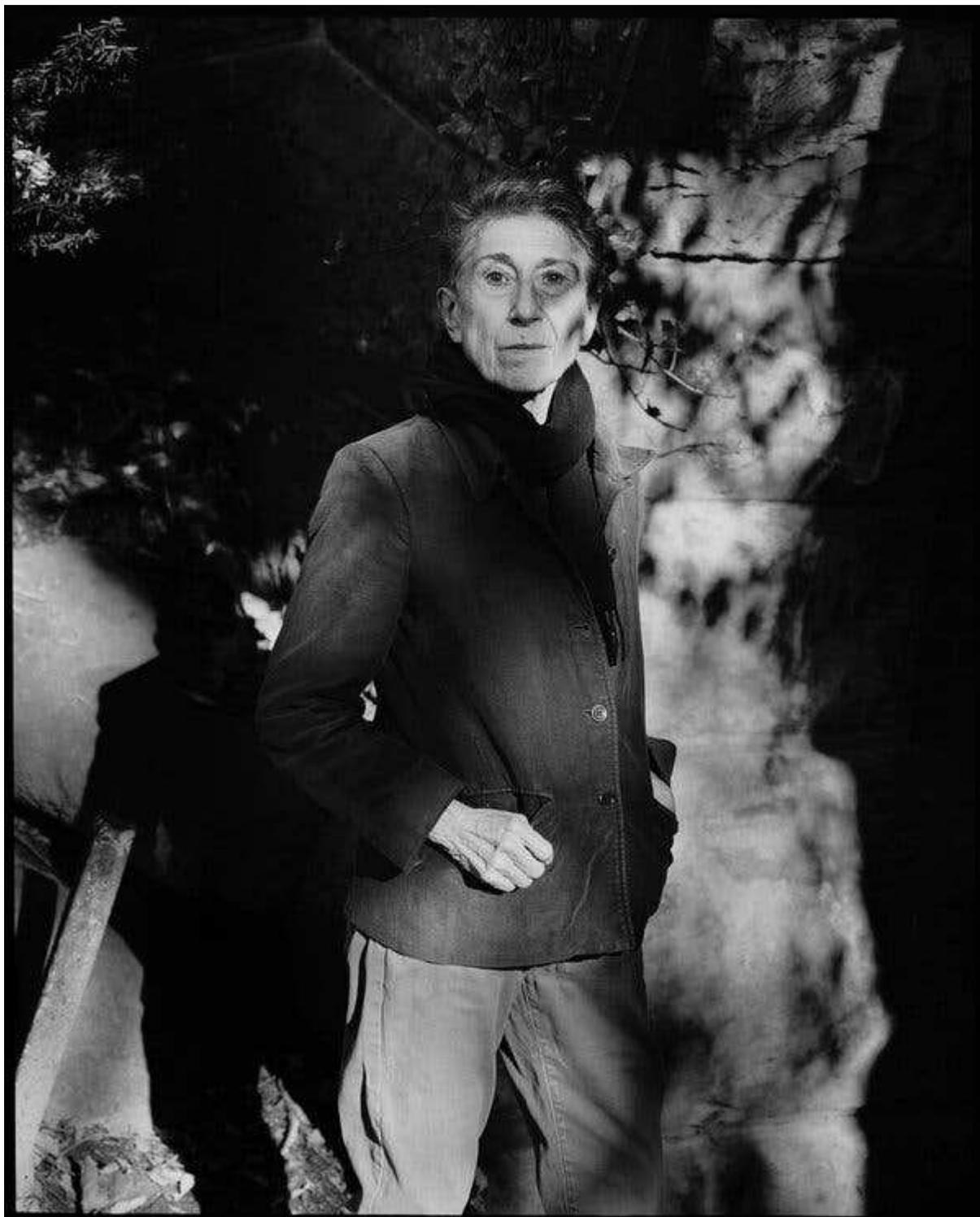


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Silvia Federici Credit...Sharif Hamza for The New York Times

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The Lockdown Showed How the Economy Exploits Women. She Already Knew.

Silvia Federici has been warning for decades of what happens when we undervalue domestic labor.

By **Jordan Kisner**

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Prospect Park in May is a commotion of beauty: meadows and dense rambles, hills and hollows, everything covered in chokeberries, spicebush, violets, flowering hawthorns, magnolias and lindens. In this splendor the birds are boisterous, as are the people. But last May, the park was quieter than usual, and the people moving through it had a subdued, worried energy. Many wore masks; many did not. Occasionally someone shouted at someone else for coming too close. There was both fear of breathing common air and a desperate craving for it. Through this scene proceeded, at an energetic pace, Silvia Federici, the 78-year-old scholar and theorist of domestic labor, one of the most influential socialist feminist thinkers of the last century.

Federici had a black scarf tied over her nose and mouth, and she was wearing a delicate blue sweater her mother made long ago. Federici walks all the way around Prospect Park at least once every day, even in the winter, with her partner of 47 years, the philosopher George Caffentzis. (Caffentzis learned he had Parkinson's disease a few years ago, she explained, and the walking helps him stay well.) But for several days in May, she agreed to do a second daily walk with me.

I had asked to meet because the pandemic and its cascade of economic, social and political breakdowns had led to a profusion of Federician thinking in places I had never encountered it before. Suddenly notions and phrases from her work were all over my social media feeds, op-ed pages and exchanges with friends, as people confronted what kinds of labor are considered essential and why. Federici is a longtime advocate of the idea that domestic work is unwaged labor and was a founder of the Wages for Housework movement in the early 1970s. It is a form of gendered economic oppression, she argues, and an exploitation upon which all of capitalism rests.

As a scholar and activist, Federici is one of a cohort of thinkers who have, for decades, critiqued the way capitalist societies fail to acknowledge or support what she calls "reproductive labor." She uses this term not simply to refer to having children and raising them; it indicates all the work we do that is sustaining — keeping ourselves and others around us well, fed, safe, clean, cared for, thriving. It's weeding your garden or making breakfast or helping your elderly grandmother bathe — work that you have to do over and over again, work that seems to erase itself. It is essential work that our

economy tends not to acknowledge or compensate. This disregard for reproductive labor, Federici writes, is unjust and unsustainable.

These ideas weren't exactly obscure before the pandemic. But mainstream feminism — not to mention mainstream economics or politics — has mostly ignored domestic labor. Instead, it has measured women's empowerment by their presence and influence in the workplace, which is attained by outsourcing housework and child care to less economically advantaged women for a low wage. Even so, women remain mired in housework. It's common now to hear the term “the second shift” (coined in 1989 by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild), which describes how the work of maintaining a home and caring for children still falls disproportionately to women, even if they have full-time jobs and pay for help. What's more, people who are paid to do domestic labor or care work (like elder care or house cleaning) are, as a group, badly compensated and denied workplace protections or benefits. These jobs are held mostly by women of color and immigrants. The arrangement is hardly a success for women at large.

Public-policy experts and economists have pointed out in the last several years, the folly of excluding domestic work from economic measures like G.D.P., given the data showing that unpaid women's work constitutes a huge slice of economic activity in every country. A year ago, Oxfam circulated research indicating that if American women made minimum wage for the work they did around the house and caring for relatives, they'd have earned \$1.5 trillion in 2019. Globally, the value of that unpaid labor would have been almost \$11 trillion. In a 2019 speech, Marilyn Waring, a public-policy scholar and longtime advocate of revising economic measures of “productivity,” noted the absurdity of defining activities like caring for elderly relatives or newborns, shopping and cooking, as having no value, or as leisure. “You cannot make good policy if the single largest sector of your nation's economy is not visible,” she said. “You can't presume to know where the needs are.”

This isn't the only part of the present economic system that seems awry. The wealth gap is as wide as it has been in hundred years, with more workers than ever in unstable or low-wage employment, or subject to the whims of the “gig economy.” As the exhaustion and insecurity caused by these economic conditions have deepened, more and more people are coming around to the idea that the morass of America's social ills might be traceable to an incorrect relationship to work and the question of whose work is valuable.

‘You cannot make good policy if the single largest sector of your nation's economy is not visible.’

When the lockdowns started, this growing malaise exploded into a crisis. First came the discussion of “essential workers,” a category that, it was quickly noted, frequently corresponded with the most critically underpaid workers. Then came the acute realization among the middle and upper classes that their lives had run smoothly because they'd been able to subcontract domestic labor — and, critically, elder care and child care — to other people. After nearly a year of school closures, working parents are keenly aware of the amount of child care they rely on underpaid teachers to provide

for eight hours a day. Without even the ad hoc systems for managing the constant work of child care (day care; grandparents; after-school programs; summer camp; babysitters), American parents have discovered that the requirements of caring for a family match or even exceed the requirements of the full-time jobs needed to support that family.

None of this is news to, say, the single parents who were already working multiple jobs at minimum wage and unable to afford rent and food, much less babysitters — but the reversion of the professional classes to a situation that feels to them similarly untenable has inspired a radical mood. Increasingly, even those relatively unscathed by the pandemic are voicing anticapitalist sentiment, critiquing an economy that underpays or ignores domestic labor. A group of wealthy female actors and executives (including Julianne Moore, Charlize Theron and the leaders of Birchbox, ClassPass and Rent the Runway) are calling for a “Marshall Plan for Moms,” including monthly government payments to mothers. “You know this well: Moms are the bedrock of society,” they write, “and we’re tired of working for free.” Shonda Rhimes wrote on Twitter last March: “Been home-schooling a 6-year-old and 8-year-old for one hour and 11 minutes. Teachers deserve to make a billion dollars a year. Or a week.”

Last March, the scholar and activist Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor [wrote prophetically in *The New Yorker*](#), “American life has been suddenly and dramatically upended, and when things are turned upside down, the bottom is brought to the surface, and exposed to the light.” It has been a year of ugly revelations that a majority of Americans — the millions who were laid off, or furloughed, or were fortunate enough to be deemed “nonessential” — have experienced in isolation at home. Home, where dishes are piling up, where the cleaning and laundry loads have increased in the name of caution. Home, which has always been someone’s workplace but is now, for more people than ever before, a collision zone for many kinds of work. Home, which up to 34 million Americans have lost or are at risk of losing entirely because of job loss and subsequent eviction.

How might this year have looked different had the work we do to care for one another, ourselves and the world around us been valued at a premium? How would the future look different if, as Federici suggests, “we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others,” if “we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them”?

Federici’s profile has risen since Occupy Wall Street, a movement that she supported and wrote about and that brought a new generation of leftist feminists into contact with her writing. In the last year, she has been cited over and over in popular publications — from *The New Yorker* to *The Atlantic* to *The Cut* to *Teen Vogue*, in an article titled [“Socialist Feminism: What Is It and How Can It Replace Corporate ‘Girl Boss’ Feminism?”](#)

When we met in May, Federici seemed less panicked, or maybe less caught off guard, than most everyone else I knew. She was focused and brisk as she walked toward me through the park, smiling behind her mask. She is slight and wiry, with lively hands and short, curly gray hair. As we walked, she spoke quickly, tallying up the fracturing systems, the interlocking forms of vulnerability that were always present but were now affecting even the people who thought they were immune.

She said she was occasionally surprised that people are calling her up now to talk about things she wrote 20 or 30 years ago. But she long suspected that the dangers of devaluing care work would eventually materialize into a crisis too big to ignore. “The pre-existing condition is a system that makes life intolerable and unhealthy for millions of people,” she said, her words muffled slightly by her scarf. “It is a system that is not working — that is the main pre-existing condition.”

Federici was born “under the bombs.” The second daughter of a philosophy professor in Parma, Italy, she was, her mother told her later, an unintended wartime child. “I was born in Parma in 1942, one of the worst years in human history, I think,” she told me. “January was the beginning of the Final Solution.” Her mother would go to sleep in her clothes and wake to a red sky in the middle of the night, grab newborn Federici and her 4-year-old sister, and “run run run” to the outskirts of Parma, into the fields, where she would squat in the dirt with the children until the dawn came. Laughing, she told me this experience made her want never to have children: the horror of cowering in the fields with babies, the bottles of milk, the terrible vulnerability of the world.

Parma, unlike many parts of Italy after World War II, was a Communist stronghold, and in her teenage years Federici was influenced by the labor and anti-fascist movements there. Theories of oppression and workers’ rights were dinnertime conversation. Throughout her childhood, her parents and their friends discussed what the war “meant,” and what fascism had wrought.

Parma’s leftist politics coexisted uneasily with its intense patriarchal culture: Federici’s father, a professor of philosophy, was “the one who knew.” Her mother, who came from a peasant family, “was supposed not to have knowledge.” She did the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping and the caring for children and handmade everything they couldn’t afford to buy. “Nobody sees my work,” Federici’s mother would complain. Her father would tease, “That is because this work is not real work.”

Well into her 30s, Federici refused to have anything to do with what she was raised to think of as “women’s work,” everything her mother had done. (Later, as a graduate student studying phenomenology in Buffalo, she ate uncooked hot dogs right out of the package and potatoes that she — grudgingly — boiled.) “I think I sensed the devaluation of her work. It was an activity that had no rewards, no pleasure in it.”

But Federici credits her mother for first exposing to the ideas that would become her life’s work. “I would, you know, hear and speak about the factory worker,” Federici told me. “The working class for me was the factory worker. And my mother several times said to me, *You’re always talking about the factory worker as if they’re the only people who work!*” She banged the park bench we were sitting on with one fist. “She said that, not my father, who was the teacher, the intellectual, the knowledgeable person. She was the one who told me the things that later became my politics. Whether in terms of housework, whether in terms of agricultural work, she was the one who basically was saying, *But work is more than blue overalls!*”

‘I think I sensed the devaluation of her work. It was an activity that had no rewards, no pleasure in it.’

Federici’s politics didn’t fully coalesce until about 10 years later, in 1967, when she moved to the United States to study on a Fulbright scholarship. She was inspired by the vibrant antiwar and student movements in Buffalo and by the civil rights movement. But she didn’t quite see feminism as central to her political views until in 1972, when a friend passed her a tract in Italian by the feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa: “*Donne e sovversione sociale*,” or “Women and the Subversion of the Community.” (The most widely known version of this essay is called “The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community” and was written by Dalla Costa and the American activist Selma James.) The essay argued that by working without pay in the home, women were producing the labor force that capitalism exploited for profit.

The notion was epiphanic to Federici. “Immediately everything made sense,” she said: her mother’s complaints about seeing only men in factories as authentic laborers; her own revulsion toward housework, which she hadn’t yet thought of as tied to Marxism. Federici became involved with a group of feminists, including Dalla Costa and James, who called themselves the International Feminist Collective. The I.F.C. began the Wages for Housework campaign in Europe. Federici, with her collaborator, Nicole Cox, founded the first United States chapter of Wages for Housework in New York in 1974 with James’s guidance.

Federici’s essay “Wages Against Housework,” published in 1975, was an early, impassioned manifesto for the movement and remains one of its best-known texts. “To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, [expletive],” she wrote, referring to sex. “At the same time, it shows that we have cooked, smiled, [expletive] throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice. Our faces have become distorted from so much smiling.”

From the start, Wages for Housework was expansive in its definition of who belonged in the feminist movement. “We want and have to say that we are all housewives, we are all prostitutes and we are all gay. ... Because as long as we think we are something better, something different than a housewife, we accept the logic of the master, which is a logic of division.” Federici wrote. Her tone is almost pleading when she suggests that society needs to rid itself of the notion that some people are naturally servile or subordinate, that anything can be a “labor of love.” “We want to call work what is work,” she wrote, “so that eventually we might rediscover what is love.”

The New York committee operated out of a storefront in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where they campaigned to improve living conditions for women in poverty. They supported the formation of other groups around the country and in Canada, and worked locally with the activists Margaret Prescod and Wilmette Brown, who formed Black Women for Wages for Housework. They campaigned together in support of welfare activists, as

they considered welfare the first victory in the struggle to demand that the government compensate women for their work in the home.

But after four years, the international network splintered. The New York committee, among others, dissolved after a falling-out with James and Prescod, who claim that the priorities of Black Women for Wages for Housework were ignored; Federici denies this, and claims the group's issue was with James.

Until very recently all parties declined to discuss the 40-year-old internecine conflict in public, convinced that it would distract from their work. This is especially sensitive terrain because of the long history of white people's dismissing and marginalizing Black, brown, Indigenous, queer and trans people within the feminist movement. Though they have never reconciled, Federici, James and Prescod went on to long, concurrent careers in feminist activism — James and Prescod within the International Wages for Housework campaign and the Global Women's Strike, among other initiatives, and Federici as an activist with the Anti-Death Penalty Project of the Radical Philosophy Association and the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, and as a scholar at Hofstra University.

Federici's most influential book came almost 30 years later, with the publication of "Caliban and the Witch" in 2004. Many anticapitalist feminists like bell hooks, Angela Davis, Wilmette Brown and the Combahee River Collective had been arguing since the '70s that feminist struggle was necessarily anticapitalist struggle, and that anticapitalist struggle must necessarily take up gender and race because capitalism oppressed women, people of color and the working class. The contribution of "Caliban and the Witch" to this tradition was to trace these forms of oppression to a single source, arguing that their origins were inextricable.

Federici proposes a new theory about the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, marshaling historical evidence to argue that this also was the moment when women's work was brought under the control of male heads of household and confined to the domestic sphere. Women were the ones who could birth and raise the labor force, so their autonomy, and especially their childbearing capacity, needed to be "enclosed." Then it needed to be made "natural," as if domesticity was simply women's inherent condition and desire. This transition was violent, she argues, citing thousands of women killed during that period, usually women who failed to conform to their new, radically constricted reality and were accused of being witches.

"Capitalism, as a social-economic system, is necessarily committed to racism and sexism," Federici wrote. "For capitalism must justify and mystify the contradictions built into its social relations ... by denigrating the 'nature' of those it exploits: women, colonial subjects, the descendants of African slaves, the immigrants displaced by globalization."

Federici argues that it's not "natural" that the kinds of work that involve care and sustaining life were the province of any one gender; neither is it natural or inevitable that people be subjugated by an economic system that benefits a very few. These were merely conventions useful to the rise of an economic system that has become so all-encompassing that we no longer dare to imagine another way. It was made this way for someone's profit, Federici argues. This way of things can be reversed.

Image



Wages for Housework demonstrators marching in 1977. Credit...Estate of Bettye Lane/Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

The last year — this plague year, this election year, this horrific year — has been a fruitful time to pay attention to who profits from our economic system, and at whose expense. In the last year, more than 70 million Americans filed for unemployment, a majority of them in the service sectors, where workers are more likely to be women of color. Low-wage workers lost their jobs at greater rates, and have stayed unemployed longer. At the same time, just over half of essential workers, who have continued working outside the home at risk to their health, are women, and disproportionately women of color. [An article in Think Global Health by the scholar Catherine Powell](#), a law professor at Fordham, described a “racial-justice paradox” in which Black and brown Americans are “more likely to be unemployed due to the impacts of the pandemic on the labor market,” but are simultaneously “overrepresented among essential workers who must stay in their jobs, particularly lower-skilled positions, where they are at greater risk of exposure to the virus.” This paradox has cost thousands of people their lives.

In the last year, women in health care have fared worse than their male counterparts: [A C.D.C. study](#) reported that 72 percent of the health care workers hospitalized with Covid between March and May of last year were women. Many were nurses and certified nursing assistants, jobs that involve direct patient care — sponge baths, feeding, administering medication — and are more populated by women and people of color. (They’re also compensated less well than male-dominated health care jobs.) Hospital housekeeping and home health aides also got sick and died in higher numbers.

In the last year, housekeepers have faced a “full-blown humanitarian crisis.” [The National Domestic Workers Alliance](#) reported up to 60 percent unemployment in May,

adding that many of its members weren't receiving any kind of government relief because they were undocumented.

In December, 156,000 women lost jobs; men gained 16,000, [according to an analysis by the National Women's Law Center](#). But, as is usually the case, evaluating "women" as a general category hides something important: A further dissection of the data revealed that it was Black, Latina and Asian-American women who suffered job losses — white women actually gained jobs. It is expected that when the vast numbers of unemployed women re-enter the job market, they will be paid lower wages than before.

In the last year, 2.3 million American women reportedly dropped out of the work force — often to perform child care when school and day care closed. Because they've left the work force entirely, and aren't seeking new jobs, they aren't counted in unemployment statistics anymore.

In the last year, [America's billionaires have become \\$1.1 trillion richer](#). All this, amid perverse debates about whose lives are acceptable to sacrifice to save the economy. President Trump admitted in May that as we resumed economic activity, more people would die, but, he declared, "We have to get our country back." Whose country? Back for whom?

It is somewhat less than surprising that there is a growing hunger for a different way, a society less stubbornly resistant to valuing human life when it stands in the way of profit for a rich, white, often male ruling class. A society "that allows millionaires to stow their wealth in empty apartments while homeless families navigate the streets," Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor wrote in March, "that threatens eviction and loan defaults while hundreds of millions are mandated to stay inside to suppress the virus, is bewildering in its incoherence and inhumanity."

Taylor is among a generation of scholars and activists bringing renewed attention to the leftist, often Black-led wings of the feminist movement that were shut out by mainstream white feminism. Writing in 1984, hooks summed it up this way: "Particularly as regards work, many liberal feminist reforms simply reinforced capitalist, materialist values (illustrating the flexibility of capitalism) without truly liberating women economically." Many writers of that era, including Hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and the members of the Combahee River Collective, insisted all along what is now widely seen as common sense: Feminism is both toothless and hypocritical if it ignores the material needs of women who are poor, Black, gay, trans, disabled, immigrants or living outside the United States. Their legacy has been taken up by contemporary social-justice activists and scholars like Taylor, adrienne maree brown, Rachel Cargle, Dean Spade and Mariame Kaba. This is where the energy of the left is now, if not a majority of the money or institutional power.

There's a pressing question at hand, still unanswered, about how the American feminist movement will re-collect itself now, and whether it will push in an ideological direction more aligned with the thinkers it marginalized. The "liberal feminist reforms" of the late 20th century, which turned into the corporate feminism of the 21st. This hit its logical endpoint in the branded and sloganeered feminism of the last 10 years. There was "lean in" feminism, which held that women's entrance into the C-suite required only the right kind of will to power and determined obliviousness to the demands of family-making. There was the swagification phase: THE FUTURE IS FEMALE T-

shirts, “Nevertheless, She Persisted” baseball caps. There was the merch shop of the Wing (the “women’s space” with the high price tag, baby-pink interiors and, as employees claimed, abusive and racist internal culture) selling wildly popular “Head Witch In Charge” pins and “Girls Doing Whatever the [Expletive] They Want” key chains.

As it turns out, “girls,” or more accurately women, did not get to do whatever they wanted this year. Though — as people pointed out about the key chains — generalizing to “women” as a blanket category is a flawed prospect. (“What do you mean when you say women?” I asked Federici on one of our walks. “To me it has always been mostly in terms of a political category,” she said, defining “women” as all those who suffer under the material conditions that have historically been assigned to women, which includes trans and nonbinary people, intersex and agender people and queer people.) And years like 2020 do not fall evenly on all women.

The promises of liberal feminism have never sounded more hollow as the huge population of women who were left out of this vision entirely has grown. Gender parity in the work force (signified by equal representation or even equal pay) never materialized, and has been set back generations by the unsolved problem of domestic labor. These issues are gaining traction in the halls of power — not because they are new, but because they now affect even middle- and upper-class women, particularly white women. Similarly, a broad interest in socialism hasn’t come about because capitalism has only just begun to harm workers, but because the gig economy and a vanished social safety net have broadened whom they harm.

“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,” Federici writes in her book “Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.” There are models for resisting “a social system committed to the devaluation of our lives,” she argues. There are ways to restore that value, relocating it where it was all along.

Federici still lives in Park Slope, as she has, on and off, since 1970. She met George Caffentzis in 1973, when they became roommates. Within the year they were together. Caffentzis did most of the cooking throughout their partnership until recently, when his Parkinson’s made it harder. Federici has taken up the cooking, which she enjoys more than she did in her 20s. Caffentzis loves to cook, she told me, and his pleasure in it helped her see the task as less burdensome and more beautiful. Still, she refers to these domestic tasks as “reproduction” in conversation — as in: “I do more reproduction than in the past. Before, we had a more equal share.”

Their apartment is filled with hundreds of books — on shelves but also stacked under the sofa and the bed, piled in corners, even stashed in the kitchen cabinets between the dishes. At 78, she is still active: She is editing a book about the death penalty (which she has campaigned against for years) and preparing a new book for publication: “Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism,” which comes out in May. Its questions are, in a way, the same questions she has been asking since the ’70s: Why did Marxist critiques of capitalism so completely overlook the kinds of work that don’t happen in what we generally think of as the workplace? What are the stakes of that omission?

On one of our walks, Federici told me about three years she didn't write at all. Her aging mother needed round-the-clock care, and Federici flew to Parma to join her sister in the effort. "She couldn't move. Me, my sister, all day, and there was not enough. We were collapsed at 9 o'clock, when she finally slept."

Federici discovered that her mother, over her 14-day hospital stay, had gotten deep bed sores. "This a moment I can never forget, the desperation. What are we going to do?"

In the days that followed, as Federici and her sister dressed and cleaned the wounds themselves, took their mother back and forth from the couch so she wasn't bedridden, fed her, clothed her, bathed her, Federici's mind turned often to health care. "Imagine if we had some sort of structure in the community that could help us! This is one of the things I always had in mind: I'm here in this moment in this town in this country — there must be another thousands of women like me who are going through the same type of agony."

She turned to me and said, with a lilt in her voice: "It's really a question of the value of life. What is valuable? What are the priorities, eh? I think unless we touch that? Unless we touch that. ... " After her mother died, she came home and began writing about the commons.

In the last 10 years, Federici has shifted her focus toward the need to reverse "enclosure" — the process whereby the world became divided and contained for profit. Nearly everything, Federici argues, has become "enclosed" within capitalism: not just property and land but also our bodies, our time, our modes of education, our health, our relationships, our attention, our minds. During the pandemic, as Francisco Cantú pointed out in a January *New Yorker* article citing Federici, our ability to talk to the people we love has become mediated and monetized by tech companies. The remedy for enclosure, Federici proposes, is turning more and more of the world into a commons.

"The commons" denotes resources (land, knowledge, cultural and intellectual material) commonly held outside any kind of market. Commoning is that idea in action, a practice of putting more and more of your life outside the reaches of commodification or extraction. The allure of commoning is that it's possible anywhere as long as there's a willing community: An empty lot can become a small subsistence farm, a neighborhood's health care concerns can be met with a local, neighborhood-run clinic; care work can be shared among families. "You don't need permission" to common, says David Bollier, longtime scholar of commoning. "You don't need to have proxies in Washington as lobbyists and lawyers. You don't have to be an expert — you are an expert of your own dispossession. And therefore, you can devise some of your own things that are situationally appropriate."

The ways this could look are as various as the communities seeking to address unmet needs. Recently, a group of coders built a free online tool to help families form and schedule child care co-ops. Mutual aid networks are one iteration that has flourished during the pandemic: Using something as simple as a Google Doc, neighbors can write down what they need and what they can give, forming (or revealing) a network of symbiotic relationships. (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez co-hosted a conference call with the prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba on the basics.) These exchanges often seem mundane: Instead of your hiring a handyman, a neighbor might come to your house to

help install your ceiling fan; in exchange, you might help him, or someone else, with his taxes or pet-sitting or garden work. In addition to donating to big nonprofits, you might also reply to calls on your local mutual aid network to help a neighbor make rent. While agitating for the government or other organizations to allocate desperately needed resources, your community might band together to pool and increase the resources it currently has.

Federici's models for successful commoning are drawn from an internationalist perspective, and she notes that Indigenous communities are frequently originators and keepers of commoning practices: She cites "water defenders" in the Amazon, the Landless People's Movement in South Africa, urban gardens in Ghana, the Chilean women who pooled their food and labor amid government-mandated austerity programs. "It is not the most industrialized but the most cohesive communities that are able to resist and, in some cases, reverse the privatization tide," she writes in "Patriarchy of the Wage."

One of Federici's most instructive examples of commoning is the protest campaign of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe in 2016 and 2017. In the course of fighting a pipeline project, the tribe and its allies built an encampment network that kept thousands of protesters housed and fed and safe, even as winter descended; they created a school for the children, recognizing that if whole families were going to participate, the children would need both care and education. In part because they made the camps a livable, long-term community, they were able to sustain and amplify the effort into a movement with international support and ongoing momentum even though the camp itself was cleared by law enforcement in February 2017.

Commoning, Federici writes, produces "a powerful and rare experience as that of being part of something larger than our individual lives, of dwelling on 'this earth of mankind' not as a stranger or a trespasser, which is the way capitalism wishes us to relate to the spaces we occupy, but as home."

"Too often the left doesn't see the power of communities," she told the filmmaker and writer Astra Taylor in an interview in 2019. Her politics, which echo the methods of *Wages for Housework*, emphasize the revolutionary possibilities of telling people they can struggle for change right where they are, whether that's at home, in the supermarket, in church, in the shelter, on the production line, at day care. "Everyday life is the primary terrain of social change," she writes.

Federici, when imagining the possibility of a truly just world, writes about the way collective, transformative action can match the magic worked by nature, which continually regenerates. In this sense, she continues to hold Prospect Park up as an example of creativity, possibility and beauty. When I asked, on one dark day last year, what if anything was making her feel the magic of the world, she cried: "Oh! Oh! This." She waved her hands around in the air, gesturing at the trees, the birds, the dirt in the nearby planter currently being examined by a pair of toddlers.

Her eyes crinkled behind her mask. "The creativity of nature. And of people. I am very excited about people." When I burst out laughing in disbelief, she protested. "There is really a lot of beauty, generosity, courage, my God. There is still joy, I see it — there is still a lot of beauty in this world. And I hope it prevails over those who only want to control and tear it apart."

Jordan Kisner is the author of the essay collection “Thin Places,” out in paperback this April, from which [her last article for the magazine, about America’s autopsy crisis](#), was adapted.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/magazine/waged-housework.html>