

**FAMILY, WELFARE,
AND THE STATE**

*Family, Welfare, and the State:
Between Progressivism and the New Deal*
© 2015 Mariarosa Dalla Costa
Preface © 2015 by Silvia Federici
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Translated from Italian by Rafaella Capanna



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FAMILY, WELFARE, AND THE STATE

Between Progressivism
and the New Deal

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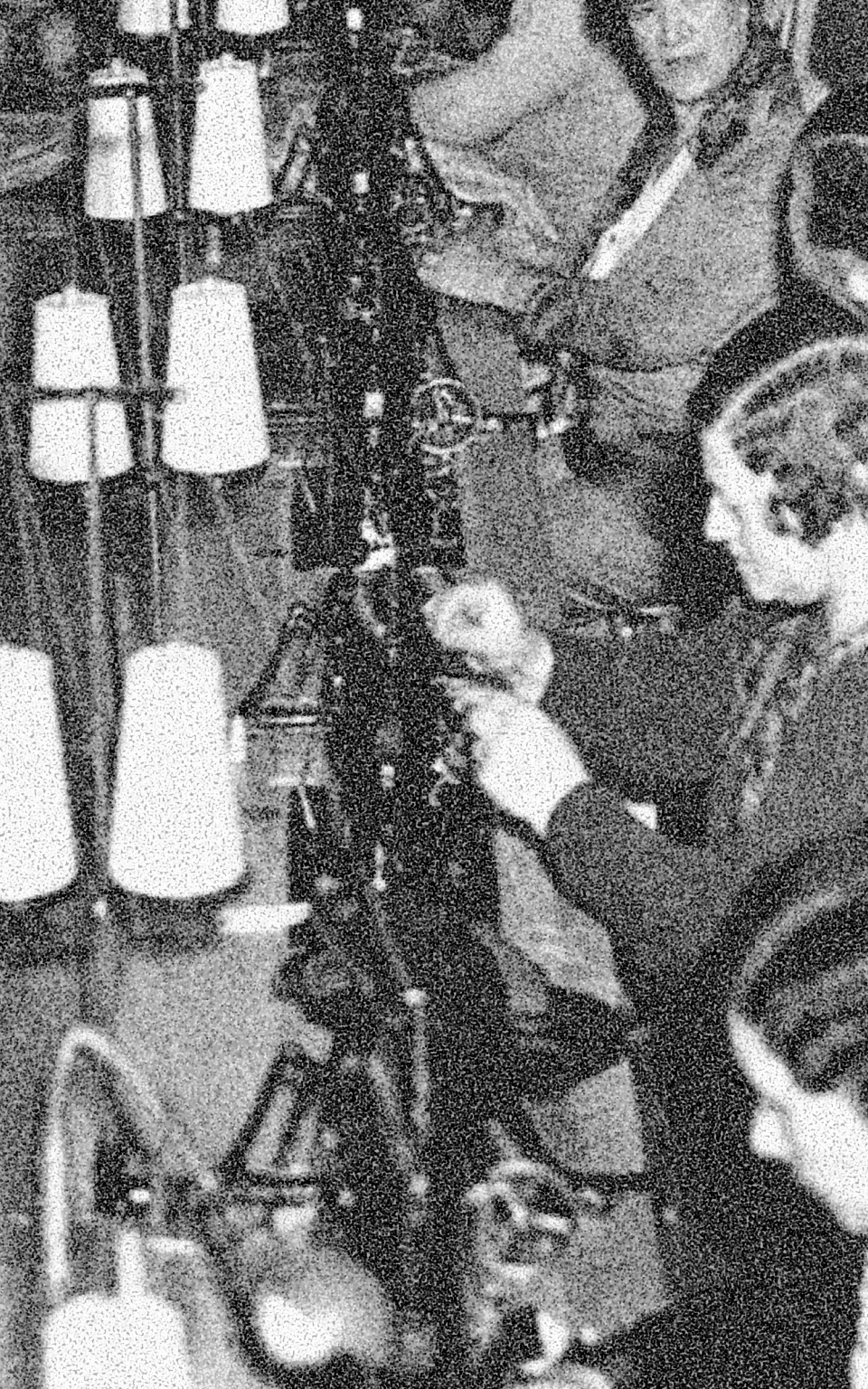
TO MY FATHER FRANCESCO
AND MY MOTHER MARIA GHIDELLI

ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	Agricultural Adjustment Administration
ADC	Aid to Dependent Children
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AJS	<i>American Journal of Sociology</i>
BPW	Board of Public Welfare
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CIO	Committee of Industrial Organization (Since 1938: Congress of Industrial Organization)
CWA	Civil Works Administration
FDD	Five-Dollar Day
FERA	Federal Emergency Relief Act / Administration
FSA	Farm Security Administration
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
HOLC	Home Owners' Loan Corporation
NAM	The National Association of Manufacturers
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act
PWA	Public Works Administration
RFC	Reconstruction Finance Corporation
RPAA	Regional Planning Association of America
SSA	Social Security Act
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
USA	United States of America
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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PREFACE

AS THE END OF THE WELFARE STATE is calling for a reassessment of the politics of the New Deal—its main point of origin in the United States—the publication of a U.S. edition of Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *Family, Welfare, and the State: Between Progressivism and the New Deal* could not be more timely.

Originally published in Italy in 1983, as the welfare state was already undergoing an historic crisis, the book centers on the new relation that the New Deal instituted between women and the state, and the development of a new reproductive regime in which the working-class housewife plays a strategic role as the producer of the workforce and manager of the worker's wage.

This is an aspect of New Deal politics that to this day remains understudied. It is crucial to an understanding of not only the limits of the welfare state, but also the paths to be taken in the construction of alternatives to it. Even the theorists of Italian *Operaismo*, who described the New Deal as a turning point in the management of class relations and as capital's first conscious integration of the class struggle in its development plans, have ignored the central relationship of women and the state underpinning this historical change in class relations. The New Deal, for Operaist political theorists like Mario Tronti, marked the institutionalization of collective bargaining and the transformation of the state into an agent of economic planning.¹ It was part of a Keynesian deal in which wage increases would be exchanged for and matched by labor productivity, with the state and the unions acting as guarantors of the equilibrium to be achieved.

What Dalla Costa shows, however, is that the complex social architecture upon which the New Deal relied was at all points dependent on a reorganization of the reproduction of the workforce and the integration of women's domestic labor and the family in the schemes

of American capitalism. According to the New Dealers' plans, it was the woman's task to ensure that the higher family wage, which workers would gain through their newly acquired collective-bargaining power, would be productively expended and actually contribute to the production of a more disciplined, more pacified, and more productive workforce. As such, the "house-worker" was the strategic subject on which the success or failure of the New Deal depended, while essential to the exploitation of her work was the invisibilization of her labor.

Like many historians before her, Dalla Costa acknowledges that the New Deal continued trends that had been developing on both sides of the Atlantic since the last decades of the nineteenth century, culminating on the eve of WWI with Fordism. As she argues, there is no doubt, that the wage contract stipulated in the Ford factories in 1914—with its revolutionary introduction of the five-dollar-a-day wage and the reorganization of domestic life it promoted—was the model for the welfare and labor provisions of the New Deal. Fordism was the laboratory for the rationalization of domestic work that the New Deal required. In the Fordist "deal," the housewife was no longer expected to contribute to the production of consumption goods, which could now be produced industrially on a large scale, but to provide wise management of the wage and the socialization of the new generation—innovations that, in the Progressive Era, became the object of the new science of rationalization.

With the New Deal, for the first time, the state assumed the responsibility for the social reproduction of the worker, not only through the introduction of collective bargaining, but also through the institutionalization of housework—smuggled in, however, as "the work of love." As Dalla Costa shows, it was only with the New Deal that the state began to plan the "social factory"—that is, the home, the family, the school, and above all women's labor—on which the productivity and pacification of industrial relations was made to rest.

Dalla Costa's guidance through these historic developments—with a narrative spanning from the Fordist era to the Great Depression and the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935—and in particular, her analysis of the social forces these developments responded to, including their implications for worker-capital relations and for relations within the working class, is one the greatest merits of Dalla Costa's work. But there are many other aspects of the book that make it a major contribution to a feminist analysis of the New Deal, as well as a critical intervention advancing the ongoing debates on the role of the "public" and the construction of the "common."

First, Dalla Costa's reading precludes any celebratory interpretation of the New Deal as the "benign father" or "parental state" that some feminists in recent years have advocated. *Family, Welfare, and the State* leaves no doubt that the New Deal was not only the last resort to "save capitalism" from the danger of working-class revolution, and was in essence a productivity deal, it was also structured to maintain a patriarchal and racist order. Social Security was reserved for waged workers while domestic workers, even when working for pay, were excluded from it. Racial discrimination, exploitation, and domination too were pervasive in every aspect of its administration, from job creation to the disbursement of the only Social Security funds houseworkers would receive, namely Aid to Dependent Children (ADC, AFDC).² Dalla Costa nevertheless acknowledges the importance of this social security provision for women, as it opened a new terrain of confrontation with the state that in the 1960s was to assume mass proportions. This provision enabled women to achieve a degree of autonomy without relying on the male wage and inspired an international Wages for Housework Campaign of which Dalla Costa was one of the founders and main promoters.

An additional merit of Dalla Costa's work is that it highlights the prominent creative role that women played in both the social and factory struggles of the 1930s and

vii its transformation of family relations. *Family, Welfare, and the State* brings attention to another important, but still ignored, aspect of the New Deal regarding the social context in which it was hatched. This is the great variety of initiatives that workers across the U.S. put in place to create autonomous forms of self-reproduction. To this day, little has been written about this impressive surge of self-organization, which reached proportions exceeding the experiments with self-management that we have witnessed in Argentina, with workers taking over factories to produce the necessities of life.³ This is a history that today must be revisited as we ask whether our energies and our movements should concentrate on restoring or defending the welfare state, or constructing more autonomous forms of reproduction.

Were the New Deal and the institutions of the welfare state the saviors of the working class, or were they the destroyers of its self-reproducing capacities? As this question is presently coming to the center of radical political debate, at least in the U.S., an evaluation of the “reproductive” politics of the New Deal is more important than ever, and Dalla Costa’s work is a powerful contribution to it.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED TO FILL A GAP in the literature on the New Deal concerning the relationship between women and the state, and therefore, the roles assumed by the family and women in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan. It is important to begin by precisely defining these themes to best bring into focus the relationship between the state and social reproduction in the U.S. in the 1930s.

Much has been written on the institution of collective bargaining as a new form of management for class relationships. Likewise, studies have been dedicated to the propulsive role of public spending for promoting development. It should also be shown how, through the policies of the New Deal, a vast and articulate operation directed at restructuring the reproduction of labor power came into being, and how the state's planning efforts intended to integrate this force with the modalities of development. Consequently, the new role assumed by public spending responded to the need for investment in human capital as a means of increasing the productivity of labor.

The New Deal provided answers to problems of labor reproduction that were already being addressed in the second half of the nineteenth century by technological innovations and during the prewar period by Fordism. These instances highlight the centrality of investment in human capital for the purpose of increasing labor productivity. One can easily observe the correlation between Marshall's recommendations (*Principles of Economics*, 1890) for investing in the working class and Ford's "five dollars a day" policy, as well as the criteria that inspired the Social Security Act of 1935. It took the struggles of the 1930s to *generalize awareness of the value of human resources* even though the most progressive exponents of capital had previously expressed this need.

The state's new role in relation to the economy—particularly its acceptance of the budget deficit and

expansion of public spending to support demand—could function to propel development only if worker consumption passed through an arc of activities capable of guaranteeing the formation of a physically efficient and psychologically disciplined working class that, above all, was able to accept more intense work rhythms. All the initiatives in this direction revolved around strengthening the family—primarily through women’s domestic work—because the income paid by the state, or wages, resulted in the greater productivity of labor power. Caring for children and a husband required a woman to know how to carry out a complex range of tasks which, until then, had not been required. Knowing how to prepare a balanced meal was just one of the most important material tasks of domestic work. In addition to the reproductive labor of housewives, the state began taking direct responsibility for reproducing and improving labor power. To give one example, programs offering free lunches in schools responded to the concern of establishing a level of physical efficiency in the new generations to overcome the impasse of the Depression generation as quickly as possible. The attention that the social sciences increasingly devoted to issues such as the home, diet, sexuality, birthrates, health, education, and leisure always led to this central need for an adequate science of reproductive and social planning. Another aspect of state intervention concerned the function of social assistance. This did not just mean improving the level of physical reintegration of labor power, but rather insuring its subsistence independently of both perturbations induced by the production cycle on employment opportunities and the subjective capability (disability, seniority) of the person to be employed. This system of measures was intended to produce a new economic and social order. The unfolding of these new social features, however, presupposed the centrality of the family and the work of women within it.

We can therefore say that, if the New Deal represented the first comprehensive agreement between the

state and the working class, in which the working class was guaranteed a certain level of reproductive security in exchange for an increase in labor productivity, the effectiveness of such a pact passed significantly through the restructuring of the family and the intensification of women's domestic work. Even the work of women outside the home, in the areas and in the percentages allowed, would contribute to the subsistence and cohesion of the family during the Depression.

The New Deal remained the model social pact for the entire postwar period up to Kennedy's New Frontier policy (which featured investment in mass university education with the aim of developing the scientific-technological potential of the nation after the event of the Soviets' Sputnik launch in 1957) and especially until Johnson's "War on Poverty" and "Great Society" policies were implemented after the 1960s race riots in the ghettos.

The 1970s witnessed the historic end of the New Deal in the U.S., and of similar development plans in the countries it had inspired. In the name of fighting inflation, stagnation of economic development, and the erosion of profits, the Reagan administration passed a series of measures that seemed to turn back the clock to the time of Hoover. The dismantling of public spending on social assistance brought about cuts to welfare, Medicaid, Medicare, school lunches, subsidies for low-income housing, and student loans. With the 1983 federal budget, this process has also begun to affect Social Security, the sacred cow of the New Deal. In the name of *laissez faire* and supply-side economics (meaning reduced public spending for social assistance but fewer taxes for industry in order to encourage investment), there is an attack on the main assumption of the New Deal that the state should take responsibility for social reproduction, thus denying that state intervention in reproduction results in an increase in labor productivity. Though never explicitly stated, this is the basic premise of Reagan's policy of implementing widespread cuts in welfare.

The popular slogans of the 1980s are modeled on liberal-Hooverian themes: “we need to encourage private charity”; “the jobs are there, you just have to look for them”; “if people are unemployed it’s because they refuse to adapt to low wages.” Is it a return to Hoover? No, even if the current economic situation resembles that of the Great Depression, with thirteen million unemployed and a general condition of rampant poverty.

The Reagan administration’s strategy of reducing public expenditure on social assistance while increasing spending on weapons is not a contingency policy, but the expression of a historical turning point in the relationship between capital and the working class—that is, in the form of accumulation and the agreement which lies at its foundation. This policy is accompanied by a massive industrial restructuring aimed at dismantling the type of political recomposition that came about during the 1960s through welfare struggles. The struggles of mothers on welfare have played an important role in this regard, acting as an indicator of the overall struggles of the women’s movement against a mode of social reproduction undergirded by free domestic labor and subordination. Behind the wage claims, reflected in political pressure in the area of welfare and on the labor market, there was a withdrawal of women from free labor and the regimentation of the family, and with it the undermining of that entity as a means and guarantee of the productive result of investments in the area of reproduction. Since the mid-1970s, widespread worker disaffection—e.g., absenteeism at work, the tendency for workers to retire earlier, to cycle through jobs—has been discussed by economists as the “feminization” of male workers’ behavior. The social struggles of women on the terrain of reproduction in the ’60s and ’70s have certainly been an important factor in breaking the balance between production and reproduction on which the Keynesian plan was founded. The continuous increase of female-headed households, the concurrent increase of divorces, and the sudden

population decline during the 1970s, are only several of the most immediately obvious indicators of the limits of the presuppositions on which the cycle of postwar development was founded.

We have now come to a general recognition in political and economic areas that the forms of “social security” created by the New Deal are responsible for a set of expectations that is no longer compatible with the productivity and competitiveness of American capital. Indeed, the industrial restructuring that the Reagan administration has put into action has faced no real obstacles. At its center lies the end of mass industrial production, and with it, the end of a certain kind of working class, enabled by a certain kind of wage structure. The sectors of economic development that have been the strongest since the postwar period (auto, steel, rubber, construction), and which were producers not only of mass goods but also of more homogeneous mass wages, are experiencing a historical decline that verges on crisis. These manufacturing sectors are being replaced by a pyramidal production and wage system. At the top of this new system are the high-tech sectors: energy, computer science, and biogenetics. At the bottom is the magnum sea of the service sector, in which *reproduction services* have become a large part (food services, health care, etc.). Many areas of domestic work are moved out of the house and reorganized into waged positions. There is also a vast “industrial black market,” in industries ranging from textiles to electronics, maintained by the labor of migrant workers and women.

Cuts to public spending on reproduction, the programmed *absenteeism* of the state with respect to planning in this area, and industrial restructuring are all closely linked. Reproduction, so to speak, is left to “free initiative” in the sense that everyone is empowered individually outside of a social plan. Despite Reagan’s rhetoric on the importance of family, there is no family policy. The *housing crisis*, and the building crisis more generally, are signs of this. Today, we take for granted that the American

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6 dream—that is, having one’s own home—is no longer possible for most people. What we are seeing is a real attack on *state investment in working-class reproduction*. Mass unemployment is the prerequisite for a compression of the expectations of women and men forced into fierce competition in the labor market. Meanwhile, the deindustrialization of the United States, advocated by the liberal-democratic wing of the American Establishment (the left, trade unions, certain sections of the Democratic Party), does not really seem to be able to offer any capitalist alternative to the mass devaluation of the working class. Indeed, the new wage structure not only produces much deeper differences and hierarchies within the working class but also foresees a general lowering of the standard of living.