their grandchildren, see their children come back and take them away forever).

At a certain point in the 80s, during which, by the way, I had some personal problems (even activists have a life, although removed), I felt the need to reevaluate the previous years and test them through the infallible filter of emotions. I had to recognize that during my activism first in *Potere Operaio* and then in the Feminist Movement I didn't experience even a single moment of joy. I remember just a big sense of fatigue. A fatigue that was necessitated in *Potere Operaio* by a need for justice and in the Feminist Movement by a sense of dignity and by the urge to acquire an identity. Of course, through the experience of *Potere Operaio* I acquired some important tools for the interpretation of reality, while the Feminist Movement gave me and many other women, along with other interpretative tools, a strength, a solidity, and an equilibrium that no man could ever shatter again. It put the land under our feet. I remember many comrades saying that the Feminist Movement had saved them from insanity. Yet I couldn't remember a single moment of joy. A lot of suffering, in both experiences. How come? Regarding the Feminist Movement, I tried to take everything into account, even the melancholy caused by the shattering of a sense of belonging; after all, as I was saying, I was born and raised in *Potere Operaio* and the complete separation hurt me. The male comrades, who didn't know anything about the issues that were central to the theories we were developing, were left behind and, every time we crossed paths with them, could articulate only very primitive answers. At the same time, we were left in the dark about their internal debate, while we should have joined the discussion on themes that were of increasingly pressing importance. At least I had this need. It would have been important, while maintaining our autonomy, to have some level of common discussion. I don't know how and to what extent it would have been possible in those years in Italy, while I never had any problems communicating with the American comrades, those of *Midnight Notes* for example. That group had formed after the emergence of Wages for Housework in the US and had redirected the debate and the understanding of the development of capitalism in the world on the basis of the centrality given to the issue of the work of reproduction. They had already therefore been exposed to our feminist analysis and knew it very well. These comrades are still doing compelling research and organizing significant political actions.

While I was looking for the reasons behind my lack of joy, I was forced to admit that the field of my struggles during the 70s, be it in front of factories or inside women's houses, failed to move me deeply and let my vital energy flow. They were all, in fact, struggles around the pair time/money, even when combined with the issue of the harm done by factories in themselves or, within the Feminist Movement, with campaigns around reproductive rights, sex work, violence, and much more. That's why I didn't experience joy (and I'm not feeling it even now, while struggling against the medical abuse of women's bodies). What I was missing was something capable of moving me in a positive way, to inspire a strong imagination, capable of disclosing different landscapes. I needed to encounter different questions and new actors, longing and effectively able to imagine a different world. So, for part of the 80s I went on migrating from room to room in the house of reproduction. Then finally I found the door that opened into the garden: I realized the importance of the question of the land. That door was thrown open for me by the new actors I was looking for, the protagonists of indigenous rebellions, the farmers, fishermen, the people fighting against dams or deforestation, the women of the Global South (but luckily also more and more men and women of industrialized countries). They were all treating the issue of land as central. They were all fighting against its privatization and exploitation, and the destruction of its reproductive powers represented by the Green Revolution (of which GMOs represent the last phase), The White Revolution and the Blue Revolution; initiatives that all take on the destruction of the garden of reproduction outside our bodies.

These were the people I was looking for. They converged with my research and my feelings, moved me and gave me joy because they let me have a glimpse of a different world, starting from the ways in which life is produced and reproduced, the life of plants, animals and humans. The land is not only our source of nourishment, but it is from the land that bodies gather meaning, sensations, collective imagination. Here I crossed path with the voices

and actions of Rigoberta Menchù, Vandana Shiva, Marcos. Together with Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Farida Akter and many others, and together with the Network of *La Via Campesina*, already in 1996 here in Rome, we organized an alternative conference to that of the FAO on food. It was our first counter-summit, which will be followed by a second one in just a few days.

The third question therefore, that of the land, finally gave me some joy, emotions, and inspiration. In those years I often travelled to various Third World countries, many times to Africa, so that I understood directly what it meant to live there, not only in terms of the harshness of the living conditions but also in the presence of a power capable of evoking a different world. I found that world because I needed it, I was looking for it.

The question of the land overwhelmingly forced us to rethink that of reproduction: the reproduction of humanity as a whole, if we want to think in global terms. In industrialized countries reproduction happens essentially through the work of managing money, not the money which directly pays for it, which never arrives, but the money coming from the husband's wage packet or, in more post-Fordist terms, from the two precarious wage packets of his and her jobs outside of the home. In Third World countries, on the other hand (and they remain Third World even when they enter the First World or vice versa), reproduction happens first of all through the work in the fields. In other words, through farming for sustenance or local consumption, according to a system of collective ownership or small property.

In order to appreciate this issue in all its seriousness, both regarding the privatization and the exploitation and destruction of the reproductive powers of land, we need to reconsider what happened during the 80s. While there's no doubt that those were years of repression and normalization in Italy, in Third World countries those were the years of the draconian adjustment dictated by the IMF. The adjustment involved all countries, Italy included, but in Third World countries, it called for particularly draconian measures. For instance, the cuts to subsidized staple foods, and most importantly, the strong recommendation to put a price on land, thus privatizing it wherever it was still a commons (as it was for most of Africa), basically making subsistence agriculture impossible. This measure (made even more dramatic in those years in the context of other typical IMF adjustments) represents, in my opinion, the major cause of world hunger, and it creates the illusion of overpopulation, while the real problem is that of landlessness. As the implementation of the adjustment policies of the 80s became more severe, reproduction regressed at a global level. This was the preparatory phase of neoliberalism. In fact, creating poorer living conditions and fewer life expectations and a level of poverty without precedent, it provided the prerequisites for the launch of the new globalized economy: for the deployment of neoliberalism worldwide, requiring workers to sacrifice so that corporations can compete on the global market; for the endorsement of new models of productivity with smaller salaries and deregulated working conditions; for the stabilization of an international hierarchy of workers with an ever larger and more dramatic gap, both in the fields of production and reproduction. Starting in the 80s, the wave of suicides among farmers in India reached 20,000 cases in the last three years. All of them couldn't pay back the debts they had incurred to buy seeds and pesticides. A genocide!

As mass suicides give us the measure of the amount of hunger and death brought upon people by the Green Revolution and by IMF policies, the 80s were also the years that saw the rise of struggles against these policies (from South America to Africa and Asia), against the expropriation and poisoning of the land, against the distortion and the destruction of its reproductive powers. The protagonists of these struggles created networks, organizations, and movements that we found again in the '90s as components of the big anti-globalization movement, which was called, not accidentally "the movement of movements". The first moment of unification of these different entities, and with it, the launch of the anti-globalization movement, happened at the end of July and beginning of August '96 in Chiapas, when the Zapatistas called for an Intercontinental meeting for "humanity against neoliberalism." The central demand in the Zapatistas' insurrection was that of land. There was also the issue of the revision of the article 27 of the Mexican Constitution¹³⁰, along with all that was included in NAFTA. I always say that Marcos's mere appearance in '94 freed the horses and opened the fence that kept the western debate confined and unable to see or take into consideration the question of the land. Activists from all over the world went to Chiapas to offer their cooperation because Marcos had freed their imagination: he was a man on a horse, with a ski mask the colour of the earth and grass under his feet. Besides, he could talk about poetry. The land, humans, and animals, separated and counterposed in the capitalistic scheme of nature, in the industrialization of agriculture and animal farming, were reunited, thus disclosing a different landscape.

These brief considerations about the centrality of the question of land within the conversation about reproduction have implications for the issues that we are returning to today. First of all, any discourse about so-called "political recomposition", if it wants to be up to the challenge of the new global economy, needs to recognize the centrality of this problem and to find a way to relate to existing struggles, because the expulsion of great masses of people from their land is what makes the continuous re-founding and the re-establishment of a hierarchy inside the global economy possible. Evidently, in fact, only a small portion of these expropriated people will be able to find a job, more or less under the table and for a minimal compensation. The vast majority is destined to be wiped out by wars, harsh economic conditions, starvation, the spreading of contagious diseases, police and military repression. It is almost like all the political work done all over the world were continuously thrown into a bottomless pit. We need to start wondering about how to close that pit.

¹³⁰ Article 27 has for its objective "Property in land and water within the limits of the national territory belongs originally to the Nation, which had and has the right to transfer the domain of them to individuals, constituting thus private property": <https://leyes-mx.com/constitucion/27.htm>

I started dreaming about the change in the stratification of work that would take place if a considerable portion of the expropriated multitudes were to reclaim their land, and about what would happen to capitalism then. After all, capitalism started there, with the expropriation of land. That's why I don't understand the accusation of Third Worldism or of Third Worldist tourism. I always tell my students that they should travel to Third World countries, even just for tourism. Tourism is better than nothing. It is an essential step, if we want to understand the relationship between development and underdevelopment in capitalism. When it comes to militancy, on the other hand, it is very important that we start projects of serious political cooperation, "*vitattivida*" (there are enough projects for cooperation in Third World countries that are not serious). Those projects carried out in Chiapas, for instance, the construction of an electric turbine and of various hospitals. It's true, in fact, that you need to stay alive in order to fight and not die or be weakened by diseases that would be curable with the proper medical structure. Seriousness also means showing the locals how to maintain these structures in an uncomplicated and timely manner, so that, once the comrades leave, the structure doesn't become unusable, as regularly occurs with less serious projects of cooperation. During this work, knowledge is transmitted and hybridized but most importantly relationships are created and go beyond any single project. It's a part of that political recomposition that, in different ways, is creating opportunities for organization, networks of communication, and cooperation. These are the building blocks of a project, of a cluster of projects that could effectively make a different world possible. It is possible that this is nothing but a glimpse of light coming in, but at least it's something.

Another myth that we need to bust is that "we should never look back," which is like branding as inadequate or backward everything that has been produced, thought, and planned before the most recent evil deeds of capitalism. It is like playing the game of the evildoers: they do the deed and we are left ambivalent. Particularly when it comes to the question of land and water, this strategy doesn't hold. The struggle of Cochabamba in Bolivia, standing up and forcing the opposition to give back the ill-gotten gains, is exemplary of the opposite tactic: against the privatisation of water approved by the government to the benefit of a company that was going to have an exclusive monopoly. The city's Coordinadora in Defence of Water and Life fought hard and won: not only was the water reinstated as a commons, but also as collectively managed, restoring that organisation the Incas had perfectly devised and that had been maintained up until the attempt at privatisation¹³¹. In the same way, the organization of farmers in Colombia was able to take back a great amount of land and to recover many species of beans and edible plants, the memory of which had almost been lost. They reactivated ancient farming and culinary traditions, going back to recuperate spirit and life and opposing the destructive logics of capitalist production. There is an ever-bigger network of farmers across the continents going in the same direction. These are the strong protagonists who decided to change the world starting from that essential and too often ignored question: how to live?

One initiative was able to meet these demands better than others, even though it came from official institutions this time: the restitution of the forest to its community in Nepal, through a system of state concessions. It turned out to be the best solution to the problem of poverty because it reinstated that relationship between humans and land that guarantees the possibility of a sustainable life for both. During the 80s there were many actions organized with the purpose of reclaiming the forest as a source of livelihood. Even before then, there was the Green Belt Movement (which reconstituted stretches of forest around cities, wherever before there were only empty open spaces). It was started in '77 by the Kenyan Wangari Maathai with the idea of "reforestation for life."¹³²

I was glad to find in the introduction to the seminar the idea that we need to imagine an alternative science, different machines. I've been thinking the same thing for a while. The ones we use are such carriers of death that it's impossible to be "against them from within". At this moment, of course, I'm thinking a lot about farming technology. Right here in Veneto, farmers of the Steiner tradition were able to obtain, through biodynamics and interbreeding, a species of wheat that produces taller sheafs with more grains; which demonstrates yet again that it's possible to create great agricultural progress without resorting to genetic manipulation and thus endangering public health. Many farms are following suit and even finding it more cost-effective.

That example even leads us directly to another consideration.

I emphasized many times how the problem of land also has to do with the destruction of its reproductive powers. This is a crucial problem for Third World countries as well as for us. We must reopen and redefine the conversation about reproduction. What are we going to do with a wage if all we can buy is toxic? What will guarantee the continuation of life on Earth, money or the viability and healthiness, and therefore the reproductive capability, of the land? It's such a level of extortion and lack of freedom for humanity to have to depend only and exclusively on money for survival. Are times ripe enough to start making a connection between a guaranteed income, the availability of land, and the protection of its reproductive powers?

A great process of organisation has started all over the world, a process in which many questions (like those related to the Green, the White, and the Blue Revolutions, to the expropriation of land and the way it's used), require the demolition of the false and the explanation of the truth about the new and continuous monstrosities-miracles. These questions require group work or on target solitary work in order to drive out the monsters, expose them and get rid of them. At the same time, they require the willingness to discover or recover alternative

¹³¹ Alejandra Flores, "*La Coordinadora: la femme dans la guerre de l'eau à Cochabamba*" [The Coordinadora, women in the war for water in Cochabamba], *Genre et développement*, Rencontres 8, GIP, 2003: <https://books.openedition.org/iheid/6194>

¹³² See the site of the Green Belt Movement: <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>

knowledge and a different kind of technology. The big change, in my opinion, is set in motion by the strong protagonists who are figuring out how life is produced and reproduced: by these movements of farmers, of fisher people, of indigenous people; by networks of women who pose the problem of the relationship with the land as central; by new inventors. We are not dealing with isolated campaigns anymore, people struggling to connect and be heard, as it used to be several years ago, also because of a certain deafness or of a stale default way of dealing with these issues on the part of the left and the militants of industrialized countries. On the contrary, intercontinental communication and interconnection between advanced capitalist zones and non-advanced zones were established with an efficacy and a convergence of themes that involves the entire planet. Against the expropriation and devastation of the land, the rivers, the oceans, the new protagonists said *ya basta* and are devising key points for an alternative project, for the establishment of a different kind of relationship with the gardens of Earth.

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“By cowardly giving way in their everyday conflict with capital, they [the workers] would certainly disqualify themselves from the initiating of any larger movement”

Karl MARX,
Wages, Prices and Profit, 1865