

FOR THE DANCING BODY

Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020), 176 p. ISBN 9781629637068

“The history of the body is the history of human beings, for there is no cultural practice that is not first applied to the body” (119), states Silvia Federici in her 2020 collection of essays *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*. Indeed, the human body in its historicity constitutes the vantage point of Federici’s socialist feminist project. For her, multiple histories of women’s oppression, colonialism, and class exploitation are first and foremost material histories: however abstract or “merely cultural” oppression, discrimination, and exploitation may be, they primarily leave their mark on the material and economic reality of the oppressed themselves, on the body. Federici’s aim in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* is to re-examine the body as a material givenness, a foundation into which the intersections of class, race, and gender are indelibly written, as the ultimate site of exploitation by capitalist ruling classes but also as the key site of resistance to exploitation and inequality. Federici’s main goal is to develop Second Wave feminism’s focus on the material basis of the complex systems of gender discrimination and to reconcile the Marxist analysis with feminism.

Striving to reintegrate economic questions, Federici’s project emerges from the background of 1970s socialism, especially feminist views on social reproduction theory. Connecting Marxist analysis and feminist thought, these views articulated the importance of reproductive work for the maintenance of capitalist surplus accumulation. According to socialist feminists, the capitalist class exploited not only waged workers, but also a large area of unwaged labour: housework, care work, and reproductive work largely done by women. The interpretation and transfer of key Marxist insights onto the field of feminism, however, was a strenuous process that elicited a heated debate within various interpretive standpoints within the feminist movement itself. As opposed to the strand of feminist social reproduction theory represented by Lise Vogel, who argued that reproductive work should not be conceptualized in terms of value, Federici maintains that reproductive work does directly contribute to the production of surplus value and, therefore, can be assigned an exchange value. As a founding member of the Wages for Housework movement, Federici has fought for the valorization of reproductive

work. According to this strand of socialist feminist thought, the fact that reproductive work – like slave labour – is not valued helps conceal its status as a form of labour and intensifies the exploitation of the workers in question. By maintaining the workforce in operation, reproductive work helps create surplus value, and thus constitutes an integral part of capitalist production. Therefore, for Federici, it is productive to consider reproductive work as labour entitled to wages.

Nevertheless, attempts at reconciling feminism and Marxism are manifold, as such a theoretical fusion had to grapple with several obstacles, mainly in interpreting the fundamental positions of Marxism. As Federici points out, Marx's analysis *per se* features the woman question only marginally: it focuses mainly on industrial, waged workers and thus overlooks the fact that various mechanisms of capital accumulation incorporate unpaid work as well. According to Federici, this is one of the most important drawbacks of Marx's analysis of the capitalist system of profit accumulation, as "it marginalises the experience of the wage-less of the world, those whose labour fuelled capitalist accumulation but outside of contractual relations. In doing so, it gives us a partial understanding of capitalist relations."¹ In fact, capitalism hugely benefits from unpaid plantation work, domestic work, care, and childrearing: "This much despised, always taken for granted labour, always dismissed by socialists as backward, has in reality been the pillar of the capitalist organisation of work."² Marx addresses the importance of unwaged labour for the maintenance of capitalism only to a limited extent. Therefore, the Marxist analysis has tended to overlook the fact that capital accumulation has always been strongly dependent on wage-less work: that of women and slaves. Subjects of unpaid work, namely women, are at the centre of Federici's theoretical interest. Scrutinizing the relation between gender and class, Federici deals with a "gendered perspective of the history of capitalism."³ Her works explore the ways in which women have been disciplined, oppressed, and exploited within capitalist society and its desire for wealth accumulation. In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici traces the capitalist sexual division of work into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, connecting witch-hunts in Europe with the growing popularity of privatization and land enclosures underway at that time.⁴ Perceiving both witch-hunts and land enclosures as bound to a new epistemic approach to the world based on the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, Federici claims that eventually both conceptually parallel processes were tools of asserting the newly emergent capitalist system. A system which confined women and land within new discipline practices, convenient boundaries of a submissive subject or object subordinated to the patriarchal system, and restricted,

¹ Silvia Federici, "Marx and Feminism," *Triple C* 16 (2018), no. 2 (online at triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/1004 [accessed 20 Nov. 2020], pp. 468–475, here 468.

² *Ibid.*, p. 473.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (London: Pluto, 2004).

in terms of agency, to the domestic sphere. In *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* published in 2018, Federici elaborates on her argument from *Caliban and the Witch* and expands on it in relation to contemporary witch-hunts in the global context.⁵ Drawing an epistemic parallel between the “natural” and the female inherent in the capitalist worldview, the author emphasises capitalism’s dependence on reproductive work and subsequent ways of disciplining women around the globe, back in the sixteenth century and now. The topic of capitalist gendered body-politics reoccurs in *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* in connection with the approach to land and the commons. According to Federici, land enclosures help confine women in the domestic space and thus maintain them in a socially inferior position. She claims that the idea of the commons represents

the possibility of overcoming the isolation in which reproductive activities are performed and the separation between the private and the public spheres that has contributed so much to hiding and rationalising women’s exploitation in the family and the home.⁶

Beyond the Periphery of the Skin is a collection of essays based on Federici’s 2015 lectures exploring the relation between Marxism and feminism, analysing the capitalist means of discursive and physical discipline of the female population. The core argument is that all kinds of discipline are entrenched in the material basis of human lives: they always primarily affect the human body. Theoretically grounded in Federici’s previous books, the argument thus rhetorically revolves around the body – and especially the female body – under capitalism, its historicity as well as its emancipatory potential. One of the key arguments of the collection is that the body is a site of histories: of disciplining powers and systemic oppression on the one hand, and of resistance and emancipation on the other. Exploring this historicity of the body, Federici’s essays shed light on her Marxist-feminist theoretical position, analyse contemporary epistemic paradigms regarding the body illustrated using specific social phenomena, or offer a historical discursive analysis of certain types of discipline. At the same time, Federici engages with present-day radical thought and explores the body as a locus of political action. According to her, it is crucial to re-conceptualize and thus to reclaim the body and its powers and use it in the anti-capitalist struggle.

Federici’s argument starts with a conceptual analysis of the approach to the body inherent in the capitalist paradigm. She argues that in pursuit of profit accumulation, capitalism has created a new conception of the body – the body-machine: “Capitalism has treated our bodies as work-machines because it is the social system that most sys-

⁵ Silvia Federici. *Witches, Witch-Hunts, and Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018).

⁶ Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), p. 4.

tematically has made of human labour the essence of the accumulation of wealth.” (11) Pointing out that even discipline practices are gendered, Federici continues to focus on the mechanization of female bodies. The key argument is that the mechanization of female bodies takes place on two levels: the exploitation of the labour force (the female body as a work-machine), and body politics (sexual objectification of the female body and exploitation of reproduction). In Federici’s words: “Besides being subjected to the discipline of work, paid and unpaid, in plantations, factories, and homes, [women] have been expropriated from their bodies and turned into sexual objects and breeding machines.” (14)

Along these lines, the 1970s feminist movement recognized that the exploitative dimension of the body politics of the time was reaching far into their intimate experience. The feminist politicization of their private experience (birth control, abortion rights, care, and unpaid domestic work) shed light on the fact that these are “in reality highly political matters of great concern to the nation-state.” (24) The seventies struggle to redefine womanhood and reclaim the exploited body, however, has shown that women cannot reclaim their bodies on a large scale if the material conditions of their lives remain the same. Federici asserts that “the feminist movement [...] has changed and valorized what it means to be a woman. But that valorization has not translated into economic security. On the contrary, our poverty has grown along with our autonomy [...]” (29) For Federici, the problem is that the achievements of feminist movements have not translated into the organization of work. Nowadays, women theoretically have equal rights; however, because domestic work and care are not systematically valorized within the capitalist market, their social mobility and economic equality is not granted at all. Female bodies remain mechanized and exploited.

Having explained the basis of the image of the body as a machine, Federici moves on to illustrate her point through several case studies, shedding light on how the body-machine imagery has served to justify, support, and institutionalize capitalist economic models. For instance, she offers a persuasive Marxist critique of surrogate motherhood. Often coming from poorer backgrounds, women who opt for surrogacy do so mainly because of the monetary compensation. They are usually reduced to mere “carriers” or “donors,” often maltreated and alienated from their own bodies and the child they bear. According to Federici, surrogacy is a form of exploitation of the female body and an epitome of the “commodification of human life.” (63) Federici also traces the image of the body-machine in the present-day trend of remaking and adjusting the body. She makes the point that the desire to valorize oneself through body remakes (from fitness to plastic surgeries or reproductive technologies) has become a means of institutional control over the body. Not only our bodies are dependent on medical institutions and their commercial and power interests. The practice of remaking the body also mirrors class differences within society and broadens the physical health gap between the rich and the poor. Federici sees these practices as the result of the process of neoliberal individualization underway since 1980s and its imaginary. Federici claims that the

imaginary of the system supports the conception of a body as a “patchwork of decentred mechanisms, open to be rearranged according to our will and desire,” (58) and resources, we might add. In a case study on the history of sex work in the UK and the USA, she analyses major discursive changes in the body-machine image since the eighteenth century and its gendered political consequences. Federici claims that the image of the mechanized body has been in various forms a rhetorical strategy of capitalist policy making and served as a justification for systemic oppression of certain parts of the population, namely women. In an essay on the position of psychology, medicine, and philosophy within the current capitalist economic system, Federici develops the argument of human dependence on (not only) medical institutions and reveals some mechanisms and impacts of structural, institutional body-mechanization. The author unmasks these institutions as potential profit seekers, implicitly arguing that in an economic system based on capital accumulation, institutionalized medicine, psychology, and (to a certain degree) academia are likely to prefer pursuing their vested interests over human welfare.

Federici uses these case studies to support her claim that feminism should re-examine Marxist thinking and reintegrate economic analysis as a crucial part of the feminist project. Opposing the conceptual mechanization of the body, which has been used to support and confirm politics based on capitalist economy, Federici repeatedly insists on organic unity of the body and its importance as a site of political resistance to the system. It is useful, however, to specify Federici’s own position in the radical debate about the struggle to reclaim and re-conceptualize the body. It is most clearly formulated in juxtaposition to a popular notion of performative theories of gender. As Federici herself admits, her critique applies only to popular and simplified performative theories of gender, and thus the critical project of Judith Butler, for instance, is not confronted at all. Her refusal to provide an in-depth analysis of contemporary less “popularized,” more academic takes on the performativity of gender, including Butler’s arguments, renders her own position weaker and schematic. Federici’s key argument against performative theories is that they, to a certain extent, petrify gender in time and thus essentialize its current shape. The possibility to perform the female gender intrinsically presupposes a certain ideal norm or standard isolated from individuals who are able to make it a part of their identity, put it on like clothes, and take it off at will. The main drawback of these theories is that they inherently accept and reproduce the current gender standard enforced by institutions as a norm. For Federici, identities are not ideal forms; they are liable to change and they have their own histories of discipline and resistance:

“Woman” is not a static, monolithic term but one that has simultaneously different, even opposite and always changing significations. It is not just a performance, an embodiment of institutional norms, but also a contested terrain, constantly being fought over and redefined. (48)

Performance theories neglect the fact that to change the image and signification of gender, one must first change the institutions and economic system that enforce its current norm. These enforcements take place within the physical realm, their site being primarily the body and its historical and economic situatedness. By perceiving genders and identities as primarily discursive and socially constructed, performance theories maintain the conceptual division between “natural” and “cultural” and tend to overlook the fact that the body is the ultimate subject of exploitation, and thus the fundamental site of resistance. Federici perceives natural histories as interwoven within cultural histories, bodies being directly influenced by, and impacting, political and social change: it is the body that bears witness to eugenic policies, capitalist exploitation, pollution, and global warming. In short, Federici is calling for the inclusion of “natural” histories into the “cultural” discourse:

The fact that we cannot apprehend the world that we inappropriately call nature, biology, the body, except through a screen of social values, interests, and political considerations, and the fact that “nature” and “physiology” have a history does not imply that we must rule them out of our discourse, and that all that we can speak about are the purely culturally produced realities that we have the power of making and unmaking. (50)

In the final section of *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, Federici urges us to get hold of “natural” and “cultural” histories and consider them as one. Histories of bodies eventually mirror political and power practices. In other words, a “history of the body can be reconstructed by describing the different forms of repression that capitalism has activated against it.” (119) Analysing the imagery depicting the body in different eras since the rise of capitalism in connection with changing disciplinary practices allows us to reconstruct aims of power regimes and their weaknesses. Federici insists that the body, with its power to act and transform, is also a site of resistance, “a limit on exploitation.” (119) Thus, for her, the path to successful resistance leads through enriching the merely “cultural” viewpoint by including the “natural.” In practice, this means focusing on the body, re-appropriating the body, and exploring its natural history: its capacities, formative experiences, and ways of expression. Speaking of “joyful militancy,” she invites us to create a joyful anti-capitalist mobilization based on the premise that “either our politics are liberating, either they change our life in a way that is positive, that make us grow, give us joy, or there’s something wrong with them.” (125) Federici highlights the importance of institutional, economic change directed from below. Federici epitomizes this grassroots militancy and the embrace of the “natural” and resistance informed by the bodily histories as a dance. Her struggle for a feminist mobilization, informed by corporeality, metaphorically takes the form of a struggle for the dancing body.

Federici’s demand for the re-economization of feminist thought is a strong argument, especially as presented in the essays illustrating her position in opposition to the

system (that is, those on surrogacy, institutional power over the body or history of sex work). Nevertheless, the mode of presenting her stance in juxtaposition to performative theories makes her position seem more popularizing. She set out to criticize popular performative theories for their prioritization of “the cultural” and alienation from “the natural.” For Federici, the claim that identities are constructed discursively and culturally is misleading, as it overshadows the physical (“natural”) situatedness of people’s identities. The bodily is perceived as an equal identity constituent along the lines of the Marxist equation between the “natural” and the “cultural” *qua* concepts, realities, and histories. Federici endeavours to overcome the nature-culture opposition, showing that binary thinking has been a tool of asserting certain kinds of economic and political strategies. For many gender performative theorists, however, the Marxist emphasis on the importance of fusing the “natural” and the “cultural” has been prominent, as well as attempts at an accurate treatment of the bodily dimension of culturally constructed gender. The fact that Federici does not engage in a critical debate with more complex takes on performative theory makes a cogent popularizing argument that, however, might be potentially less academically persuasive.

Overall it seems that Federici opts (rather than for philosophically complex arguments) for clarity and concision. *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* represents an essayistic, almost manifesto-like style, and its arguments are laid out in a lucid manner. At the same time, Federici’s demand for the conceptual fusion of “the natural” and “the cultural” and the re-economization of feminism has pervaded her entire oeuvre since the publication of *Caliban and the Witch*. *Caliban and the Witch*; *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*; and *Re-Enchanting the World* share a similar structure, and the key arguments overlap to a considerable extent; and *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* loosely connects: it can be read as a development of some arguments already employed in Federici’s previous works. Interestingly, in May 2020, not a half a year after the publication of *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, PM Press published another collection of essays by Federici, titled *Patriarchy of the Wage*. The collection represents another attempt at reconciling Marxism and feminism partially based on the arguments offered in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*. It analyses the discursive function of labour in the Marxist tradition and in capitalist thought, and thematizes unpaid work and the aforementioned mechanization of the body. One might feel a desire for a comprehensive systematization of Federici’s interconnected topics, which might help to develop some of her arguments further and make an elucidating contribution to the academic debate. However, Federici’s five collections of essays represent an important, popularizing contribution to contemporary feminist thought, which picks up the threads of the Second Wave. With its focus on the power of the body to resist, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* makes a mobilizing demand for reviving economic questions within the feminist movement.