

[00:00:00] **MARÍA CARRI**

Hi, welcome to CCS. I'm thrilled to introduce Silvia Federici to such an amazing and large audience. My name is María Carri, I'm a second year student in the Curatorial program here at the Center for Curatorial Studies, and today I have the privilege to introduce Silvia Federici as part of our speaker series program. Each semester CCS hosts a program of lectures by artists, curators, theorists and critics, situating the school and the museum's concern within the larger context of contemporary art production and discourse. We are very thankful to Sylvia for making time for us. The lecture will last 45 minutes followed by a 20 minute Q and A, moderated by Nour Annan, MA student from the OSUN Center for the Human Rights in the Arts. I will introduce Silvia Federici, who of course needs no introduction. Sylvia Federici is a feminist activist, Professor Emerita of Political Philosophy at Hofstra University and one of the most impactful political theorists today. She was born in Italy and in 1967 she moved to the United States where she lives to this day. Here she became involved in the student movement and the antiwar movement. In 1972 she co-founded International Feminist Collective which brought the campaign for Wages for Housework into the international sphere.

[00:01:33] **MARÍA CARRI**

Between 1984 and 1986 she worked as a teacher in Nigeria and experienced highly influential [inaudible 00:01:41] work. While there, she witnessed a war driven by [inaudible 00:01:46] companies and how the IMF and its structural adjustment program impacted the communal organization of the land and educational system. The book, *Caliban in the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, published in 2004, is already a classic for the new generations of feminists. Other publications among her vast production are *Revolution at Point Zero*, *Wages for Housework*, *The Patriarchy of Wages*, and the most recent, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, among many, many others. Her work has assertively redefined Marxist theory and reconfigured one of the fundamental features of capitalist accumulation, namely the unpaid and reproductive work carried out by women, and in centrality, the process of creation of worlds. I remember when *Caliban and the Witch* was translated into Spanish in Argentina and how that revolutionary thinking deeply impacted our theory

and provided a true toolbox to transform our practice. Silvia's work continues to be an inspiration for feminist struggles all over the world. And for that reason it's such an honor to me to present her today.

[00:02:57] **MARÍA CARRI**

Please join me in welcoming Silvia Federici.

[00:03:15] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

Good evening, it's a great pleasure to be here and see so many people. And I want to first thank you, CCS, and all those that contributed to organize this event. I was going to speak about the politics of care and reclamation, but I'm going to change a little bit the structure and topic of my talk because since I chose that approach, I've had a meeting with women from Latin America. Some of the things that emerge from that meeting have become really important for me, and I want to also communicate them with you. One of the most important things was the realization that in many regions—Chile, Argentina, Mexico—feminism is probably the most important social political movement and is the movement that is most capable of fighting across many transversal struggles and bringing together—creating a common ground between—different types of struggle. And so my point today is, in a sense, to reflect on what is making, what are the elements that are making for this trend that feminism has in so many parts of the global south today, and then see how we can rethink what feminism also should be in the United States.

[00:05:14] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

Because, I think this is an important moment. It's a moment in which—and I'm very interested in to know what you think—but it's a moment where feminism needs a new foundation, needs rethinking about its reason of being and its path towards social transformation. The fact that we have lost, for instance, the right to abortion and that we do not have thousands of women in the street, a thought of insurrection, feminist insurrection, I think, is a major concern. And so, this is my take from which I want to approach this question today. One of the things that emerged from the conversation

that we had a week ago and also following many, many meetings in the last couple of years with several feminist organizations from worldwide to Argentina is that they seem that the perspective, the theme that was central to feminist organizing—certainly to my feminist activism starting in the 1970s—which is the perspective of social reproduction. It's today the terrain on which feminists unify and feminists are organized, not only to protest against different forms of social injustice, but also to begin the construction of a new society. And so, I want to say a few things about what was for us social reproduction in the 1970s, how it was understood in the feminist movement and also in particular in the Wages for Housework movement, how that concept and that perspective has also changed over time, and what are the paths for struggle that are opening today.

[00:07:48] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

So, as you know, I'm sure the issue of reproduction was one of the key, if you want to say, revolutionary development—theoretical, practical, revolutionary development—in the feminist movement. When the issue of understanding the roots of the discriminations, subordinations that women suffer in capitalist society was posed, it became very clear that the whole sphere, the confinement of women to the sphere of domestic work—to the sphere of housework, familial relations, domesticity—that this was, in a way, the place to which to turn our attention. And at the same time, we had major disagreement as to the reasons why this was the case, why such confinement. But, I will not rehearse things that have already been written. Certainly socialist feminists, for instance, argued that women's subordination in society stems from the fact that domestic work is not productive in a capitalist way, and I think one of the major contribution that the theorists and activists of the Wages for Housework campaign has given to feminist theory and practice has been to actually reject that view—to recognize that the sphere of domesticity is a sphere of capitalist relation, is a sphere of capitalist production.

[00:09:48] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

And that if, in fact, we want to change the position of women in society, we first have

to confront the terrain which has been the source of the devaluation of women as a social subject, and face the devaluation of reproductive labor. And I think this, I always say that this was for us a Copernican revolution. It was a Copernican revolution because for generations and generations of revolutionary activity, women were always confined to be the support workers of the working class—the male, predominantly male, working struggle in the factory, in the offices. So the women did not have, in their form of oppression, a direct relation of exploitation to capital like wage workers. And so to actually identify reproductive work as a form of capitalist production was extremely important because it was the key not only to redefine, but re-understand, what is the family, what is housework. Housework, as we recognize, what we call housework, is actually a production of labor. Power is actually a production of the workforce. What we call the family is a particular type of factory, the community is a factory where the workforce is daily, generationally reproduced. We saw familial relations as relations of production.

[00:11:49] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

And we also saw that so many of the crises that we had lived in the family, in love relationships, in sexual relationships, were not accidental, that those crises had to do with the fact that in capitalism, the reproduction of daily life, and love, family, sexuality have all been subordinated to the accumulation, the principle of accumulation. But already at that point, the importance was to see that reflecting on the question of domesticity and housework also gave us an insight into the logic of capitalist society, into the logic of capitalist accumulation. Which is, to recognize that capitalism is really a system that perpetuates itself to a constant, massive extraction of unpaid labor, so that there is a massive, massive exploitation of labor. And this, again, was very important because it enabled us to see the continuity, the continuity between the feminist struggle, the struggle against racism, against apartheid. And, it enabled us to see also that we will not be able to change the conditions of women—as we will not be able to create a society, a non-racist society, non-colonial society—without transforming the entire system. So already, I think from in the 1970s, already in the United States, Europe, and internationally, we had the rise of an anti-capitalist feminism.

[00:13:57] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

But certainly, one of the challenges that feminism has met, particularly in the United States, though not exclusively, throughout the '80s and beyond, even to this day, has been this massive intervention, massive institutional intervention in feminist politics, led by the United Nations with these famous four conferences on women that have really attempted—and in many ways, succeeded—in absorbing and manipulating the energy that the feminist movement had created and to places at the service of the integration of women in the developing global economy. In other words, feminism explodes in Europe, in the United States, at the very time when capitalism—responding to the labor crisis it had faced, the accumulation crisis that it faced all throughout the '70s—begins the process of restructuring, massive restructuring that we now define as globalization, and we now define as the neoliberal phase of capitalist development. And, it's a restructuring that to great extent has succeeded, to the extent it has integrated women as cheap labor, at all levels in the former colonial world as well as in the US. Women have been the cheap workers that, in the name of emancipation, have been brought into wage labor.

[00:15:59] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

In fact, what took place in the 1980s with the massification of Women's wage work, was in a way a confirmation of what had been our hypothesis in organizing around Wages for Housework. Which was, that unless we dealt—unless we, as a feminist movement, and in cooperation with other movements—with the question of the devaluation of reproduction, the question which is the devaluation of people's life, which is the devaluation of our community, unless we address that question, the devaluation, subordination of women, discrimination, et cetera, was in fact, to the extent that women were the subject of reproductive work, was a devaluation of human life, that is really at the core of the logic that drives capitalist accumulation. And our argument was that unless we dealt with that issue we will not be able to change our condition no matter where we go. And in fact, we saw in the decades following the first phase of the movement, we saw through the '80s and '90s, that on one side, most of their

occupation, the forms of employment that women have gained once they have so called left home, have been really extensions of housework and have been characterized by the same devaluation that has characterized housework.

[00:17:58] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

So that, wherever women have been, as a nurse, teacher, care workers, has still been extra-domestic housewives, and at the same time has suffered the same condition of devaluation that women have suffered as domestic worker.

[00:18:20] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

At the same time, very clearly, no new infrastructures have been created, and this is true to this day. On the contrary, no newly productive infrastructures have been created to respond to the crisis that women's entrance into which wage work opened up on the family floor. In fact, the opposite has taken place. The moment women begin to leave the home for many hours a day to work outside the home is the very moment in which, in every country, you have a process of systematic defunding. Systematic defunding of social services, whether it is centers for the elderly, whether it is daycare centers, health care, and so on. Each of these of course would be a whole discourse in itself. But clearly, and of course the assumption, the argument, that we have been given all throughout, which is that domestic work, reproductive work can be marketized—that the market will answer for this [inaudible 00:19:42] to satisfy our need. We know that in fact that has opened new fronts of crises. That, in fact, the marketization of domestic care (and here, in fact, there is a whole parentheses that should be open to discuss about the politics of care) because one of the difficulties, one of the more recent feminist concerns with care work, which is very understandable—there's been really an outburst of literature, and an outburst of initiative, about the question of care work—has also been problematic to the extent that by not identifying who really benefits from the work of care has in fact been enabled to confront the marketization, industrialization of care. The whole industry that is being created around care work. And maybe I will speak of that later in the discussion.

[00:21:10] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

So, I think that the issue of reproduction has become very, very crucial in terms of opening up a whole set of struggle and perspectives. At the same time, there's been also a change in the way reproduction has been conceived. And I think, here, the struggle that women have made, especially in various parts of the global south—and I speak in particular, of the experience of Latin America, which is the one that now I'm much concerned with and much more familiar with—has been extremely important.

[00:22:00] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

The concept of reproduction has very much broadened over the last decades, and to a great extent, because of the expansion of the feminist movement internationally. But also, because, hand-in-hand with the rise of the international feminist movement, what we have seen has been a global attack on the most basic condition of reproduction of life, across the world. The Zapatista have spoken of a "Fourth World War," and I think they understood the developments in the global economy correctly, because what we call globalization has been, in fact, driven by a massive process of degradation of the major conditions of reproduction in every part of the world. And, the global economy, the expansion of capitalist relation, begins with the so-called debt crisis in 1979. I think it's important to talk about it now, because the Federal Reserve of the United States is going through a new round of increases in the interest rates by maneuvers that seem very abstract. They have developed this amazing language, they are going to "soften the labor market," what a beautiful world, right? How positive. In reality, they are doing so, because there has been a growth, a small growth, in wages. The softening of the labor market, the raising of interest rates, is a way of responding.

[00:24:20] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

It's a way of recuperating, by making people unemployed, by curtailing many, many forms of industrial activity, and so forth. It's a way of basically making people accept lower wages, worse conditions of work. So, the increase in 1979 of the Federal interest on the dollar is, in a sense, the big bank that defined what the new global economy

would be like. Because, the interest rate made many loans that former colonial countries, formerly colonized countries had taken in order to develop, in order to catch up, once they had achieved independence—make that loan impossible to repay. And as we know, everything followed from that. The intervention of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, structural adjustment, that imposed all kinds of conditionalities in order to give the countries—the indebted nations—new loans. Well, each of those conditionalities has been a kind of war on a condition of reproduction. Educational systems have been destroyed, sanitary systems drastically undermined, industries have closed.

[00:26:24] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

Most important, a whole system has been put into place, from Africa to Latin America to [inaudible 00:26:35], whereby, in order to pay back the loans, country after country have had to open its doors to all kinds of extractivist activity, basically under the name of paying back the loan. What we have witnessed and continue to witness because the robberies continue, the extraction, the squeezing of people's lands and people's lives continue... what has been happening is that mining companies, petroleum companies, agribusiness companies—producing elephant grass, for example, in Africa to produce green gasoline—all of these were given a red carpet by the World Bank. The World Bank, the IMF, creates the conditionality that is forcing the countries to take these loans, to accept these conditions, and then the World Bank writes the regulations. These are the rules for the mining companies to go into the Congo, these are the rules upon which oil drilling, et cetera. Well, these developments that have taken place chronologically, simultaneously, with the rise and expansion of the international feminist movement, have also created a whole new consciousness, have created a whole new need. First of all, they've created, internationally, a process of recolonization.

[00:28:20] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

Globalization is recolonization. I mean, the new global economy, the new expansion of capital isolation, the new forms of accumulation—the foundation stone is really this new colonialism, not that accidentally. There's been a whole set of theories discussing the

question of coloniality. Coloniality, the fact that capitalism structurally needs colonies. In the same way structurally needs racialized populations, structurally needs hierarchies. It needs the ability to delegate to some work and the control over others. That structure needs social inequality. Part of this social inequality is exactly the fact of colonization and decolonization.

[00:29:21] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

So, I'm going through these analyses because they help me to explain why, for example, from Africa to Latin America, new forms of feminism have emerged. New forms of feminism have emerged that have seen, as fundamental, the question of the struggle around domestic work, the struggle around procreation, around sexuality, abortion. But at the same time, have also expanded the notion of "what is the terrain of social reproduction?" And, "what is the terrain of struggle?" And, "what is the terrain that we need to engage in our resistance and reconstruction?" Already in the 80s, because of the rise of the ecological movement, we saw, in many parts of the world, the rise of ecofeminist movements. But really, in a sense, the most deeply, most profoundly rooted, in the process of social change, has been the kind of ecofeminism that has come from communities in Africa, in Latin America, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, that have fought against the destruction of the ecological system. Against the destruction of the natural world, the natural wealth. Whether it is forest, or it is waters, seas, and so on, that have been contaminated by petroleum drilling or by gold extraction, which uses mercury. And that mercury has contaminated and poisoned so many waters, lakes, rivers that were fundamental to the reproduction of life for entire communities.

[00:31:43] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

So, we have begun to see a feminism that interprets, that has broadened the terrain of social reproduction, and sees social reproduction not only in the home, relating to issues of domestic labor, but basically, taking the struggle outside. Also, because, not until almost the '80s, in many parts of the world, domestic work began in the fields, began with subsistence economy. The very subsistence economy that the expansion of capital installation is now putting under siege. So, I think this is very fundamental because what

we are beginning to see through the process—which continues to this day—what we begin to see through this process is that, social reproduction as a terrain of struggle, as a terrain of expectation, as a perspective from which to look at capitalism, is also a terrain that is capable of bringing together many different forms of struggle.

[00:33:09] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

It's also the terrain where you can have the possibility of seeing the continuity of movements. The continuity, for instance, between feminist movements, movements struggling around ecology, movements struggling around education and health care, and therefore creating a sense of kind of broad forms of coalition, broad forms of alliances. And, this is something that is now a reality in many countries. For example, in Argentina—that is now suffering, is now confronting one of the biggest moments of crisis in its history, because the Argentinian government just signed a deal with the IMF for a loan, which is the biggest loan in IMF history—it's coming with conditionalities that are going to destroy the means of reproduction of millions of people. At the same time, a major resistance is building because of the initiative of the movements that I've just described. The fact that, for example, in Argentina, as in Uruguay, as in Colombia, you have a feminism that has begun over the years to work not only around isolated issues, but to work on a broad-based program that connects feminism, feminists, with many other forms of organization, and many other social movements.

[00:35:11] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

For instance, today women in Argentina, with organic feminist organizations like Ni una menos, which is an organization that developed to fight against the violence against women. It's also connecting with women in the union, with the so-called [inaudible 00:35:34] [in Chile], which is a feminist organization that has come out of the union to discuss issues with the male dominated union. So they are connecting with women that are working women (Campesina), Indigenous women (Mapuche women), for example, in the south that are fighting against Destructivism in Patagonia. Also, they are beginning to address the issue of debt. So, there is a whole analysis and struggle that has begun in the last two, three years against the question of indebtment. So, here, I'm

pointing to the fact that it's a feminism that is very inspirational for us. I'm referring to Argentina, but I could also make similar claims for the feminist movement in Chile, for example, which recently was part of a broad coalition of movements that began to draw a new constitution, that presented the program of a new constitution. That program was not successful. The election did not allow the program to actually prevail. But, nevertheless, it also indicates the level to which feminist movements have brought, have matured and have been able to really present a transformative vision of society.

[00:37:27] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

I want to say something more about this, but first, I think there's a very interesting documentation that is coming out of Argentina, relating to a feminist reading of debt, feminist reading of the politics of debt. There's a whole interest that women are pursuing through the question of understanding what the process of financialization is, the dominance of finance capital that is so much nourished by the politics of debt—what that is doing to people's lives, and how it can be fought against. How, for example, a feminist movement can respond to it, and discovering that actually a feminist movement can make a contribution to fighting against that. Because, as two important feminist writers and activists, Veronica Gago and Luci Cavallero, have written recently, the question that the feminist movement can pose is "who owes to whom?" A feminist movement can bring to the institution, to the IMF, a generational, ancestral experience of women who have worked over and over and over, without being paid, without being compensated, without any form of remuneration.

[00:39:27] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

So, the question of "who is the debtor," when we speak of indebtment, "who owes to whom," and reversing the table. So, there is a feminist reading of the debt, I think this is very important. Moving towards the conclusion of my presentation because I have about five minutes—it's so difficult to speak about this issue quickly, it's so difficult to put it all together quickly. But, I'm going to respect the five minutes because I really want to hear what your questions are. But, the importance for me, the inspirational level, the inspirational power of travels, particularly in Latin America, but global south as a whole,

is also that there's a profound understanding—this has become a mantra in my work—that you cannot oppose capitalism, you cannot oppose this war, that capitalism in very different ways, in very diversified ways, that the power of diversification is waging against our life, is gauging against people's most basic means of reproduction—that we cannot simply say no. But we also have to begin from the very, very present to construct a new society. The importance that women in the global south are placing on the construction, reconstruction of communitarian relations, reconstruction of what in Europe were called the commons—in a way that can break the isolation in which we have reproduced ourselves in capitalism.

[00:41:46] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

Breaking the walls of the nuclear family, breaking the walls of the home of domesticity, and beginning to organize collective forms of reproduction. And of course, the influence of Indigenous people, the whole influence of the fact that in so many countries the experience, the culture of indigenous people is still present and constantly renewed, for example, through struggle like the struggle of the Zapatista, is very, very crucial. So, the question of the commons, and the question of building commons not just as a goal, as something to be aspired to, to be projected into the future, but as something to be constructed right into the present. As a condition for the struggle, not only as a goal, not only as an end of our struggle, but as a condition. Because unless we build communitarian relation, effective relation among those who are making a struggle we will not have the strength, we will not have the power, to confront the state. So that if, in fact, the construction of a new society is dependent on not only the ending of the war, the capitalism is making today on so many aspects of our life and our very possibility to reproduce ourselves, but also the creation of a very different society. A society built on not only social justice, but cooperation, solidarity, and care work. So that the idea, the need of building from the present, from everyday life, ways of reproducing ourselves, that are not individualizing us, that are not isolating us, becomes really fundamental.

[00:44:11] **SILVIA FEDERICI**

This kind of solidarity also implies that this is something that is very powerful that we really again learn from our sisters and brothers from the south of this continent. This solidarity extends not only to the living but also to the dead. Because, part of the reconstruction of the commons that feminist movements are making is also the reclaiming of the history, and of those who have come before them, before us, in the struggle, and reconstructing forms of collective memory, and making sure that the struggle that is conducted today is placed in a much broader frame. Because that expansion of the frame of the struggle is also what gives people the courage to continue in a situation in which the violence they meet is continuously more intense. Thank you.