

Biographical note of Mariarosa Dalla Costa

Mariarosa Dalla Costa was born on 28 April 1943 in Treviso, a city to which she has remained deeply attached and where she often goes, keeping up emotional ties.

As a historical figure of international feminism, in the early 1970s, together with Selma James, she launched the debate on housework and its remuneration, the woman as its subject, the family as a place of production and reproduction of labor power.

Her text *Potere femminile e sovversione sociale* (*The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*), which includes the writing of Selma James *Il posto della donna* (*A Woman's Place*), was published in Italy by Marsilio in March, 1972, and, in October of the same year, in Britain by Falling Wall Press (Bristol). It gained immediate international attention in both the debate of the feminist movement and in the studies on reproduction and the status of women that flourished in academia. Translated into six languages and still being translated into others, the text has been adopted as a feminist classic in various courses on Women's Studies and continues to represent a milestone. It revealed and analyzed housework as a hidden phase of capitalist accumulation; it revealed that behind the closed doors of the home, women were working; that the territory was a big social factory, the home a production center, the housewife its worker, or *houseworker*, as she has been called since then in English speaking countries. The labor force, the most precious commodity for capital, needed women's work in order to be generated and reproduced. The realization of workers' consumption passed through female labor. Even in the late '60s in the factories of the chemical center of Porto Marghera all the workers were men and the women were housewives. The working class housewife would be the privileged subject of the political work of this feminism.

In Padova in 1972, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James (London), Silvia Federici (New York) and Brigitte Galtier (Paris) formed the International Feminist Collective to promote the debate on the work of reproduction and to coordinate action in various countries. Soon, in fact, a vast international network would be formed: *Gruppi e Comitati per il Salario al lavoro domestico* (Wages for Housework Groups and Committees) which would have a leading function.

It was a militant feminism which promoted and organized major struggles in an anti-capitalist perspective. It pursued a great change in the organization of production and society to be able to guarantee a personal autonomy to women that started with economic autonomy. But here is precisely where it broke from previous theories, and in particular with emancipationism. In fact, an autonomy paid at the price of double the work was refused, both at home and outside. Instead, by claiming recognition of the economic value of housework, the request for wages was put forward.

Together they asked for a halving of outside work – 20 hours per week – so that all people, men and women could have time for their duties but also for the pleasure of reproduction, having time for emotional exchange, for being together. Another system of services was being asked for, not just in function of women's employment outside the home but to liberate time even for the housewife.

It was a totally self-organized feminism; financially it counted only on the dues offered by its activists. In this sense it had a great power, not only didn't it depend on anyone, but its commitments were real ones, related to the effort of winning a battle, not the bureaucratic commitments of funded projects like those it would be given in the following period. It was a feminism that kept away from the institutions which it distrusted, although many of its victories would determine major changes at the institutional level. Think of the legalization of abortion, the outcome of the referendum on divorce, the law establishing family planning clinics, the new family law.

It was a feminism that did not get stirred up by issues of equality and would therefore remain rather silent at the time of passage of the relative law, n. 903 of 1977. It believed that not only was it a great defect in the discourse on equality to understand it as ratification to man's level but, above all, that it remained empty talk if policies consistent with reproduction, that were able to offer different solutions so that such problems weren't resolved in the usual female slavery, were not enacted.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa had a prominent role in this feminism to which she devoted full-time activism after several years of militancy in *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power). But her engagement in the struggles of the late '60s and early '70s, struggles of workers, technicians, students, made her feel that something was lacking in that commitment. The discomfort and suffering of women, which did not yet have a name, was lacking. This became the new ground of her reflection in a time when, in Italy, there were already signs of a women's awakening. In London, she met Selma James with whom she established a relationship of communication and political cooperation. She drew up a text that, after further work, would become *Donne e sovversione sociale* (*Women and the Subversion of the Community*), the main essay of the book *Potere femminile e sovversione sociale* (*The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*). She convened a meeting with some women to subject it to their attention and see if it could constitute the point of departure on another path, for another story, that of feminism. She invited Selma James to one of these early meetings. The text raised the issue of housework as unpaid work and how to launch a struggle about it. It was June, 1971, and the mimeographed document was signed *Movimento di Lotta Femminile di Padova* (Movement of Women's Struggle of Padua). There wasn't the audacity to sign it Feminist Struggle yet. But that would only take a few months. After a period when Feminist Struggle would be the

name of this feminism in Italy, it would then dissolve to become the network of the Committees and Groups for Wages for Housework.

During the '70s Mariarosa Dalla Costa was engaged in this movement and at the same time teaching in temporary positions at the Institute of Political Science of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Padua. In July of 1967, she graduated with a degree in Law, writing a thesis on Philosophy of Law under Prof. Enrico Opocher and soon after was appointed by Prof. Opocher to file all documents relating to the Italian Resistance in World War II that were stored at the Institute of History of the Resistance at the University of Padua. She then began to work with Prof. Antonio Negri, a former assistant to Prof. Opocher, who went on to become Professor of State Doctrine at the Faculty of Political Science. For her, this encounter basically meant the discovery of the works of Marx with which she learnt to have a direct relationship, starting with *The Class Struggles in France from 1848 to 1850* and *Capital*. And at the same time, it meant the discovery of the factory and militancy: her political work in Porto Marghera. But it was a discovery she sought. As she herself said, "this was the experience I had been looking for and which responded to my need to understand and to act ... method, determination and passion in wanting to take action to transform the existing situation. These were only three basic elements of that experience but I found them all in the other territories that I crossed over to in the following periods" (*Gli operaisti*, DeriveApprodi, 2005). On the other hand, that moment was historically very important, new things happened: students discovered workers, workers discovered students, a circuit of intellectuals favoured this encounter. The connections between the various places allocated in society and in the world were discovered, and one wanted to change the world with its inequalities and sufferings. Through the struggle, a great and total cooperation was generated. Certainly the experience of those years was fundamental in her political training, and for what mattered in her activity in the feminist movement. In the '70s, she went several times to the United States and Canada where she was invited to give a series of lectures at universities and at meetings with women activists. She was also offered a teaching position in New York at the University of Staten Island. But, upon her return to Italy, she decided not to accept because she felt she could not stop the political work she had recently begun with the women's groups.

In the late '70s a strong operation of repression in Italy closed down the paths of movements, including the feminist movement. In particular, the discussion on wages for housework was totally ignored or strongly opposed. To this political repression there corresponded a social and cultural normalization. Since the '80s the institutional response to feminist motions was defined rather as equal opportunity institutions and policies. In other words, the framework was fine and so it was not to be put into question. But it contained a problem, discrimination between men and women, and

this was the dominant theme which the new generations aimed to address, in the perspective of being able to ascend, indeed, with equal opportunities, in the given context. This type of study was encouraged and also greatly supported financially.

The exponents of the network of Wages for Housework could only mark their distance from this approach. Their interest, instead, continued with a constantly updated reading of capitalist development and consequent changes of the status of women in the new coordinates. Rather, they turned their attention to the South of the world. Some of them, including Mariarosa Dalla Costa, would travel several times to countries of this area, while in the advanced countries, any chance of discourse aimed at making great changes appeared to be over.

With regard to Mariarosa Dalla Costa's intellectual production, *time* and *money* were still, in the early '80s, the two poles of the discourse, both in analysis and in political proactiveness. In the '70s she carried out studies on the relationship between reproduction-emigration-immigration with particular attention to the new behaviors of women with regard to the choice of maternity, and she analyzed the relationship between the action of the feminist movement and labor and social policies. She devoted a systematic study to the period of the 1930s in the United States by analyzing the relationship between the emergence of the welfare system and the redefinition of the woman's role in the urban nuclear family, a work that would be published in 1983: *Famiglia welfare e stato tra Progressismo e New Deal*, FrancoAngeli, Milano; (English transl. *Family, Welfare and the State between Progressivism and the New Deal*, Common Notions, New York, Phoneme Books, Delhi, India, 2015). Her interest for this period was motivated by the fact that, albeit with some significant differences such as the lack of a public health care system, it provides the model of reproduction for the modern family in times of crisis. And it is especially enlightening about important processes that preceded it.

But the 1980s were the years in which neoliberalism took off and when structural adjustment policies were drastically applied, bringing about a widespread increase in the struggles for bread throughout the world, as well as resistance against such policies applied in the name of paying off the international debt. Since the 1990s, neoliberal globalization has represented a powerful work of proletarianization and lowering of labor costs through an attack on common goods, the application of structural adjustment policies, the imposition of a development model increasingly oriented toward exportation, delocalization, and, as pointed out by S. Federici, the advancement of a new international division of labor that also involves the area of reproduction, thereby forcing more and more women from the south and east of the world to migrate to the advanced areas for paid domestic work and care. Neoliberal globalization, thus, would have globalized and re-stratified even care work worldwide.

The question of reproduction, and hence of the status of women, for Mariarosa Dalla Costa, is situated within this framework. She dedicated two books to these issues, which she co-edited with Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa: *Donne e politiche del debito* (FrancoAngeli, 1993) and *Donne, sviluppo e lavoro di riproduzione* (FrancoAngeli, 1996) translated into English (*Paying the Price*, Zed Books, London, 1995; *Women Development and Labour of Reproduction. Struggles and Movements*, Africa World Press, Lawrenceville, N. J., USA, 1999) and into Japanese, along with several other writings.

Since the early '90s, through her readings on the attack led by the neoliberal economy on common goods, another issue has become crucial in her research: the issue of land and hence food supply, the policies of food and food sovereignty. She has paid great attention to the indigenous struggles around the issue of land and water, around the maintenance of the subsistence economies and biodiversity. In the winter of 1992-93, she went to Chiapas, in Mexico, and saw in the various posters praising the heroes of the epic Zapatista guerrillas warnings of a movement that would explode on January 1st of the following year, while already in '93, the Maya women had drafted their Women's Revolutionary Law. In 1994, she was invited to Japan to hold a series of conferences on the theme of women and ecology. In Hiroshima she met the atomic bomb victims and in Okinawa she met women's groups which were active against prostitution around military bases and which favoured compensation of Korean women who had been abducted and forced to provide sex services for Japanese soldiers during the war. Her tour around major Japanese cities was also an opportunity for a fruitful meeting with the European ecofeminist scholars participating in the initiative. With these women, including Maria Mies from Germany and Vandana Shiva from India, she would speak at the Women's Day on Food in Rome, a conference parallel to the FAO summit meeting in 1996 in which La Via Campesina would launch the program of food sovereignty. More and more, land, in a versatility of meanings, and the policies of food would be at the center of Mariarosa Dalla Costa's reflections as an essential element of the discourse on reproduction at a global level. We need to grasp, as she points out in her various writings, the strategic nature of the current food policies as a new formula of dominion over humanity from which they subtract more and more freedom and self-sufficiency. In contrast to all this, and in contrast to a life that is increasingly a product of the laboratory, it means fighting for the safeguarding of the sources and cycles of the spontaneous reproduction of life, first among which are land, water, and seeds. The succession of increasingly frequent food scandals that now generate great circumspection around food, fear rather than joy, requires paying new attention to the ways of its production, starting with the knowledge that food is not just any old commodity. Therefore, she argues, the guarantee of human reproduction cannot reside only in the guarantee of money, even in the form of a guaranteed

income. What shall we do with the money if we can buy only poison? It is not a question of having enough hard currency to buy food on the global market, as argued by the sellers of “food safety”. We should, says Mariarosa Dalla Costa, exercise food sovereignty as a right to decide what to eat and how to produce it.

Since the ‘90s, she has made this theme the crux of her research by publishing various writings about it; in English in the web magazine *The Commoner*, in Italian in the review *CNS Capitalismo Natura Socialismo* (Capitalism Nature Socialism) which later was renamed *Ecologia politica* (Political Ecology) and in the journal *Foedus*, also online. Always in the perspective of the defence of common goods, of other food policies and new terms of human reproduction, she has addressed the problems of the sea, of overfishing and the fish farming industry. With Monica Chilese, she published *Nostra madre oceano* (DeriveApprodi, 2005), translated into English as *Our Mother Ocean*, (Common Notions and Phoneme Books, 2014).

But in the course of the ‘90s she encountered another important issue that she calls the third great battle that the female body has to face in its maturity, after those of childbirth and abortion: the abuse of the hysterectomy. This means the often unjustified castration of the reproductive powers of the “nature female body” as often happens in the case of “nature Earth”. She decided to investigate the problem, and published *Isterectomia. Il problema sociale di un abuso contro le donne* (Hysterectomy. The Social Problem of an Abuse against Women) (Franco Angeli, 1998, 3rd ed. 2002), which would be translated into English (*Gynocide*, Autonomedia, 2007) and Japanese (*Igaku-no boryoku-ni sarasareru onnatachi, Italia-ni okeru sikyuu tekisyutsu*, Impact Shuppankai, 2002). This subject would keep her busy for a few years. She publicly denounced this abuse in a series of debates with many participants, including doctors and lawyers, that she held in major Italian cities. On this theme she has actively sought to raise consciousness among women and the medical profession, bringing about very positive results.

Since 1985 she has been Associate Professor of “Political Sociology” at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Padua. She also taught for several years at the School of Specialization in Human Rights in the same Faculty. Since the advent of the University reform she has structured her teaching in two courses: “Globalization: Issues and Movements” in the three-year degree program, where she gives special emphasis to the global networks built by the movements of farmers and fishermen; and “Globalization, Human Rights and the Advancement of Women” in the two-year specialization degree program.

She organized and chaired the session *Women and the Economy* (Economy and Society Research Committee 02) in the XII World Congress of Sociology of the ISA (International

Sociological Association) held in Madrid from 9 to 12 July 1990. She organized and chaired, once again for Research Committee 02, with Prof. Silvia Federici the session *Women, Development and Housework* and with Prof. Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa *Development Democracy and Women's Human Rights* at the XIII World Congress of Sociology of ISA held in Bielefeld from 18 to 23 July 1994.

In her teaching that she has continued to carry out with passion over the years, she further developed the discourse of other terms of human reproduction, enriched by all the issues that she has experienced. Recently, she has discussed this theme in conferences and meetings in Spain, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. Her works continue to be translated into several languages.

Among her best known works:

- *Potere femminile e sovversione sociale*, with *Il posto della donna*, di Selma James, Marsilio, Padova, March 1972, 4° ed. 1977, translated into many languages (in English, with Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Falling Wall Press, Bristol, October 1972); *Riproduzione e emigrazione* in A. Serafini et al. (edited by), *L'operaio multinazionale in Europa*, Feltrinelli, Milano, (1974), 2° ed. 1977, (English transl. "Reproduction and emigration", in *The Commoner* n. 15, 2012); "Emigrazione, immigrazione e composizione di classe in Italia negli anni '70", in *Economia e lavoro*, n. 4, October-December 1981; *Famiglia Welfare e Stato tra Progressismo e New Deal*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1983, 3° ed. 1997 (English ed. *Family, Welfare and the State between Progressivism and the New Deal*, Common Notions, 2015); *Kajirodo ni Chingin-o-feminizumu no aratana tenbo*, (a collection of her writings), Impact Shuppankai, Tokyo, Japan, October 1986, 2° ed. 1990); *Donne e politiche del debito*, editor with Giovanna F. Dalla Costa, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1993 (English transl. *Paying the Price*, Zed Books, 1995), (Japanese transl., *Yakusokusareta hatten?*, Impact Shuppankai, Tokyo, 1995); *Donne sviluppo e lavoro di riproduzione*, editor with Giovanna F. Dalla Costa and author, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1996 (English transl., *Women, Development and Labour of Reproduction. Struggles and Movements*, Africa World Press, Lawrenceville, N. J., USA, 1999); *Isterectomia. Il problema sociale di un abuso contro le donne*, editor and author, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1998, 3th expanded ed. 2002, (Japanese ed. *Igaku-no boryoku-ni sarasareru onnatachi, Italia-ni okeru sikyuu tekisyutsu*, Impact Shuppankai, Tokyo, 2002; English ed. *Gynocide*, Autonomedia, New York, 2007); with Monica Chilese, *Nostra madre Oceano. Questioni e lotte del movimento dei pescatori*, DeriveApprodi, Roma, 2005 (English ed. *Our Mother Ocean*, Common Notions, New York, and Phoneme Books, Delhi, India, 2014); *L'indigeno che è in noi, la terra cui apparteniamo*, in A. Marucci, *Camminare domandando*, DeriveApprodi, Roma, 1999 (English transl. "The Native in Us, the Land We Belong to", in *Common Sense* n. 23, 1998 and in *The Commoner* n.6, 2002, in www.thecommoner.org); with Dario De Bortoli, "Per un'altra agricoltura e un'altra alimentazione in Italia", in *Foedus*, n. 11, 2005, (English transl. "For Another Agriculture and Another Food Policy in Italy", in *The Commoner*, n. 10, 2005); "Perché i pesci saltino nell'orto. Biodiversità e salute nei movimenti per un'agricoltura contadina e una pesca artigianale", in *Foedus*, n.12, 2005 (Engl. transl. *So that Fish May Flop in Vegetable Gardens*, in *The Commoner*, n. 15, 2012 (Archive)); *Some Notes on Neoliberalism, on Land and on the Food Question*, in *Women in a Globalizing World: Equality, Development Peace*

and Diversity, ed. by Angela Miles, Inanna Publications, Toronto, 2012; “La puerta del huerto y del jardín” in *Noesis, Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, julio-diciembre 2005, vol.15, n. 28; *La sostenibilidad de la reproducción. De las luchas por la renta a la salvaguardia de la vida*, in Laboratorio feminista, *Transformaciones del trabajo desde una perspectiva feminista. Producción, reproducción, deseo, consumo*, Tierra de Nadie, Madrid, 2006; *Dinero perlas y flores en la reproducción feminista*, Akal, Madrid; *Kadınlar ve Toplumun Altüst Edilmesi*, Istanbul, Otonom Yayincilik, 2014; *Women and the Subversion of the Community. A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, PM Press, Oakland, CA, 2019; *Feminismeui Tujaeng: Gasanodongeh daehan omgeumbuter Samuei Bohokaji*, Galmuri Publisher, Seoul, 2021

Translation by Rafaella Capanna