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[Dossier: The relevance of Antonio Negri today: constituent power, autonomy and the crisis of democracy]

The revelatory power of feminism: Antonio Negri, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Carla Lonzi in the Italian 1970s

O poder revelador do feminismo: Antonio Negri, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici e Carla Lonzi na Itália dos anos 1970

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Abstract

The text focuses on the years 68-77 in Italy, as the period in which there were, on the one hand, radical recompositions of the country's working class and its modes of struggle - which were interpreted and intervened by *operaismo* and later by autonomism- and on the other hand, the emergence of feminist groups, among them those derived from *operaismo*. These feminisms are read as tests and putting in tension of central concepts of *operaismo*, such as the identification between productive and reproductive work, the "social factory" and the production of surplus value beyond the factories, in reproductive work.

Keywords: Workerism; 1970s Italian Feminisms; Negri; Social Factory; Crisis.

Resumo

O texto se concentra no período italiano de 1968-1977, como um período que viu, por um lado, uma reestruturação radical da classe trabalhadora do país e seus modos de luta — que foram interpretados e influenciados pelo operaísmo e, mais tarde, pelo autonomismo — e, por outro, o surgimento de grupos feministas, incluindo aqueles derivados do operaísmo. Esses feminismos são lidos como testes e tensões de conceitos centrais do operaísmo, como a identificação entre trabalho produtivo e reprodutivo, a "fábrica social" e a produção de mais-valia além das fábricas, no trabalho reprodutivo.

Palavras-chave: Operaísmo; Feminismo Italiano dos anos 70; Negri; Fábrica Social; Crise.

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By the end of the '60s, Italy was a powder keg. It is arbitrary to put a temporal milestone from which to start reconstructing facts that prove this statement, but for what we know today as autonomism, probably that milestone is the revolt of Corso Traiano, on July 3, 1969. That revolt demonstrated the power that the autonomous organization of the workers was having and the overflow of their demands and their modes of organization with respect, on the one hand, to the unions and the parties - such as the Communist (PCI) or Socialist (PSI) - and, on the other hand, the eclipse of the factories, as the privileged place of struggle.

The revolt, which arose from a call for a strike by the unions, in protest against the cost of housing in Turin -headquarters of the Mirafiori subsidiary of FIAT-[1], culminated in a besieged city, police repression and an extended struggle in the streets, which showed the cooperation that was taking place between students and workers.[2] From the revolt of Corso Traiano - which began as a strike and ended as a popular insurrection - two central groups of autonomist militancy originated: on the one hand, *Potere operario*, in September (1969-73), and on the other, *Lotta continua*, in November 1969 (until 1976).

Corso Traiano marks the beginning of what was called the Italian “Hot Autumn” (*l'autunno caldo*), which would last until 1973. And although in that insurrection the struggle took place around FIAT, its overflow shows what is central to those years: the progressive loss of relevance of the figure of the factory worker in the struggles and in the

[1] V. Castronovo calls FIAT-Mirafiori "the graveyard of struggles," especially after the Piazza Statuto clashes in 1962. However, at that giant plant, which produced more than 5,000 cars per day and employed over 50,000 people, everything changed a few years later, starting in 1968, when it began to suffer constant strikes, which overwhelmed the unions. Aldo Cazzullo describes FIAT's Mirafiori plant this way: “In the Spring of 1969 Mirafiori is the largest European factory, bigger than Volkswagen of Wolfsburg. Thirty-seven open doors along the perimeter of ten kilometers, three million meters squared, half covered: forty kilometers of assembly line, 223 air ducts, and thirteen underground galleries. A city in the city, protected by insurmountable walls against those who do no live there, but besieged during the hours of shift changes -five in the morning, one in the afternoon, ten at night- by young people distributing bundles of pamphlets, with police intended to watch them, and journalists to write about them, Behind the guarded doors each day fifty-five thousand people work, eighty-five percent of whom are blue-collar (*operai*)”. Quoted by PALAZZO, 2014, p. 293. See also CASTRONOVO, 1999, p. 1176.

[2] Turin had been under tension since early 1969: spontaneous strikes, street blockades, and housing occupations. Medical students had occupied the Molinette Hospital and established a permanent worker-student assembly, which met twice a day. On July 3, the unions called a general strike over housing conditions in the city—full of migrant workers from the south, without specific qualifications and severely discriminated against, described as the “mass worker.” The assembly called for a meeting in front of FIAT gate 2 to join the workers in the city center. The southern part of Turin was besieged by barricades and clashes with the police, in which residents and activists from other cities joined, resulting in numerous injuries and arrests. Banners displayed slogans such as *“Cosa vogliamo? Tutto!”.* The events are seen as an insurrection that tested the relationships between different sectors in struggle and led to the nationalization of *Potere operario* (which already existed as a local group in Venice, in which Negri participated) and *Lotta continua*, both with a strong Leninist influence. For a description by an activist from Corso Traiano, see: https://maremosso.lafeltrinelli.it/news/battaglia-di-corso-traiano-torino

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imaginary of the left. To put it in Negri's terms: the replacement of the “mass worker” by the “social worker”.

Italy was a powder keg, we say. In this Italian powder keg, there are some questions that specifically concern that country, which had been having an “economic miracle” and a “post-fascism” (which resisted the prefix post) and others that are extensible to several capitalist countries: it is about the time of the recomposition of the working class, or rather, of its decomposition, as it was known, associated with industrial and wage labor. In Italy, as it is usually summarized, '68 lasted 10 years. Those ten years could be divided as follows: from 1969 to 1973 there was a period of intense factory and street struggles, known - as we said - as the “Hot Autumn”, and from 1973 to 1979, a moment of theoretical renewal of autonomism, of a certain marginalization within the factories and of nationalization of street struggles, of fragmentation of the “extra-parliamentary” groups - with the centrality of *Autonomia operaria*, after the dissolution of its predecessor, *Potere Operario*, in 1973 -, and of increasing repression and violence (the so-called “strategy of tension”, in which sectors of the State and neo-fascist groups were articulated). Towards the end of the 1970s, a change of epoch was imposed by two central events: the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, on March 16, 1978, and the imprisonment of Negri and other comrades of *Autonomia operaria*, on April 7, 1979.

Seen from today, that period is a watershed in the ways of thinking about struggles and subjects within the world left. These are the years of the decline of industrial labor and of the welfare State, whose crisis produced recompositions of the State, labor and capital, which would give rise to what today we would quickly call “neo-liberalism”. This was the period of the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreements, the end of the dollar's convertibility into gold, rising inflation, Vietnam, the Pinochet *coup d'état* in Chile - which would herald the succession of dictatorial coups in Latin America - and the dictatorship of the colonels in Greece. In this context, the situation in Italy -that is, the intense and continuous degree of political activism- could be read as one of imminent revolution.

The purpose of this text will be to trace some transformations that took place in that period, on the one hand, in the work of Antonio Negri, the greatest intellectual of the extra-parliamentary left in those years. On the other hand, the emergence of feminist groups which, although some of them have a common origin in Italian *operaismo*, show

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major conceptual and practical divergences.[3] The cut of the epochal period is then due to the emergence of massive feminist groups in Italy, many of them with origins in *operaismo*, which allow us to visualize how the concepts impact differently when it comes to gender struggles and workers' struggles. Feminisms - or more particularly, some texts by protagonists of the period that we will analyze in detail, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici and Carla Lonzi - seem to show the degree of transformation that *operaismo* had recognized in its texts and proclamations, but which it refused to accept at all: the crisis of the law of value, the indistinction between productive and reproductive labor and the identification of capital with the whole of society, making the whole of society a factory, a terrain from which to extract surplus value.

Negri in the late 1960s. The crisis of the planning State and the breakdown of the capital-labor dialectic

Italian *operaismo* implied a radical revision of the theses of orthodox Marxism. In particular, of the thesis that gave account of the existence of an objective dialectic constituted by two poles - capital and labor - whose critical analysis dictated the possibilities of struggle, the horizon of demands for the working class. The “Copernican revolution” proposed by Mario Tronti in his 1967 book *Workers and Capital*, on the contrary, dismantled the idea of the existence of such a dialectic and inverted the terms: from then on -it was assumed- the dialectic was broken and one of the poles, that of labor, as autonomous and non-subordinated, could initiate a cycle of struggles in pursuit of its desires and needs, without attending to the supposed objective conditioning factors, to the determined level of capitalist development, as an *a priori* limit. That is, for Tronti, operaism should begin by reading the conflicts, the modes of political organization and the workers' subjectivities: this was the primacy. The identity of the working class was its mode of struggle. It was assumed, moreover, that it was because of the pressure of labor that capital adopted certain developments - above all, advances in technology and

[3] Mario Tronti defines Italian *operaismo* as a movement that originated with the magazine *Quaderni Rossi* in 1961 and culminated with the dissolution of the magazine *Classe operaria* in 1967. What followed would, for him, be considered post-*operaismo* or autonomism. Here, however, I extend that existence (something also contemplated in the prefix "post") to account for the continued influence of the figure of the industrial worker on later autonomism, which is both its heir and its rupture. See TRONTI, 2012, pp. 103-120.

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machinery - as an effect and an attempt to reinscribe the dialectic; that is, as a search for the political subordination of the working class.

Operaismo proposed a subjectivist position based on a reading of "tendencies" that enabled political "projects": on the one hand, it affirmed the tendency towards the progressive abstraction of labor, which was concomitant with its socialization.[4] On the other, the politicization of the moment was affirmed: capital needed to impose its political command over that autonomous pole, the working class, which was not a productive element, but a political force.

The rupture of the dialectic and the reversal of the primacy between capital and labor implied the autonomization of labor: there was no possible measure that could account for a point of equilibrium between, for example, the wage and the rate of profit. The two terms were not chained to each other. There was no such economic "rationality". For operaism, capitalism thus entered a phase in which institutional mediations and equilibria broke down: capitalism inaugurated the phase of its normal existence, as a *crisis*.

Capitalism was interpreted as a system of social control rather than as an economic regime. The economy ceased to be read as an objective field and was transformed into a political struggle in which capital sought to reintroduce its command - characterized by Negri as "despotism" - and the other pole sought to break out of that enchainment, that subordination. What was imposed for political activism -given this reading- was to force the massive *rejection of labor*, rather than to fight for better working conditions, as the unions and the parties wanted. In other words, a search for the liberation of labor was imposed, putting the focus on the revaluation of the desires and needs of a working class in recomposition.

Negri reads '68 as the opening of a cycle of struggles and, above all, as the inscription in time of a radical, systemic crisis. Crisis is the concept to which Negri turns over and over during the period we are analyzing. But he does so not as a university intellectual, but as a witness and even as a scribe of struggles in which he participates. For this reason, the tone of the writings becomes different from the more academic essays that precede these years, such as the texts dedicated to Hegel, Dilthey, Meinecke and

[4] Negri summarized the key-reading of *operaismo* as follows: "The fundamental thesis on which all the theory of *operaismo* is constructed is, if you will, that of the successive abstraction of work that runs in parallel to its socialization" (2007, p. 19).

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Kant. Towards the end of the 1960s, Negri begins to write urgently, without footnotes, mixing analysis and conjuncture, as if his body were a point of reversion: from what he hears in assemblies to what he expresses in his writings and from this letter, back to the assembly.

The search is to decode the period, to intervene it and to accelerate imminent processes, but also to attend to two central points: the recomposition of an Italian working class, which extended its forms of struggle to occupations of urban properties, to initiatives for the reduction of the payment of utility rates and for the availability and price of housing and to articulations with students. And, on the other hand, derived from this first point, to imagine new forms of organization of the struggles, outside the unions and parties (for which Lenin becomes an inescapable point of reference). In these discussions, *operaismo* experienced internal divisions and fractions, at the moment prior to the so-called "Historic Compromise" that the PCI would later assume.[5]

Three texts are central to Negri's work in those years. The first, the discussion on the political figures of Keynes and Schumpeter, especially in line with Mario Tronti, embodied in the article: *"John M. Keynes e la Teoria Capitalistica dello Stato nel '29"*. The second, a review of the approach to the crisis in Marx's work, particularly in the *Grundrisse*, which he dealt with in *"Marx sul Ciclo e la Crisi".* Both texts were published in the book *Operai e Stato*, in 1972 -the year in which Negri began to edit a collection called "Marxist Materials" for the Feltrinelli publishing house-. Third, the text *"Crisi dello Stato-Piano: Comunismo e Organizzazione Rivoluzionaria"*, written in 1971, on the occasion of the third congress of *Potere Operario* and also published by Feltrinelli, in 1974.[6] The three articles form a common set of elements of theoretical research, which starts from the recognition of a radical crisis of capitalism and of the State-form, which will affect the "composition of the class" and transform society as a whole into an extended "social factory". In the operaist reading, this had been Keynes' lucidity: the attempt to resolve the rupture of the dialectic between capital and labor politically, through the political

[5] The *Compromesso Storico* is the policy of collaboration between the PCI, the PSI, and the Christian Democrats, which emerged as a proposal following the *coup d'état* in Chile. The then-Secretary General of the PCI, Enrico Berlinguer, assumed that the communist parties would not come to power without the support of moderate forces and that the current situation required avoiding authoritarianism through coordination between forces with national representation.

[6] At least the following contributions could be added to this selection of three important texts: "*Partito Operario contro il Lavoro,*" also included in *Crisi e Organizzazione Operaria*, published by Feltrinelli in Milan in 1974; *Proletari e Stato: Per una Discussione su Autonomia Operaria e Compromesso Storico*, published by 1976; and three texts published in 1977: the introduction to Jerry Rubin; *La Fabbrica della Strategia: 33 Lectures on Lenin*; and *La Forma Stato: Per la Critica dell'Economia Politica della Costituzione*.

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command of the welfare State. It was this attempt that, at the end of the 1960s, came to an end.

For Negri, the crisis of the period could be described as capital's response to the degree of organization of the working class, with the welfare State. To respond to this workers' advance, capital was forced to establish radical modifications: on the one hand, to devalue labor as the sole source of surplus value. It did so through a radical change in the role of currency. Negri rereads the chapter on currency in the *Grundrisse* and anticipates the central role that currency, the pervasive and widespread financialization, will have in the new stage of capitalism, to the detriment of labor. Labor will be above all autonomized, mechanized, motorized. This will result in a fall in the rate of profit, but also in a radical recomposition of the working class and its living conditions.

On the other hand, capital will force a change in the role of the State, which will go from being a planning State and mediator between the poles, to an autonomous, independent, "free" State. The crisis, for Negri, implies the fall of institutional mediations: the fall of the national State, of trade unions and parties -and with them, the calling into question of structuring relations, such as labor and social rights and also the crisis of the political legitimacy of mediators-. The State abandons its role of structuring the system, of guarantor of the dialectic between capital and labor, and gives way to the rule of crisis as a normal form of existence. In this regard Negri writes: "The separation and unilaterality between labor and command over labor is thus pushed to the furthest limit; the State can only take the form of a crisis-State, in which it enforces and manages its own freedom of command for the survival of the system as a whole." (NEGRI, 1971, p. 119).

If crisis was the normal condition of capitalist development in the period that was opening up, it was more than seen in the destabilization of monetary parities. Coinciding with the abandonment of the Bretton Woods gold standard, Negri reads the opening of a stage of capitalism centered on currency rather than labor. But it is no longer about currency in its role of stabilizer, of general equivalent, but as a central instrument of the production of imbalances.

This diagnosis of the radical restructuring of capitalism also meant, obviously, a devastating impact on the concept of the working class. It was no longer just a question of a recomposition, but of a progressive loss of protagonism in the struggles, of a gradual dilution of the class in a front of new subjects -women, homosexuals, blacks, students-, whom he called the "social worker". Perhaps this was the greatest theoretical intrepidity

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of *operaismo*, which is seen even with the abandonment of that name, in favor of "*Autonomia*", from 1973, with the dissolution of *Potere operario*: the affirmation that the working class as such, that the factory as such, was in decline.

Negri took up the concept of "social factory", which appeared in Tronti and Raniero Panzeri, and took it a step further, identifying it with the limits of society itself: capital no longer extracted surplus value only from formal factory labor, from paid labor (which was read by Marxism as the place that "immediately" enabled a privileged role in the struggles), but extracted it from all social relations. The commodity-form was the form assumed by all social relations. With this, the division between productive and reproductive labor was diluted, because what was understood by productive labor was radically modified.

The concept of the social factory implied, for Negri, that capital had completely extended its domination over society, transforming "general sociability" into a commodity. In Marxist terms, this entailed a transformation whereby society moved from being under formal subsumption to capital to real subsumption. Michael Hardt explains that formal subsumption implies that "certain pre-capitalist and autonomous forms of production and social cooperation persist external to capital"; by contrast, real subsumption occurs when "labor-power and capitalist relations of production are extended horizontally throughout society; labor and production are purely social determinations and hence the 'social factory' is absolutely diffuse. Real subsumption, in short, is defined by the direct rule of capital over society" (HARDT, 2005, p. 20).

As capital blurs into the interior of social relations and models them as mercantile relations, its command becomes extensive and despotic. Negri describes it in *Crisi dello Stato-piano* as follows (p. 30): "Capital is now obliged to move to the *social* organization of that despotism, to diffuse the organization of exploitation throughout society, in the new form of a planning-based state which -in the particular way in which it articulates organization and repression throughout society- directly reproduces the figure of the factory".

This implied that the working class, by rejecting the principle of production, by rejecting labor, rejected at the same time that domination and denied itself as a productive factor, in order to vindicate itself as a political force. It was a matter of denying the commodity-form and the principle of productivity, because in that principle lay domination. It was also a question of going beyond a reformist position -as, according to

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Negri, the one of Tronti, for example-, insofar as those who officiated as institutional mediators -such as trade unions and parties-, in fighting for productivity, accepted the social hierarchy implied in it, in which the working class was subordinated to capital.

In this context, paradoxically, the struggle for wages acquired a central place. The demand for higher wages, in operationalist terms, showed that there was no natural point of equilibrium in capitalism -as Keynes and Schumpeter had already foreseen-, and that no equation could be established between productivity and wages, or between profit and wages. The wage operated as an independent variable within the capitalist process and the struggle for its increase made visible the needs and desires of the working class, with autonomy from the available counts, and served as a unifier of the class. But given that, at the same time, a radical restructuring of what was understood by productive work was underway, some lines of workerism and later of autonomism began to advocate a guaranteed wage for all, beyond the occupation of the job.[7]

The centrality of the struggle for wages in the discussion of the period and the contradictions shown in Negri's own texts, between the social worker and the insistence on the privilege of the factory worker in the struggles, showed the strong workerist roots of the left worldviews of the time. But, progressively, the struggles diversified in fact and with them, the militant intervention. This was seen in particular with the formation of *Autonomia operaria*, which progressively withdrew from the factories and extended its presence in an "area", defined as a territory of extended struggles.

Autonomia mobilized occupations of universities, city buildings, "workers' shopping malls", initiatives for the reduction of service charges, for the lowering of rents, etc. Among these initiatives, he supported the Wages for Housework Campaign, launched by Mariarosa Dalla Costa -at that time Negri's teaching assistant at the University of Padua- and Selma James. It did so, however, under the ambivalence of the moment: with discomfort, between recognition and annoyance.

With the indistinction between production and reproduction that the concept of social factory promoted, the social division and hierarchy -also the gender-generic division- was disrupted. The concept of the social factory opened up a propitious field for

[7] This gave rise to new divisions, insofar as some groups conceived work as an element of humanization: they were not against work, but against the capitalist organization of labor, centered on exploitation and the search for profit. For Mario Tronti, in advanced capitalist societies, there was an expansion of wage labor, which did not necessarily imply industrial labor. On this subject, see PALAZZO, 2014, p. 351.
On the divisions implied by the devaluation of labor, see the position of the Alfa Romeo assembly, which, after defending labor as a factor of humanization, abandoned *Autonomia operaria.* In WRIGHT, 2017, p. 147.

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feminisms -and nevertheless, for Marxisms and even for the Negri of these years- it was a potion difficult to swallow.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa and *Lotta Femminista*: between caste and class

The relationship between the groups of the extra-parliamentary left -*Potere operario, Lotta Continua, Il Manifesto* or *Avanguardia operaria*, to cite the largest ones- and the Italian feminisms of the period is scarcely investigated. In general, despite there being a common conceptual, practical and even biographical ground, in academic books dedicated to reviewing the militant experience, women do not appear and much less are feminisms recognized for their singular contribution to the struggles.[8] In recent times, there is talk of a "double militancy" to account for the pressures and criticisms experienced by women such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, Alisa del Re or Silvia Federici, as they tried to combine traditional political activism with feminist activism. But there are few analyses that give comparable importance to both topics.

In 1971, Mariarosa Dalla Costa left *Potere operario* and gave rise, together with other women workers' comrades, to the *Lotta Femminista* group.[9] Leaving the organization implied the recognition of the exhaustion of certain forms of approaching the specific problems of women, in the "Women's Commissions". 1971 is also the year in which the *Movimento di liberazione della Donna* presented the request for the decriminalization of abortion in Italy, which, despite initial criticism from self-conscious feminist groups, became the unifying theme of the different strands of feminism, starting the following year, and which would be achieved, after massive demonstrations, in 1975. These were also years of strong public presence of gender issues in the political agenda, as witnessed, for example, by the declaration of unconstitutionality of article 553 of the Penal Code by the Italian Court, which prohibited the propaganda and sale of contraceptives, in 1972.

[8] This contrasts with the recent strong interest in Italian 1970s feminisms, especially—but not only—in Italy, as evidenced by the reprinting and translation of texts. In this regard, see the article by Virginia FUSCO, 2023, pp. 343-364.

[9] Regarding militant texts, the archive donated by Dalla Costa can be consulted online on the *Biblioteche Civiche Padova* website: bibliotechecivichepadova.it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa

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In this context, *Lotta Femminista*, together with other groups at the international level, launched the Wages for Housework Campaign (WfH), under the slogan: *"Soldi a tutte le Donne"*. This is perhaps the first major difference between the groups of the extra-parliamentary left and the feminists: the early internationalism of women's activism. *Lotta Femminista* undertook this campaign with criticisms that had repercussions within the labor movement. Dalla Costa affirmed, for example, that there had never been a general strike, because if there had been, women would have participated in it.[10] Fortunati spoke of the crisis of reproductive work: by designating care as a feminine vocation, as a natural instinct -as it used to be and still is today-, and not as work, the analyses (including Marx's) denied the production of value of reproductive work. Thus, they favored that, under the hiring of a worker, the unpaid labor of women is absorbed, while invisibilizing it as such. Also criticized was the militarism that the organizations were adopting and the sexist accent of the protagonism, discussions and forms of organization.

But the campaign, despite these "internal" objections, coincided with the general definitions of *operaismo*: for *Lotta Feminista*, wages were exploitation and an incentive to accept subordination and domination by capital, as a counterpart to productivity. Therefore, in opposition to what the rest of the left was proposing, for autonomist feminisms it was not necessary to seek greater insertion of women in the labor market: no paid work implied liberation.[11] Instead, it was a matter of forcing the recognition of the central role of reproductive work and of taking the struggle for wages to a greater universalization, but always within the slogan of "rejection of work".

Operaismo supported the campaign, but with contradictions. Through the pamphlets reproduced in texts of interpretation of the period, one can read how the struggle of women -like that of blacks and immigrants- is saluted, but not given its specificity, but as addenda, additions, brushstrokes to the general question. They are saluted because they are part of the class and as long as they do not demand too much specificity. Women, for example, did well to affirm reproductive work as work, but once the difference was made, it was criticized for favoring a certain division of struggles. These "caste" issues, like that of women, 'divided' "class" issues.[12]

[10] DALLA COSTA, M. "The General Strike" (1974).

[11] The Italian industrial boom meant a return to the home for many Italian women. Between 1959 and 1973, women's participation in the formal labor market declined. On this subject, see GINSBORG, 2003, p. 448.

[12] For example, in an article in *Potere operario* in 1970, written after the dismissal of women from FIAT-Mirafiori, blacks were compared to the women's "caste" issues: "Women are being hired by FIAT Mirafiori somehow like Black were hired by the Detroit auto industry in the 1930s. It is about time to stop shedding

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For *Potere operario*, it was about "not playing into the hands" of capital, dividing struggles such as that of wages. *Lotta Femminista*, by contrast, understood that the issue of women's exploitation was resolved too quickly by imposing a male hegemony in struggles and sweeping everything else under the rug. For women, the metonymy with the Black struggle in the United States was appropriate, but for other reasons: without a differentiated struggle, women's issues would not be taken into account. *Lotta Femminista* wrote in 1972: “In seeing women as the instruments of capitalist attack upon the wage, *Potere Operario* navigates in dangerous waters. The traditional motive for attack the migrant worker, especially if he or she is Black (or an Italian Southener), is that their presence threatens the conquest of the indigenous working class. It is exactly the same thing that is said of women in relation to men” (Quoted by WRIGHT, 2017, p. 123).

In 1972, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James published *Donne e sovverzione sociale*, written a year earlier. The text can be considered the major theoretical contribution of the period by *Lotta Femminista*, because while it articulates "caste" and "class" as "inextricably linked situations," it adopts a very different perspective from the general tone of political writings of the time (DALLA COSTA and JAMES, 1972).[13] To begin with, this text features subjects who are invisible in other texts, such as the elderly, children, and women. They also appear as effects of a historical process that the authors consider one of separation, exclusion, and expulsion: capitalism, by destroying the home and the family as centers of production and education, excludes children and the elderly from production (which becomes placed in the factory and the office), expels from the home those who neither procreate nor work for wages, and confines women to reproductive labor. Only in this way, with the separation between members, the loss of relative social power of children and elderly, and the isolation of women, can the male wage worker achieve "freedom."

It is worth pointing out some differences that the text highlights, as indicators of the distinction between this feminist struggle and workerism in general, with which it shares—as we said—a common framework. On the one hand, the text defines the field of production as the result of a historical division, in which there are other related institutions that function in conjunction with the factory and the office: the family and the

tears about women’s ‘equality’, [which] like every lecture about civil rights is fucked up. Capital is already ‘equalised’ women at Mirafiori, assigning them to the assembly lines”. Quoted by WRIGHT, 2017, p. 122.

[13] Paragraph: “Socialización de la lucha del trabajador aislado”. Own translation from Spanish.

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school, among the main ones. That is, the problem is not the factory, as an isolated element, but how the factory comes to exist in conjunction with other institutions, separating social subjects and removing or granting relative social powers, according to whether or not those subjects immediately participate in the sphere of production. The approach is much broader, institutional, and historical than the classic analysis of political texts of the period. The factory is a problem, but so are the school and the family, as defined, in a knot. In the face of these assembled institutions, the text proposes their destruction as an assembly, their demolition as institutions that articulate and separate the community into disempowered elements.

These social subjects, according to the article, form a chain of exploitation and derived political subjugation, reminiscent of Etienne de La Boétie's analysis of tyranny. While women, separated from the socially organized production process, remain in the isolation imposed by the ghetto of the home and—as if they were the remnant of a pre-capitalist situation—are personally dependent on men; these "free" men are exploited at work but exercise a derived power within the home. The authors write: "The figure of the boss is hidden behind that of the husband. The latter appears to be the sole recipient of domestic services, and this gives housework its ambiguous and slave-like character. The husband and children, through their emotional involvement, their emotional blackmail, become the first overseers, the immediate controllers of this work."[14]

The text, therefore, does not seek equality or the equalization of women and men, but is above all a capillary analysis of power within capitalist society, of the relations of dependency, individualization, and isolation enforced within it. A specific form of exploitation has been imposed on women, *as women*. The category of *women* appears in the text as a biological determinant, but it is much more defined based on an axiomatic generalization, made at the beginning of the writing: all women are housewives, even when they work for pay outside the home.[15] Extreme individualization, confinement, and separation have been imposed on women: women have been deprived of experiences of organization and collective planning, they are denied sources of education, and they are denied the experience of social rebellion. Their problems appear as their own deficits, due

[14] *Ibid*. Paragraph: “La productividad de la esclavitud asalariada sobre la base de la esclavitud no asalariada”.
[15] The adoption of a generalist position, such as “all women are housewives,” was criticized by Angela DAVIS (1981) in chapter 13 of her book *Women, Race and Class*, because being a housewife meant different things in different places and referred to different subjects: not necessarily middle-class women, but migrants, domestic workers, third-party caregivers, etc.

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to their lack of aptitude for family organization, which is supposed to be their exclusive or primary responsibility. In this separation from other women, in this attribution of an inability to understand, to rebel, to organize collectively, etc., women are comparable, the text says, to the situation of "backward" children in "special" schools.[16] This is why it is also a question of taking the home as a field of struggle, of leaving the house, as the 1975 exhibition *"La mamma è uscita"* (Mom left) attests.[17]

The text, therefore, does not seek formal labor insertion, but rather recognizes that the issue of wages is the necessary starting point for discussing the social services that capitalism outsources and places on women. It is central to receive a payment for social services rendered, because it will allow to focus on these tasks as a public problem -and not simply say to leave the house, as leftist feminism in general proposed-.

The text, then, presents another idea about mechanization and automation, relative to the conception of *operaismo*. For the authors, there is a limit to the mechanization of domestic work, which is above all affective work. But there is also an erroneous perspective in considering that machines would free from housework: once a limit is crossed, automated domestic work would become socialized, and this would destroy the family in this heteropatriarchal and nuclear form, which is a pillar of capitalist organization; therefore, this, the authors assert, will not happen soon. And, on the other hand, it's a mistaken position because the problem with domestic work isn't the lack of machines, but the isolation, confinement, and enslavement of women. With or without machines, the problem is that it's work that confines. They write about this: "If technological innovation can reduce the limit of necessary labor, and if the struggle of the working class in industry can use this innovation to gain free time, the same cannot be said of domestic work; to the extent that women must procreate, raise, and take responsibility for children in isolation, the high level of mechanization of domestic work leaves them no more free time. […] Women's workday is endless not because they lack machines, but because they are isolated."[18]

Thus, through wages, the real issue arises, which is the dispute over free time. But this dispute could not be posed without the first. The text offers other perspectives on the omnipresent debate of the period regarding the type of organization: for the authors,

[16] DALLA COSTA and JAMES, paragraph: "Confirmación del mito de la incapacidad femenina".
[17] Produced by the newspaper *Le Operarie della Casa*, part of the Wages for Housework Campaign in Rome. On the visual arts as a mode of activism during this period, see GALIMBERTI, 2022.
[18] DALLA COSTA and JAMES, paragraph: "La explotación de los no asalariados".

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it is not only a matter of discussing the type of organization of political groups—that is, to summarize: Leninism, yes or no—but also within a community, with internationalism as a backdrop. The authors clarify that it is not a matter of achieving better dining halls, or better schools and nursing homes. It is about integrating these demands into a quest for the reappropriation of social wealth by the excluded and exploited and generating new connections between men, women, children, the elderly, and the sick, without personal dependencies, but with "autonomy." They write: “It's not about having collective dining halls. We mustn't forget that capital first creates FIAT for the workers and then its dining halls. Therefore, by demanding a collective dining hall in the neighborhood without integrating this demand into a practice of struggle against the organization of work, against working hours, we run the risk of giving impetus to a new leap that, at the community level, would only regiment women with some tempting job, so that we would then have, at midday, the opportunity to eat junk collectively in the dining hall. We want to let them know that this is not the dining hall we want, nor are we looking for daycare centers and recreation centers for children, of the same order. We also want dining halls and daycare centers and washing machines and dishwashers, but we also want alternatives: to eat in private with a few people whenever we want, to have time to be with the children, with the elderly, with the sick whenever and wherever we choose. 'Having time' means working less.”[19]

Finally, the text problematizes how this capitalist social organization affects women's bodies and identity. Women are given an identity dependent on the functioning of a household, consumption patterns, an "atrophied" personality, and a broken physical integrity. The word used is "atrophy": it is not just sexuality, but women's entire creativity and their sexual, psychological, and emotional autonomy that are repressed, amputated, and compromised.

This feminism unequivocally identifies productive and reproductive labor. In this, Dalla Costa and James are much more radical than, for example, Negri of those same years, and they affirm it without hesitation, without contradictions. Thus they write, for the first time: reproductive labor generates surplus value. It is not just a matter of inculcating subjective values; domestic labor participates inextricably in the production of profit, and therefore, sexism is not a matter of "oppression" or "manners," but of "exploitation." Women are exploited for being immersed in relations of personal

[19] *Ibid*. Paragraph: “Socialización de la lucha del trabajador aislado”.

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dependency that are clothed in affective social relations. As long as the social fabric exists—that is, the penetration of capital into all social relations—the social services of reproduction are privatized and placed on women, without paying for them what such labor would require as a contribution to the extraction of surplus value. Therefore, specific women's struggles, with specific women's voices, are needed. They write: “If we fail to fully grasp that this very family is the true pillar of the capitalist organization of labor; if we make the mistake of considering it only as a superstructure, and its change as dependent only on the stages of struggle in the factories, then we will initiate a lame revolution that will perpetuate and aggravate a basic contradiction in the class struggle, and a contradiction that is functional to capitalist development. We would be perpetuating, in other words, the error of considering ourselves producers of use values only—of considering housewives as something external to the working class.”[20]

Silvia Federici: from the rejection to the valorization of reproductive labor

In the 2011 introduction to the collection of texts on "the question of reproduction," Silvia Federici takes stock not only of her career, but also of how feminisms in general have revisited the issue of housework. The concept now used, in fact, is not "housework," but "reproduction," understanding by this the "complex of activities and relationships" through which life and labor are reconstituted daily. In other words, the question of reproduction now involves more than work and has geographical boundaries other than those of the home. However, it remains not only a central issue, but was—in Federici's words—the object of a war that capital waged and continues to wage against the majority of the population, especially against women, since the 1970s. Since then, the war has been over reproduction, over ensuring (or not) the conditions for the reproduction of life.

The introduction added to the texts is relevant because it summarizes more than 40 years of feminisms. In those years, the way domestic work was viewed changed: if for feminisms close to the *operaismo* movement of the 1970s, this work was "worse than death," as Federici stated in her 1975 manifesto, today's approach to reproduction seeks to revalue these highly gendered activities (FEDERICI, 2012, p. 15). Federici then moves

[20] DALLA COSTA and JAMES, paragraph: “La productividad de la esclavitud asalariada sobre la base de la esclavitud no asalariada”.

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from the rejection of domestic work, from the call to flee and destroy this role, to its valorization, and this passage is representative of feminisms in general. But it is no longer about “domestic work” -as we say-, but about the issue of reproduction, understood as a network of activities and ties that includes and at the same time exceeds the domestic, to focus on the territory, as a field of struggle.

In Federici's narrative, World War II plays a central role in explaining the reason for the rejection of reproductive labor at the time (which is placed in quotation marks in the text). The war implied the impossibility of thinking of oneself in terms of sacrifice, the author explains, whether in the sacrifice of domesticity or motherhood. This association between domesticity, motherhood, and sacrifice is not questioned, but rather asserted to support many of the political slogans of the 1970s. Federici writes: “The confrontation with ‘reproductive work’ -understood, at first, as housework, domestic labor- was the defining factor for many women of my generation, who came of age in the aftermath of the World War II. For after two world wars that in a space of three decades decimated more than seventy million people, the lures of domesticity and the prospect of sacrificing our lives to produce more workers and soldiers for the state had no hold on our imagination” (p. 5).

In her 1975 text, “Wages Against Housework,” written in the context of her involvement in the Wages for Housework Campaign between 1972 and 1980, Federici returns to topics that appeared in Dalla Costa and James's text, but gives them a different emphasis. In responding to objections, Federici asserts that fighting for wages for housework was “the only revolutionary perspective, from a feminist point of view” (p. 16). This was because housework was not work like any other, but rather a “deception” and a “violence,” naturalizing servility as if it were constitutive of women's condition (p. 16). However the salary seems to be the fair pay received for a job and that hides the unpaid work that becomes profit, in the case of domestic work, its conversion into a natural destiny of women makes it not appear as a job and the struggle around its limits is reduced to be a private problem, to be raised between the bed and the kitchen.

Women appear in the text as the result of a (failed) socialization that takes at least 20 years of each woman's life to accept the role of wife/mother/housewife. By socializing women into this role, capital, on the one hand, externalizes services that would be paid for and, on the other, generates a social structure in which there are servants serving the reproduction of the working class. Women socialized in this way form a stratum of

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physical, emotional, and sexual servants of male workers, and this servitude becomes even greater the lower the social class. Federici thus creates a difference within the universal "housewife": although women are generally servants, poor women are even more so. Servitude acts as a buffer against the violence that male workers experience in formal wage labor, and while this violence is greater in more precarious jobs, so is the servitude of these women (p. 18).

Therefore, the demand for wages implies a denaturalization: an abandonment of this artificial "nature" of servitude and the adoption of a struggle for another social structure. The author writes: “If we start from this analysis, we can see the revolutionary implications of the demand for wages for housework. *It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature*, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us” (p. 18, emphasis in the original).

But Federici makes another shift from Dalla Costa and James's text. For her, the struggle for domestic work cannot be compared to the struggle for wages undertaken by workers. While they were fighting for better pay within a role, the campaign was fighting to destroy women's social role. It is, as she writes, a struggle of slaves against slavery. She writes: “it is absurd to compare the struggle of women for wages for housework to the struggle of male workers in the factory for more wages. In struggling for more wages, the waged worker challenges his social role but remains within it. When we struggle for wages for housework we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role. In the same way, there is a qualitative difference between the struggles of the waged worker and the struggles of the slave for a wage against the slavery. It should be clear, however, that when we struggle for a wage, we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them” (p. 19).

For Federici, there is also a lack of identification. The struggle for wages for domestic work is weak because few women identify as housewives. It seems to be a role no one wants to take on. But this isn't a matter of taste, but because that role implies a lack of social power. Federici thus returns to the central perspective of feminism: that of power distributed within a society with gender roles. The lack of identification favors the invisibility of this work and the status quo of caregiving conditions. She writes on p. 22: “Unfortunately, many women -particularly single women- are afraid of the perspective of wages for housework because they are afraid of identifying even for a second with a

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housewife. They know that this is the most powerless position in society and they do not want to realize that they are housewives too".

In the 2011 introduction, Federici returns to the topic. In the present, she clarifies, one cannot fight only for wages. Not only because the approach of the 1970s sounded binary and heteropatriarchal, and because many young women would not feel challenged by these forms of protest in the present. But also because today it is necessary to go for the wage but also *beyond it*, given that in many places the wage is either a relationship that includes a reduced number of the population, or because capital advances over territories and common goods, beyond that relationship, such as land, forests, water, public space and also currency. This dilution of the issue of domestic work, it seems, is the cost of expanding the limits of the concept of reproduction.

Carla Lonzi and *Rivolta Femminile*: Other Feminisms

Rivolta Femminile was a feminist group, co-founded by Carla Lonzi, that emerged in 1970, carrying the sticker of its first manifesto on the streets of Rome. The group later spread to various locations in Italy, as a loose network of autonomous and women-exclusive gathering groups. They were not part of *operaismo* or *autonomismo*, but rather constituted the other strand of Italian feminisms, further removed from demonstrations and, above all, from the frameworks of traditional politics. Their role was central, however, because they forced Marxist feminisms to further tighten their positions.

Rivolta Femminile, which was highly influential, did not necessarily participate in street fights, as there were many of those years. Its central practice was the formation of female "self-awareness groups," which were meeting and discussion groups among women, where they discussed common problems without attempting to reduce them to any theoretical position. Even though Carla Lonzi explicitly stated that feminism was not theory but practice, shortly after the group's founding she published the "manifesto-text" (to quote Verónica Gago and Raquel Gutiérrez's definition), *Let's Spit on Hegel*. *Let's Spit on Hegel* returns to two central topics for feminism that would be revisited by other celebrated authors, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray: the first is whether or not feminine identity can be read according to the key provided by the master-slave dialectic, and what that reading would be like (that is: whether gender identities were

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complementary, whether they were subaltern, whether they required a struggle, and whether or not that struggle had taken place). And the second was the meaning of Hegel's expression for describing woman (in the singular): "the eternal irony of the community." This description, or this performativity, initially cast women as an "internal enemy" of the State, as a principle of subjectivity incapable of going beyond the representation of the universality of the family, which comes into tension with the State. This is reinforced, as we know, by Hegel's interpretation of Antigone.

Lonzi goes beyond these two readings, although he nonetheless cites them. He rereads Hegel through the centrality of the concept of culture, especially in *Philosophy of Right*. He argues that culture, as Hegel reads it, is the foundation upon which all products (art, religion, philosophies, ideologies, the division of labor, ways of life of various groups) will be built, and that this foundation presupposes the hierarchy of the sexes. Culture (a very broad concept in Hegel), which is already a way of living, representing, speaking, forming ideas of good, of virtues and vices, of working, nests everything that will later shape theoretical/practical cultural products, which already have the sexual hierarchy inscribed within them (whether they thematically address it or not, whether they are conscious of it or not). This underlining of the centrality of culture in the Hegelian system (and not a reinterpretation of how it constructs the interweaving of family-woman-State or how it places women in tension with citizen political identity) is Lonzi's unique approach.

Lonzi's radical proposal in response to this diagnosis is thus to "deculturalize": just as the strength of the masculine resides in its identification with the universal proposed by culture, with its sublime products, with work and struggle, the strength of the feminine resides in rejecting it, in showing its possible non-universality. "To deny culture means to deny the appreciation of the facts that constitute the basis of power," he says (p. 46). Therefore, the pursuit of legal equality, quota policies, parity, the assumption of masculine roles, etc., are rejected from the outset. Lonzi says: women's oppression "is not resolved in equality, but continues within equality. It is not resolved in revolution, but is perpetuated within revolution. (…) Women's actions do not imply participation in male power, but rather a questioning of the concept of power. If our imbrication in equality is recognized today, it is precisely to ward off that danger" (p. 26).

There are two options, then: one, the rejection of culture. This can be operationalized in practical terms by rejecting the masculine as an interlocutor, by

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abandoning the search for recognition within culture, by—as she says—eroding and eroding all unconscious emotional ties with male culture. This has a direct impact on women's practices in the intellectual field, but not only. Here's a critique of De Beauvoir, for example, but not only of her: when De Beauvoir says, "I freed myself from domesticity and motherhood and was recognized in my exceptional role, because in my time no woman graduated from philosophy," she recognizes that her image conformed to what was expected of male recognition: she was the exception. In *Let's Spit on Hegel*, there are two possible figures of escape: women who distance themselves from the process of cultural recognition by beginning to talk to each other, and young hippies who reject the call to war, in the United States, as a rejection of the image of virility. In *Itinerary of Reflections*, a 1977 text, the model of escape is saints, even when their chastity is not shared. In short: it's about not seeking cultural recognition.

The second option that emerges is the "cultural void." There, Lonzi proposes the "authenticity" of relationships: non-instrumentalization, non-pretense, non-adaptation to maintain relationships or obtain social recognition, the formation of "interspecies" recognition and recognition with other women, internal dialogue, the "search for self" in shared spaces for women, without presuming what the assumption of that self would be. It's about feminist practice, in short, without feminism being able to assume itself from the outset as a theory in dialogue with other theories, because all of them (even language) are already products of a masculine culture, a culture that claims to be universal. It's about imposing a certain alienation. She gives a disruptive example for feminisms: motherhood. She says: "Motherhood is the moment in which a woman, going through the initial stages of life in symbiosis with her child, becomes deculturalized. She sees the world as a product foreign to the primary demands of the existence she is reliving" (p. 46).

Questioning every cultural product (including language, insofar as it may be a product), the naturalness it produces, the structure of honesty and dishonesty it inscribes, the *telos*, might seem to bring Lonzi closer to silence. But that would not be a correct reading. Silence, like the assumption by a female voice, or the Antigone model, which recalls the non-closure of State or community ethical universality, is for Lonzi the place predetermined by culture for women: women are expected there, expected to conform to those roles (to be silent, to scream like crazy, to show the limits of the law or of citizenship). The question, however, for her, is how to break with cultural expectations, how to renounce even the cultural ideals of rebellion. How to break with questions and

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answers, with ways of speaking, of fighting, and of distancing oneself. It is about imagining how feminisms can effectively be an "unforeseen subject" for politics and history, capable of generating cultural autonomy that sustains social interdependence. Or as she best summarizes it in the closing of the manifesto: "We want to rise to the level of a universe without answers" (p. 24).

Conclusion

The period from 1968 to 1977 is a time of rupture with the primacy of the working class in struggles, within the conceptions of the left. It is a period of crisis, which inaugurates the era of capitalism centered on the liberalization of currency, financialization, and the devaluation of labor. The impact of this transformation, of the loss of centrality of work, is still difficult for any contemporary society to assimilate.

During that period, Italy was a laboratory. The operaist and later autonomist left was experimenting new forms of struggle in the face of this gradual decline in the ascendancy of the factory worker, and reinvented modes of resistance and concepts that are being tested even today, beyond the borders of Europe. Concepts like social factory, social worker, and autonomy allow us to think about articulations of subjects, rather than hegemonies. This is the framework within which, today, feminisms conceive novel articulations.

The Negri of those years was still hesitant to deny the primacy of the industrial worker—or he was aware of its political costs and therefore hemmed in the argument. Feminisms, on the other hand (much less revisited by academic literature and activist texts and with strong connections to *operaismo*, even biographical ones) clearly expressed what was being quietly assumed: a redrawing of the boundaries of productive work and its identification with reproductive labor. At the time, they focused on something still unresolved in our societies: the gendering of care work, on care as a social problem, rather than a private intricacy or something that would be resolved with automation.[21] They even focused on the need to break away from stereotypical ways of

[21] For a critique of automation, in addition to the one discussed here, see FEDERICI, 2018, p. 98.

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fighting, to reject "boxing in" and procrastination. A detailed study of how these feminisms were central to revealing the limits of *operaismo* remains to be done.[22]

In that era, which is the beginning of ours, trends and limits were drawn that are more visible today: the affirmation of the plurality of subjects and forms of struggle, dispersion, the explosion of modes of work, the loss of relevance of work in the face of massive financialization, the general impoverishment of living conditions, growing inequality, the crisis of legitimacy of institutions. The praise of precarious work that *operaismo* made at the time ("*precario è bello*," they said in graffiti) sounds today like illusory optimism, like irony. The refusal of work or the Wages for Housework Campaign seem like maximalist demands in a context like the current one. However, this doesn't speak ill of those struggles; rather, it describes our time, its narrow horizons. It describes a defeat. Revisiting that era reveals possible leftist movements, with remarkable radicalism, experimental creativity, and acuity: those who co-investigate in the midst of social movements, those who persist, and those who know how to read time, which also means knowing its possible transformation.

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[22] In this regard, see the interview with Alisa del Re: "Feminism and Autonomy: Itinerary of Struggle" in MURPHY and MUSTAPHA, 2005, p. 48.

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