



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### The doctor's knife

**Citation for published version:**

Boast, H 2021, 'The doctor's knife: [Review of] Silvia Federici, Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism' (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020). 145pp., £11.55 hb., 978 1 62963 706 8', *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 2.10, no. Summer 2021, pp. 106-109.  
<<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/the-doctors-knife>>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Radical Philosophy

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



lost on the reader, as it was on me. A history can be told of hats that, at some point, were phallic and hats that, at other points, were yonic. This, for Ekhardt, represents a shift from the androgyny of the 1920s to a biorphication of the body in the 1930s: rendered classically, with exaggerated sexualities. The connection to a fascist aesthetic could be elaborated further here, as it is in Irene Guenther's *Nazi Chic: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (2004) and Eugenia Paulicelli's *Fashion Under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt* (2004).

For Benjamin, as for Ekardt (bar a brief discussion of textile manufacture), production remains a neglected part of the analysis, which does not mean that they think it unimportant, even foundational. Marx began the first volume of *Capital* in a similar place, with the commodity and its transfigurations, but he fell back quickly to a discussion of linen and its quantities and the conditions of its making. Étienne Balibar has claimed that one should start by reading the final chapter of *Capital*, so that the first element of capital's accumulation – i.e. primitive accumulation – is at the start when (spoiler alert) it isn't. But if capital is a whirling circuit of im-

minent disaster and exploitation, it does seem strange to ignore the sweatshops, the monopsonies, the mythical factory ships that combine production with circulation, the industrial disputes and disasters, the wage relation, the environmental extractions and disasters, the way in which racism and gendered violence structure all moments of the circuit. After all, if elegance is teased by death, isn't this because, as commodities, the elegant things of fashion contain the dead labour of their production, and, as such, like all other commodities, they drip with the tragedy of their production?

Fashion is a corpse. Benjamin knew that, but fashion too animates the body in new ways, against (or through) the objectification of subjects in capital. But it does so insufficiently and incompletely. Of Benjamin's famous image, in which the hems of the dresses expand with the territorial expansion of French Empire, one wonders what could happen to our dresses, our hems, our touch, our relation to materials after empire's total abolition. Only at this point, the tiger jumps backwards, into another world. Ekardt, through Grund and Benjamin, points the way.

Sam Dolbear

## The doctor's knife

Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020). 145pp., £11.55 hb., 978 1 62963 706 8

Silvia Federici is one of contemporary feminism's celebrity thinkers, and with good reason. Her work since the 1970s on capitalism and gender has been of fundamental importance in developing theories of social reproduction. She is known as both a scholar and an activist, as a founding member of the Wages for Housework campaign. Her writings have reached a new audience in recent years through a series of essay collections published by PM Press, helping to galvanise a popular revival of Marxist feminism that offers a valuable counterpoint to the shallow neoliberal individualism that has underlain much of feminism's mainstream resurgence. Federici remains distinctive in Anglophone feminism for her attention to environmental issues and to feminist justice on a global scale; her concern with elder care and ageing

is similarly unusual and praiseworthy. Her work on social reproduction has taken on a renewed urgency in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of homeschooling and increased demands for unpaid care.

Federici's latest book consists of ten short chapters on familiar themes. These include the historical context for the disciplining of the body under capitalism (the subject of her earlier work *Caliban and the Witch* (2004)); the body in second wave feminist thought and activism; theories of gender performativity, with which Federici takes issue; and the feminist politics of surrogacy and of sex work. The book collects a number of essays mostly published in the last ten years, along with new material developed from lectures delivered in 2015.

*Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* will be of most interest for its promise to address a tension in Federici's work. That is, how can her theorisations of social reproduction, which typically rely on a narrow and cisnormative model of the female body, accommodate the more diverse understandings of womanhood that characterise contemporary feminism? In her Introduction, she asks: 'is "women" still a necessary category for feminist politics, considering the diversities of histories and experiences covered under this label, or should we discard it, as Butler and other poststructuralist theorists have proposed that we do?' Her further questions concern 'new reproductive technologies' and their capacity to heighten our agency or 'turn our bodies into objects of experimentation and profit-making at the service of the capitalist market and the medical profession'. Federici's framing of the latter question makes her answer clear. This slide from considering the feasibility of the category of 'woman' to casting doubt on technologies that 'remake our bodies in ways that better conform to our desires' raises concerns that the book does not sufficiently assuage.

A key target of Federici's critique is a perceived shift in feminist thought from an engagement with "'biological" factors' to an understanding of the body as primarily textual and discursive. For Federici, the latter fails to adequately explain the social origins of ideas about the body and their roles within systems of exploitation, while also lacking sufficient sense of the coercive power of actual and threatened punishment, and of historical and ongoing struggles for change. These ideas are largely not attributed to a specific author, but Federici's target appears to be Judith Butler, particularly in their 1990s incarnation as a postmodernist bogeyman, a model latterly revived by the right.

Federici's account of Butler's work is fuzzy. She writes that Butler calls gender a 'performance', criticising what she calls 'performance theory'. For Butler, gender is instead 'performative', or brought into being through the repetition of socially prescribed acts. The distinction is important: while 'performance' suggests that a subject chooses their gendered presentation, 'performativity' identifies these acts as bringing gender into being and sustaining the social fiction of its naturalness, and, in turn, the naturalness of binary sex and heterosexuality. It is also worth noting that Butler is well aware of the

social sanctions and physical risks attendant on an 'incorrect' gendered embodiment (as they write in their 1988 essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 'those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished'). Federici is on stronger ground when alluding to Butler's ahistorical mode of argumentation, an issue previously noted by Nancy Fraser. (Federici might have productively engaged with the 1998 Butler-Fraser debate in *New Left Review*.) Later, Federici notes that she is concerned less with Butler's work than with 'the popular version circulating among feminists'. While this is worthy of attention, Federici's reluctance to concretely identify the body of ideas with which she takes issue and engage fully and accurately with its texts leaves the feeling that she has constructed something of a straw man.



Federici's critique of what she sees as feminism's retreat from the body forms the basis of a broader argument about the hazards of 'remaking' the body with new technologies. Her thesis, broadly construed, is that contemporary feminism, informed by Butlerian notions of gender as merely 'performed', has uncritically adopted a dominant tendency of our age to 'promote remaking our bodies as a path to social empowerment and self-determination'. This shift threatens to entrench capital-

ist social relations, with 'body remakes' (only ever loosely defined) likely to intensify the mechanisation of the human body that she identifies here and elsewhere as a key driver of capitalist accumulation. Federici argues that the increasing power of technology to alter the human body may ultimately just enable capitalists to create the bodies they need.

Federici is further concerned that changes to individual bodies do not alter overall social and economic conditions, noting that elective procedures are primarily accessible to wealthy people and, for this reason, sharpen social hierarchies. Yet her claim that 'the trans and intersex movements' are insufficiently concerned with these issues neglects activism and scholarship that indicate the opposite. Federici's hope for 'the development of an egalitarian society where appearance no longer matters' is not ill-intentioned, but her remarks feel culpably insensitive to the realities of trans people's experiences and needs in the present.

As in her earlier work, notably *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici is sharply critical of the role of doctors in this process. She doubts the likelihood that a profession that has 'sterilized us, lobotomized us, ridiculed us when we cried in pain giving birth' can offer a route to liberation. Many of her broader claims about medicine, particularly in its privatised form in the United States, are true, if not especially remarkable. She rightly takes aim at the emphasis on 'personal responsibility' as a cause of illness over social and environmental factors, the insurance industry, and the history of medical experimentation on African Americans. Her preferred approach to bodies and health is less persuasive. She argues for 'the power and wisdom of the body as we know it' and for attention to modes of knowledge that have 'formed over a long period of time, in constant interaction with the formation of the earth, in ways that are tampered with at great risk to our wellbeing'.

Federici's concern for nonhuman nature has long been a strength of her work. However, the connections between women and nature in her writing have not always been entirely clear, often leaning towards an essentialism that is neither fully endorsed nor fully eschewed. This lack of clarity invites troubling conclusions, an issue that is compounded by her stylistic tendencies. Her habit of moving between topics, geographies and time periods can be exhilarating and provocative. Here, a slide from

a discussion of the 'magic' of cis women's bodies giving birth to the ways that '[n]ature too is magical' leaves unanswered questions. Her typically vivid descriptive language, which causes her to describe 'body remakes' as 'experimentation' and 'dismemberment', might have been toned down to avoid evoking tropes of trans monstrosity. Reviews of the book have unsurprisingly concentrated on its trans politics. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Federici's account of cis women's bodies, focused on wombs, birth, and sceptical of elective caesareans, leaves much to be desired. The vagueness of the notion of 'body remakes' leaves it unclear on what grounds Federici would exclude other, less eye-catching health procedures and aids from her critique. At present, pacemakers, hip replacements and glasses seem captured by her concerns over the blending of bodies and machines. She might have productively considered the relationship between her comments here on the body, technology and capitalism and her work elsewhere on ageing, to give an account of the disability implications of her claims.

Reconnecting our bodies with nature is part of Federici's project of moving 'beyond the periphery of the skin'. She portrays the body as coextensive with the world, in 'a magical continuity with the other living organisms that populate the earth: the bodies of humans and not-humans, the trees, the rivers, the sea, the stars'. This evokes work in material feminism, notably Stacy Alaimo's notion of 'trans-corporeality' (2010) and Astrida Neimanis' work on 'bodies of water' (2017). Yet *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* sits in strange self-isolation from much recent feminist theory. Most notably, Federici's recuperation of the 'natural' and opposition to body modification sits in sharp contrast to the 'technomaterialist, anti-naturalist, and gender abolitionist' philosophy of Xenofeminism. Even so, Federici recalls Xenofeminist ideas in her brief demand for the sharing of medical knowledge within communities to enable greater agency in medical decision-making and accessing care, echoing Helen Hester's discussion of DIY abortion technologies (2018). Her lack of engagement with the most prominent recent feminist theorisations of nature, the body and technology, is a missed opportunity.

Federici's latest book is a frustrating read. It largely fails to deal with pressing questions for her version of social reproduction theory, including whether and how it can avoid gender essentialism, and the possibility of

squaring it with a gender abolitionist position. As has been widely noted in reviews, her (at best) confused approach to trans lives is disappointing at a time at which feminist solidarity with trans people, particularly from figures of her stature, is acutely needed. Nevertheless, the book does offer – perhaps in spite of itself – starting points for answering these questions within Federici’s model. Her emphasis on ‘a *common terrain of struggle for women*, even if it is one in which contrasting strategies may develop’, suggests a broader and more inclusive approach to identity and strategy, as does the claim that “‘woman” is not a static, monolithic term but one that has simultaneously different, even opposite and always changing significations’. Federici’s efforts to resignify the meanings of body parts seem as applicable to trans and gender-nonconforming people as to the cisgender women who are Federici’s primary concern. At times Federici makes claims for the resistant potential of trans lives. While her comment that trans and intersex people offer a way to ‘recognize the broad range of possibilities

that “nature” provides’ derives from her antagonism to modifying bodies, we might also read this line as congruent with queer ecology’s challenge to any notion of ‘natural’ sexual dimorphism. Her description of trans people as offering a model of the body that is ‘nondependent on our capacity to function as labour power’ similarly points towards a potential trans-inclusive reorientation of Federici’s work.

The most promising part of the book is the Afterword. Federici argues for ‘joyful militancy’, or the principle that ‘either our politics are liberating, either they change our life in a way that is positive, that make us grow, give us joy, or there’s something wrong with them’. Joyful militancy rejects a notion of activism as heroic self-sacrifice in service of the future, prioritising instead ‘the reproductive side of political work’ that transforms our lives and our selves in the present. This final chapter, which is evocative, illuminating and strategically astute, is a reminder of what Federici, at her best, can do.

Hannah Boast

## Precarious euphoria

Tina Managhan, *Unknowing the ‘War on Terror’: The Pleasures of Risk* (London: Routledge, 2020). 132pp., £120.00 hb., 978 1 35104 860 6

It is a wild adventure we are on. Here, as we are rushing along through the darkness, with the cold from the river seeming to rise up and strike us; with all the mysterious voices of the night around us, it all comes home. We seem to be drifting into unknown places and unknown ways; into a whole world of dark and dreadful things.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Dracula may seem like a strange place to start a review of a work primarily concerned with the global War on Terror. But, in the same way Tina Managhan walks us through the ‘excesses and uncanniness of this war’, so Bram Stoker’s novel lays bare the libidinal urges haunting imperial Britain. Stoker tells a tale about the eternal return of the supernatural (racialised) ‘other’ embodied in Dracula and his voluptuous undead ladies, whose nightly visitations and seductions of virtuous Victorians serve only to reveal the impotence of ‘science’ in the face of

other-worldly attacks. While conventional accounts of Dracula focus on the fight between good and evil, science, superstition and female sexuality, it is the unbridled *enjoyment* or *jouissance* experienced by Van Helsing and his cohort in battling the Count which drives the novel forward. From illicit sexual encounters and amateur detective work, to the joy of driving a stake into the heart of one’s enemy and, most of all, the sheer thrill of the pursuit of Dracula, an obscene light is shed upon characters we are invited to think of as the pinnacle of civilisation and modernity.

If dominant ways of theorising the War on Terror have been rooted in ideas of precautionary risk logics or the understanding that ‘we act *not* on the basis of knowledge, but on the basis of “catastrophic contingency” – on the basis that the slightest conceivable risk of the absolute worst that could happen’, then Managhan implores