

# **Silvia Federici, On capitalism, colonialism, women and food politics**

*Politics and Culture*, Edition 2009 Issue 2.

<http://www.politicsandculture.org/2009/11/03/silvia-federici-on-capitalism-colonialism-women-and-food-politics/>

## **An interview with Silvia Federici**

*Interviewed by Max Haiven*

Silvia Federici is a researcher, activist and educator. She was born and raised in Italy but came to the US in 1967 on a scholarship to study Philosophy at the University of Buffalo. Since then, she has taught at several universities in the US and also at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. She is now Emerita Professor at Hofstra University (Long Island, NY) and lives in Brooklyn.

A veteran feminist activist, Federici's work is informed by and in dialogue with the many struggles which have animated her career. Since the early 1970s Federici was, along with theorists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, a founder of the International Feminist Collective and an organizer with the famous Wages for Housework campaign. This movement brought together a global alliance of feminist groups to make a revolutionary challenge at the very hinge of capitalist and patriarchal power by demanding economic sovereignty for women engaged in the elemental labour of social reproduction.

Federici has also been a central part of the Midnight Notes Collective and a co-founder of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA), a support organization for the struggles of students and teachers in Africa against structural adjustment. Between 1991 and 2003 she was a co-editor of the CAFA Bulletin. In 1995, she co-founded the Radical Philosophy Association (RPA) anti-death penalty project.

Her ground-breaking 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia), received critical laudations and was much talked of in both academic and activist circles, supplying as it did a capacious, lucid and historically rigorous picture of the intersections of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism and violence from the 15th to the 18th century. The book served as a crucial corrective to both Marxist analyses of the period of primitive accumulation which write gender out as well as to the fashionable academic discourse of biopolitics. The latter, Federici argues, has tended, in the work of both Foucault and his followers, to forget the witch trials of the 16th and 17th century. These were part and parcel of the systematic destruction of women's power over biological and social reproduction and social creativity, a process essential to the enclosure and colonial movements and the scene of the nascence of both capitalism proper and the modern state.

In other work, Federici has addressed themes of enclosure, colonialism, labour, patriarchy and racism in areas as diverse as the advance of capitalist accumulation, international development policy, the labour of "immaterial workers," the analysis of social movement strategy and anti-colonial struggle.

In this interview Federici shares her thoughts on the relationship between food, agricultural production, women's work, global capitalist accumulation and struggle around the world.

Max Haiven (MH) for Politics and Culture: Your historical work has focused on the way the process of what Marx called "primitive accumulation"—the way capitalism is created out of the destruction of other ways of life—has relied upon the systematic destruction of women's power and the "accumulation of divisions" amongst the working class. Can you speak to how this relates to the history of food politics?

Silvia Federici (SF): There is a direct relation between the destruction of the social and economic power of women in the "transition to capitalism" and the politics of food in capitalist society.

In every part of the world, before the advent of capitalism, women played a major role in agricultural production. They had access to land, the use of its resources and control over the crops they cultivated, all of which guaranteed their autonomy and economic independence from men. In Africa, they had their farming and cropping systems, which were the source of a specific female culture, and they were in charge of the selection of seeds, an operation that was crucial to the prosperity of the community and whose knowledge was transmitted through the generations. The same was true of women's role in Asia and the Americas. In Europe as well, until the late medieval period, women had land-use rights and the use of the "commons"—woods, ponds, grazing grounds—that were an important source of sustenance. In addition to farming with men, they had their gardens where they cultivated vegetables as well as medicinal herbs and plants. Both in Europe and the regions the Europeans colonized, primitive accumulation and capitalist development changed this situation. With land privatization and the expansion of monetary relations, a deeper division of labor developed in agriculture that separated food production for profit from food production for direct consumption, devalued reproductive work, starting from subsistence farming, and appointed men as the chief agricultural producers, whereas women were relegated to the rank of "helpers," field hands, or domestic workers.

In colonial Africa, for example, British and French officers systematically favored men with regard to allocations of land, equipment, and training, the mechanization of agriculture being the occasion for a further marginalization of women's agricultural activities. They also disrupted female farming by forcing women to assist their husband in the cultivation of cash crops, thus altering the power relations between women and men and instigating new conflicts between them. To this day, the colonial system, whereby land titles are given only to men, continues to be the rule for "development agencies" and not in Africa alone.

It must be said that men have been accomplices in this process, not only claiming control over women's labor, but, in the face of growing land scarcity, conspiring to curtail women's communal land-use rights (wherever these survived) by rewriting the rules and conditions of belonging to the community.

Despite women's resistance to their marginalization, and their continuous engagement in subsistence farming and land reclamation struggles, these developments have had a profound effect on food production. As Vandana Shiva so powerfully described in her book *Staying Alive* [1], with the exclusion of women from access to land and the destruction of their control over food production, a large body of knowledge, practices, techniques that for centuries safeguarded the integrity of the land and the soil and the nutritional value of food has been lost.

Today, in the eyes of “development” agencies, the image of the female subsistence farmer is one of complete degradation. For example, this is how the latest World Bank annual report [2], dedicated to agriculture, begins “an African woman bent under the sun, weeding sorghum in an arid field with a hoe, a child strapped on her back—a vivid image of rural poverty.” For years in fact, following the footsteps of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, the World Bank has tried to convince us that land is a dead asset when used for sustenance and shelter, and it becomes productive only when it is brought to a bank as collateral to gain credit. Behind this view is an arrogant philosophy that sees only money as creative of wealth, and believes capitalism and industry can recreate nature.

But the opposite is the case. With the demise of women’s subsistence farming, an incredible wealth is increasingly being lost, with severe consequences for the quality and quantity of the food available to us. What the Bank does not tell us is that much of the nutritional value of food is lost through the industrialization of agriculture. It also does not tell us that it is thanks to women’s struggles to continue to provide for their families’ consumption, often farming on unused public or private land, that millions of people have been able to survive in the face of economic liberalization.

MH: This all brings up the importance of agricultural labor, especially women’s labour, to the processes of globalization. What’s your sense of how agricultural labour fits into how we are conceptualizing global labour today. Numerically, it remains the biggest employer of people’s time, especially women’s time, world-wide. But it seems to fall off the radar in analyses of the changing forms of work and capital these days.

SF: It is a mistake for left movements to underestimate, practically and analytically, the importance of agricultural work in today’s political economy and, consequently, the transformative capacity of the struggles that farmers are making on this terrain. Certainly, the capitalists are not making this mistake. As the World Bank reports I mentioned (among other documents) indicate, the reorganization of agricultural relations always takes priority in its restructuring programs.

Although the number of people employed in agricultural work is impressive (probably amounting to two billion people), its importance is not to be measured only by its sheer size. Most important is the contribution agricultural work makes to social reproduction. As I mentioned, subsistence agriculture in particular, mostly done by women, enables millions to live who would otherwise have no means to purchase food on the market. Moreover, the revalorization, extension, and reintegration of agricultural labor into our lives are a must if we wish to construct a self-sufficient, non-exploitative society.

There are many political groups and movements, also in the industrialized North (eco-feminists above all), who recognize this need. It is also encouraging that, over the last two decades, we have seen the growth of urban garden movements, returning agricultural work to the heart of our industrial metropolises. But unfortunately, many in the left have not yet overcome the legacy of class struggle in the industrial era with its unique stresses on the factory and the industrial proletariat, as well as its belief in a technological road to liberation from capitalism.

For example, in Negri and Hardt’s *Multitude* [3] we read that the peasantry is destined to disappear from the historical scene because of the increasing integration of science and technology in the organization of agricultural production and the dematerialization of labor. It is disturbing that Negri and Hardt cite genetic engineering to support their view that the peasantry, as a historical category, is on its way to becoming defunct, given the fierce struggle farmers are conducting worldwide against genetically modified (GM)

seeds, which, from this perspective, is already presumed defeated.

In reality, what we are witnessing is a process of re-peasantization and “rurbanization” which the present crisis can only accelerate. It’s already occurring in China: former immigrants to the towns are returning to the rural areas destined to become a body of laborers in constant motion between these poles. In Africa too, many urban dwellers are now returning to the village, but they often move back and forth, because they cannot find sufficient means of survival in any single place.

MH: There is something deeply chilling about this image of constantly moving labourers eking out an existence in a world of enclosures. I’m reminded of the sections of *Caliban and the Witch* where you talk about vagabonds as those condemned to wander having been dispossessed of their common lands through the medieval European enclosures. In the same vein, Zygmunt Bauman uses the metaphor of the vagabond (as compared to privileged “tourists”) to describe the paradigm of human dispossession under globalization [4]. It certainly should chasten the often too hasty celebration of mobility and unfettered existence which many on the left take to be the basis of a new politics. It brings up one of the things I’ve always admired about your work is your ability to keep globalization and colonialism central. Over the last few years you’ve done quite a bit of work on the new processes of enclosure in Africa under neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Can you tell us about how these are related to the ongoing global food crisis?

SF: A book would not be sufficient to describe the many interconnected ways in which colonialism, old and new, and neo-liberalism have contributed to created the present food crisis.

What we are witnessing today is but the latest act in long process that has been unfolding for at least two centuries. Colonialism disrupted the farming systems of Africa, Asia, South America through land expropriation, the introduction of cash crops and mono-cultures, and the enforcement of policies that degraded the environment (e.g. logging) or took workers away from food production.

Independence did not remedy this situation, although it allowed for the creation of domestic food markets. Land reform, based on the restitution of the stolen land which the former colonial subjects demanded as the fruit of the liberation struggle, was only very marginally realized. In a context of continuing economic and political dependence on the former colonial powers, the new states preserved the commercial, export-oriented, model of agriculture the colonizer had planted on their soils, even though it visibly undermined the ecology and the social relations of the rural areas, starting with the relations between women and men I mentioned earlier.

Two further blows to food production in the Third World in the post-independence period were the US sponsored “food aid programs,” a weapon in the Cold War as effective as military intervention in creating new forms of political control, and the “Green Revolution.” A bonus to the developing agribusiness, the Green Revolution industrialized Third World agriculture, made it dependent on imports from abroad (of hybrid seeds, pesticides and fertilizers), and expelled small farmers from the land. By the early 1970s, the disastrous consequences of decades of colonial and post-colonial degradation of the rural environment became most visible in the form of recurrent famines, the most severe of which struck the countries of the Sahel Belt, just south of the Sahara, where more than 100,000 people died and many more were permanently displaced. By the 1980s, when, in the name of the debt crisis and economic recovery, the World Bank imposed on Third World nations across the world a rigid neo-liberal agenda,

the agriculture of “developing countries” was already a disaster area, with famines and malnutrition an endemic reality. In this context, the requirements of “Structural Adjustment,” as the World Bank’s recipe was dubbed –(import liberalization, the removal of subsidies to farmers, the diversion of agricultural production towards the production of “high quality,” “luxury products” for the export market)– signaled a catastrophe in the make, as farmers’ organization, anti-globalization activists, environmentalists repeatedly warned. Add to it the effects on farming of logging, of long distance pollution, of trade agreements sanctioning the appropriation and patenting of Third World farmers’ traditional knowledge, the increasing and truly totalitarian corporate control of seed production, and you have what Mariarosa Dalla Costa defines as a “policy of genocide.” And, in fact, many farmers, especially in India, have taken their own lives, utterly ruined by these policies.

We must be careful, then, when we hear that the worldwide hikes in the price of food in recent months have been the outcome of the same speculative drive that created the housing bubble. Speculation is possible only under certain conditions and it is with these conditions that we need to be concerned.

What we are dealing with is a crisis far deeper than it is generally acknowledged and one that cannot be resolved through more “regulations.” Neo-liberalism, the speculative drives of the financial system, the promotion of bio-fuel, all have exacerbated trends that are inscribed in the logic of agriculture and food production under capitalism. As long as food is grown for profit and is a tool to be used to force people to accept the desired forms of exploitation, the creation of food scarcity will remain a dominant objective of agricultural production as planned by governments and financial institutions.

What is needed is a systemic change, a completely different form of agriculture, one that does not poison those who produce and consume food. And this requires, in the first place, a very different system of social relations and values.

MH: I’m glad you mentioned the way food and food politics become weapons to reproduce, spread and intensify systems of exploitation and, in particular, a capitalist and patriarchal system of value that is fundamentally genocidal. In this journal issue we’re trying to puzzle out this term “sovereignty” when it’s applied to food. On the one hand, the term signifies the fundamental principle of international politics of imperial Europe: the discrete nation-state and its exclusive right over territory and population. On the other, since anti-colonial movements of national liberation, the term sovereignty has taken on new meanings, speaking instead to the rights of people to self-determination. The term has also stimulated a lot of new reflections in critical theory camps with the renewed interest in biopolitics and globalization. What’s your sense of the term? Do you think it’s useful or appropriate? Where and when?

SF: I understand that we should be suspicious of the concept of “sovereignty” given its genetic association with the history of the nation-state. But in the case of “food sovereignty” we should focus on its use rather than on its genealogical meaning. “Sovereignty” today, as used since the early 1990s by the farmers’ movements forming the Via Campesina coalition, is a weapon against the international corporate takeover of food production, against land expropriation, GM food and the industrialization and commercialization of agriculture. “Sovereignty,” in this sense, has none of the monarchical or nationalistic connotations historically associated with the term. It is a call for autonomy, for self-determination, and it is a rejection of the capitalist model of agriculture, that expropriates people from their lands and their traditional knowledge,

subjects them to deadly international regulations, and turns food into a poison. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa puts it, “sovereignty” is an affirmation “of the right of populations to decide what to eat and how to produce it,” with a view of food as a “common good” rather than a commodity[5].

The question, of course, is whether “sovereignty” should be understood in the sense of total “autarchy.” Despite some declarations suggesting this possibility, I believe those who have such fears are mistaken. Broad trade networks and sophisticated systems of exchange existed in Africa and the Americas for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, who proceeded to disrupt them. Thus, we should not be concerned that those calling for “sovereignty” today will be averse to trading with neighboring countries and in regional networks of the type that existed prior to colonization. A broad effort is already underway to construct regional exchanges based on the principles of dignity and autonomy. This will undoubtedly be one of the main challenges facing social justice movements in the years to come.

MH: On that note, your research on historical and contemporary women’s labour and struggle has been extremely insightful. How do women’s work and women’s struggle factor into the politics of food sovereignty today?

SF: Women’s work and struggles are central to the question of “food sovereignty” today. Women are those who pay the highest price for the increase in food prices, and the fact that their access to land and capacity as agricultural producers have been severely undermined is one of the reasons why such price hikes are possible.

As I mentioned earlier, women have been the world’s food producers and processors since time immemorial. To this day, in some parts of the world (Africa above all) 80% of the food consumed is produced by them. Their subsistence agriculture enables millions to live who could not otherwise purchase food on the market. However, their ability to grow food is increasingly threatened by increasing land scarcity, the privatization of land and water, the commercialization of agriculture, and the shift in most Third World countries to export-oriented agricultural production (now dubbed “high value” agriculture by the World Bank). These trends reinforce each other. To the extent that the land available to farmers is constantly diminishing, even in regions where the majority of the population depends on agriculture, women are subjected to exclusionary procedures by their male relatives and male members of their communities so that their access to land and customary rights are increasingly restricted. This represents a major threat to food production and the food consumption of large segments of the world population. It also places the control over the food consumed out of the hands of women.

A campaign is now taking place in Latin America and Africa, conducted by women’s groups and associations who demand that women’s rights to land be guaranteed in the laws and constitutions of their countries. Meanwhile, women have been at the forefront of urban farming and land struggles. In many African cities, from Accra to Kinshasa, they take over unused plots of land to grow maize, cassava, and peppers, changing the landscape of African towns, adding to their families’ food and monetary budget, and boosting their own economic independence. But the battleground remains the redistribution of lands and the guarantee that women have full access to them and to the waters that run through them. As feminist writers like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have stressed, food sovereignty is best guaranteed when food production is “in women’s hands,” in the sense that women have the means to control how food is produced and consumed.

MH: It seems that such demands have even made their way to the halls of international power, albeit in a typically neoliberal form. The recent micro-credit “movement” that is currently being promoted mobilizes the idea of Third-World women as crucial economic producers to promote small-scale loans. Critics argue that it is just a sort of neoliberalism from below which seeks to make women the new “economic men” of the Third World and agents of further enclosures. What do you make of this movement?

SF: World Bankers and other economic planners have discovered women as economic producers because they believe that women can be more easily controlled given their responsibility toward their families. They know that women will make any effort to ensure that their children are fed, or go to school, and also that they can be counted upon to be more responsible in the repayment of debts. They are also eager to integrate women into the money economy and discredit subsistence activities, which they consider a threat to the hegemony of the market.

Many women would most likely prefer to have land; that would give them more independence as well as the possibility of selling their surpluses to the local markets. But it is a solution economic planners never propose, because they oppose any redistributive policy, believing land should be used just for commercial purposes. Not surprisingly, a great advocate of micro-credit has been the World Bank, for its Structural Adjustment Programs are creating the very poverty and landlessness that the micro-credit schemes are supposed to “alleviate.”

Micro-credit schemes are also a source of divisions within the community and among women by selecting the “worthy” of credit from the unreliable and subjecting women to a reciprocal policing that undermines their solidarity. They are also a perverse ideological tool, suggesting that self-discipline is all that is needed for a positive outcome, thus drawing a blanket on the disastrous conditions in which the majority of women live in Indian or African villages, thanks to policies that are not of their making. Critics also point out that debt repayment often comes at the expense of the needs of women’s families and that, after many years of experience, there is no evidence that micro-credit schemes have had any positive impact on the lives of women.

MH: While the global south has seen a huge rise in social movements contesting corporate globalization’s sovereignty over food it seems that food movements in the global north, and especially in North America, have tended to follow a consumerist logic (slow food, eating organic, etc.). Do you think there are new political possibilities for organizing around food that move us beyond this?

SF: The contrast is real, but a number of trends, in recent years, indicate that new ways of organizing around food are developing that move beyond the narrow concept of self-interest embodied in the demand for organic food.

First, there has been the urban gardens movement I mentioned before that has spread in several US cities. It has increasingly been acquiring a political dimension, thanks, in part, to the attacks against it by conservative politicians like former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani. His plan, to bulldoze dozens of gardens in New York in the mid ’90s, raised everyone’s consciousness and had the effect of turning gardening into a movement. We now realize that the gardens are the seeds of another economy, independent of the market. Not only do they fulfill an economic function by providing cheaper, fresher food that many could not otherwise afford, but they create a new sociality; they are places of gathering, cooperation, reciprocal education between people of different ages and cultures.

There is also a new interest, among youth in North America, for farming, for learning the properties of herbs and plants, and for creating a new relationship with nature. I continuously meet young people in the U.S. who are genuinely disgusted with the consumerist culture that surrounds them, and become vegetarian or vegan out of concern for the ecological and human cost of cattle raising as well as their refusal of animal suffering. The spread of food co-ops, Community Supported Agriculture, and groups such as Food Not Bombs, indicate the existence of this new consciousness. The problem we face in building a mass movement is that changing consciousness is not enough to change food buying and eating practice. Lack of access to land, lack of money, space and time (to shop, cook, and learn about the conditions of production of what we eat) are the main obstacles in this respect. The food movement must be embedded in broader movements addressing the totality of our lives. At the same time, social movements need to build campaigns to stop

- \* large-scale /industrial concentrations of animals, that are as cruel as they are disastrous for our ecology and our health.

- \* the continuing devastation of million of hectares of lands and miles of coastal areas for the purpose of cattle ranching and fish-farming, both of which displace and impoverish large populations, destroy the land, and produce poisonous food.

- \* the systematic expropriation of the natural wealth of Third World countries, under the guise of structural adjustment, which forces them to export their food, see their fisheries depleted, log their forests, waste their crop land for luxury fruits and vegetables and now even bio-fuel.

Lastly, it helps us to be cognizant of the struggles that other countries are making to refuse our food exports, which always provide us with interesting information we in North America are the last to acquire. For example, I have learned from the EU's refusal to import frozen chickens from the US that, prior to packaging, they are plunged into a chlorine bath. I have learned that beef "produced" in the USA contains a cancer-producing hormone. And so forth.

## **Endnotes**

[1] Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive : women, ecology, and development*. London, Zed Books.

[2] (2007). *World development report 2008: agriculture for development*. Washington, D.C., The World Bank.

[3] Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2004). *Multitude: war and democracy in the age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.

[4] Bauman, Z. (1998). *Globalization: the human consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

[5] Dalla Costa, M. (2008). "Food Sovereignty, Peasants and Women." *The Commoner* (12).