

Commoning

With George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici

‘We need to struggle, perhaps more than ever, given the magnitude and the character of the current destruction of everything – nature, society, culture, the very social fabric allowing us to live together. We need *compas*. We need, particularly, comrades with a clear sight and an open, affective heart. Many of us have found in George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici that company. They have led and accompanied us in many struggles, big and small, in great events and mobilizations or in small coffee talks. And here they are, to celebrate them, with an exceptional cohort of intellectuals/activists, with *compas*, who are saying today what needs to be said to continue the struggle, to resist the horror and to create a new world’.

– Gustavo Esteva, activist, ‘deprofessionalised intellectual’ and founder of Universidad de la Tierra in Oaxaca, Mexico

‘This collection offers an extraordinary kaleidoscope of critical reflections on social reproduction and class struggle. More than that, it is fitting testimony to the inspiration and grounding that Silvia and George continue to provide for those seeking a life beyond the sway of capital’.

– Steve Wright, author of *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*

‘No one has taught us more, and more generously, that communism is with us than George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici. Indeed, to be in their presence, to be with their writing and interviews, is to feel intimately the social wealth we are struggling to defend and expand in the face of the geocidal and genocidal plans of the policy class and its backers. That we are the sources not only of that wealth but also of the social transformations necessary to survive in abundance, this is the insight, the lifeline, the hug we receive from the greatest living theorists of commoning’.

– Stefano Harney, co-author of *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*

‘In this labour of love, radical theory joins passionate praxis to honour the social thought and political vision of Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, whose work together and apart offers hope that another world can be made.’

– Eileen Boris, co-author of *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State*

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Nicholas Beuret and David Harvie



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Introduction: Always Struggle

*Camille Barbagallo, Nicholas Beuret and
David Harvie*

...ideas don't come from a light-bulb in someone's brain; ideas come from struggles – this is a basic methodological principle. – George Caffentzis¹

The militant scholarship of George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici has never been more needed. Together and separately, they have, over a half-century, developed a radical political perspective and praxis. Today, activists and militants across the world are engaging more widely with their many insights and methods. The commons, the uptake of ideas of social reproduction, the integration of ecological and energy concerns with Marxist analysis, and a renewed radical critique of technology are all contemporary themes that they have helped develop over the past decades.

What connects all of these ideas and perspectives is the concept of *struggle*. There are three ways to understand struggle in George and Silvia's work: as practice, as theory and as method. The first is reflected in the *practice* of Silvia and George themselves. For more than 50 years – from the 1960s' anti-Vietnam war movement, through feminist movements, including Wages for Housework in the 1970s, various workers' and anti-colonial struggles, anti-nuke movements from Three Mile Island to Fukushima, campaigns against the death penalty, the Gulf War, the second Gulf War, to Occupy Wall Street and debtors' movements – George and Silvia have always involved themselves in social struggle of one form or another. The second is as the source of *theory* – of ideas and praxis. Theory as something that comes not only from struggle, but also from a commitment to struggle as that which drives social change. The third is to see struggle as a *method* for understanding crises, events, social and political relations, and movement.

The work of George and Silvia converges on and flows out of these interconnected understandings of struggle. More than that, they both – separately, together, with others – have worked tirelessly to expand and deepen our understanding of the terrain of struggle. Of who it is that struggles, how struggles come to matter or count, and of the significance of struggles across the social field.

This volume explores the life and scholarship – the main themes and key insights – of George and Silvia. It is a celebration of two comrades, a chance to revisit their writings and appreciate the wealth of their contribution, and at the same time a continuation of the circulation of militant ideas, theories and histories – a continuation of their own practice.

Through militant lives that became intertwined in the 1970s George and Silvia developed a particular orientation to radical politics, one that started in conversation with the Italian Marxist tradition of *operaismo*, and continued through the perspective developed by Wages for Housework. They experienced first-hand – and struggled against – the emergence of neoliberalism with the ‘structural adjustment’ of New York City in the mid-1970s; a little later, their experiences in Nigeria deepened their understanding of colonialism, imperialism and energy struggles, which in turn sparked an engagement with ‘primitive accumulation’ and a rediscovery of the commons. On returning to the United States, they became heavily involved in the emerging counter-globalisation movements; by chance arriving in Mexico at the beginning of 1994 they witnessed the Zapatistas’ uprising and went on to spend considerable time in Latin America. What these examples – just a handful out of many – demonstrate is the extent to which Silvia and George have always been grounded *within* revolutionary and other rebellious movements and currents.

The concept of struggle reflects a feature of the world: there is *always* struggle. Here we understand struggle most broadly as class relations. As Werner Bonefeld reminds us in his chapter in this volume, ‘history does not unfold at all. “History does nothing”’. There are just human beings, pursuing our ends – struggling. We cannot understand the development of the capitalist mode of production or other social forms without understanding the struggles of millions, and now billions, of human subjects. In this sense, George and Silvia’s work is in dialogue with the insight that opens *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle’.

For both George and Silvia the ‘Copernican inversion’ of Marxist theory developed within *operaismo*, where working class struggles are understood as primary – primary in the sense that it is struggle that militants must be concerned with and theorise, and primary to capitalist development, where struggle precedes capital’s transformations – marked a turning point in their own political development.

The first set of ideas came out of the Italian *operaista* movement... We begin to look at class struggle as a field, instead of certain spots or sites – that there’s this field of struggle that takes place all across the system... You look at

buildings and you begin to see not the thing itself but the processes that went on, the sufferings, the struggles that went on to make the thing. It was like an opening of the eye, really. – George Caffenzis²

From the Operaist movement... we learned the political importance of the wage as a means of organizing society... From my perspective, this conception of the wage... became a means to unearth the material roots of the sexual and international division of labour and, in my later work, the 'secret of primitive accumulation'. – Silvia Federici³

It is here that struggle becomes something ordinary, everyday. It is not a matter of unions, parties or parliaments, but of the daily actions of workers *in work* – and struggling *against and beyond* work. Within this tradition, the refusal to work figures as a key weapon of the proletariat, one through which autonomy from both capital and the state is asserted. Silvia and George have helped extend this tradition to encompass and speak to women struggling against patriarchy, people of colour struggling against racism, peasants struggling against 'progress' and 'development'. In the words of the Zapatista Ana María, 'Behind us we are you, ... behind, we are the same simple and ordinary men and women who repeat themselves in every race, who paint themselves in every colour, who speak in every language and who live in every place'.⁴

When the capitalist counter-offensive of the 1970s took hold, George and Silvia responded by staying within the struggles around them. They 'stretched' Marx and his categories in order to develop an account of the wage that foregrounded the crucial role of the *wageless* – 'housewives', peasants, students, for example – of how people devalued, made invisible or less-than-human laboured to underpin capitalist accumulation through their partial and total exclusion from the wage relation. Thus throughout their work we find an emphasis on expanding and developing our understanding of the composition of the proletariat, with this insistence that the struggles of the unwaged are as important – sometimes more so – as those of the waged. Rejecting forms of autonomist Marxism that flee the question of value, George and Silvia instead develop a current in which Marx's 'law of value' – appropriately 'stretched' of course – is as important as ever. In their expansive conception, we find a broadening of the field of struggle. This allows them – and us – to continue to pose the questions of energy, war, money and debt, and automation in a manner profoundly relevant for contemporary political debates and antagonisms around climate change, environmental destruction, automation and the role technology can and does play in shaping our world and those worlds to come.

Social Reproduction

I saw the struggle, that feminism really had a class dimension, once we understood the feminist movement as one that confronted the revolt against one of the major articulations of the capitalist organisation of work, which is the work of reproduction. – Silvia Federici⁵

It is well known that Silvia was a founding member of the International Wages for Housework Campaign as well as organising numerous other militant feminist collectives and initiatives. In connected ways, the feminist movement in general, and Wages for Housework in particular, were formative for George as well. Wages for Housework was more than the source of theoretical insight. It was both part of a struggle against capital and the state and, at the same time, a critique of the radical social movements of the time. Seeing housework and social reproduction as work, as a site of labour and exploitation, situated women as workers. It was a political praxis that generated considerable conflict within both the left and feminism. Understanding social reproduction in this way was a provocation that led to the ‘opening up [of] a new terrain of revolt, a new terrain of anti-capitalist struggle directly’ and no longer acting as just supporters to men’s struggles.⁶ These insights remain as important now as they were in the 1970s – for these struggles and tensions, within social and left-wing movements, and within feminism, continue today, albeit under different names.

Connected to the definition of reproduction as a labour process is the Marxist feminist argument that, at the same time that reproductive labour makes and remakes people, it also produces and reproduces that ‘special commodity’, labour-power – a process which Silvia refers to as the ‘dual characteristic of reproduction’. In positing reproduction as possessing a duality, it becomes possible to both revalue this work and, at the same time, identify the practices and processes that are implicated and foundational in the maintenance of capitalist social relations. The dual characteristic of reproduction draws attention to the tensions and contradictions at the centre of the processes of social reproduction; a tension that is directly related to what reproduction does within capitalism and how it operates.

In societies dominated by capitalism, people are reproduced as workers but also, at the same time, they are reproduced as people whose lives, desires and capabilities exceed the role of worker. People are more than their economic role; they are irreducible to it. This is one aspect of why labour-power is ‘special’ – if we did not exceed our economic role, we would not be capable of producing surplus-value. People struggle, are involved in conflict and, frequently, resist. In this way reproductive labour can be said to have two functions: it both maintains capitalism in that it produces the most

important commodity of all – labour-power – and, at the same time, it has the potential to undermine accumulation, by producing rebellious subjects.

The Commons

...when we returned to the United States – other comrades had already left the US during this period. And we all returned and had pretty similar stories to tell. So we began to work on this notion of the commons and enclosures. Being the way in which we can talk about the class struggle in this period.
– George Caffentzis⁷

George and Silvia are also well known for their work on the commons. They have credited their experiences in Nigeria in the early-to-mid-1980s as being the genesis point on their thinking around commons and their antithesis, enclosures. But potentially as significant is the New York they left behind them. That city was declared bankrupt in 1975: capital's response was one of the world's first 'structural adjustment programmes', a weapon that would become well-established in neoliberal globalisation's armoury. This restructuring used the city's 'debt crisis' to enforce a series of privatisation programmes, savage cuts to the social wage and attacks on working conditions and workers' rights to organise. When George and Silvia witnessed first-hand another 'structural adjustment' in Nigeria, they could see how capital's various restructurings were in fact different manifestations of one global process, in which questions of the social wage, land and still-existing commons – in Third World as well as First – all intersected.

The transnational character of 'structural adjustment' and capital's offensive against commons led directly to an engagement with the continuous nature of what Marx called 'primitive accumulation'. George and Silvia, as a part of the Midnight Notes Collective, described these ongoing instances of primitive accumulation as 'new enclosures'.

The Enclosures... are not a one time process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism. They are a regular return on the path of accumulation and a structural component of class struggle. Any leap in proletarian power demands a dynamic capitalist response: both in the expanded appropriation of new resources and the extension of capitalist relations.⁸

Midnight Notes' work on the new enclosures covered struggles spanning the globe. It emphasised not only the central importance of land as a site of struggle and dispossession, but also debt as a mechanism of dispossession. This recognition of the tight connection between debt on the one hand and enclosure on the other forms a crucial part of George and Silvia's work on

the commons. Insights developed to understand capital's creation and exploitation of an 'international debt crisis' in the 1980s continues to inform their work today, on microfinance, say, or in their involvement in the Occupy movement.

But against the capital's various mechanisms to dispossess and to enclose, just as crucial is the recognition of the commons' role in facilitating resistance: in Nigeria, the commons 'made it possible for many who are outside of the waged market to have collective access to land and for many waged workers with ties to the village common land to subsist when on strike'.⁹

Even when urbanized, many Africans expect to draw some support from the village, as the place where one may get food when on strike or unemployed, where one thinks of returning in old age, where, if one has nothing to live on, one may get some unused land to cultivate from a local chief or a plate of soup from neighbours and kin.¹⁰

Here we also have the recognition that commons may have the potential, not only to enable struggle against capital, but also provide a foundation for the creation of worlds that exist outside and beyond capital and the state.

This scholarship has directly inspired and influenced more recent theoretical work on the present-day relevance of commons and enclosures.¹¹ It also predates by a decade and a half David Harvey's discovery of 'accumulation by dispossession'.¹² Through it, George and Silvia have connected the 'old' Enclosures – and the struggles of English and Scottish commoners against these – to the wide range of present-day European and non-European commons that continue to be fiercely contested. But, more than this, Silvia and George present to us the commons as a political project. Commons are not *things*, but social relations – of cooperation and solidarity. And commons are not *givens* but processes. In this sense, it is apt to talk of *commoning*, a term coined by one-time Midnight Notes collaborator Peter Linebaugh.¹³ Neither George nor Silvia argue that commons as projects are a panacea for the issues that beset the contemporary left, feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial or environmental movements. However, the commons fill a lacuna in radical thought, providing a way in which we might practically work out how we are to live with each other and the world without the violence of the state or the rule of capital. That is, when we pose the question, as urgent now as ever, *What sort of world do we want to live in?* commons must surely be part of the answer.

In the chapters that follow a wide range of comrades explore and develop the themes woven above, as many other concepts and struggles that George

and Silvia have addressed. We begin with George and Silvia's engagements with history. This first section opens with an interview in which they outline their own experiences – the interview both lays the groundwork for later chapters but also emphasises the role historical thought has played in their work. In Section II we turn to questions of money and value. As we noted above, George and Silvia insist on the continued relevance of value – with money as its expression – as organiser of human activity and the contributions here explore various historical and contemporary aspects of the way the 'law of value' operates – and is resisted. The subject of Section III is reproduction. The chapters in this section address the modes in which human beings are 'produced' and reproduced, and the separations between spheres of 'production' and 'reproduction'; we also include here a speculative account of the way an entire society might transition from one way of life to another – and the consequences of this. The book then turns – in Section IV – to the commons, working through both practical and theoretical engagements with the concept. Finally – and appropriately – we end – in Section V – with five chapters which engage with the idea and reality of contemporary struggles.

We cannot do justice in this collection to the extent of the contribution George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici – singly, together and in collaboration with others, such as the Midnight Notes Collective – have made to militant feminist and anti-capitalist scholarship. It goes without saying that we recommend readers explore their many writings – if they haven't already.¹⁴ We are delighted how enthusiastically our invitation to contribute to this volume was received. This is testament to the esteem and affection with which George and Silvia are held by comrades around the world. And yet we haven't been able to *represent* the breadth and depth of their contributions over half a century, touching militants on every one of our planet's inhabited continents. All we have been able to do is *sample*. The contributions here are, nevertheless, extremely varied. In content. In style. In tone. And spanning several generations. This diversity is testament to the wide reach of the influence of George and Silvia and their care.

Notes

1. 'In Conversation with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici', this volume.
2. 'In Conversation with'.
3. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press 2012), p. 7.
4. Quoted in John Holloway, 'Zapatismo and the social sciences', *Capital and Class*, 78 (2002), p. 156.
5. Part of the longer interview from which 'In Conversation with' was taken, but not included in this volume.

6. 'In Conversation with'.
7. Part of the longer interview from which 'In Conversation with' was taken, but not included in this volume.
8. Midnight Notes Collective, 'Introduction to the New Enclosures', in *The New Enclosures* (Jamaica Plain, MA: Midnight Notes, 1990), p. i. Two other former members of the collective, Peter Linebaugh and P.M., have contributed to this volume.
9. George Caffentzis, 'Two Themes of Midnight Notes: Work/Refusal of Work and Enclosure/Commons', in Craig Hughes (ed.) *Toward the Last Jubilee: Midnight Notes at Thirty Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia and Washington, DC: Perry Editions, 2010), p. 28.
10. Silvia Federici, 'The debt crisis, Africa and the new enclosures', in Midnight Notes Collective (eds) *The New Enclosures*, p. 11. Reprinted in Midnight Notes Collective (ed.) *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War 1973–1992* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1992).
11. One scholar who draws directly from George and Silvia and the Midnight Notes Collective is Massimo De Angelis – see his contribution in this volume.
12. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
13. George Caffentzis, 'Commons', in Kelly Fritsch, Claire O'Connor and A.K. Thompson (eds) *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016), p. 101; Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
14. Good starting points are four anthologies: George Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013); George Caffentzis, *No Blood for Oil: Essays on Energy, Class Struggle, and War 1998–2016* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2017); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reprocutation, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); and Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019). We also recommend Midnight Notes' *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973–1992* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1992).