

Introduction to Laws of Social Reproduction Lectures

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This collection of lectures emanates from an EU supported research project titled the [Laws of Social Reproduction](#). As we know, social reproduction is what makes human life possible. It encompasses biological reproduction; unpaid work including domestic work, care work and subsistence work; the reproduction of culture and ideology; the provision of sexual, emotional and affective services; social provisioning and voluntary work (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). For decades, there has been a profusion of feminist scholarship on social reproduction across disciplines. Feminist understandings of reproductive labour are deep as they are wide-ranging. Much of this work uses Marxist and materialist feminist theorising as its point of departure, to think, both with and beyond Marx, and to convincingly deconstruct the conceptual binaries that have prevented the recognition of women's reproductive labour, including the divides between production/reproduction, the economic/the social, the market/the household and the public/private. Feminists study social reproduction in a vast range of institutional settings including the home but also childcare centres, schools, hospitals, care homes for the elderly, dance halls and massage parlours. Feminists focus not only on capitalist economies but also on diverse economies including non-capitalist and paracapitalist economies. Studies of social reproduction are not limited to women but include social reproduction in non-heteronormative families and communities of care. The possibilities for political action have also expanded in recent

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years. Far from lobbying for discrete policy changes, feminists understand broader political struggles for housing, healthcare, food security, climate change, childcare, education, and pensions as being fundamentally about social reproduction.

Like much of this scholarship, our project *The Laws of Social Reproduction* uses materialist feminist theorising as the point of departure to undertake a cross-sectoral study of reproductive labour in five sectors, spanning the market-marriage continuum by looking at sex work, erotic dancing, surrogacy, paid domestic work and unpaid domestic work. Our intuition is that despite their disparate nature, there are in fact significant similarities in the women's work across these sectors, whether in terms of entry due to patriarchal failures, in their conditions of work—including high levels of stigma, justification for maintaining hierarchies between these forms of work, reduced bargaining power, and finally, the terms of exit from such work. Further, we are keen to demonstrate the law's key role in producing and entrenching the invisibility of women's reproductive labour, but also examine the law's highly differential regulation of their labour through diverse legal fields, each with its own internal logic. Our goal is to problematise law's jurisdictional boundaries over women's reproductive labour and to interrogate the tremendous work that the law does in governing women's work and in maintaining the boundaries between different groups of women workers that impedes their mobilisation and produces poor economic outcomes. We seek an alternate regulatory matrix to further their economic justice. To help us rethink the role of the law in these terms, we invited feminist law professor Kerry Rittich to deliver our First Annual Lecture in the Laws of Social Reproduction. Her lecture titled *Visibility and Value at Work: The Legal Organization of Productive and*

Reproductive Work was delivered on 18th August 2020, a few months after the pandemic started. The lecture was moderated by Professor Bina Agarwal.

As waves of the pandemic unfolded, the riches of feminist theorizing on social reproduction came to the fore. The massive care infrastructure that holds up the visible GDP part of the economy was revealed for all to see. Care talk felt ubiquitous with trending hashtags like ‘care income now’ or ‘care can't wait’ on Twitter (now X). Green shoots of political opportunities emerged even as powerful states like the U.S. considered investing billions of dollars in the care economy. Feminists seized the moment to write manifestos which sought to reimagine a more just and equal world, giving life to the anti-capitalist, anti-racist feminism that has had to jostle for too long in a crowded feminist space with various manifestations of lean-in feminism, governance feminism and carceral feminism. We invited Professor Silvia Federici, a scholar who has rigorously studied the gendered history of capitalism, rendered visible the subsidies that unpaid care and domestic work offer to capital and has reimagined resistance to capitalism in the form of the commons to deliver the Second Annual Lecture in the Laws of Social Reproduction titled *From Reproducing Labour Power to Reproducing our Struggle, a Strategy for a Revolutionary Feminism* on July 13, 2021. Her lecture was moderated by Professor Samita Sen.

The COVID 19 pandemic produced high levels of economic penury. As unemployment rates hit a high and households scrambled to meet their basic needs in the face of economic shocks and variable social safety nets from governments, household debt assumed significance. The experience of countries like Argentina through economic crises became crucial to theorizing our new realities. Hence, we invited Professor

Verónica Gago to deliver the Third Annual Lecture in the Laws of Social Reproduction titled *Social Reproduction and Financial Extractivism* which she was delivered by on 16 September 2022. Her lecture was chaired by Professor Kumkum Sangari and the text of her talk was translated by Liz Mason Deese.

Our three speakers, all leading thinkers of law and social reproduction theory alerted us through their analytically sharp and politically inspirational lectures to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead even while helping forge feminist solidarity between hundreds of attendees from across Europe, the Americas and South Asia amidst an acute crisis of social reproduction, namely the COVID 19 pandemic. Video recordings of the lectures which were held virtually are available on our [You Tube channel](#).

The fourth and final Annual Lecture in the Laws of Social Reproduction will be delivered by Professor Adelle Blackett in 2024. Please stay tuned for updates on the lecture and other news on social media (on X @LawsOfSocialRep; on Instagram @lawsofsocialreproduction)

Kerry Rittich and Bina Agarwal's bios

Kerry Rittich is Professor at the Faculty of Law and the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. She teaches and writes in the areas of international law and international institutions, law and development, human rights, labour law, and critical and feminist theory. Her publications include *Recharacterizing Restructuring: Law, Distribution and Gender in Market Reform and Labour Law*,

Work and Family: Critical and Comparative Perspectives. She has also authored numerous articles including most recently for the *Leiden Journal of International Law*, and contributed chapters to books on the Theory of International Law, Re-Imagining Labour Law for Development and the Governance of Trafficking and Forced Labor. She has also completed a report for the Law Commission of Canada entitled, *Vulnerable Workers: Legal and Policy Issues in the New Economy*. Professor Rittich has been a fellow at the European University Institute, the Mackenzie King Visiting Professor of Canadian Studies at Harvard University, Visiting Professor at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University, Visiting Professor at Sciences Po Law School in Paris, and Professor and Academic Director of the Center for Transnational Legal Studies, London.

Bina Agarwal is Professor of Development Economics and Environment at the University of Manchester, where she teaches part time. Her pathbreaking work on gender inequality in property and land, and on environmental governance, has had global impact. She pioneered the field of gender and land rights with her 1994 award-winning book, *A Field of One's Own*. In 2005, she also led a successful civil society campaign to amend India's Hindu inheritance law to make it gender equal. She has written numerous academic papers and 12 books including *Gender Challenges*, a three-volume compendium of her selected papers, published by Oxford University Press in 2016. Professor Agarwal has been President of the International Society for Ecological Economics, Vice-President of the International Economic Association, and President of the International Association for Feminist Economics. She has held distinguished visiting positions at Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton, and the NYU School of Law where she taught inheritance law. Professor Agarwal's multiple awards

include a Padma Shree from the President of India in 2008, the Leontief Prize 2010, the Louis Malassis International Scientific 2017, and the International Balzan Prize, 2017 ‘for challenging established premises in economics and the social sciences by using an innovative gender perspective’.

Silvia Federici and Samita Sen’s bios

Professor Silvia Federici is an Italian and American scholar, teacher, and activist from the radical feminist Marxist tradition. She is a Professor Emerita and Teaching Fellow at Hofstra University, where she was a social science professor. She is originally from Italy. When she was a graduate student in Buffalo in 1972, a friend passed her a tract in Italian by the feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa: “*Donne e sovversione sociale*,” or “Women and the Subversion of the Community.” (The most widely known version of this essay is called “The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community” and was written by Dalla Costa and the American activist Selma James.) She soon became co-founder of the International Feminist Collective, and an organizer with the wages for housework campaign. In 1973, she helped start Wages for Housework groups in the US. In 1975 she published ‘Wages Against Housework’ where she exposed how capital profits from our housework by sexualizing and naturalizing it. Despite the misconceptions about the wages for housework campaign, Federici notes the essence of the claim of the campaign as follows: “It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us”.

She then went on to write *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), a magisterial social history which rethinks Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation from a feminist viewpoint. The main thesis of the book is that in order to understand the history of women in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, we must analyse the changes that capitalism has introduced in the process of social reproduction and, especially, the reproduction of labour power. As millions of agricultural workers were expropriated from their land and were left pauperized and criminalized, Federici reexamines the reorganization of housework, family life, child-raising, sexuality, male-female relations and the relationship between production and reproduction in the 16th and 17th centuries leading up to the subjugation of women's bodies and the witch-hunts in Europe and the new world.

Many books have followed including *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (2020, 2012), *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (2018), *The New York Wages for Housework Committee: History, Theory, Documents, 1972-1977* (edited with Arlen Austin) (2018), *Beyond the periphery of the skin: rethinking, remaking, reclaiming the body in contemporary capitalism* (2020) and *Patriarchy Of The Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism* (2021). Most crucially, in *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018), she reads globalization as a process of primitive accumulation but also investigates the role of the commons as resistance to the current phase of globalization and the intertwined nature of political organizing with processes of social reproduction. Re-enchanting the world is possible Federici claims and shows us how to make sense of existing communitarian forms of social organisation. Thus, as Peter Linebaugh has noted, Federici is a teacher, a social theorist, an activist, a historian,

who will separate neither politics from economics, nor ideas from life. She writes from those sites where history is made, the sidewalk with the street vendors, the group kitchen, the storefront collective, the park, the women's shelter, and there she listens while she talks.

Professor Samita Sen is a distinguished historian. She received her PhD from Cambridge University and was a Junior Research Fellow at Trinity College. She taught at Calcutta University and Jadavpur University and served as the first Vice-Chancellor of the Diamond Harbour Women's University. She was also Dean of the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies at Jadavpur university. Her monograph, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* published by Cambridge University Press in 1999 won the Trevor Reese prize in Commonwealth history. She has published extensively on gender and labour. Her specialization is in colonial South Asia, but she has also conducted interdisciplinary research on contemporary issues such as domestic work and labour in the informal sector. Her 2016 book, *Domestic Days, Women Work and Politics and Contemporary Kolkata*, coauthored with Nilanjana Sengupta, is a magnificent study of paid domestic workers in Kolkata, where her on-the-ground look at the conditions of social reproduction of paid domestic workers themselves is immensely generative for reimagining feminist theorising on social reproduction. Professor Sen has also edited several books that provincialise received Marxist thinking, including *Passage to Bondage Labour in the Assam Tea Plantations* published in 2016; *Accumulation and Post-Colonial Capitalism*, also published in 2016; *'Capital' in the East*, published in 2019 and more recently *Love, Labour and Law: Early and Child Marriage in India* published in 2021. Professor Sen also been active in the women's movement in India and internationally.

Veronica Gago and Kumkum Sangari's bios

Professor Verónica Gago teaches Political Science at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and is Professor of Sociology at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín sun Martin. She is also an Independent Researcher at the National Council of Research. She is a member of the independent radical collective press Tinta Limón. She was part of the militant research experience Colectivo Situaciones, and she is now a member of Ni Una Menos, a feminist grassroots movement. She is the author of *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies* published by Duke University Press, 2017, which is a tour de force in elaborating on a theory of the market, the informal economy, the community, cross border migration, citizenship and how to make sense of neoliberal governmentality and populism, all issues that we grapple with in India. She is also the author of *Feminist International How to change everything* published by Verso in 2020 which offers a feminist theory of the strike and an expansive feminist theory of violence but one that does not prioritise solutions from the state. In the book she also articulates a feminist economics of exploitation and proposes 8 theses for a feminist counter-offensive.

Most recently she has co-authored with Luci Cavallero a book titled *A Feminist Reading of Debt* published by Pluto Press in 2021 which offers a feminist reading of debt by looking at indebtedness in everyday life and its linkages with sexist violence and by mapping reproductive labour as a site which finance seeks to exploit.

Professor Kumkum Sangari is the William F. Vilas Research Professor of English and the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She has been a Professorial Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; a Visiting Fellow at Yale University, Delhi University and Jadavpur University; and a Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, Central European University, University of London, University of Erfurt and Ambedkar University. She is the author of *Solid Liquid: A transnational reproductive formation* published by Columbia University Press in 2015 and *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English* also published by Columbia University Press in 1999. She has co-edited several books including the path-breaking collection *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* and, most recently, *Arc Silt Dive: The Works of Sheba Chhachhi* and *Trace Retrace: Paintings, Nilima Sheikh*. Professor Sangari has also published extensively on British, American and Indian literature, the gendering of South Asian medieval devotional traditions, nationalist figures such as M.K.Gandhi, feminist art practice, and several contemporary issues pertaining to women.