



# Feminism, Finance and the Future of #Occupy - An interview with Silvia Federici

Occupations and the Struggle over Reproduction

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*Silvia Federici is a veteran activist and writer who lives in Brooklyn, NY. Born and raised in Italy, Federici has taught in Italy, Nigeria, and the United States, where she has been involved in many movements, including feminist, education, and anti-death penalty struggles. Her influential 2004 book Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation, built on decades of research and activism, offers an account of the relationship between the European witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the rise of capitalism. Federici's work is rooted in a feminist and Marxist tradition that stresses the centrality of people's struggle against exploitation as the driving force of historical and global change. With other members of the Wages for Housework campaign, like Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and with feminist authors like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Federici has been instrumental in developing the idea of "reproduction" as a key way to understand global and local power relations. Reproduction, in this sense, doesn't only mean how humans reproduce biologically, it is a broad concept that encompasses how we care for one another, how we reproduce our physical bodies depending on our access to food and shelter, how culture and ideology are reproduced, how communities are built and rebuilt, and how resistance and struggle can be sustained and expanded. In the contest of a capitalist society reproduction also refers to the process by which "labor power" (i.e. our capacity to work, and the labor force in general), is reproduced, both on a day to day basis and inter-generationally. It was one of the main contributions of the theorists of the Wages For Housework Movement to Marxist feminist theory to have redefined reproductive work in this manner. In this interview, an extended version of which will appear in a forthcoming issue of Politics and Culture, Federici reflects on the #Occupy movements, their precedents and their potentials.*

**Max Haiven:** We hear a lot of talk about the originality of Occupy Wall Street and the other Occupations. But people have been pointing out that this movement isn't unprecedented and it has been building in various ways for a long time. What do you see as the feminist roots of the Occupations, both in New York and more broadly?

**Silvia Federici:** This movement appears spontaneous but its spontaneity is quite organized, as it can be seen from the languages and practices it has adopted and the maturity it has shown in response to the brutal attacks by the authorities and the police. It reflects a new way of doing politics that has grown out of the crisis of the anti-globalization and antiwar movements of the last decade, one that emerges from the confluence between the feminist movement and the movement for the commons. By "movement for the commons" I refer to the

struggles to create and defend anti-capitalist spaces and communities of solidarity and autonomy. For years now people have expressed the need for a politics that is not just antagonistic, and does not separate the personal from the political, but instead places the creation of more cooperative and egalitarian forms of reproducing human, social and economic relationships at the center of political work.

In New York, for instance, a broad discussion has been taking place for some years now among people in the movement on the need to create “communities of care” and, more generally, collective forms of reproduction whereby we can address issues that “flow from our everyday life (as Craig Hughes and Kevin Van Meter of the Team Colors Collective have put it [1]). We have begun to recognize that for our movements to work and thrive, we need to be able to socialize our experiences of grief, illness, pain, death, things that now are often relegated to the margins or the outside of our political work. We agree that movements that do not place on their agendas the reproduction of both their members and the broader community are movements that cannot survive, they are not “self-reproducing,” especially in these times when so many people are daily confronting crises in their lives.

Great sources of inspiration here have been the response of Act Up to the AIDS crisis, the anarchist tradition of ‘mutual aid,’ and, above all, the experience of the feminist movement which realized that “the revolution begins at home” in the restructuring of our reproductive activities and the social relations that sustain them. In recent years, this merging of feminism and political ‘commoning’ has generated a great number of local initiatives - community gardens, solidarity economies, time banks, as well as attempts to create ‘accountability structures’ at the grassroots level to deal with abuses within the movement without resorting to the police. Often these initiatives seemed to remain confined at the local level and lack the power to link up to confront the status quo. The Occupy movements show us that this need not be the case.

The Occupy movement is also a continuation of the student movement that has grown throughout North America and internationally over the last decades in response to the commercialization of education. The very concept of ‘occupation’ connects it with the tactics that students adopted over last two years, from New York to Berkeley and beyond, and especially in Europe. For all their contradictions, these student struggles expressed the same need: not only to oppose the authorities but to produce moments of collective experience and collective reproduction on different terms than the competitive logic of neoliberal capitalism. It is significant that some of the young people who started Occupy Wall Street (OWS) were City University of New York students who, in June of this year, were involved in the creation of ‘Bloombergville,’ an around-the-clock encampment in front of New York City Hall protesting the budget cuts planned by Mayor Bloomberg’s administration.

I also cannot help thinking that the experience of the ‘tent cities’ set up by homeless/evicted people over the last few years across America has contributed to shaping the collective imagination. They also evoke the historic memory of the Hoovervilles and the Bonus Army of the Great Depression, where thousands of out-of-work families and veterans camped out, both to demand government action and to support their own survival.

**MH: Many people have criticized the Occupations for having a relatively narrow focus on the crimes of finance, rather than the broader systems of power of which finance is just a part. What do you make of the movement’s general orientation?**

SF: I do not think that this movement is exclusively concerned with the crimes of the finance world. A visit to OWS or some of the other occupations spreading across the country would demonstrate the great variety of issues discussed and the diversity of organizing going on, as well as the diverse composition of this movement. Occupations are becoming a point of convergence for all kinds of struggles: opposition to the war, opposition to the prison system, support for healthcare and education reforms. A movement of teachers and students to abolish student debt is presently being coordinated through the occupations, at least in the United States. On November 21<sup>st</sup> an anti-student debt movement was officially launched at OWS, its members pledging to refuse to pay back their debts when the pledge reaches one million signatories [2]. The Occupy movement is also developing an alternative to representative politics and becoming, in effect, a school of direct democracy and self-government.

I must add that, in the present economic context, is it impossible to take on Wall Street's 'crimes' without confronting the entire economic system at the basis of its abuses. As with any other movements, there are different strands within the Occupations. Some participants may be satisfied with just obtaining a more regulated banking system, or a return to Keynesianism. But the economic crisis is bringing to light, in a dramatic way, the fact that the capitalist class has nothing to offer to the majority of the population except more misery, more destruction of the environment, and more war.

Occupations, in this context, are sites for the construction of a non-capitalist conception of society and a coming together of the practices that, in recent years, have begun to concretize this project. A sign of the broad scope of this movement and its capacity to resonate beyond downtown Manhattan is that in Egypt the people of the squares have recognized the commonality between their movement and that of OWS or Oakland.

As some have put it, the Occupy movement is the first worldwide anti-capitalist movement to appear in a long time in the US. It is the first movement in this country to give expression to the growing revolt against the present economic and political order, which is the reason why it has spread so rapidly and has excited the collective imagination to such a degree.

**MH: Where do you see the Occupations going? What will be critical for their success?**

SF: There are already two encouraging developments under way. On one side, the Occupations are organizing a network that is circulating experiences, information, forms of mutual support, and articulating a perspective for the construction of nationwide and worldwide mobilizations. There is now a plan to hold a general assembly on July 4, 2012 in Philadelphia that will be a test of the 'constituent' power of this movement, by which I mean the ability of the movement to create new models of social cooperation.

I agree with Mike Davis, however, that the movement should not be too eager to produce programmatic demands and should concentrate, instead, on making its presence more visible, on reaching out to other communities, and on 'reclaiming the commons.' This is beginning to happen with the migration of the occupations into the neighborhoods, which is essential to reconstruct a social fabric that has been dismantled through years of neoliberal restructuring and the gentrification and suburbanization of space."

The most crucial test, however, will be whether the Occupy movement has the capacity to address the divisions that have structured the history of this continent. Clearly, you cannot have an egalitarian society without undoing the legacy of centuries of enslavement, genocide, and imperial warfare that have left a deeply scarred and divided social body. Confronting racism, colonialism and other forms of oppression and exploitation, both within the movement and in broader society and its institutions, will have to be the centerpiece of the drive for the production of a new "constitution," whatever forms this may take.

A positive sign is that the composition of the movement is already quite diverse, although the degree of diversity varies in different parts of the country. It has been a long time since we've seen a movement bringing together students, nurses, veterans, radicals and trade unionists with immigrant- and people of color-led grassroots community organizations. The key questions will be whether this movement can be a bridge to the millions of incarcerated in the US jails, or to the many more who cannot take their money out of the banks because they have no bank accounts, and whether the movement's agenda can include an end to the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and the policy of deportation.

**MH: Is feminism critical for this movement, and how so?**

SF: Feminism is still critical for this movement on several grounds, and I am encouraged by the fact that many young women today identify themselves as feminists, despite a tendency in past years to dismiss feminism as merely "identity politics."

First, many of the issues that were at the origins of the women's movement have not been resolved. In some

respects the position of women has worsened. Despite the fact that more women have access to paid employment, the root causes of sexism are still in place. We still have an unequal sexual division of labor, as reproductive work remains primarily a woman's responsibility, even when she works also outside the home, and reproductive work is still devalued in this society. Though we are less dependent on individual men, we are still subject to a patriarchal organization of work and social relations that degrades women. In fact, we have seen a re-masculinization of society with the glorification of war and the increasing militarization of everyday life. Statistics speak clearly: women have the longest work-week and do most of the world's unpaid labor, they are the bulk of the poor, both in the US and around the world, and many are practically sterilized because they cannot afford to have children. Meanwhile, male violence against women has intensified rather than diminishing, not only at the individual level but also at the level of institutions: in the US, for instance, the number of women in jail has increased fivefold since the '80s.

For all these reasons feminism is crucial for the Occupy movement. You certainly cannot have a 'sustainable' movement if the unequal power relations between women and men and male violence against women are not addressed.

I am also convinced that the Occupy movement has much to learn both from the egalitarian vision of society that the feminist movement developed in its radical phase -- which was also an inspiration for the queer and the ecological movements. Consensus-based decision-making, the distrust of leaders (formal or charismatic) and the idea that you need to prefigure the world you want to create through your actions and organization, these were all developed by radical feminist movements. Most importantly, like the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the radical feminist movement began to address the question of unequal power relations in the movement and in society by, for instance, creating autonomous spaces in which women could articulate the problems specific to their conditions. Feminism has also promoted an ethics of care and sisterhood and a respect for animals and nature that is crucial for the Occupy movement and, I believe, has already shaped its practice. I have been impressed by the tolerance and patience people demonstrate to one another in the general assemblies, a great achievement in comparison with the often truculent forms of behavior that were typical in the movements of the '60s.

**MH: Where do you see feminism in this movement and what do you make of the gender dynamics as you have observed and encountered them?**

SF: I do not want to be unduly optimistic, but it seems to me that feminists are well represented in this movement, though it would be naïve to imagine that this is sufficient to eliminate sexism from it. As a recent article published in *The Nation* on this subject pointed out, "women are everywhere": they facilitate and speak in the general assemblies, organize educational forums, make videos, run the information center, speak to the press, and circulate information through scores of blogs on the net [3]. At OWS, before the eviction, they created an all-women space, a tent "for women by women," that functioned as a safe autonomous zone. This is what I learned in my visits to OWS and from my online reading about other occupations.

What is especially promising is the diversity of women who are active and present in the occupations: this is a movement that brings together white women and women of color, young women and women with white hair. I also see the influence of feminism in the fact that this movement places its own reproduction at the center of its organizing. The lesson of the feminist movement -which is that you cannot separate political militancy from the reproduction of your everyday life, in fact you must often revolutionize your reproduction relations in order to engage in the struggle—is now being applied on a broad scale, including the creation of ongoing free food distribution, the organization of cleaning and medical teams, and the activities of the working groups that are daily discussing not only general principles and campaigns but all the issues concerning daily co-existence. That OWS is no longer a standing camp, after its eviction from Liberty Square, does not invalidate this point. Hundreds of occupations are now taking place all over the country and around the world. The loss of the camp at Liberty Plaza in New York is only the start of a new phase of the movement. Hopefully it will be a phase in which the building of reproductive commons will take on a new meaning and dimension. Soon, in fact, the movement must begin to pose the question of how to create a reproductive network outside of the market, for instance connecting with the existing urban farming projects and other elements of the solidarity economy.

**MH: Since the 2008 financial crisis, we've heard a lot of attempts to understand and critique the system, both from liberal critics and from Marxists and others on the Left. But we haven't heard a lot of feminist explanations. What does a feminist critique of finance capitalism look like?**

SF: Finance capitalism is not different in nature from capitalism in general. The idea that there is something more wholesome about production-based capitalism is an illusion we must abandon. It ignores the fact that finance capitalism is also based on production and unequal and exploitative class relations, although in a more circuitous way. A feminist critique of financial capitalism, then, cannot be substantially different from a critique of capitalism in every other form. Nevertheless, looking at finance capitalism from the viewpoint of women, we can gain an insight into some of the ways in which our everyday reproduction and the relation between women and capital have changed.

We see first that financial transactions—through credit cards, student loans, mortgages—have become part of our everyday means of subsistence. Like male workers, many women too have come to rely on them to make ends meet and satisfy their desires. This by itself indicates that the world of finance is not a fictitious sphere of capitalist relations, but reaches deeply into our day-to-day lives. It also indicates that, increasingly, women now confront capital directly, rather than through the mediation of the male wage, as was the case for women who worked exclusively in the home, or through the mediation of the state, as was the case of women on welfare and other forms of social assistance. Indeed, through the entanglement of finance capital in the working of our daily lives, financialization has become one of the main grounds of confrontation between women and capital, and this is an international phenomenon.

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

This situation shows that when we speak of a “financial crisis” we must be very careful not to assume that we speak of one reality alone. For surely the massive indebtedness that women have incurred both in the North and the South, through credit cards, loans or micro-credit, is a financial crisis in itself!

As for the other financial crisis, the one that capital declared in 2008 and that continues to this day, we can see that it is one more twist and turn in a process that has been unfolding now for 35 years, starting in the mid 1970s, when I wrote my first paper on women and the crisis. [4].

Since then, global capitalism has waged a continuous attack on people's means of subsistence, women's in particular. This has been especially devastating for women in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The difference, today, is that the crisis has been unleashed on populations that, by now, have nothing left, and the attack has also been extended to relatively affluent people in Europe and North America. But its objectives, and the effects it has on women, are predictable. Not surprisingly, the reports on this subject coming from international institutions (like the United Nations) are increasingly formulaic. Once again, we hear that “the conventional conceptual frameworks used to design macro-economic policies are gender blind.” We hear of “the disproportionate burden women bear in the financial crisis,” and the negative impact this will have on their access to education and healthcare. We are told that the crisis “threatens women's meager gains” and will lead to a further expansion of women's unpaid and ‘informal’ labor. How many times have we heard these laments, often from women (self-described feminists included) who are totally complicit with the institutional

system that is responsible for the policies that have caused the crisis in the first place, over which now they shed crocodile tears?

Clearly employers and the state once again expect women to absorb the cost of the new austerity programs that are being introduced and to compensate both for the cuts in social services and for the increased costs of food, fuel and housing with extra labour, both in the home and outside the home. This is what British Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Big Society' program is about: downloading the costs of reproduction from society and government onto women - never mind demanding a greater share from corporations and capital, despite the fact that they depend on that reproduction. The financial crisis is an excuse to extend these policies. But if the Occupy movement is a sign of the response to be expected to this new assault on our means of reproduction in the months to come, this crisis may very well backfire.

#### **MH: How can we improve inter-generational learning in our movements?**

SF: In the '60s there was a saying that if you were over 30 you were already on the other side. It never worked that way and the contribution of activists from the older generation was always important for the movement. But activists today are certainly more open to intergenerational learning. The question, however, is what kind of structures are necessary for knowledge to be transmitted and for intergenerational cooperation, in both directions, to be made possible.

Building archives and reproducing materials are all-important steps, but they are not enough. I think activists today need to rethink the history of the movements of the '60s -- their contributions and limits, and the issues they left open -- in the same way as those movements reconstructed the history of the labor movement and the old left of the pre-war and post-war periods. I am thinking, for instance, of the feminist movement. Its history has been so distorted by the media and by its subsumption within the United Nations that many young women in recent years have dissociated themselves from it. But they are discovering that they still face many of the same problems that led to the establishment of 'women's liberation.' I am referring here not only to the fact that there is still evidence of sexism within social movements, but that, in the best of cases, women today can achieve some economic independence only at the cost of "becoming like men," that is, at the cost of accepting work regimes that make no space for other relations: children, friends, families, and political activism. I have also heard, over and over, young women complaining of the balancing act they must perform in a workplace that expects them to be both 'feminine' and competent at the same time. Add to this that many of the achievements of the feminist movement today are in jeopardy. For instance, Access to abortion is constantly being attacked and reduced. In the US, several states are trying to pass laws which greatly extend the government's control over a women reproductive capacity, for instance making it possible to charge pregnant women with murder for engaging in any activity that can be construed as jeopardizing the foetus. Presently, about 50 women are jail under this charge. Indeed, over the years, we have seen that no gains women have made can be taken for granted. I am convinced that learning the history of the struggles of the past is crucial in this context as they enable us to understand what forces we up against.

More generally, there is a great amount of knowledge that should be recuperated so that younger activists do not repeat the same mistakes as those who have gone before them, so that we can better understand what is new and specific about today's struggles, and also so we can learn to anticipate the strategies our rulers will deploy to try to defeat us. That said, it is clear that the present Occupations are a great moment of intergenerational exchange, and I am confident that, as the movement grows, younger activists will see the need to re-appropriate the radical past, and that activists like myself from an older generation will be able to celebrate what is new in this movement, rather trying to put new wine into old bottles.

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