



# RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD

*Feminism and the  
Politics of the Commons*

Silvia Federici

Foreword by Peter Linebaugh

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of the Commons

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# From Crisis to Commons: Reproductive Work, Affective Labor and Technology, and the Transformation of Everyday Life

## **Introduction**

Everyday life is the primary terrain of social change, and within it we find a critique of institutional and political orthodoxy that has a long history. As early as *The German Ideology* (1847), Marx contrasted the study of the material conditions of our existence to the speculations of the neo-Hegelians. A century later, the French sociologist Henry Lefebvre and the Situationists appealed to 'everyday life' as an antidote to the bureaucratic French Marxism of the time. Challenging the left's concentration on factory struggles as the engine of social change, Lefebvre argued that social theory must address the life of the "whole worker"<sup>1</sup> and set out to investigate how "everydayness" is constituted and why the philosophers have constantly devalued it. In this process he inspired and anticipated a new generation of radicals, starting with the Situationists, as his discussion of "consumerism" and technological alienation and his critique of work in capitalist society set the stage for much of the literature of the New Left.

It was with the rise of the feminist movement, however, that the critique of 'everyday life' became a key to that comprehensive understanding of society that Lefebvre was seeking in his work. By rebelling against women's confinement to reproductive work and the hierarchies constructed through the sexual division of labor, the women's movement gave a material basis to the critique of everyday life and uncovered the 'deep structure,' the 'arche,' underlining and binding the multiplicity of daily acts and events that Lefebvre had sought for but never truly grasped.<sup>2</sup> From a feminist viewpoint it became possible to recognize that 'everyday

life' is not a generic complex of events, attitudes, and experiences searching for an order. It is a structured reality, organized around a specific process of production, the production of human beings, which, as Marx and Engels pointed out, is "the first historical act" and "a fundamental condition of all history."<sup>3</sup> A theoretical and practical revolution has followed from this discovery that has transformed our concept of work, politics, 'femininity,' and the methodology of the social sciences, enabling us to transcend the traditional psychological viewpoint that individualizes our experiences and separates the mental from the social.

At the core of the feminist revolution there has been the recognition that we cannot look at social life from the viewpoint of an abstract, universal, sexless social subject, because the racial and sexual hierarchies that characterize the social division of labor in capitalism, and especially the divide between the waged and the unwaged, produce not only unequal power relations but qualitatively different experiences and perspectives on the world. Second, while all experiences are subject to societal construction, it is of special significance that in capitalist society the reproduction of daily life has been subsumed to the reproduction of the labor force and it has been constructed as unpaid labor and 'women's work.'<sup>4</sup> In the absence of a wage, domestic work has been so naturalized that it has been difficult for women to struggle against it without experiencing an enormous sense of guilt and becoming vulnerable to abuse. For if it is natural for women to be mothers and housewives, then those who refuse these roles are not treated as workers on strike but as 'bad women.' Third, if domestic work is subsumed to the needs of the labor market, then familial, sexual, and gender relations are 'relations of production,' and we should not be surprised by the contradictions that permeate them and our inability to make them fulfill our desires. This realization has been a liberating experience for women, and we can say that it has given the everyday "access to history and political life."<sup>5</sup> It has revealed that not only is the personal political,<sup>6</sup> but the private/public divide is a ruse mystifying women's unpaid work as a 'labor of love.'<sup>7</sup>

It is important to stress that the feminist critique of everyday life has been not only theoretical but practical and political, triggering a democratization process that has left no aspect of our life unchanged. Thanks to it, for the first time battering and rape in the family, traditionally condoned as conditions of housework, have been seen as crimes against women. The right of husbands to control their wives' bodies and to demand their

sexual services against their will has been denied. In several countries, the feminist movement has led to the legalization of divorce and the right to abortion. More broadly, women have transformed their everyday interaction with the world, asserting a new power with regard to language, knowledge, relations with men, and the expression of their desire. Even the sexual act has been placed on a more egalitarian basis, as many women have begun to refuse the 'fast sex' typical of marital life, advocating their right to sexual experimentation and to a sexual intercourse more conforming to the configuration of the pleasure points in their bodies. Most important, the feminist movement has established that women will no longer accept a subordinate social position and a relation to the state and capital mediated by men.

This in itself has produced a social revolution, forcing significant institutional changes, such as the censoring of many practices and policies that discriminate on a gender basis. Thus, from the viewpoint of Lefebvre's problematic,<sup>8</sup> we could say that the feminist movement 'has rehabilitated' and revalorized everyday life, making a searing critique of some of the most important institutions by which it has been structured. But to the extent that the movement could not turn its critique of the family and what I call the 'the patriarchy of the wage' into a critique of other forms of exploitation, and equated 'liberation' with 'equal rights' and access to wage labor, it could not escape co-optation by governments and the United Nations, which, by the mid-1970s, were ready to embrace edited forms of feminism as key elements in the restructuring of the world economy.

As I have written elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> three considerations plausibly motivated the decision of the United Nations to intervene in the field of feminist politics and appoint itself as the agency in charge of de-patriarchalizing its international power structure. First, the realization that the relationship between women, capital, and the state could no longer be organized through the mediation of the male/waged workers, as the women's liberation movement expressed a massive refusal of it and a demand for autonomy from men that could no longer be repressed. Second, there was the need to domesticate a movement that had a great subversive potential, being fiercely autonomous (until that point), committed to a radical transformation of everyday life, and suspicious of political representation. Taming the movement was especially urgent at a time when, in response to the intractable 'labor crisis' of the mid-1970s, a global capitalist counteroffensive was underway, aiming to reestablish the command

of the capitalist class over work discipline and dismantle the organizational forms responsible for workers' resistance to exploitation. It is in this context that we must place the launching of the Decade of Women and the first International Conference in Mexico City in 1975, which marked the beginning of the institutionalization of the feminist movement and the integration of women into the globalizing world economy.

As we know, in the space of a decade, women entered the waged workforce in large numbers, but with that the feminist revolution of everyday life came to an end. Reproduction was abandoned as a terrain of feminist struggle, and soon the feminist movement itself was demobilized and could not resist the dismantling of the welfare programs that had been an essential part of the social contract between labor and capital since World War II. Even more problematic is that fighting for equal opportunity and waged work the feminist movement contributed to re-legitimizing the flagging work ethic and countering the refusal of work that had been so prominent in workplaces across the industrial world in the 1960s and 1970s. The lesson we have learned in this process is that we cannot change our everyday life without changing its immediate institutions and the political and economic system by which they are structured. Otherwise, our struggles to transform our 'everydayness' can be easily digested and become a launching pad for a rationalization of relations more difficult to challenge. This is the situation that we are currently experiencing in the U.S., which confronts us with an immense 'crisis of reproduction' and recurrent revolts, opening the possibility of the creation of more cooperative forms of social reproduction in response. This, however, has yet to occur. In what follows I discuss the conditions for the emergence of a society of commons. First, however, I look at the current reproduction crisis, with particular reference to the situation in the United States, which is the one I am most familiar with and that best exhibits the developments I have mentioned.

### **Everyday Life as Permanent Crisis**

While some feminists have read the changes that have taken place in the lives of American women since the 1970s as an instance of progress, in many respects both women and men are today in a more difficult economic and social position than they were at the time when the feminist movement took off. Even the evidence of more egalitarian relations is spotty. The feminization of the workforce has increased women's autonomy from

men. Also, as Nancy MacLean has pointed out, the fight for entrance into male dominated jobs has contributed to “our own era’s heightened consciousness concerning the social construction and instability of the categories of gender, race and class.”<sup>10</sup>

Women, however, have entered the waged workforce at the very moment when waged work was being stripped of the benefits and guarantees that it had previously provided, making it impossible to negotiate the sort of changes in the organization of work and the workweek that could enable them to reconcile work outside the home with the care of families and communities. Few jobs provide childcare or a schedule compatible with homemaking, even when it is shared. As for the commercialization of domestic work, that is its organization as a purchasable service, this much hailed development has proven to have serious limitations, starting with the high cost and low quality of the services provided. We know, for instance, that the fast food that many workers rely upon is one of the leading causes of obesity that now affects many children. An option for those who have a steady income is hired domestic labor, but the present conditions of paid domestic work and the fact that those employed are mostly immigrant women who seek this employment because of the harsh economic conditions in their countries of origin rule this out as a desirable solution.<sup>11</sup>

Added to this is the fact that the cuts in education, health care, and hospital care have brought back to the home a significant quantity of housework, particularly with regard to the care of children, the elderly, and those with illnesses or disabilities. Thus, the economic independence that entrance into waged work had promised has proven to be an illusion, at least for the majority of women, so much so that even among those who were career bound, there has recently been a return to the home and revalorization of domesticity.<sup>12</sup> Tired of struggling in a workplace that no longer tries to care for the workers’ reproduction, still assuming they have wives at home, many women, in middle-class families at least, have presumably ‘thrown in the towel’ and dedicated themselves to providing their families with a ‘high-quality’ reproduction: baking bread, growing vegetables, shopping for nutritious food, schooling children at home, and so forth. As Emily Matchar points out in *Homeward Bound* (2013), the newly reclaimed domesticity is also shaped by ecological concerns and the desire to know where food comes from, leading to the refusal of convenience food and industrially produced goods in general. Many women opting for it are

also affected by the DIY (do it yourself) movements and are not as secluded as their mothers might have been when centering their lives in the home, even becoming bloggers to spread and acquire information. But these are individual solutions that do not address the problems that the majority of women face and only deepen the social distances among them. They are a manifestation of the rise of a new individualism pursuing the 'good life,' but not through a social struggle for the 'common good.'

Because of the double load to which many women are condemned, the long hours of work, the low wages they earn, and the cuts of essential reproductive services, for most women everyday life has become a permanent crisis. In the United States, proletarian women on average work about fifty hours a week, thirty-five or more outside the home and about three hours a day in the home. If we add the (expanding) transport time and the time spent preparing to go to work, we see that little time is left for relaxation or other activities. Furthermore, much of the work that women do is emotional/affective labor—pleasing, exciting, comforting, and reassuring others—a task that, especially when performed for the market, is very draining and over time leads to a profound sense of depersonalization and an incapacity to know what one really desires.<sup>13</sup> Compounded by the economic downturn and the precarization of life, this too explains why women are twice as likely to suffer from clinical depression and anxiety as men. The figures are staggering. Women form the majority of the fifteen million adults in the United States affected by depression. Some forty million women suffer daily from anxiety; one in five will suffer from depression at some point in her life.<sup>14</sup> Other countries exhibit similar statistics, and the numbers are on the rise. In the United States, indicators also show a decline in happiness for women over the last decade and, most significantly, a decline in life expectancy that is especially pronounced for working-class women, who between 1990 and 2008 have lost five years of life expectancy compared with their mothers' generation.<sup>15</sup>

The crisis of everyday life is not limited to women. Both overwork and insecurity with respect to employment and the possibility to plan for the future are now pervasive problems affecting all social groups and ages. There is also a breakdown in social solidarity and family relations. In the absence of a steady wage, families are falling apart at the very time when the forms of organization that as late as the 1960s characterized working-class communities are also disintegrating, unable to resist the impact of

economic restructuring, gentrification, and forced mobility. Clearly the neoliberal restructuring of the world economy is mostly responsible for this situation. But as Leopoldina Fortunati points out in her introduction to *Telecomunicando in Europa*—a study of the impact of communicative technology on the reproduction of everyday life in Europe—we are also witnessing the consequence of the inability of the various social subjects, who structure everyday life to mediate their interests and find forms of organization that enable them to resist the devastating consequences of globalization.<sup>16</sup> Men’s refusal to accept women’s autonomy, for instance, as reflected in the increasing male violence against women, has contributed to weakening social bonds. Under these circumstances, everyday life, which is the primary terrain of mediation among people, has been allowed to shipwreck; it has become a terrain from which many are fleeing, unable to sustain interpersonal relations that appear too laborious and difficult to handle.<sup>17</sup> This means that care work, either by family members or friends, is not attended to, with consequences that are especially severe in the case of children and the elderly. Witness the new trend that is developing in Europe, which is to send elderly relatives, especially when affected by Alzheimer’s, to be cared for abroad.<sup>18</sup> Interpersonal, face-to-face communication, a key component of our reproduction, is also declining, both among adults and between adults and children, diminished in quantity and content and reduced to a purely instrumental use, as the internet, Facebook and Twitter gradually replace it.

In brief, one of the most prominent facts concerning everyday life at present is a ‘crisis of reproduction’ in the sense of a drastic decline in the resources devoted to it, a decline as well of the work of caring for other people, beginning with family members, and a further devaluation of everyday life to which the new communication technologies contribute, although they are not its primary cause. In this case too statistics are telling. As we have seen, life expectancy is diminishing and so is the quality of life, as daily experience is characterized by a profound sense of alienation, anxiety, and fear. Mental disorders are rampant, for many fear that dispossession and homelessness may be just around the corner and experience a destabilizing lack of projectuality. What is most worrisome is that now these pathologies affect even children, plausibly caused by the collapse of the care work that family and school once provided. To what extent these mental disorders are real or are constructed—by doctors and pharmaceutical companies with the tacit assent of parents

and teachers—in order to medicalize the unhappiness of a generation of children who, both at home and at school, are denied time, space, and creative activities, is difficult to tell. What is certain is that never have so many children and such young children been diagnosed with so many mental illnesses. By 2007, the number of mentally ill children in the U.S. had risen to thirty-five times the number in 1990. One in five, including toddlers, according to the Center for Disease Control, may suffer a mental disorder.<sup>19</sup> These include depression, hyperactivity, and attention deficit disorders. And for all of them the ‘cure’ is a variety of psychoactive drugs that the schools and families liberally administer, so that by the time they are ten years old some children take up to seven pills a day, even though the negative effects on their mental development are well known.

The reality is that in today’s society children are the great losers. In a world where monetary accumulation is all, and all our time must be ‘productively’ engaged, satisfying children’s needs is a low priority and must be reduced to a minimum. This, at least, is the message that comes from the capitalist class, for whom children today are essentially a consumer market. There is almost a desire to erase childhood itself as a nonproductive state, for instance by teaching toddlers—as some economists recommend—how to manage money and become wise consumers and submitting them to ‘attitude tests’ as early as age four, to presumably give them a good start in the race for economic competition. The erasure of childhood is also proceeding apace in working-class families, as parents are more and more absent from home and face severe economic crises that are a constant source of despair and rage. Adults, whether parents or teachers, have neither time nor energy and resources to dedicate to children. As Fortunati asserts in *Telecomunicando in Europa*, they may teach them to speak but not to communicate. And judging from the spread of child abuse, they clearly see them as a disturbance. It is a worrisome sign of the intense crisis of parent-child relations we are now experiencing in the United States that between 2001 and 2011 more than 20,000 children—75 percent of them under the age of four—were killed by their families, this being four times the number of troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan in the same years.<sup>20</sup> No wonder, then, that even the massacres of children by gunmen entering the schools—a recent development that dramatically captures the devaluation of children’s lives and disintegration of social relations—is evoking such tepid response and no real attempt to put an end to it.

**“Riprendiamoci la vita”—“Let’s Retake Our Own Lives”<sup>21</sup>**

How to stem this flight from the terrain of daily relations and reproduction? How to reconstitute the social fabrics of our lives and transform the home and the neighborhood into places of resistance and political reconstruction? These, today, are some of the most important questions on humanity’s agenda. They are certainly the motivating force behind the growing interest—practical and philosophical—in the production of ‘commons’; that is, the creation of social relations and spaces built on solidarity, the communal sharing of wealth, and cooperative work and decision-making.<sup>22</sup>

This project—often inspired by the struggles of indigenous peoples and now shared by a variety of movements (feminist, anarchist, green, Marxist)—responds to a variety of needs. First, there is the need to survive in a context in which the state and market provide less and less of the means of our reproduction. In Latin America, as Raúl Zibechi has documented in his *Territories in Resistance*, in the 1980 and 1990s, women in particular pooled their resources to support their families in the face of harsh austerity measures that left their communities demonetized or dependent on the remittances of those who have migrated. In Lima, women created thousands of committees—shopping and cooking committees, urban garden committees, glass of milk (for children) committees, etc.—that provided different forms of assistance that for many made a difference between life and death.<sup>23</sup> Similar forms of organization have developed in Chile, where, after the Pinochet coup of 1973, in the face of devastating impoverishment and political repression, the popular kitchen “never stopped.”<sup>24</sup> In Argentina as well, elements of a ‘collectivization’ or socialization of reproduction appeared in the crisis of 2002, when women brought their cooking pots to the *piquetes*.<sup>25</sup> In Colombia, in the early 1990s, proletarian women constituted themselves as *madres comunitarias* to care for children living in the streets. Begun as a voluntary initiative, after a prolonged struggle the *madres comunitarias* project is currently undergoing a formalization process whereby, by 2014, about seventy thousand *madres* will receive a small salary from the country’s welfare department.<sup>26</sup> But their work is still performed on the basis of communal solidarity, with the salary gained barely enabling them to survive and provide for the care of the children.

Neither in the United States nor in Europe have we seen the kind of collectivization of reproductive work mentioned above, yet more communal and self-managed forms of reproductive work are beginning to appear across the ‘developed’ world. Both in the United States and Europe,

urban gardens and community-supported agriculture are now well established practices in many towns, providing not only vegetables for the pot but various forms of instruction, especially for children, who may attend classes on how to plant and preserve food and how grow things.<sup>27</sup> Time banks, once a radical project, are currently spreading in mainstream America, as a means of acquiring services without monetary exchanges and above all acquiring new support networks and friendships.<sup>28</sup>

All such initiatives may appear small things in the face of the enormous disasters—social and ecological—that we are facing. But in a context of growing impoverishment and the militarization of everyday life, leading to paralysis, withdrawal, and distrust of neighbors, these signs of a will to cooperate are encouraging. They are sign of a growing realization that to face the crisis alone is a path to defeat, for in a social system committed to the devaluation of our lives the only possibility of economic and psychological survival resides in our capacity to transform everyday practices into a terrain of collective struggle.

There is a further reason why it is crucial that we create new forms of social bonding and cooperation in the reproduction of our everyday life. Domestic work, including care work and affective work, is extremely isolating, being performed in a way that separates us from each other, individualizes our problems, and hides our needs and suffering. It is also extremely laborious, requiring many, often simultaneous, activities that cannot be mechanized, performed mostly by women as unpaid labor, often in addition to a full-time waged job. Technology—communication technology in particular—undoubtedly plays a role in the organization of domestic work and is now an essential part of our daily life. But, as Fortunati argues, it has primarily served to replace, rather than to enhance, interpersonal communication, allowing each family member to escape the communication crisis by taking refuge in the machine.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the attempts by companies in Japan and the United States to robotize our reproduction—with the introduction of nursebots and lovebots customized to satisfy our desires<sup>30</sup>—are more signs of a growing solitude and loss of supportive relations than alternatives to it, and it is doubtful that in the future they will enter many homes. This is why the efforts that women above all are making to deprivatize our everyday lives and create cooperative forms of reproduction are so important. Not only do they pave the way to a world where care for others can become a creative task rather than a burden, they also break down the isolation that characterizes the process

of our reproduction, creating those solidarity bonds without which our life is an affective desert and we have no social power.

In this context, commons are both objectives and conditions of our everyday life and struggles. In an embryonic form, they represent the social relations we aim to achieve, as well as the means for their construction. They are not a separate struggle but a perspective we bring to every struggle and every social movement in which we participate. As a member of a Zapatista community put it: “Resistance is not merely refusing to support a bad government, or not paying taxes or electric bills. Resistance is constructing everything that we need to maintain the life of our people.”<sup>31</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991 [1947]), 87–88.
- 2 As Henri Lefebvre wrote, “daily life, like language, contains manifest forms and deep structures that are implicit in its operations, yet concealed in and through them”; *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 3, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005[1981]), 2.
- 3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part 1, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 48–49.
- 4 The first feminist document to analyze domestic work as producing labor power was Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, ed. Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).
- 5 Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 2, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2002 [1961]), 41.
- 6 On the origin of this slogan, see Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political: The Women’s Liberation Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction,” (2006 [1969]), accessed May 31, 2018, <http://carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.
- 7 On this subject, see Federici, “Wages against Housework,” in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 15–22.
- 8 Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, 87.
- 9 Federici, “Andare a Pechino: come le nazioni unite hanno colonizzato il movimento femminista,” in *Il punto zero della rivoluzione: lavoro domestico, riproduzione e lotta femminista* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2014).
- 10 Nancy MacLean, “The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women’s Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class,” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 68.
- 11 On the “globalization of care,” see Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

- 12 Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).
- 13 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- 14 Mayo Clinic staff, "Depression in Women: Understanding the Gender Gap," *Mayo Clinic*, accessed May 29, 2018, [www.mayoclinic.org/diseases/in-depth/depression/art-20047725](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases/in-depth/depression/art-20047725); Pam Fessler, "Panel Charged with Eliminating Child Abuse," *National Public Radio*, February 25, 2014, accessed May 29, 2018, [www.npr.org/2014/02/25/282359501/panel-charged-with-eliminating-child-abuse-deaths](http://www.npr.org/2014/02/25/282359501/panel-charged-with-eliminating-child-abuse-deaths).
- 15 See S. Jay Olshansky et al. "Differences in Life Expectancy Due to Race and Educational Differences Are Widening, and Many May Not Catch Up," *Health Affairs* 31, no. 8 (August 2012): 1803–13. Also, the March 2013 issue of *Health Affairs* reported that life expectancy in the United States has lost ground in the past decade compared to other countries, so the United States now ranks at the bottom of twenty-one industrialized nations for life expectancy. The drop was especially notable for non-educated white women, who on average could expect to live five years less than their mothers; David A. Kindig and Erika R. Cheng, "Even as Mortality Fell in Most US Counties, Female Mortality Nonetheless Rose in 42.8 Percent of Counties from 1992 to 2006," *Health Affairs* 32, no. 3 (March 2013): 451–58. Suicide rates among women, especially middle-aged ones, have sharply increased in recent years. However, men are still leading in the number of suicides. Quoting figures issued by the Center for Disease Control, see Tara Parker-Pope, "Suicide Rates Rise Sharply in U.S." *New York Times*, May 2, 2013, accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/health/suicide-rate-rises-sharply-in-us.html?mtrref=www.google.ca>.
- 16 Leopoldina Fortunati, ed., *Telecomunicando in Europa* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998).
- 17 Fortunati, *Telecomunicando in Europa*, 27.
- 18 Heike Haarhoff reports that about seven thousand elderly Germans have been "delocalized" and now live in nursing homes in the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Spain, and Thailand; "Les Allemands exportent aussi leurs grands-parents," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2013, accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2013/06/HAARHOFF/49160>.
- 19 Misty Williams, "CDC: Mental Disorders Rising in Children," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 16, 2013, accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.myajc.com/news/cdc-mental-disorders-rising-children/MxRBjZ8EcqQDPt880Pt3VP/>.
- 20 Michael Petit, "America Can Fix Problem of Child Abuse Fatalities," *BBC News*, October 17, 2011, accessed May 29, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/15345278/michael-petit-america-can-fix-problem-of-child-abuse-fatalities>; see also Fessler, "Panel Charged with Eliminating Child Abuse." The United States leads the developed world in child abuse deaths, according to this organization. More than twenty thousand American children have died over the past decade in their own homes because of the actions of family members, with about 75 percent being under four years of age and nearly half

- being under one. The U.S. child maltreatment death rate is three times higher than Canada's and eleven times that of Italy.
- 21 "Riprendiamoci la vita" was the slogan chanted by feminists in Italy in the 1970s in many demonstrations, giving voice a struggle that exceeded any specific demand, aspiring instead to free women's lives from the hold of the state.
- 22 George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, "Commons against and beyond Capitalism," *Upping the Anti* 15 (September 2013): 83–99.
- 23 Raúl Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012), 236–37.
- 24 Jo Fisher, "Chile: Democracy in the Country and Democracy in the Home," in *Out of the Shadows: Women, Resistance and Politics in South America* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1993), 177–200.
- 25 Isabel Rauber, "Mujeres piqueteras: el caso de Argentina," in *Economie mondialisée et identités de genre*, ed. Fenneke Reysoo (Geneve: IUED, 2002), 115–16.
- 26 "Madres comunitarias: del voluntariado a la formalidad," *Unimedios, Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, October 4, 2013, accessed May 29, 2018, <http://agenciadenoticias.unal.edu.co/detalle/article/madres-comunitarias-del-voluntariado-a-la-formalidad.html>.
- 27 Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is the name of a number of initiatives that have grown in recent years in the United States, whereby 'consumers' connect directly with the producers, in this case the farmers, paying them in advance for the coming crops and sharing their risks; Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons in an Era of Primitive Accumulation," in *Revolution at Point Zero*, 141–42.
- 28 "Diane Sawyer's Hometown in Kentucky Saves Money by Helping Each Other Out," *ABC News*, January 15, 2014, accessed May 29, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb\\_uu3v48Rk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb_uu3v48Rk). In this news segment on the growing practice of time banking in the United States, the reporter stated that there were time-banking efforts going on in forty-two states.
- 29 Fortunati warns against assuming that communicative technologies are by themselves responsible for the communication crisis that we are witnessing. Rejecting this type of 'technological determinism,' which ignores that the 'consumers' are active political subjects, she argues that communicative technologies intervene in a social reality already "structurally organized in an alienated way"; Fortunati, *Telecomunicando in Europa*, 38. That is, the crisis of family relations is the ground enabling technologies to break into and dominate our daily life; Fortunati, 34–48.
- 30 Nancy Folbre, "Nursebots to the Rescue? Immigration, Automation, and Care," *Globalizations* 3, no. 3 (September 2006): 349–60.
- 31 EZLN, *Autonomous Resistance—First Grade Textbook*, trans. El Kilombo (2014), 70, accessed May 29, 2018, [www.schoolsforchiapas.org/library/autonomous-resistance-grade-textbook](http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/library/autonomous-resistance-grade-textbook); for the course "Freedom According to the Zapatistas."

## Re-enchanting the World: Technology, the Body, and the Construction of the Commons

Almost a century has passed since Max Weber argued in “Science as a Vocation” that “the fate of our times is characterized, above all, by the disenchantment of the world,” a phenomenon he attributed to the intellectualization and rationalization produced by the modern forms of social organization.<sup>1</sup> By ‘disenchantment’ Weber referred to the vanishing of the religious and the sacred from the world. But we can interpret his warning in a more political sense, as referring to the emergence of a world in which our capacity to recognize the existence of a logic other than that of capitalist development is every day more in question. This ‘blockage’ has many sources that prevent the misery we experience in everyday life from turning into transformative action. The global restructuring of production has dismantled working-class communities and deepened the divisions that capitalism has planted in the body of the world proletariat. But what prevents our suffering from becoming productive of alternatives to capitalism is also the seduction that technology exerts on us, as it appears to give us powers without which it seems impossible to live. It is the purpose of this article to challenge this myth. This is not to engage in a sterile attack against technology, yearning for an impossible return to a primitivist paradise, but to acknowledge the cost of the technological innovations by which we are mesmerized and, above all, to remind us of the knowledges and powers that we have lost with their production and acquisition. It is to the discovery of reasons and logics other than those of capitalist development that I refer when I speak of ‘re-enchanting the world,’ a practice that I believe is central to most anti-systemic movements and a precondition for resistance to exploitation. If all we know and crave is what capitalism has produced,

then any hope of qualitative change is doomed. Societies not prepared to scale down their use of industrial technology must face ecological catastrophes, competition for diminishing resources, and a growing sense of despair about the future of the earth and the meaning of our presence on it. In this context, struggles aiming to re-ruralize the world—e.g., through land reclamation, the liberation of rivers from dams, resistance to deforestation, and, central to all, the revalorization of reproductive work—are crucial to our survival. These are the condition not only of our physical survival but of a ‘re-enchantment’ of the earth, for they reconnect what capitalism has divided: our relation with nature, with others, and with our bodies, enabling us not only to escape the gravitational pull of capitalism but to regain a sense of wholeness in our lives.

### **Technology, the Body, and Autonomy**

Starting from these premises, I argue that the seduction that technology exerts on us is the effect of the impoverishment—economic, ecological, cultural—that five centuries of capitalist development have produced in our lives, even—or above all—in the countries in which it has climaxed. This impoverishment has many sides. Far from creating the material conditions for the transition to communism, as Marx imagined, capitalism has produced scarcity on a global scale. It has devalued the activities by which our bodies and minds are reconstituted after being consumed in the work process and has overworked the earth to the point that it is increasingly incapable of sustaining our life. As Marx put it with reference to the development of agriculture:

All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-term sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as a background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original source of all wealth—the soil and the workers.<sup>2</sup>

This destruction is not more obvious, because the global reach of capitalist development has placed most of its social and material consequences out

of sight, so that it becomes difficult for us to assess the full cost of any new forms of production. As the German sociologist Otto Ullrich wrote, only modern technology's capacity to transfer its costs over considerable times and spaces and our consequent inability to see the suffering caused by our daily usage of technological devices allow the myth that technology generates prosperity to persist.<sup>3</sup> In reality, the capitalist application of science and technology to production has proven so costly in terms of its effects on human lives and our ecological systems that if it were generalized it would destroy the earth. As it has often been argued, its generalization would only be possible if another planet were available for more plunder and pollution.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, another form of impoverishment, less visible yet equally devastating, that the Marxist tradition has largely ignored. This is the loss produced by the long history of capitalist assault on our autonomous powers. I refer here to that complex of needs, desires, and capacities that millions of years of evolutionary development in close relation with nature have sedimented in us, which constitute one of the main sources of our resistance to exploitation. I refer to our need for the sun, the wind, the sky, the need for touching, smelling, sleeping, making love, and being in the open air, instead of being surrounded by closed walls (keeping children enclosed within four walls is still one of the main challenges that teachers encounter in many parts of the world). Insistence on the discursive construction of the body has made us lose sight of this reality. Yet this accumulated structure of needs and desires that has been the precondition of our social reproduction has been a powerful limit to the exploitation of labor, which is why, from the earliest phase of its development, capitalism had to wage a war against our body, making it a signifier for all that is limited, material, and opposed to reason.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault's intuition concerning the ontological primacy of resistance<sup>6</sup> and our capacity to produce liberating practices can be explained on these grounds. That is, it can be explained on the basis of a constitutive interaction between our bodies and an 'outside'—call it the cosmos, the world of nature—that has been immensely productive of capacities and collective visions and imagination, though obviously mediated through social/cultural interaction. All the cultures of the South Asian region—Vandana Shiva has reminded us—have originated from societies living in close contact with the forests.<sup>7</sup> Also the most important scientific discoveries have originated in precapitalist societies, in which people's lives

were profoundly shaped at all levels by a daily interaction with nature. Four thousand years ago Babylonians and Maya sky watchers discovered and mapped the main constellations and the cyclical motions of heavenly bodies.<sup>8</sup> Polynesian sailors could navigate the high seas on the darkest nights, finding their way to the shore by reading the ocean swells—so attuned were their bodies to changes in the undulations and surges of the waves.<sup>9</sup> Preconquest Native American populations produced the crops that now feed the world, with a mastery unsurpassed by any agricultural innovations introduced over the last five hundred years, generating an abundance and diversity that no agricultural revolution has matched.<sup>10</sup> I have turned to this history, so little known or reflected upon, to underline the great impoverishment that we have undergone in the course of capitalist development, for which no technological device has compensated. Indeed, parallel to the history of capitalist technological innovation we could write a history of the disaccumulation of our precapitalist knowledges and capacities, which is the premise on which capitalism has built the exploitation of our labor. The capacity to read the elements, to discover the medical properties of plants and flowers, to gain sustenance from the earth, to live in woods and forests, to be guided by the stars and winds on the roads and the seas was and remains a source of ‘autonomy’ that had to be destroyed. The development of capitalist industrial technology has been built on that loss and has amplified it.

Not only has capitalism appropriated the workers’ knowledges and capacities in the process of production, so that, in Marx’s words, “the instrument of labor appears as a means of enslaving, exploiting and impoverishing the worker,”<sup>11</sup> as I argued in *Caliban and the Witch*, the mechanization of the world was premised on and preceded by the mechanization of the human body, realized in Europe through the ‘enclosures,’ the persecution of vagabonds, and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch hunts. It is important here to remember that technologies are not neutral devices but involve specific systems of relations, “particular social and physical infrastructures,”<sup>12</sup> as well as disciplinary and cognitive regimes capturing and incorporating the most creative aspects of living labor used in the production process. This remains true in the case of digital technologies. Nevertheless, it is difficult to disabuse ourselves of the assumption that the introduction of the computer has been a benefit to humanity, that it has reduced the amount of socially necessary labor and increased our social wealth and capacity for cooperation. Yet

an account of what computerization has required casts a long shadow over any optimistic view of the information revolution and knowledge-based society. As Saral Sarkar reminds us, just to produce one computer requires on average fifteen to nineteen tons of materials and thirty-three thousand liters of pure water, obviously taken away from our commonwealth, plausibly the common lands and waters of communities in Africa or Central and South America.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, we can apply to computerization what Raphael Samuel has written about industrialization: “if one looks at [industrial] technology from the point of view of labor rather than that of capital, it is a cruel caricature to present machinery as dispensing with toil. . . . Apart from the demands which machinery itself imposed there was a huge army of labor engaged in supplying it with raw material.”<sup>14</sup>

Computerization has also increased the military capacity of the capitalist class and its surveillance of our work and lives—all developments compared to which the benefits we can draw from the use of personal computers pale.<sup>15</sup> Most important, computerization has reduced neither the workweek, the promise of all techno-utopias since the 1950s, nor the burden of physical work. We now work more than ever. Japan, the motherland of the computer, has led the world in the new phenomenon of ‘death by work.’ Meanwhile, in the United States a small army of workers—numbering in the thousands—dies every year of work accidents, while many more contract diseases that will shorten their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Not least, with computerization, the abstraction and regimentation of labor is reaching its completion and so is our alienation and desocialization. The level of stress digital labor is producing can be measured by the epidemic of mental illnesses—depression, panic, anxiety, attention deficit, dyslexia—now typical of the most technologically advanced countries like the U.S.—epidemics that can also be read as forms of passive resistance, as refusals to comply, to become machine-like and make capital’s plans our own.<sup>17</sup>

In brief, computerization has added to the general state of misery, bringing to fulfillment Julian de La Mettrie’s idea of the ‘man-machine.’ Behind the illusion of interconnectivity, it has produced a new type of isolation and new forms of distancing and separation. Thanks to the computer millions of us now work in situations where every move we make is monitored, registered, and possibly punished; social relations have broken down, as we spend weeks in front of our screens, forfeiting the pleasure of physical contact and face-to-face conversations; communication has

become more superficial as the attraction of immediate response replaces pondered letters with superficial exchanges. We are also becoming aware that the fast rhythms to which computers habituate us generate a growing impatience in our daily interactions with other people, as these cannot match the velocity of the machine.

In this context, we must reject the axiom common in analyses of the Occupy movement that digital technologies (Twitter, Facebook) are conveyor belts of global revolution, the triggers of the 'Arab Spring' and the movement of the squares. Undoubtedly, Twitter can bring thousands to the streets, but only if they are already mobilized. And it cannot dictate how we come together, whether in the serial manner or the communal, creative way we have experienced in the squares, fruit of a desire for the other, for body-to-body communication, and for a shared process of reproduction. As the experience of the Occupy movement in the United States has demonstrated, the internet can be a facilitator, but transformative activity is not triggered by the information passed online; it is by camping in the same space, solving problems together, cooking together, organizing a cleaning team, or confronting the police, all revelatory experiences for thousands of young people raised in front of computer screens. Not accidentally, one of the most cherished experiences in the Occupy movement was the 'mic check'—a device invented because the police banned the use of loudspeakers in Zuccotti Park, but which soon became a symbol of independence from the state and the machine and a signifier of a collective desire, a collective voice and practice. "Mic check!" people said for months in meetings, even when not needed, rejoicing in this affirmation of collective power.

All these considerations fly in the face of arguments that attribute to the new digital technologies an expansion of our autonomy and assume that those who work at the highest levels of technological development are in the best position to promote revolutionary change. In reality, the regions less technologically advanced from a capitalist viewpoint are today those in which political struggle is most intense and most confident in the possibility of changing the world. An example are the autonomous spaces built by peasant and indigenous communities in South America, which, despite centuries of colonization, have maintained communal forms of reproduction.

Today the material foundations of this world are under attack as never before, being the target of an incessant process of enclosure

conducted by mining, agribusiness, and biofuel companies. That even reputedly ‘progressive’ Latin American states have been unable to overcome the logic of extractivism is a sign of the depth of the problem. The present assault on lands and waters is compounded by an equally pernicious attempt by the World Bank and a plethora of NGOs to bring all subsistence activities under the control of monetary relations through the politics of rural credit and microfinance, which has turned multitudes of self-subsistent traders, farmers, and food and care providers, mostly women, into debtors. But despite this attack, this world, which some have called ‘rurban,’ to stress its simultaneous reliance on town and country, refuses to wither away. Witness the multiplication of land squatting movements, water wars, and the persistence of solidarity practices like the *tequio*,<sup>18</sup> even among immigrants abroad. Contrary to what the World Bank would tell us, the ‘farmer’—rural or urban—is a social category not yet destined for the dustbin of history. Some, like the late Zimbabwean sociologist Sam Moyo, have spoken of a process of ‘re-peasantization,’ arguing that the drive against land privatization and for land reappropriation sweeping from Asia to Africa is possibly the most decisive, certainly the fiercest, struggle on earth.<sup>19</sup>

From the mountains of Chiapas to the plains of Bangladesh many of these struggles have been led by women, a key presence in all squatters’ and land reclamation movements. Faced with a renewed drive toward land privatization and the rise in food prices, women have also expanded their subsistence farming, appropriating for this purpose any available public land, in the process transforming the urban landscape of many towns. As I have written elsewhere, regaining or expanding land for subsistence farming has been one of the main battles for women in Bangladesh, leading to the formation of the Landless Women’s Association, which has been carrying on land occupations since 1992.<sup>20</sup> In India, as well, women have been in the forefront of land reclamations, as they have in the movement opposing the construction of dams. They have also formed the National Alliance for Women’s Food Rights, a national movement made up of thirty-five women’s groups that has campaigned in defense of the mustard seed economy, which has been under threat since the attempt by a U.S. corporation to patent it. Similar struggles are also taking place in Africa and South America and increasingly in industrialized countries, with the growth of urban farming and solidarity economies in which women have a prominent part.

### Other Reasons

What we are witnessing, then, is a ‘transvaluation’ of political and cultural values. Whereas a Marxian road to revolution would have the factory workers lead the process, we are beginning to recognize that the new paradigms may come from those who in fields, kitchens, and fishing villages across the planet struggle to disentangle their reproduction from the hold of corporate power and preserve our common wealth. In the industrialized countries, as well, as Chris Carlsson has documented in his *Nowtopia*, more people are seeking alternatives to a life regulated by work and the market, both because in a regime of precarity work can no longer be a source of identity formation and because of their need to be more creative. Along the same lines, workers’ struggles today follow a different pattern than the traditional strike, reflecting a search for new models of protest and new relations between human beings and between human beings and nature. We see the same phenomenon in the growth of commoning practices like time banks, urban gardens, and community accountability structures. We see it also in the preference for *androgynous* models of gender identity, the rise of the transsexual and intersex movements and the queer rejection of gender, with its implied rejection of the sexual division of labor. We must also mention the global diffusion of the passion for tattoos and the art of body decoration that is creating new and imagined communities across sex, race, and class boundaries. All these phenomena point not only to a breakdown of disciplinary mechanisms but to a profound desire for a remolding of our humanity in ways different from, in fact the opposite to, those that centuries of capitalist industrial discipline have tried to impose on us.

As this volume well documents, women’s struggles over reproductive work play a crucial role in the construction of this ‘alternative.’ As I have written elsewhere, there is something unique about this work—whether it is subsistence farming, education, or childrearing—that makes it particularly apt to generate more cooperative social relations. Producing human beings or crops for our tables is in fact a qualitatively different experience than producing cars, as it requires a constant interaction with natural process whose modalities and timing we do not control. As such, reproductive work potentially generates a deeper understanding of the natural constraints within which we operate on this planet, which is essential to the re-enchantment of the world that I propose. By contrast, the attempt to force reproductive work into the parameters of an industrialized

organization of work has had especially pernicious effects. Witness the consequences of the industrialization of childbirth that has turned this potentially magical event into an alienating and frightening experience.<sup>21</sup>

In different ways, through these new social movements, we glimpse the emergence of another rationality not only opposed to social and economic injustice but reconnecting us with nature and reinventing what it means to be a human being. This new culture is only on the horizon, for the hold of the capitalist logic on our subjectivity remains very strong. The violence that men in every country and of all classes display against women is a measure of how far we must travel before we can speak of commons. I am also concerned that some feminists cooperate with the capitalist devaluation of reproduction. Witness their fear of admitting that women can play a special role in the reorganization of reproductive work and the widespread tendency to conceive of reproductive activities as necessarily forms of drudgery. This, I believe, is a serious mistake. For reproductive work, insofar as it is the material basis of our life and the first terrain on which we can practice our capacity for self-government, is the 'ground zero of revolution.'

### Notes

- 1 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" [1918-1919], in *For Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 155.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol.1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 638.
- 3 Otto Ullrich, "Technology," in *The Development Dictionary*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 1992), 283.
- 4 Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Press, 1996).
- 5 See Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia 2004), especially Chapter 3.
- 6 Referred to in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 31.
- 7 Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989).
- 8 Clifford D. Conner, *A People's History of Science: Miners, Midwives, and Low Mechanics* (New York: Nation Books, 2005), 63–64.
- 9 Conner, *A People's History of Science*, 190–92, also reports that it was from Native sailors that European navigators gained the knowledge about winds and currents that enabled them to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

- 10 Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1988).
- 11 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 638.
- 12 Ullrich, "Technology," 285.
- 13 Saral Sarkar, *Eco-Socialism or Eco-Capitalism? A Critical Analysis of Humanity's Fundamental Choices* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 126–27; see also Tricia Shapiro, *Mountain Justice: Homegrown Resistance to Mountaintop Removal for the Future of Us All* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010).
- 14 Raphael Samuel. "Mechanization and Hand Labour in Industrializing Britain," in *The Industrial Revolution and Work in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Lenard R. Berlanstein. London: Routledge, 1992, 26–40.
- 15 Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991).
- 16 According to JoAnn Wypijewski, 40,019 workers died on the job between 2001 and 2009. More than 5,000 died on the job in 2007, with an average of 15 corpses a day, and more than 10,000 were maimed or hurt. She calculates that "because of under-reporting, the number of injured workers every year is likely closer to 12 million than to the official 4 million"; "Death at Work in America," *Counterpunch*, April 29, 2009, accessed June 2, 2018, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2009/04/29/death-at-work-in-america/>.
- 17 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009).
- 18 *Tequio* is a form of collective work, dating back from precolonial Mesoamerica, in which members of a community join their forces and resources for a community project, like a school, a well, or a road.
- 19 Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, eds., *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 2005).
- 20 Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).
- 21 Robbie Pfeufer Kahn, "Women and Time in Childbirth and Lactation," in *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality*, eds. Frieda Johles Forman and Caoran Sowron (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 20–36.