

## Wages for Housework: The Marxist-Feminist Case for Basic Income

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“All women are housewives”.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa (1972: 21)

“If we have understood housework, then we have understood the economy”.

Claudia von Werlhof (1984: 131)

**Abstract.** This article explores the Marxist-feminist critique of capitalism of the International Feminist Collective (IFC) of the 1970s and its Wages for Housework (WfH) campaign. WfH theorists, including Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Maria Mies, and Claudia von Werlhof, combine Marxist and feminist perspectives to articulate a compelling critique of capitalism designed to unite the entire working class, including both waged and unwaged workers. I argue that, despite the movement’s seemingly narrower slogan, the WfH demand was an implicit argument for an unconditional, individual, and universal basic income. Like other historical precedents of contemporary basic income movements, the WfH campaign was unsuccessful in achieving its policy goal. Despite its failure, its identification of unwaged housewives as workers, its extension of the concept of the housewife to precarious workers in the globalized economy, and its identification of the strategic deficiencies of mainstream working class and feminist movements are critical to contextualizing contemporary debates on basic income and to the development of successful strategies for contemporary working class movements.

**Keywords:** Mariarosa Dalla Costa; Silvia Federici; wages for housework; basic income; housework; housewife; gender; feminism; Marxism; capitalism.

### [es] Salario por trabajo doméstico: el argumentario marxista-feminista a favor de la renta básica

**Resumen.** Este artículo explora la crítica marxista-feminista al capitalismo del Colectivo Feminista Internacional (CFI) de los años 70 y su campaña Wages for Housework (Salarios por Trabajo Doméstico). Las teóricas de este movimiento, entre las que se encuentran Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Marie Mies y Claudia von Werlhof, combinan las perspectivas marxista y feminista para articular una crítica convincente del capitalismo, diseñada para unir a toda la clase trabajadora, incluyendo a los trabajadores asalariados y no asalariados. A pesar del eslogan aparentemente más acotado del movimiento, la demanda de esta campaña era un argumento implícito para una renta básica incondicional, individual y universal. Al igual que otros precedentes históricos de los movimientos contemporáneos por la renta básica, la campaña de Wages for Housework no tuvo éxito en la consecución de su objetivo político. A pesar de su fracaso, su identificación de las amas de casa no asalariadas como trabajadoras, su extensión del concepto de ama de casa a los trabajadores precarios de la economía globalizada y su identificación de las deficiencias estratégicas de los principales movimientos obreros y feministas son fundamentales para contextualizar los debates contemporáneos sobre la renta básica, y para el desarrollo de estrategias exitosas para los movimientos contemporáneos de la clase trabajadora.

**Palabras clave:** Mariarosa Dalla Costa; Silvia Federici; salario por trabajo doméstico; renta básica; trabajo doméstico; ama de casa; género; feminismo; marxismo; capitalismo.

**Summary.** 1. Introduction. 2. Brief history of the Wages for Housework movement. 3. Theoretical roots of the Wages for Housework movement. 4. The Wages for Housework critique of capitalism. 5. Wages for Housework as demand for basic income. 6. Conclusion: Wages for Housework and the reimagining of communal life. 7. Bibliography.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the Marxist-feminist argument for basic income implicit in the 1970s international movement known as “Wages for Housework” (hereafter WfH). The WfH movement, in its official organizational status, was active for less than a decade. Like other historical precedents for a basic income movement, the WfH movement was unsuccessful in achieving its material goal. Despite their failures, understanding the demands, strategies, and practices of these movements is critical for the contemporary basic income movement. In this paper I explore the meaning of the WfH movement’s core demand of a “wage for housework”. This provocative slogan can and has been read as a reformist demand for compensation for unwaged domestic labor. I read it instead as an underappreciated revolutionary perspective on capitalism that is essential to contextualizing the contemporary basic income debate as well as broader working class struggles in capitalist economies. I begin by tracing a brief history of the WfH movement and exploring its roots in two prior materialist movements: Marxist historical materialism and “material feminism”. I then articulate its Marxist-feminist critique of capitalism, drawing parallels with the critique of capitalism in some arguments for basic income, and conclude by considering how the demand for a wage for housework can be read as a demand for an unconditional, individual, and universal basic income.

## 2. Brief history of the Wages for Housework movement

The Wages for Housework movement was launched in Italy in 1972 by the International Feminist Collective (IFC), a group founded by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici and Brigitte Galtier (Toupin, 2018: 83-84) In Federici’s words, its goal was “to open a process of international feminist mobilization that would force the state to recognize that domestic work is work” and to remunerate it accordingly (Federici, 2012: 8) The IFC brought a critical Marxist perspective to the analysis of the place of housework in the larger system of capitalist domination. It argued that the foundation of “productive”, waged, and typically male labor is unpaid, “reproductive”, and typically female labor in the home, and that the emancipation of waged labor can only come through the emancipation of unwaged labor.

The IFC’s founding manifesto declared the centrality of women’s reproductive work to both class struggle and the women’s movement (International Feminist Collective, 1972). At a time when the mainstream women’s movements were rebelling against patriarchal domination of women, these women sought to expose the hidden exploitation of women by the capitalist economic system the mainstream women’s movements largely ignored. At the same time, the group demanded that the labor movement recognize the productive role of domestic labor in the home, which had therefore to be a site of working class struggle as central as the factory. Calling attention to the intersectionality of women’s gender and class exploitations, these women rejected both feminism’s subordinate role in class struggle, and class struggle’s subordinate role in the women’s movement. “Class struggle and feminism for us are one and the same thing, feminism expressing the rebellion of that section of the class without whom the class struggle cannot be generalised, broadened and deepened” (International Feminist Collective, 1972). Despite this posited unity with the labor movement, the manifesto declared the need for an autonomous international women’s movement independent of the traditional laborist left.

The founding of the IFC led to the establishment of WfH groups in cities in Italy, France, Switzerland, England, the US, Mexico, Argentina and Canada (Toupin, 2018). The groups formed, in the words of the Swiss affiliate “an embryo of a women’s Internationale” (Toupin, 2018: 97). National WfH groups sponsored meetings, lectures, rallies, marches, and international conferences spreading their Marxist feminist message, and the founders and members elaborated their perspective through books, articles, and speeches. Members of the movement attended international women’s conferences and fought to put the problem of housework on the agenda of the mainstream women’s movements, which were more focused at the time on women’s access to the waged labor force. WfH activists fought for the preservation and extension of family and children’s allowances, against social assistance cuts for women-led families, for reproductive autonomy and access to gynecological services, and for improvements to women’s waged working conditions, particularly those that demanded “emotional labor” on top of their job functions. The Swiss affiliate, *L’insoumise* (“The Rebellious”), perhaps best embodied the movement’s call for women to reclaim resources and autonomy from the state, creating communal childcare centers and women’s health clinics, fabricating coupons entitling women to free rail travel to attend their congress and to free abortions in honor of the United Nations’ 1975 “Year of the Woman”. This group declared themselves against housework and demanded a generous wage for mothers to do with what they pleased (Toupin, 2018: chap. 6).

Despite these local successes, the IFC did not survive for long. As an organization, it seems not to have resolved the tension between its egalitarian ethos and the need for structures of leadership, particularly given the international dispersion of its members and founders in the pre-internet age. In later interviews (Toupin, 2018: 220-52), Dalla Costa noted the general lack of funding at the time for feminist causes, and more specifically the repression of activism in Italy in response to Red Brigade violence, though it should be noted that social-

ist feminists won more recognition in the Italian labor movement in the 1970s than did their peers in other countries (Cockburn, 1984). Federici noted the mainstream women's movements' dominance by middle class and professional women, who prioritized equal access to paid employment outside the home over recognition of women's reproductive work in the home. In addition, welfare states came under attack in the 1970s after decades of expansion, and conservatism and neoliberalism emerged as alternative ideologies to the perceived failures of liberalism and in rebuttal to the increasing demands of women and minorities for equal access to political and economic goods. The IFC ceased its coordination of local WfH efforts in 1977 (Toupin, 2018: 126-28).

### 3. Theoretical roots of the Wages for Housework movement

The WfH movement emerged from the women's movements and labor movements of the second half of the 20th century, but its deeper roots lie in a pair of materialist perspectives with origins in the 19th century: Marxist historical materialism, and in particular its claim that social and political norms and institutions shift in response to changes in economic relations of production (Marx, 1859: Preface); and feminist materialists' efforts to socialize and industrialize housework (Hayden, 1981).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels discussed the role of gender in their critique of capitalism in *The German Ideology*, written in 1845-46 (Marx and Engels, 1932). Engels restated their discussion in his 1884 manuscript *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. "The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children (...) The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male" (Engels, 1972: 129). Engels conceived of marriage under capitalism in terms analogous to waged labor: a "free" contract of imagined equals, but in reality a form of coercion by the class with economic power over the class without. The wife is distinguished from the prostitute only "in that she does not let out her body on piecework as a wage worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery" (Engels, 1972: 135-36, 134).

On this point orthodox Marxists and Marxist feminists agreed. The WfH theorists accepted and extended the Marxist critique of marriage, as well as the underlying materialist premise that changes in the mode of production lead to changes in social norms and institutions. They acknowledged that a gendered division of labor had existed previously but argued that capitalism had transformed housework from socially necessary and publicly recognized labor in pre-capitalist communities to a private service and the concealed form of slavery Marx and Engels described. Where the WfH theorists diverge from Marxist materialists is on the assumption that the family and all inequality between men and women will disappear under socialized production, a utopian vision built on the false premise that all reproductive work can be subsumed under commodity production.

Another aspect of Marxist theory became the subject of debate among Marxist feminists in the 1960s: whether women produce "exchange value" or "use value" only. In orthodox Marxist theory, commodities produced for exchange on the market have both use value and exchange value. In contrast, goods produced for private consumption have only use value. The appearance of commodity production on a large scale signals the start of the capitalist era. The production of goods with use value only is pre-capitalist, carried out by peasants and housewives, outside the bounds of Marxist theory (Mandel, 1969: 18-21).

Reconsidering this dismissal of the labor of so many women became a project for Marxist feminists. Does reproductive labor create only use value, or does it create exchange value "in the form of the labour power of the adult male worker, sold like any other commodity on the market, with his overalls neatly pressed and his sandwiches in his pocket"? (Bryson, 2003, 206). Or are housewives oppressed by patriarchy, but not "exploited", a condition reserved for those in a wage relationship with capital? (Secombe, 1974). Can housewives be part of the labor movement, or must they be wage-earners to belong? While the theoretical debate continued, trade unions did little to address women's disproportionate responsibility for domestic work, let alone sign up housewives as members. The Marxist consensus that the emancipation of women would follow the industrialization of housework gained ground as more women joined the waged labor force, despite the fact that it was not industrialization that relieved (some) waged women of housework, but commodification and globalization that redistributed it to other waged and unwaged workers. The question of housework and its relation to capitalism and the labor movement's struggles against it remained unresolved until the WfH theorists gave it a more definitive answer, discussed below.

The second strand of materialism related to the WfH movement is "material feminism", so named by urban historian Dolores Hayden, who traces the efforts of American feminists in the 19th and 20th centuries to liberate women from housework through cooperative and architectural innovations (Hayden, 1981). Many of the early material feminists took inspiration from French philosopher Charles Fourier, one of the 19th century communitarian socialists dismissed by Marx as "utopian" (Marx and Engels, 1848: chap. 3). Fourier imagined egalitarian communities living and laboring in common, with the emancipation of women a central goal. Fourier, and his fellow communitarian socialist Robert Owen, inspired the creation of dozens of intentional

communities in Europe and the US. In Fourier's ideal, all labor —agricultural, manufacturing, and domestic— was to be shared equally, though in reality, Hayden reports, women were generally confined to domestic labor in these intentional communities and did not receive equal pay (Hayden, 1981: 39).

Fourier-inspired communities did achieve one goal of the material feminists, which was to end the isolation of women in separate households. The transition from agrarian to industrialized economies had differential effects on men and women. As families moved to urban industrial centers, the sociability of men's work increased, while that of women's decreased.

The growth of manufacturing meant that while the rest of society appeared to be moving forward to socialized labor, the housewife, encased in the woman's sphere, slowly became more isolated from her husband, who now worked away from home; her children, who attended school all day; and the rural social networks of kin and neighbors which were disrupted by migration to the growing urban centers (Hayden, 1981: 13).

A second group of material feminists took up this challenge, experimenting with ways to socialize housework in urban centers, by establishing community dining rooms, laundries, and childcare. Some did so with the goal of gaining compensation for women's unpaid domestic labor, others with the goal of freeing women to take on work outside the home without neglecting domestic responsibilities. Others designed kitchen-less apartments and homes, some for families and others for single or working women. As with Fourier's communities of labor, many experiments in communal housekeeping and kitchen-less living were launched, with some in the US lasting years or decades (Hayden, 1981).

But just as Marxist historical materialism had foundered on the issue of gender, cooperative housekeeping foundered on the issue of class. If cooperative housekeeping was meant to compensate women for their labor, it was hard to convince men to pay for something they were already getting for free from their economically dependent wives. If it was meant to liberate middle-class women from housework, was it not just shifting housework to poorer women, especially those who might be excluded by racism or anti-immigrant sentiment from other kinds of work? Should housekeeping enterprises be capitalist and make a profit, or should they be socialist and organized as producer or consumer cooperatives? The most successful of these experiments in the US were those with either a clear profit-making or social motivation and whose participants were members of a single class, including commercial food delivery services for affluent urbanites, settlement houses for single working women, union-built housing for working class families, and dining clubs for middle class families in the Midwest (Hayden, 1981).

In a sense, the material feminist movement addressed the symptoms of women's confinement to the domestic sphere without attacking the underlying problem, as it was later identified by the WfH theorists: the way women's unpaid labor serves not just men as a class but the capitalist system, and the way capitalism shapes families and communities to serve its interests. Following the first disruption of rural to urban migration in the 19th century in the US, which helped shape the class identity of working class men and provided the proximity required for cooperative housekeeping and a restoration of women's networks, a second disruption of urban to suburban migration occurred in the 20th century. Suburban homeownership divided workers along class and racialized lines and created a new spatial isolation for wives and mothers. At the same time, the growing consumer manufacturing sector promised to alleviate the drudgery of individualized housekeeping with labor saving appliances. Hayden documents the strategic intentions of business interests to use home ownership to suppress the American socialist movement in the first decades of the 20th century, especially after the Russian Revolution, in guides titled *Good Homes Make Contented Workers* (1919) and *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929) (Hayden, 1981: 283-86). Material feminists lacked a strategy for uniting not only women of different races and classes, but also for rallying men to their cause, until the WfH theorists exposed the connection between women's subordination and capitalist domination of the working class.

#### 4. The Wages for Housework critique of capitalism

The first essay by a WfH theorist, Selma James' essay "A Woman's Place" (1953), exemplifies the movement's conceptual advance over these previous materialist movements in tying women's growing rebellion against their confinement to the domestic sphere to the labor movement's ongoing struggle against conditions of employment. James describes the problems faced by wives and mothers in terms that intentionally evoke critiques of waged working conditions: the isolation of housewives, the repetitive nature of reproductive work, the lack of defined working hours, and the invisibility of "the boss" The boss was actually her husband's boss, but because of her reliance on her husband's wage, he was her boss too. The essay is more a rumination on the condition of women typical of feminist writings in the 1950s than the call to action the WfH theorists would later produce. James' suggested solution is the one that was typically voiced by the mainstream women's and labor movements: escaping the constraints of the domestic sphere through a waged job outside the home.

While James' essay marks the first link by a WfH theorist of housework and the labor movement, it did not fully explain the relation of housework to capitalist production, nor did it articulate the revolutionary demand



for wages for housework that became the WfH's theorists' distinct contribution. That demand first appeared in an essay by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, a professor at the Institute of Political and Social Sciences in Padua, Italy. Its detailed analysis of capitalist exploitation of women's labor would become the basis of the IFC's founding manifesto.

Dalla Costa's "Women and the Subversion of Community" (1972) introduces the WfH theorists' perspective on the historical materialism of women's subordination. Dalla Costa argues that the oppression of women preceded the shift from feudalism to capitalism, but that capitalism had both intensified women's exploitation and created the possibility of their liberation. Prior to capitalism, men were "despotic heads of the patriarchal family", but "all members of serf families shared the same unfreedom" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 23-24). Production and reproduction were co-located in the extended family home, with all family members seen as contributors to agricultural production. With the advent of the factory, production and reproduction were separated. Those who did not "procreate and service" wage workers were "expelled" from the family home: children to schools and the aged to old-age homes. Wage-earning men became "free" and "independent", and their "free" waged labor created a new oppositional dependency of women, children, and the aged. At the same time, however, men became responsible for the support of their "dependents", intensifying their own dependency on wages, and thus on capitalists.

Far from being merely a supplier of use values under capitalism, Dalla Costa argued, women's labor in the home is essential to the production of surplus value, because the home is the site of the reproduction and socialization of labor. Far from being "a personal service outside of capital", as patriarchal ideology makes it appear, women's labor in the home is part of the capitalist assembly line, as capital requires all members of society "to function in ways that are if not immediately, then ultimately profitable to the expansion and extension of the rule of capital" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 28). Even children are part of the assembly line, sent to schools run by the state to learn to be productive workers in the future. The nuclear family is a family form created by industrial capitalism on the foundation of pre-capitalist patriarchy. It is "the very pillar of capitalist organization of work" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 35), and it functions as a "social factory" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 22). "The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he and she will never be anything but workers" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 41).

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage laborer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage laborer been organized (Dalla Costa, 1972: 27-28).

This segregation of capitalist labor and its obscuring of the true nature of women's work excludes women from working class movements. It is "a basic contradiction in the class struggle, and a contradiction which is functional to capitalist development" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 35). Housewives are unable to strike, and men, soothed by the comforts of the home, are less likely to. A true working class movement, Dalla Costa argues, needs to consider housewives and housework as central, not secondary, to class struggle.

This grounding of the analysis of women's exploitation in a larger system of capitalist exploitation explains why Dalla Costa rejects the "myth" prevalent in the largely middle class, mainstream women's movements, "of liberation through work" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 49).

Work is still work, whether inside or outside the home. The independence of the wage earner means only being a "free individual" for capital, no less for women than for men. Those who advocate that the liberation of the working class woman lies in her getting a job outside the home are part of the problem, not the solution (Dalla Costa, 1972: 35).

Furthermore, women cannot escape their responsibility for reproductive work by taking on productive work. "We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 21). Dalla Costa, and James before her (James, 1953), describe what has come to be known as working women's "second shift" (Hochschild 1989): women performing the bulk of the domestic labor in the evening after both husband and wife work outside the home during the day. "The husband tends to read the paper and wait for his dinner to be cooked and served, even when his wife goes out to work as he does and comes home with him" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 35).

Dalla Costa's essay signals the dual nature of the WfH demand, as both a reform under capitalism and a revolutionary perspective against capitalism. At the same time, she displays ambivalence about the implications of the demand that would become the slogan of the movement. Demanding wages for housework risks looking like a desire "to entrench the condition of institutionalized slavery", she writes (Dalla Costa, 1972: 36). But she adds that the WfH demand has radicalized the women who demand it, who can no longer be placated by a meager monthly allowance:

the demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to immediately link female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploita-

tion. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand for wages for housework. This gives at once an indication for struggle, a direction in organizational terms in which oppression and exploitation, situation of caste and class, find themselves insolubly linked. The practical, continuous translation of this perspective is the task the movement is facing in Italy and elsewhere (Dalla Costa, 1972: fn 16).

The goal of the movement, and its demand, is this radicalization, and marks its distinction from the earlier strands of historical materialism and material feminism: “The starting point is not how to do housework more efficiently, but how to find a place as protagonists in the struggle; that is, not a higher productivity of domestic labor but a higher subversiveness in the struggle” (Dalla Costa, 1972: 36). The revolutionary message is clear: capitalism was the power behind the contemporary subordination of women, and thus the object of a struggle that should unite women and men. The essay leaves the question of how a housewife’s wage would be organized in practice, or even if such a wage was desirable, to the future work of the movement.

The challenge to the women’s movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalist control and regimentation. This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women’s movement (Dalla Costa, 1972: 50).

While James’ and Dalla Costa’s essays were foundational to the establishment of the IFC and the launch of the WfH campaign, Italian-American philosopher Silvia Federici became the movement’s most prolific theorist and gave the clearest explanation of the movement’s demand. Federici was one of the founding members of the IFC in Padua in 1972, and the co-founder with Nicole Cox of the New York Wages for Housework Committee (Federici, 2017). She published several essays in 1975 that clarified and extended the arguments introduced by Dalla Costa.

In “Counter-Planning from the Kitchen” (Cox and Federici, 1975), Cox and Federici responded to a critique of Dalla Costa written by anthropologist Carole Lopate (1974). Lopate voiced the mainstream women’s movements’ fear that paying wages to housewives would reinforce women’s responsibility for housework and continue to consign them to the domestic sphere of reproductive work. She articulated as well the traditional working class critique that “the ideological preconditions for working-class solidarity are networks and connections which arise from working together”, not among women working in isolated homes (Lopate, 1974: 9). But her article also illustrated her failure to appreciate the more radical elements of the feminist and working class critiques of the *status quo* that the housewives’ perspective allowed Dalla Costa. Lopate worried that because working-class men would fear that the money for housewives’ wages would likely come from their wages the WfH demand would undermine working class solidarity. She also lamented the fact that assigning a wage to housework would eliminate the one part of capitalist society not based on exchange value. “The home and family have traditionally provided the only interstice of capitalist life in which people can possibly serve each other’s needs out of love or care, even if it is often also out of fear and domination” (Lopate, 1974: 10). Lopate concedes that solving the gendered division of labor would require “a total restructuring of private work” (Lopate, 1974: 11), but fails to see that potential in the WfH demand.

Cox and Federici’s response makes clear the blindness of both the mainstream women’s and labor movements to the way these critiques undermine the nascent power of the working class and serve the interests of capitalists. Their essay amplifies the more revolutionary aspects of the movement’s demands, framing WfH as a liberation not only of women but of all workers, and a way of unifying the working class by making previously invisible work visible. They critique the mainstream left for choosing some to be “revolutionary subjects” while consigning others to supporting roles, reproducing a division of labor imposed not by nature, but capital (Cox and Federici, 1975: 28-29).

In this thread of their critique, Cox and Federici extend the gendered division of labor to the division into different labor markets by other characteristics, such as whites vs. Blacks, youth vs. adults, First World vs. Third World. The gendered division of labor is a mark of the underlying opposition of “a ‘working class’ to a ‘non-working’ proletariat, supposedly parasitic on the work of the former... Ultimately the social weakness of the wageless has been and is the weakness of the entire working class with respect to capital” (Cox and Federici, 1975: 36). In this way, they demonstrate that adopting the housewives’ perspective, rather than limiting the analysis to the comparatively narrow question of how women can achieve equality with men, expands inevitably to the much broader question of how workers can advance their interests against capitalists. They argue that this perspective should lead not only to solidarity between (white) men and (white) women, but also with Black Americans, the unemployed, the incarcerated, and the globalized labor force of the Third World:

Not to see women’s work in the home is to be blind to the work and struggles of the overwhelming majority of the world’s population that is wageless. It is to ignore that American capital was built on slave labor as well as waged labor and, up to this day, it thrives on the unwaged labor of millions of women and men in the fields, kitchens, and prisons of the United States and throughout the world (Cox and Federici, 1975: 31).

They refute Lopate's claim that waged work is the prerequisite for working class movements by pointing to the organization and struggle of Black American women welfare recipients in the 1960s for welfare benefits for single mothers (Kornbluh, 2007; Nadasen, 2012). They also critique both the racism and the defeatism in Lopate's claim that the welfare recipients' campaign had a "devastating" long-term effect on white-Black relations because members of the white working class knew that they would be the ones to pay (Lopate, 1974: 9-10). "If we assume that every struggle must end up in a redistribution of poverty we assume the inevitability of our defeat" (Cox and Federici, 1975: 40).

Cox and Federici also articulate the role of the WfH demand for wages in defining the movement as a revolutionary movement against capitalism, not a reform under capitalism. "Already [Lopate's] title —'Pay for Housework'— misrepresents the issue, for a wage is not just a bit of money, but is the expression of the power relation between capital and the working class" (Cox and Federici, 1975: 30). This is an issue Federici expands on in another 1975 essay, "Wages Against Housework":

Many times the difficulties and ambiguities that women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the fact that they reduce wages for housework to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective... To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society... The problem with this position is that in our imagination we usually add a bit of money to the wretched lives we have now and then ask 'so what?' on the false premise that we could ever get that money without at the same time revolutionizing—in the process of struggling for it—all our family and social relations (Federici, 1975: 15).

Because the demand for wages for housework demystifies women's oppression under capitalism it is not only a revolutionary perspective, but "the only revolutionary perspective from a feminist viewpoint" (Federici, 1975: 16). Unlike wage workers' demands for higher wages, the demand of housewives for wages outside of "productive" work "forces capital to restructure social relations in terms more favorable to us and consequently more favorable to the unity of the class" (Federici, 1975: 19).

## 5. Wages for Housework as demand for basic income

In the context of the contemporary basic income debate, WfH might seem, in a literal reading of its slogan, to be better aligned with a conditional, categorical, and family-based benefit, such as an extension of the child and family allowances implemented by many welfare states, for example. Or it might seem to embody what economist Anthony Atkinson called a "participation income", a benefit for those who contribute some socially-recognized unwaged work, including care work in the home (Atkinson, 1996 and 2015). But the WfH theorists make clear that WfH is incompatible with an income benefit contingent on family status, the performance of housework, or a supervisory role for the state in defining socially-valuable labor (James, 1974; Federici, 1975) Cox and Federici explicitly credit as inspiration to WfH the movements of women welfare recipients in the 1960s to demand the replacement of meager conditional welfare payments with a generous guaranteed income in recognition of their critical work as mothers (Cox and Federici, 1975: 38). The welfare recipients' movements also fought against the intrusive monitoring and control of their sexuality—in the form of man in the house searches,— and their fertility—in the form of enforced birth control or sterilization, or denial of abortion services— (Kornbluh, 2007; Nadasen, 2012). In this way, they rejected the conditioning of their income on the state-sanctioned performance of motherhood a participation income implies. The WfH movement fought for women's access to income independent of marital status, and its members saw the receipt of wages as the way women could be liberated from housework, not confined to it. "In fact, to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite" (Federici, 1975: 5). I argue instead that the wage envisioned by the WfH movement is more accurately conceived of as an *unconditional, individual, and universal* payment, or what has come to be known in English as a basic income, or *renta básica*. Some of the intersections of the WfH perspective with arguments for basic income are clear, while others require some elaboration. I take each key feature of basic income in turn: its unconditionality, individuality, and universality. I discuss how each contributes to the emancipation of women, and indeed all workers, from the status of "housewife".

At the heart of the demand for WfH is the desire to reverse the devastating economic effects of women's primary association with "reproductive work", and the way this association results in their exclusion from what is considered "productive work" once capitalism succeeds feudalism. This exclusion is discussed at length in Federici's work in the years after the WfH movement was active. In two later books (Federici, 2004 and 2018), Federici turns her attention to analyzing the enclosure movements and the emergence of agrarian capitalism in Europe in the late 16th century. During the enclosure movements, grazing and hunting commons were fenced off in order to privatize land to promote commodity production. This transformed the feudal peasant with ac-



cess to land for subsistence farming into a proletarian worker forced into precarious wage labor, on which his ability to purchase the commodities necessary for life would now depend.

The enclosure of the commons and the development of exclusive property rights forms the basis for the earliest calls for an income independent of waged labor, by Thomas Paine (1797) and Thomas Spence (1797). Paine, who was a participant in both the French and American Revolutions, was motivated by the disjunction between the natural equality articulated in Enlightenment and revolutionary philosophies and the material inequality of his times. Rather than trust the productive capacity of private property regimes to improve the material conditions of all classes through waged labor and market transactions, Paine proposed inheritance tax-financed grants to young adults, the disabled, and the elderly to compensate for the loss of direct access to the land and natural resources (Paine, 1797). Thomas Spence took Paine's proposal a step further, extending the grant to all members of society, and funding it through land taxes rather than inheritance taxes (Spence, 1797). These grants were to be *unconditional*, outside of any wage relations, justified by the unconditional natural right to the means of subsistence, not on the satisfaction of any condition of employment.

Spence goes further than Paine, arguing that the enclosure movement had particularly disastrous effects for our reproductive needs. Federici agrees, and also argues that the enclosure movement was in fact several simultaneous "enclosures". A second, metaphorical, enclosure of nature occurred simultaneously, as men sought to dominate nature rather than live in harmony with it. As anthropologist James Scott relates in *Seeing Like a State* (1999), this took the form of an attempt to impose order on "disorganized" nature to facilitate projections of its capacity to produce commodities for exchange. To consolidate their power, central governments and other elites sought to stamp out alternative sources of knowledge and power, including informal social networks and customary healers, enacting a third enclosure of approved forms of knowledge (Federici, 2018).

Each of these enclosures had devastating effects on women, especially older women, whose work depended on the commons more than men's, who served as social connectors in their communities, and who used traditional practices for care of themselves, their families, and their neighbors, including in the realm of reproduction. Women came to be enclosed in the nuclear family, chastened for "gossiping" with other women, and stripped of control over their own sexuality and reproduction (Federici, 2018). Those who resisted were persecuted as witches, tortured and brutally murdered as a warning to other women—and men—to submit to patriarchal, state, and capitalist control.

The witch was the communist and terrorist of her time, which required a "civilizing" drive to produce the new "subjectivity" and sexual division of labor on which the capitalist work discipline would rely... At the stakes not only were the bodies of the "witches" destroyed, so was a whole world of social relations that had been the basis of women's social power and a vast body of knowledge that women had transmitted from mother to daughter over the generations—knowledge of herbs, of the means of contraception or abortion, of what magic to use to obtain the love of men (Federici, 2018: 33).

This strand of Federici's work explains how the creation of the housewife was a necessary part of capitalist expansion. It divided by gender and fear those who might resist the privatizations of property. Both agrarian capitalism and, later, industrial capitalism required privatization not only for the economies of scale that accelerated the accumulation of capital, but also for the production and reproduction of a mobile proletarian labor force without ties to land or community. The first aspect of labor reproduction that occurs in the family is sexual reproduction, but sexual reproduction itself does not require any particular family structure. The role of the family under capitalist regimes, Federici argues, is to control reproduction in two ways: first, to determine "legitimate" heirs for the inheritance of exclusive property, and second to impose enforceable norms around socially and politically desirable rates of fertility, which change according to the needs of capitalists for more or less labor. Dalla Costa and Federici both identify sectors and periods of industrialization in which women's labor power is required in the waged labor force and leads to reductions in fertility and the performance of housework (Dalla Costa, 1972: 33; Federici, 2019: 157-58). This in turn leads to male worker unrest and declines in the reproduction of labor, broadly defined to encompass the care and restoration of adult labor in addition to childrearing. This unrest inspires responses from the state and capitalists to shift production from light to heavy industries, reduce the need for women's labor, increase the "family wage" and return women to unwaged housework.

The family thus becomes one of the state and capitalists' social intermediaries, along with organized religion, to discipline women's reproductive capacities. It does this by prohibiting and punishing women's (but not men's) sexual activities outside of marriage, by compelling sex within marriage through state-sanctioned violence, by policing women's access to contraceptives and abortifacients, and through enforced sterilization. Women can't resist these forms of domination in the family when they are economically dependent on men as housewives.

The WfH theorists' condemnation of the family might suggest that they would be abolitionists, like some second wave feminists who urged separatism from men and abstention from child rearing (Allen, 1983; Donovan, 2006, chap. 6), but their objection is not to sexual relations with men or to reproductive labor, but to the confinement and dependency engendered by the particular form the family has taken under capitalism. Here



they align with feminist critics of family-based social welfare benefits which predicate housewives access to health care, pensions, and income support on marital status and a waged worker's earnings, or on identification of children's fathers. These requirements have the effect of coercing women to enter into or remain in marriages or partnerships that may be unwanted or, in the worst case, sources of emotional and physical abuse (McKay, 2005). As discussed below, Federici and other WfH theorists argue for a larger scope in modern life for caregiving and reproductive work, but only on a foundation of economic sufficiency and sustainability. The "wage for housework" should be read, then, not as compensation for the performance of a particular role in a family, but as a foundation of material resources for the reproductive work itself, accessible directly on an *unconditional* and *individual* basis rather than on the basis of a socially-sanctioned family role, or indirectly through a "family wage" or employment-based benefits.

As Federici notes, the individual basis of a wage for housework has the potential to "de-sexualize" housework (Federici, 1984: 58). After all, men as well as women have reproductive needs and should have the time and resources necessary to meet them. Federici critiques the mainstream women's movements both for seeking to universalize the male condition of waged work outside the home and for leaving the division of household labor to private negotiations, rather than seeking structural reforms to the gendered division of socially necessary reproductive labor (Federici, 1975 and 1984). An individual wage for housework provides a structural foundation for a more egalitarian division of that work, as it allows for the combination of traditionally waged and unwaged work by all, regardless of gender (Fraser, 1997; Zelleke, 2008 and 2011).

An individual wage for housework without gender distinctions also facilitates family structures outside of the heterosexual norm, supporting lesbian and gay families as well as partnerships that fall outside the model of monogamous "love" marriage. If contemporary marriage and family forms have been structured by capitalist relations of production, disrupting their economic basis opens up the possibility of new family forms, including the return to extended family households, the adoption of transitory partnerships organized around the early childrearing years, or a renewal of the intentional communities envisioned by communitarian socialists and material feminists. Engels predicted that the nuclear family would cease to be the economic unit of society when the means of production were transferred into common ownership (Engels, 1872: 139), but an *unconditional* and *individual* wage would liberate both women and men from the mutual dependence embedded in the nuclear family without requiring full socialization of the means of economy first. Rather, the wage for housework is the foundation on which a unified working class can begin to engage in the larger struggle against capitalism (Federici, 1975; 1984). Winning the struggle requires attention to the third key feature of a wage for housework or basic income: *universality*.

The universal nature of a basic income has taken on several meanings in contemporary debates. In normative terms, the principle of universality stems from familiar notions of liberal equality, social inclusion, and entitlement to the material goods necessary for life. In policy terms, the principle of universality stands in contrast to the categorical nature of differential social welfare benefits accorded to different demographic groups, including children, the elderly, mothers, members of the civil or military services, the poor, and so on (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In the contemporary global debate on basic income, the idea of universality has for some extended beyond the borders of the nation state, in proposals for regional benefit schemes (Howard, 2007; Van Parijs, 2013), and as a means of global redistribution of income and wealth (Wells, 2019).

In the context of the WfH movement, the principle of universality again seems to stand in contradiction to the literal meaning of a wage for housework, which suggests a restriction to those who actually perform such work (Weeks, 2011: 137). Throughout their work the WfH theorists repeat Dalla Costa's initial declaration that "all women are housewives" (Dalla Costa, 1972: 21), including those who work outside the home or who employ household help. This claim can be read as either rhetorical overreach or as a relic of a time before the entry of larger numbers of women into waged labor forced men to take on more unwaged work in the home, but neither reading is correct. They mean it to describe a fundamental truth about the social position of all women as a class under capitalism: women are the class to which housework is assigned. But why? How did housework come to be assigned to women, rather than experienced as a naturally shared part of life for all?

First, they argue, all women are housewives due to women's biological role in reproduction; regardless of the actions or behavior of any particular woman, all women will be seen as at least potentially tied to this role (Dalla Costa, 1972: 30-31). Second, this biological reproductive function is inextricably tied to sexuality, marking all women as potential sexual partners for men. Third, this reproductive function has been extended into a larger responsibility for care in the family, and this caregiving role has been naturalized as a feminine trait (James, 1974: 12). It is not, as some have argued, women's reproductive function itself that explains women's subordination to men, but the way a functional division of labor has been essentialized as a part of women's identity. Housework, Federici writes, has been "transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (Federici, 1975: 16).

Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner offered an explanation for the process by which this essentialization of women's identity occurs in a seminal article published just as the WfH movement emerged (Ortner, 1972). Women's consistent subordination to men throughout history and across cultures stems, she suggests, from the

perception that women's reproductive functions situate women closer to nature than to culture, the "systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest" (Ortner, 1972: 10). The temporary confinements of childbirth and nursing lead to further divisions of labor that reinforce women's identification with nature and further restrict women to the realm of the family and household, while reinforcing men's identification with culture and responsibility for broader inter-familial and social relations. This social division of labor in turn engenders different psychological traits, of particularism for women and abstraction for men, and of a personal approach to relationships for women versus a positional approach for men. These contingent but mutually reinforcing roles and traits further entrench the sexual division of labor and are transformed from empirical observations to normative explanations for the subordination of women to men.

This gives rise to the expectation that women will perform the labor of comforting and sexually servicing men, and of nurturing familial and social connections. Federici describes these feminized forms of labor as a set of expectations beyond household or employment boundaries that perpetuate women's subservience to men:

Once housework is totally naturalized and sexualized, once it becomes a feminine attribute, all of us as women are characterized by it. If it is natural to do certain things, then all women are expected to do them and even like doing them—even those women who, due to their social position, can escape some of that work or most of it, because their husbands can afford maids... We might not serve one man, but we are all in a servant relation with respect to the entire male world (Federici, 1975: 18).

Even women who work (or simply walk) outside the home are expected to soothe men, she writes, including men in service roles themselves: "Smile, honey, what's the matter with you?" is something every man feels entitled to ask you, whether he is your husband, or the man who takes your ticket on a train, or your boss at work" (Federici, 1975: 18). The characterization of all women as housewives thus expresses the demand for recognition of women's work to include the kind of emotional and affective labor demanded of all women whether they are housewives or not.

But the attribution of particular qualities to different genders does not yet explain how a hierarchy of value or power becomes embedded in these gender distinctions. Ortner asks why women's ability to create and nurture life would lead to women's subservience to men, who have more association with killing than with creating life. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir, Ortner concludes that

it is not the killing that is the relevant and valued aspect of hunting and warfare; rather it is the transcendental (social, cultural) nature of these activities, as opposed to the naturalness of the process of birth: "For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills" (Ortner, 1972: 14).

Ortner's theory explains why patriarchy emerges in traditional human societies, but it doesn't explain why it would persist in the capitalist era, no longer organized exclusively around hunting and warfare, with many more occupations open to both men and women, and with both genders now able to take part in social and cultural as well as life giving activities. Under capitalism, Federici argues, hunting and warfare have given way to forms of productivity and risk centered around the factory. Waged workers part of a "social contract", a wage relationship, that is legitimized as a social site of struggle. But the struggle over housework continues to be confined to individual, rather than social negotiation—a "privatised kitchen-bedroom quarrel" in the private sphere of the family (Federici, 1975: 16). Without the elevation of the question of housework to the social realm, housework continues to mark those who perform it as socially inferior.

If women's reproductive capacities explain their relative position in the social hierarchy, this same hierarchy can be used to differentiate men's relative positions, especially as industrialization increases the differentiation of labor and consigns increasing numbers of waged workers to dull and repetitive labor while a minority of skilled "professional" workers participate in "transcendental" activities and thus are positioned further up the hierarchy.

Sociologist Claudia von Werlhof, a member of one of the German affiliates when the WfH movement was active, traces the arc of the "proletarian" worker of Marxist theory from its idealized dominance in advanced capitalist economies to its minority position within those economies and in the globalized labor force (von Werlhof, 1984). Its majority status was always an illusion, she argues, since the proletariat excluded women, slaves, the unemployed, and the imprisoned, and it enjoyed a privileged position of union-won wages and benefits well above the norm for those outside its bounds. Because the dominant women's movements fought for the access of a minority of women to that proletarian status, rather than for the recognition of housework as work, the illusion persisted a few decades longer than it should have. But the illusion that this privileged proletariat is representative of the working class was finally destroyed when globalization allowed capitalists to move production to countries with lower labor costs and lax regulatory regimes. It is now clear that workers in the global South serve, just as women do, as a vast reserve army of labor to discipline workers in advanced

economies, their low wages and non-existent labor protections justified by their countries' positions on the hierarchy of development (von Werlhof, 1984; Mies, 1986). On the other hand, the globalization of housework, with migrant domestic workers from the global South leaving their own families behind to take jobs in domestic service for wealthier families, contributes to the illusion that waged work is the route to the emancipation of privileged women from housework (Federici, 1999: 71-74).

In this perspective, all workers, waged and unwaged, who lack the means to subsist without waged labor, are like housewives in their dependence on their capitalist "husbands", who control their access to the means of subsistence and exclude them from the working class struggle. And the cause is the same for globalized workers as it was for women at the emergence of agrarian capitalism: the enclosure of the commons. According to Federici, a second enclosure movement, and a second witch hunt, are now taking place in developing countries, whose citizens are forced by their governments to relinquish communal rights to land and shift from subsistence agriculture to production of commodities for export (Federici, 2018: chap. 7). With the commons already depleted in the advanced capitalist economies, capital must extend its reach through globalization. "Capitalist accumulation is structurally dependent on the free appropriation of immense areas of labor and resources that must appear as externalities to the market, like the unpaid domestic work that women have provided, on which employers have relied for the reproduction of the workforce" (Federici, 2010: 140). In a globalized capitalist economy, therefore, the housewife's wage has to be *universal* both in the sense that it includes all workers, waged and unwaged, and by extending across national boundaries to workers throughout the globalized labor hierarchy.

## 6. Conclusion: Wages for Housework and the reimagining of communal life

Both the WfH demand and the idea of a basic income have seen a resurgence of interest in recent years. With some notable exceptions (Weeks, 2011; Macdonald, 2018; Nakai, 2022), the two are generally analyzed independently. The phrasing of the WfH demand made it particularly vulnerable to fears that it would entrench gendered disparities in responsibility for care work. Basic income proposals have also generated debate among feminists about whether it would promote or hinder gender egalitarianism (Robeyns, 2008). Those who see basic income as promoting gender equality focus on its ability to remedy the exploitation of unpaid caregivers and to provide women with the material means to increase their agency and autonomy (Zelleke, 2008 and 2011; Yamamori, 2014). Feminist skeptics of basic income fear that agency will lead to more women choosing to leave paid employment, perform unpaid care, and miss out on the emancipatory effects of paid employment (Robeyns, 2010; Koslowski and Duander, 2018). Analyzing these two concepts together reveals that the feminist divide that existed when the WfH movement launched remains today and is visible in basic income debates. On one side are feminists in the social democratic tradition who accept the labor-capitalist bargain that emerged in the 20th century. They see waged labor as the arena of full citizenship, and increased commodification of care work as the solution to the "problem" of care (Gheaus, 2008; Bergmann, 2008; Elson, 2017). On the other are those in the Marxist-feminist tradition who reject that bargain, demand autonomy from capitalist dominance, and reject the designation of the work of living as subordinate to the "productive" work outside the home (Richards, 2018).

The WfH theorists were squarely on the side of autonomy from capitalism. The movement's theorists argued that the struggle against capitalist domination could not be waged successfully by waged workers only. The struggle had to include, and indeed foreground, unwaged workers beginning with housewives, because it is through the unwaged that capitalists control and divide the working class. To focus the struggle against capitalism in the factories and union halls of the waged was to abandon the goal of overthrowing capitalist domination in favor of incremental improvements in working conditions. In this way, the debates over WfH and basic income can be seen as a continuation of the late 19th century debates over "evolutionary" versus "revolutionary" socialism. Evolutionary socialism won that battle in Europe, with the rise of social democratic parties and governments that forged a "middle way" between capitalism and socialism in the form of strong unions and job protections for (some) workers and robust welfare states coexisting with capitalist control of most of the means of production.

Alongside the WfH theorists' critique of selective wages for waged workers rather than universal wages for all workers is a critique of the second part of that bargain: the commodification of housework and the increased role of the state in our lives. Their work makes clear that the movement's goal was not only a redistribution of economic power from capitalists to workers, but also from the state to individuals and communities. They rejected the commodification of housework in state-run institutions as a solution to the problem of housework for two reasons. First, they believed that it would not redistribute responsibility for housework from women to men, but only among different classes of women (Federici, 1975: 6). Second, they argued that it would extend the state's, and thus capitalists', control over the reproduction of labor power.

It is one thing to set up a day care center the way we want it, and then demand that the State pay for it. It is quite another thing to deliver our children to the State and then ask the State to control them not for five but for fifteen



hours a day. It is one thing to organize communally the way we want to eat (by ourselves, in groups) and then ask the State to pay for it, and it is the opposite thing to ask the State to organize our meals. In one case we regain some control over our lives, in the other we extend the State's control over us (Federici, 1975: 21).

In Federici's later work, and in the work of von Werlhof and Mies (another member of the German WfH affiliate), this desire to regain control over reproductive work is extended to all work and linked explicitly to regaining control of land, preserving what is left of the commons in the developing world, and restoring it in the developed world (Federici, 2018; von Werlhof, 1984; Mies, 1986). Mies characterizes this new society as one founded on a prioritization of life giving, life making, and human happiness, rather than the pursuit of commodity abundance through the exploitation of nature (Mies, 1986: chap. 7). Rather than advocating a return to a pre-capitalist past that is no longer feasible, and was in any case a realm of pre-capitalist patriarchy, Federici responds that what is required is a feminist reimagining of society:

What is needed... are new forms of communalism guaranteeing an egalitarian access to land and other communal resources, one in which women are not penalized if they do not have children, if the children they have are not male, if they are old and can no longer procreate, or are widowed and without male children coming to their defense. In other words, feminist movements, inside and outside of Africa, should not let the demise and failure of a patriarchal form of communalism be used to legitimize the privatization of communal resources. They should instead engage in the construction of fully egalitarian commons... (Federici, 2018: 79-80).

This makes clear the WfH perspective that the wage for housework, or an unconditional, individual, and universal basic income, is not an end in itself but the first step in dismantling systems of capitalist and patriarchal domination that hinder our ability to imagine a more egalitarian, sustainable, and human-centered future.

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