

MARIAROSA DALLA COSTA: STATEMENT ON “WOMEN AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE COMMUNITY” AND SELMA JAMES’ *SEX RACE AND CLASS, THE PERSPECTIVE OF WINNING* (2012)

In her recently published volume, *Sex Race and Class, The Perspective of Winning* (PM Press/Common Notions, March 2012), Selma James makes a number of incorrect statements relative to her collaboration with me and the authorship of *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* that force me to respond, as they distort the history of our cooperation and the beginning of the Wages for Housework Campaign.

According to Selma James’ introductory notes to the *Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* and, in particular, her commentary concerning the essay “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” I have usurped her right to be considered the author or a co-author of this article. I reject this claim and I must point out first that what has been reprinted by PM Press is a heavily edited version of the original introduction that Selma James wrote in July 1972, from which my name has now been removed eleven times. In the original introduction to *The Power of Women* Selma James unambiguously presented “Women and the Subversion of the Community” not only as my work, but as the product of the new women’s movement in Italy.

Let me underline here that what is at stake is not a competition for the authorship of an essay. On the contrary, the question at stake is the historical and political origin of the campaign and struggle for wages for housework, which now appears in Selma James’ account as the product of the ‘inventiveness’ of an individual. This could not be further from the truth.

Neither Selma James nor myself ‘invented’ or discovered the perspective of “Wages for Housework” (WfH) as it is claimed in the book and in the promotional material for its launching in the United States. The demand for wages for housework had been promoted by feminists in Europe and in the United States since at least the beginning of the 20th century. I discovered their analysis and demands in the late 1970s when I was working on *Famglia welfare e stato tra Progressismo e New Deal* (1983) and mentioned them in that book. Socialist feminists like Crystal Eastman were asking for housework to be remunerated by the state and actively working on this program already in the first decade of the century. An article that appeared in 1912 in the socialist newspaper *Chicago Evening World* contained an analysis of housework that was very similar to that made by activists in our campaign, pointing out that employers buy two workers for one wage, and that the kind of work a man does determines the work and living conditions of his wife as well. Among male theorists, we can recall Wilhelm Reich who, in *The Sexual Revolution* written in the 1930s, said that marriage is an institution that exploits women, that unpaid domestic work enables employers to increase their profits, and that the employers can impose low wages precisely because behind the workers there is the free work of their wives. Reich also underlined that even women who have a waged job continued to do the housework as a condition for their marriage to function. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, written in the 1950s, has pages on the “housework question” that anticipated the analysis we produced over a decade later. Most importantly, the housework question was the central issue in the new feminism that emerged in the early 1970s in Europe and in the US, which marked a break with emancipationism and the demand for “parity”. There were different positions on this question, but the problematic arising from the unwaged character of this work, and the fact that housework reproduces labor-power was already acknowledged by various authors, from Betsy Warrior to Peggy Morton and others, prior to the publication of *The Power of Women*.

I further want to point out that the launching of the campaign for WfH was a collective process and project. Not accidentally the launching occurred with the formation of the International Feminist Collective in July 1972, which took place in Padova (Italy) at a

meeting in which about twenty women, mostly from Italy but also from France, from the US and the UK, participated. The political perspective that shaped wages for housework theoretically and practically was a coalescing of different political currents including the Italian Workerist Movement, itself the product of one of the most important cycles of struggles Italy had seen in modern history. Indeed, my very first encounter with Selma James was a product of the relation both she and I had to this movement.

By the time I met Selma James I had been involved for years in the political activity of Potere Operaio, a network of militant groups issuing from the Workerist Movement, that later dissolved into what has become “Autonomia.” The political categories I was using in my analysis were those developed by Workerism: the strategic character of the wage struggle, the refusal of work, and the social factory. Consequently it is not surprising that these categories are found in the article in question. The political use of the wage struggle by Potere Operaio was promoting struggles for a wage by other unwaged subjects, like students, who began demanding a “pre-wage” for the work of forming their labor-power. Potere Operaio also launched the objective of a guaranteed income that is still on the table today, as part of a program where it is interwoven with the question of a minimum wage. The demand for wages for housework was clearly influenced by this political framework.

The invitation to Selma James to participate in the Padova June 1971 meeting, the first in which I presented a document discussing the question of wages for housework with a group of women activists, one year prior to the launching of the Campaign, reflected my desire to connect Selma to the developing feminist movement in Italy, and it was in recognition of her merit both on the level of analysis and political practice. Selma knew very well what I would present in this meeting because, prior to it, I read to her the document I had written. From this first meeting I worked fulltime to make the new movement grow and for a while the relationship with Selma was not problematic. When we decided to join our writings in the booklet that became *The Power of Women* (published in Italian in March '72 and in English in October of the same year), Selma James wrote an Introduction that underlined the significance of the fact that my essay “Women and the Subversion of the Community” came from Italy, a country with a particularly high percentage of housewives. It is exactly this reference, along with my name and the pages that followed, that have been erased in the new version of the '72 introduction that Selma James has published in her book. (I attach this introduction of July '72 as reproduced in the PM Press volume, highlighting what was removed: file SELMA'sIntro72original_and_as_modified).

However, this is not to deny that, in the spirit of cooperation that prevailed at least for a time in the feminist movement, we fully discussed everything we published with each other, and made significant contributions to each others' writings. I should add that another activist participated in our discussions about the article and contributed to it. But at the time nobody suggested that the article should have more than one signature. To be accused now of having taken advantage of this cooperation to place my name on an article predominantly written by Selma James is something I find totally unacceptable and contrary to the spirit of comradely cooperation necessary for building an international movement. I also reject vehemently and with true indignation the argument that I was ‘allowed to sign’ “Women and the Subversion of the Community” because I needed a weapon against sexism.

I never said anything when I realized that, starting from the third edition of the book in 1975, Selma James began to add her signature on the essay, or, more outrageously, in later years, started referring to the *Power of Women* as written by her “with” Mariarosa Dalla Costa. I also never said anything about the fact that, in spite of my having been a main exponent of the Padua WfH Committee, I have no record of our Committee gathering to discuss the Forward to the third English edition nor our Committee deciding to add its signature to that of the Power of Women Collective. It is always very demoralizing when old

sisters part ways and I did my best over the last four decades to stay away from polemics about the authorship of this work. However, the comments made in the book that Selma James has now published force me to rectify the claims that she makes.

Last, I did not part ways with Selma James because of any split in the WfH network ‘on the basis of race,’ as her introductory notes claim. This is not the place for me to fully address this claim. I will only state that it masks what in reality were profound disagreements on political and organizational issues.

In conclusion, it saddens me to realize that Selma James decided, in presenting her work to a US movement public, to both erase and degrade my contribution (as well as the contribution of other sisters) to a campaign that represented an important movement in feminist history.

In recognition of the importance of this history, we are now assembling our archives and making them public. Thus, I hope that a more balanced view of the early history of this movement will be available to new generations of activists.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa
Padua, March 27th, 2012

Note:

Mariarosa Dalla Costa has donated a significant archive of Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework to the Civic Library of Padua ("Archivio di Lotta Femminista per il salario al lavoro domestico, Donazione Mariarosa Dalla Costa). A document detailing the contents of the archive can be found here:

http://www.padovanet.it/sites/default/files/attachment/C_1_Allegati_20187_Allegato.pdf

Civic Library, Centro Culturale Altinate/San Gaetano
Via Altinate 71, 35121
Padova, Italia

Tel | 049 8204811
Fax | 049 8204804
Email | biblioteca.civica@comune.padova.it

The archive of Lotta Femminista is open to the public Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. It is advisable to contact the library directly before visiting.