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Rereading the Wages for Housework Campaign: Feminist Degrowth Reflections on Social Reproduction, Commons, and a Care Income

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Abstract

This paper explores how debates on wages for housework in the 1970s contribute to current discourses on redefining, redistributing, and revaluing care. More specifically, this paper asks: How does a rereading of the international Wages for Housework (WfH) campaign contribute to feminist degrowth debates on commoning care and a care income? In trying to answer this question, I revisit original literature and interpretations of WfH and show that, as a Marxist feminist political perspective, the aim of the campaign ventured beyond the monetization of care. Subsequently, I elaborate on the now divergent ideas of Selma James and Silvia Federici, two of the campaign's main founders, of how to reactualize the transformative aim of the campaign. Their two proposals, namely, a care income and reproductive commons, are introduced, brought into conversation with each other, and critically discussed against the background of Nancy Fraser's distinction between affirmative and transformative strategies of transformation. Exploring the fertile tension between a care income and commoning care, I draw preliminary conclusions on what feminist degrowth can learn from WfH regarding a social-ecological transformation to a more socially just and ecologically sound economic system.

Introduction

Empirical evidence shows a strong correlation between GDP growth and the use of material resources, energy, and total greenhouse gas emissions (Haberl et al. 2020). This substantially challenges the hypothesis that (green) economic growth can be decoupled from environmental harm in absolute terms (Parrique et al. 2019).¹ With exacerbating ecological crises and the realization that the 2015 Paris Agreement goal of staying below 1.5°C (or even 2°C) above preindustrial levels requires a radical trend reversal in the material and energy throughput of Western societies (Keyßer and Lenzen 2021), degrowth has evolved from being a niche topic to one that receives increasing attention in mainstream discourses.² An often-cited definition of degrowth regards it as the “equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases

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human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term” (Schneider et al. 2010, 512). In acknowledging that there cannot be infinite economic growth on a finite planet, degrowth scholarship strongly builds upon the radical ecological growth critique formulated in the 1970s (e.g., Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Meadows et al. 1972; Daly 1973).

While the ecological growth critique is foundational for degrowth scholarship and activism, Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan (2022) note the importance of other forms of growth critique (distinguishing the socioeconomic, cultural, feminist, and South–North critiques, as well as critiques of capitalism and industrialism) that contribute to degrowth discussions. This paper is concerned primarily with feminist degrowth and aims to give visibility to feminist contributions that have informed or could inform degrowth scholarship and activism. While discussions of feminist degrowth³ are much broader than debates on social reproduction and care,⁴ the organization of care in a degrowth society is still much debated. Within this debate, some contributions focus on commoning care (e.g., Akbulut 2016; Zechner 2021; Dengler and Lang 2022), others on a care income (GNDE 2019; Barca et al. 2020; Kallis et al. 2020). This article explores what a rereading of the international Wages for Housework (WfH) campaign from the 1970s contributes to a feminist degrowth approach. After introducing, retracing, and contextualizing some important parts of the campaign, I discuss the divergent ideas of two of the WfH campaign’s main founders on how its original aims could be re-actualized today: Selma James campaigns for a care income, while Silvia Federici favors the politics of (reproductive) commons. I present and discuss the two proposals before answering the question of how WfH’s aim to socially recognize reproductive work can be re-actualized for feminist degrowth futures.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, by means of a thorough rereading of original texts and documents from the 1970s, as well as newer compilations of archival material (e.g., Federici and Austin 2018; Toupin 2018; James 2021), I hope to recontextualize the often-misunderstood WfH campaign with regard to its historical origins, aims, and outlooks. Second, and arguably more relevant for today, this paper seeks to contribute to feminist degrowth scholarship by providing a nuanced discussion of a care income and commoning care. In reading these two proposals against the background of WfH debates in the 1970s and putting them into conversation with each other, I elaborate on the fertile tension between them and hope to create the possibility for further debates on transformative steps toward feminist degrowth futures.

Rereading the 1970s international Wages for Housework campaign

WfH was an international political campaign and a strand within the feminist movement of the 1970s. It originated as a contribution to Marxist feminist theory and practice, which criticized orthodox Marxism for rendering class relations the principal contradiction within capitalism. Despite regional differences, two major strands of discussion shaped Marxist feminist debates in the 1970s. First, the so-called dual systems theory built upon Heidi Hartmann’s (1979) paper *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. It discussed prospects for a feminist-Marxist tradition that regards capitalism and patriarchy as two independent but interrelated spheres with the goal of overcoming the notion of patriarchy being a mere side contradiction of capitalism (Sargent 1981).⁵ The second important debate concerned domestic labor and included the international political WfH campaign, which refused the predominant liberal feminist idea of female emancipation by means of entering the unchallenged,

male-dominated sphere of wage labor. At first glance, WfH seemed to be a reformist demand for money for all the unpaid work carried out mostly by women. Arguably, this misinterpretation was partly responsible for the practical abandonment of the strategy by the end of the 1970s. However, as Louise Toupin (2018, 46) notes in her comprehensive anthology *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77*, when “reduced to a monetary demand, the entire political analysis with which it was associated, as well as its subversive capacity, is too easily bypassed.” In this section of the paper, I retrace the origins, aims, and demands of WfH to subsequently discuss its relevance for feminist degrowth debates today.

The intellectual pioneers of WfH were three women: Mariarosa Dalla Costa (1972), who was part of the activist group Lotta Femminista in Italy; Selma James (1972), who was politically active in the Notting Hill Women’s Liberation Workshop Group in the UK; and Silvia Federici (1975), who was a member of the Women’s Bail Fund in the US. Together with other activist groups, they launched the International Feminist Collective (IFC) in 1972.⁶ The IFC coordinated the WfH campaign and consisted of various WfH working groups, most notably in Italy, England, the US, Canada, Switzerland, and Germany, but also, for example, in Mexico and Argentina (Toupin 2018). With thematic, autonomous subgroups such as the Wages Due Lesbians (WDL) or Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWWFH), the IFC discussed intersecting axes of oppression from the beginning (Capper and Austin 2018), putting into question the critique that the domestic labor debate “remained limited to heterosexual, (nuclear) kin-based, White middle-class households in the Global North” (Rao and Akram-Lodhi 2021, 35).

Following the feminist slogan “the personal is political,” WfH—not unlike other strands of radical, Marxist, and socialist feminist theories—politicized the sphere of social reproduction, a sphere that until the 1970s was largely considered a private matter. Domestic labor was seen as a common denominator of oppression that all women face—a claim that must be read against the sociohistorical background of the 1970s, where “the proportion of women whose occupation was full-time housekeeper was around two-thirds, ranging from 60 percent in Quebec to 72 percent in Italy” (Toupin 2018, 18). Long before the concept of “care work” was *en vogue*, the caring activities performed in the private household—cooking, cleaning, nursing children, or caring for elderly relatives—were not considered work and, if mentioned at all, were referred to as “labors of love” that were innately tied to women. WfH strongly rejected this notion and made unpaid care work visible for what it is: the indispensable foundation of every production process in the formal economy, a constant subsidy to capitalism, “a masked form of productive labor” (Dalla Costa 1975, 36), and “the hidden face of wage society” (Toupin 2018, 37). So, when Federici begins her 1975 article *Wages Against Housework* with the sentence, “[t]hey say it is love. We say it is unwaged work,” she radically redefines what work is—a step that she considers crucial for revaluing and redistributing this work.

In her intersectional critique of WfH, Angela Davis accurately notes that Black women and “their white working-class sisters” (1981/2019, 209) only in very rare cases enjoyed the privilege of being “just housewives.” Carrying a constant double burden of work on plantations or in factories on the one hand and in homes on the other, Davis (1981/2019, 208) asserts that “housework has never been the central focus of Black women’s lives.” However, the founding texts of WfH decidedly acknowledge that the campaign was not targeted at *housewives* but at *housework* as the “‘lowest common denominator’ of all women in capitalist societies, although it was experienced quite differently depending on the class, ethnicity, and race to which the person in

that position belonged” (Toupin 2018, 3). Housework, as Davis (1981/2019) herself points out, also accrues for those who are doing paid work, to be carried out mostly by women in what has later been termed their “second shift” (Hochschild 2003). Moreover, the feminization of social reproduction also occurs in the sphere of wage work. Some WfH activists employed by the Maimonides Community Mental Health Center in New York wrote in their 1975 statement *Wages for Housework at a Waged Workplace* that the few men working there were mostly in administrative positions, while “much of the work we do at the Center is unwaged, connected to our feminine role and that we are treated as housewives on the job” (Federici and Austin 2018, 80). Over a decade later, Claudia von Werlhof (1988) would call this phenomenon, which led to the systematic underpayment of paid care work, the “housewifization of wage labor.”

A major concern of the feminist movement—which until today has been brought forward as an argument against WfH—was that paying for housework would reinforce rather than dissolve the gendered division of labor. This concern was famously countered by Federici (1975, 81):

In fact, to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity.

The women’s strike in Iceland on October 24, 1975, during which close to 90 percent of women refused to perform either paid *or* unpaid work, caused a national standstill and was a powerful example of the WfH slogan “when we stop, the world stops”—a slogan that is still used in feminist strikes around the world (e.g., James 2018; Campillo 2019).⁷ Against this background, it is crucial to read WfH not as a simple *realpolitik* demand for conditional cash transfers but as a transformative bottom-up organizing strategy that aimed to shake the very foundations of both capitalism and patriarchy. The uncompromising rhetoric of the original writings makes clear that the campaign was not a demand for money that aimed to meet policymakers on a middle ground but took a perspective that unveiled power structures in patriarchal capitalism (Weeks 2011). For example, when asked about the financial feasibility of WfH, Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici (1976, 14) state:

Since we are not the Treasury Department and have no aspiration to be, we cannot see with their eyes, and we did not even conceive of planning for them systems of payment, wage differentials, productivity deals. It is not for us to put limits on our power, it is not for us to measure our value. It is only for us to organize a struggle to get all of what we want, for us all, and on our terms.

So, how would WfH as a political perspective help to revalue and redistribute reproductive work? Most importantly, the demand was never meant as a stand-alone policy but as a step toward the recognition and socialization of housework that would necessarily accompany radical changes in the social organization of work. Let us consider the example of the Italian Movimento di Lotta Femminile (later, Lotta Femminista). The group, which later merged into the IFC, was formed in 1971 in Padua and was strongly influenced by Italian operaism and autonomous Marxism (Bracke 2013). In the group’s

early documents, such as the *Programmatic Manifesto for the Struggle of Housewives in the Neighborhood* (Lotta Femminile 1972), the activists demanded an early form of an unconditional basic income (as wages for housework paid to *everyone*) and a reduction in working time that translated to shorter hours spent in wage work per day.⁸ Similarly, James and the Notting Hill Women's Liberation Workshop Group decidedly linked WfH to a reduction of time spent in wage work to maximum of 20 hours per week, a "guaranteed income for women and for men working or not working, married or not" (James 1973, 67), and free community nurseries and childcare. Against this background, it becomes clear that, rather than being a partial, reformist demand for conditional cash transfers, WfH aspired toward a much broader transformation, with the sphere of social reproduction being the central terrain of feminist struggle.

The IFC stopped its activities in 1977 amid internal disagreements,⁹ though WfH groups in many countries persisted for longer and—most notably in the case of the UK WfH group—are still active today.¹⁰ By the end of the 1970s, however, WfH had lost traction in international women's movements. While some strands of feminisms (most notably radical, Black, Marxist, and ecological feminisms) have built upon and expanded the importance of social reproduction, "the domain of social reproduction was not the strategic choice of the women's movement" (Toupin 2018, 3). Rather, the focus by the end of the 1970s was on the integration of women into the largely unquestioned sphere of wage work. This strategy of "stirring women in" was an attempt to universalize the androcentric model of the 40-hour week in Western Europe and the US. Nancy Fraser showed in her landmark publication *Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History* that this "has unwittingly provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism" (Fraser 2013, 220), with the feminist fight for the right to sell one's labor being a major instrument to fuel global economic growth. Liberal feminism's doubtlessly important goal of financial independence could, however, also have been met by part-time wage work for people of all genders. Marxist feminists such as Angela Davis (1981/2019) emphasize the importance of wage work as an opportunity for people to meet and politically organize outside the home. While decidedly acknowledging the value of political organizing, WfH activists might have responded that such opportunities also exist—and possibly to an even greater extent—in the case of the socialization of reproductive work (i.e., when care work is shifted from the "private sphere" of the household to the sphere of the public and the commons by means of repoliticizing care and organizing it collectively).¹¹

Fifty years later and with plenty of research on care work, gender pay/care/pension gaps, and the free choice between a second shift after wage work, living a life as free from caring responsibilities as possible, or outsourcing care work to women along the class-race-gender nexus, it is easy to see that a focus on wage work—while certainly benefitting some women—ultimately might not have been the road to women's emancipation. This resonates with one early insight from WfH, namely that "women's struggles had to be led not from the position of the minority of 'liberated' women whose privileges allowed them to live almost 'like a man,' but from the position of the vast majority of women, who were houseworkers, and whose status as unwaged workers determined the sexist attitudes to which all women were subjected" (Toupin 2018, 92). Reflecting on the strategic choice against WfH raises the question of how things would have turned out if larger segments of the women's movement had favored both the paid *and* unpaid work necessary to sustain lives as sites of struggle at the time. Rather than engaging with the counter-factual, however, this article takes WfH as a critical starting point to discuss how it contributes to

discussions on socially revaluing and reorganizing the sphere of paid and unpaid care work today.

From WfH to demands for a care income and commoning care

This article is concerned with the interesting fact that two of the main founders of the international WfH campaign, Selma James and Silvia Federici, diverge regarding how the original aim of WfH could be re-actualized today, with James campaigning for a care income and Federici focusing on the politics of the (reproductive) commons. It is impossible to build seamlessly on WfH debates from the 1970s, as discourses have changed over time. To name three examples: (1) Discussions of care work, referring to both paid and unpaid care work with a focus on the emotionality, relationality, vulnerability, and asymmetry of caring activities, have been on the rise since the 1990s (Jochimsen 2003; England 2005) and have partially replaced Marxist feminist debates on social reproduction, which were central for WfH. (2) Marxist feminist discussions from the 1970s now lie at the core of social reproduction theory (SRT, see Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2020), which “is primarily concerned with understanding how categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus value” (Bhattacharya 2017, 14) and extends the sphere of social reproduction from unwaged work to include feminized sectors in the paid sphere of the economy. (3) Various streams of thought at the intersection of feminisms and the environment (for an overview, see Dengler and Strunk 2022), such as materialist ecofeminism, the subsistence approach, feminist political ecology, or postcolonial ecofeminisms, have evolved since the 1970s and have crucially influenced Federici’s work on reproductive commons. Acknowledging the limitation of being unable to retrace all those debates in their historicity and influence, I limit myself to introducing the two respective proposals, namely, a care income and reproductive commons and bringing them into a critical conversation with each other.

From WfH to a care income

Building on WfH, landmark feminist economics publications, such as Marilyn Waring’s *If Women Counted* (1988) and the Beijing platform consensus to include unpaid care work in GDP, a care income aims to directly and indirectly compensate for unpaid care work that is necessary to sustain life. The proposal was first introduced by a working group consisting of Selma James and Nina López, both central figures in the Global Women’s Strike, and degrowth scholars Stefania Barca and Giacomo D’Alisa in a collaboration for the DiEM25 Green New Deal for Europe (GNDE 2019; Barca 2020; Barca et al. 2020; James 2021). While a care income is hence a relatively new proposal that has not yet been implemented, it has important predecessors and is currently advocated for by different groups around the globe (e.g., IWRAW Asia Pacific 2020).

A care income is meant to “compensate activities like care for people, the urban environment, and the natural world” (GNDE 2019, 4) both symbolically and materially. It thus puts an emphasis on care for humans and more-than-humans (e.g., soil, forests, animals) and socially revalues both unpaid care work and subsistence work. It is important to note that a care income does not grant a universal right to income for everybody. Rather, it compensates for unpaid care and subsistence work in monetary terms, thereby “providing social and financial recognition” (GNDE 2019, 36) of unpaid care work. Based on the belief that caring for others should sustain a livelihood in and of

itself (Robeyns 2001; James 2021), a care income is a form of “participation income” (Atkinson 1996). This means that to be eligible for a care income, one needs to engage (“participate”) in a set of predefined caring activities.

James (2021, 70) is certainly right when she notes that “[e]ven considering a Care Income opens the way for all genders to rethink how we relate to each other and to the natural world.” A care income, by centering people who perform care work, raises transformative questions of power and directly addresses the gendered division of labor (D’Alisa 2020). Openly positioning care work as a social and ecological necessity and claiming capital to recognize it as such questions the material conditions of capitalism. Moreover, a care income would translate to a direct material improvement in the living conditions of caregivers, thereby finally acknowledging that “the foundations of the wealth and well-being of the world rest upon the sphere of social reproduction and the labor of care” (FaDA 2020).

At the same time, however, a care income—like arguably all non-universal cash transfers—risks falling into the trap of capitalist valorization (Wichterich 2015). In its current form of being non-universal, a care income would not widen the decommodified dimensions of life, of which care is (often but not always) a part. Rather, it arguably integrates care into the dominant language of monetary valuation, thereby reinforcing the notion of “monetary value = social recognition” and, more generally, capitalist logics of valuation (Wichterich 2015; Dowling 2016; Dengler and Lang 2022). The subversive claim of WfH that capitalism would not be able to pay for all these hours of care work adequately (Macdonald 2018; Toupin 2018) is arguably bypassed or at least not foregrounded in the policy proposal of a care income.¹²

Besides methodological difficulties regarding how to measure participation in care work, the question of what care work should be eligible for a care income is deeply normative.¹³ For example, Francis Seeck (2021) discusses in their book *Care trans_formation* (trans_ forming care) that what counts as unpaid caring activity is often limited to heteronormative conceptions of care within nuclear families and makes care work that is performed in trans and non-binary spaces invisible. A care income would elevate the sphere of (some? all?) unpaid care work; in its GNDE formulation, this would include caring for nature and subsistence work. However, other activities that contribute to the flourishing of societies, such as political activism or forms of care work that might not be commonly regarded as such, could easily remain invisible and unrecognized.

A universal cash transfer, such as a universal basic income (UBI),¹⁴ would make everyone less dependent on wage work and free their time and capacity for all other forms of work and activities, thereby opening a “material and symbolic structure of opportunity” (Ketterer 2021, 1310) to socially revalue and redistribute different forms of (also, but not only care) work. As Kathi Weeks (2011, 143) notes, “basic income’s proposal to break the link between work and income highlights the arbitrariness of which practices are waged and which are not.” A broad variety of basic income proposals are being discussed, among them market-liberal proposals that offer little transformative potential.¹⁵ Hanna Ketterer (2021) distinguishes three lines of justification for a UBI, namely market functionalist (unleashing the market), social integrationist (refurbishing the welfare state), and transformative (undermining mechanisms that support capitalism). The transformative line of justification is often framed as an important stepstone for a care-full social-ecological transformation (e.g., Wright 2010; Winker 2021). The key argument here is that the partial decommodification of labor power via a decoupling of livelihood security from wage work (Macdonald 2018) enhances the autonomy, economic security, and bargaining power of everybody who depends on a wage for a living. This strengthens all

forms of socially valuable but unpaid activities and could lead to an increase in “counter-hegemonic practices” (Ketterer 2021, 1310) in the “non-monetized economy of socio-ecological provisioning” (Dengler and Lang 2022).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea of a UBI has been discussed in international institutional settings around the world. For example, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC 2020) embraces a UBI, and the Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women sees it as a crucial step in their “Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Covid-19” (HSCSW 2020). However, most articulations of a UBI do not touch upon patriarchal power relations inherent in the gendered division of labor happening behind the scenes (for exceptions, see McKay and Vanevery 2000; Weeks 2020). James (2021, 38) discusses how a care income relates to a UBI: A care income “is light years ahead of a basic income which hides the crucial work that women do, leaves intact the sexist division of labor and the domination of the market, and can even be used to abolish benefits.” While feminist proponents of a UBI, such as Carole Pateman (2004), agree that there is limited potential to tackle the gendered division of labor “[w]ithout the debates about basic income being informed by feminist arguments,” they are more optimistic about such an outlook.

How then do we escape the respective shortcomings of a care income and a universal basic income? In *The case for degrowth* (2020), degrowth scholars Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D'Alisa, and Federico Demaria propose to combine the “universal” aspect of UBI with the “care” of a care income by promoting a universal care income. This conceptualization builds “on other expressions of UBI but differs by foregrounding the social recognition of unpaid and highly gendered care work that we all perform to sustain the life and wellbeing of households and communities” (Kallis et al. 2020, 71). Whether this “foregrounding” refers primarily to a change in name (from UBI to universal care income) that translates to a discursive visibilization/politicization of social reproduction, or whether a differentiated universal care income refers to a UBI for everybody that increases for people who perform care work, is contested.

In summary, the proposal of a care income as formulated by WfH co-founder Selma James stands in the tradition of the WfH campaign from the 1970s. The focus of the campaign lies in what others have called a “feminist wage” (Cavallero and Gago 2020) and—depending on its concrete design, with the question of universality being important in this regard—carries the potential to contribute to systemic alternatives.¹⁶ At the same time, it seems that the focus has changed from WfH as a rhetorically uncompromising political perspective in the 1970s to a more reformist proposal. Arguably, the Marxist feminist analysis that capitalism always needs an outside to stabilize itself—or as Lindsay Macdonald (2018) puts it: “[m]ade to pay the costs of reproducing life, capitalism would no longer be viable”—is no longer central to policy debates on a care income. In remembering the rich heritage of the early WfH discussions that James herself decisively shaped and in recovering some of the important dimensions of WfH that have been lost along the way (e.g., the IFC's simultaneous focus on socialization of care work, shortened wage working weeks, and basic income), a universal care income can contribute to dismantling patriarchal capitalism and related gender injustices.

From WfH to commoning care

Silvia Federici, who was introduced as a co-founder of WfH and the IFC in earlier sections, emphasizes in the introduction to her 2019 book *Re-Enchanting the World:*

Feminisms and the Politics of the Commons that WfH has been re-actualized by debates on the commons. She writes:

In the 1970s, I had campaigned for wages for housework as the feminist strategy most apt to end women's "gift" of unpaid labor to capital and to begin of a process of reappropriation of the wealth that women have produced through their work. Reading Shiva's account of the Chipko movement and her description of the Indian forest as a full reproductive system—providing food, medicine, shelter, and spiritual nourishment—expanded my view of what a feminist struggle over reproduction could be. The encounter in recent years with the struggle of women in South America—indigenous, campesina, villera—has further convinced me that the reappropriation of the common wealth and disaccumulation of capital—the two main goals of wages for housework—could equally and more powerfully be achieved through the deprivatization of land, water, and urban spaces and the creation of forms of reproduction built on self-management, collective labor, and collective decision-making. (Federici 2019, 2; italics added for emphasis)

Commons, for Federici (2019), are forms of collective (re)production that resist ever-expanding capitalist relations. Her reading of commons aligns with a discourse that does not focus on commons as a specific type of good (e.g., common pool resources in Ostrom 1990) but as social processes of democratic self-government and social relations between commoners (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2019; Perkins 2019). Commons, such as collective food provisioning in popular kitchens or open-source software, are created by commoners, who collectively produce, govern, provision, and use commons in accordance with the needs of the group (i.e., commoners collectively create the commons in the process of commoning) (Euler 2018). The inherently relational process of commoning strengthens the social fabric and puts human needs, as well as the "sustainability of life" (Pérez Orozco 2014), at its center.

It is important to emphasize that commoning is nothing *new*. Instead, as Federici (2019, 86) emphasizes, it "is the principle by which human beings have organized their existence on this earth for thousands of years." Various accounts of the enclosure movement show that the enclosure of the commons was foundational for the genesis of capitalism in the nineteenth century, a process that Karl Marx called "primitive accumulation" (Marx 1887/1976). Contrary to Marx, I follow Rosa Luxemburg, but also Marxist feminists such as Federici (2004, 2019) and materialist ecofeminists such as Maria Mies (1986), in arguing that primitive accumulation is not a completed historical process but an ongoing one.¹⁷ To put it in their words, "[i]t is a phenomenon constitutive of capitalist relations at all times, eternally recurrent" (Federici 2019, 15), as "[c]apital has to continue the colonial enclosure of other people's commons if it wants to continue its constant growth or accumulation" (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999, 149). In neoliberal capitalism, there is a constant pressure on commons and commoning by tendencies of enclosure, commodification, marketization, and co-optation, but—in the sense of a Polanyian countermovement (Polanyi 1944/2001)—people also resist this and (re)build commons, which are dysfunctional to capitalist accumulation.

This article focuses on what Federici (2019) calls "reproductive commons," namely collective modes of social reproduction and day-to-day caring activities beyond markets, states, and heteronormative families (see also Akbulut 2016; Gutiérrez Aguilar 2017). Discussing these from the vantage point of feminist degrowth, Corinna Dengler and Miriam Lang (2022) distinguish three modes of commoning care. First, affirmative

caring activities, such as volunteering in nursing homes, risk filling the care gaps of welfare states (where existent), capitalist co-optation, and community capitalism (van Dyk 2018). Second, communitarian caring commons have always existed as a mode of collective social provisioning in countries or social strata that have not had access to public provisioning by welfare states (Gabbert and Lang 2019; Banks 2020). Third, transformative caring commons are recreated by social movements around the world and aim to fundamentally transform social relations, with a focus on de-patriarchalization, relationality, interdependency, and care (Zechner 2021; Piccardi and Barca, 2022).

To make the concept of commoning care more tangible, I present three examples. (1) Federici herself mentions the example of the *Ollas Comunes* (communal pots), which emerged as self-organized popular kitchens in Chile after the 1973 military coup. Women began to shop and cook together out of material necessity, but the impact of the *ollas* far exceeded the mere provisioning of food and helped, for example, to fight the paralysis imposed by state terror in the Pinochet dictatorship. At the same time, the communal pots served to end women's isolation in the homes, thereby repoliticizing social reproduction (Federici 2019, 140–41). Some *ollas* continued to exist after the military dictatorship ended, and the shared socio-historical consciousness led to a resurgence of the communal pots in times of crisis, most recently during the Covid-19 pandemic (Daniels et al. 2021). (2) In her book *Commoning Care and Collective Power*, Manuela Zechner (2021) describes how caring commons were created in the face of the financial crisis in Spain and the resulting 15-M movement. She draws upon the example of childcare commons in the neighborhood of Poble Sec in Barcelona, where the collective self-organization of childcare in initiatives such as Babàlia/La Rimaieta has contributed to the creation of collective care infrastructures and to the politicization of reproductive activities. In a balanced discussion, Zechner shows both the potential (e.g., satisfaction of care needs in times of crisis, emergence of long-term caring infrastructures) and obstacles (e.g., persistent gender relations, enforced prioritization of wage work over all other kinds of activities) to commoning care. (3) A third example is the Centro Integral de Salud (CICS, integral health center) in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, as described by Georg Rath (2022). It is part of the Cecosesola co-operative, which was founded in 1967 and currently consists of 40 co-operatives and 20,000 members—showing that commoning care is not limited to small scales.¹⁸ Cecosesola has always been oriented towards people's needs and provides a variety of caring commons in the areas of food and health care, with the CICS polyclinic built as the heart of Cecosesola's health co-operative in 2009. The commoners decided to open the commons and health services to all people, and with up to 200,000 patients per year (a number that increased significantly during the pandemic to about 700 people per day), the CICS has a truly impressive size for a self-organized and self-financed grassroots initiative in crisis-ridden Venezuela.

While commoning initiatives such as these “are often seen as a way to fill in the gaps in the official social security systems [...], they also] follow a different logic than that of the capitalist economy, and they put this logic concretely into action through practices of reciprocity and cooperation” (Kumpuniemi and Ryyänen 2021, 144–45). Hence transformative caring commons aim not only at the collective provisioning of care. Rather, they start from the assumption that we need to *unlearn* patriarchal capitalism to build less hierarchical and more desirable, care-full ways of living. They hold that this process of unlearning requires fundamentally transforming and (re)building relations of care, mutual help, conviviality, and interdependency in everyday life. The time-consuming transformation of subjectivities, which happens when people come together in a process

of collectively resisting and/or building alternatives from below, may be *the* central way in which commoning contributes to social-ecological transformations (Dinerstein 2016; Rath 2022).

If Federici now states that the goals of WfH “could equally and more powerfully be achieved” (2019, 2) in the process of commoning, her focus lies on dimensions of the original WfH campaign that have been structurally forgotten: the socialization of reproductive labor by means of a collective fulfillment of everyday care activities, which is “an already present reality, especially in the form of existing communitarian forms of social organization, and a perspective anticipating in an embryonic way a world beyond capitalism and placing at the center of social change the question of social reproduction” (2019, 4). In her discussion of commons, Federici de-centers money and capitalist relations and instead engages in prefigurative politics by centering collective care and provisioning arrangements as means of creating systemic alternatives to the status quo.

Reactualizing wages for housework for feminist degrowth futures

Having discussed the two proposals—care income and commoning care—independently, I will now bring them into conversation with each other and critically reflect on the (potentially) fertile tension between them. In doing so, I deploy the distinction of *affirmative* and *transformative* demands and strategies, as coined by Nancy Fraser (1997).¹⁹ She states:

By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework. The crux of the contrast is end-state outcomes versus the process that produce them. It is not gradual versus apocalyptic change. (Fraser 1997: 23)

While affirmative demands remain within a given structure and aim only to retrospectively correct the symptoms of injustices without tackling their origins, transformative demands aim to change the generative mechanisms that create this structure. Taking the example of the WfH campaign, if misread as a purely monetary demand, WfH could be seen as an affirmative demand that widely accepts the gendered division of labor and compensates for the concomitant gender injustices by materially compensating people who provide unpaid care work. However, WfH as a political perspective is much more than that. It aimed to fundamentally transform the deep underlying mechanisms that generated these injustices in the first place, namely, the gendered division of labor and the appropriation of free (or cheap) labor in capitalism.

How does Nancy Fraser’s framework then translate to discussions of a care income and commoning care? To begin with the latter, it is quite clear that commoning, with its strong focus on use values, relationality, and provisioning, significantly differs from the market logics ingrained in a capitalist growth paradigm. Nick Dyer-Witthford (2007, 82) claims that “the cell form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of a society beyond capital is the common. A commodity is a good produced for sale, a common is a good produced, or conserved, to be shared.” There is certainly the danger of the co-optation of commoning practices in the era of neoliberalism, especially when they are (re)built amid capitalist social relations with all their respective problems and

conflicts. An example of an affirmative strategy that corrects the symptoms rather than tackling the generative mechanisms of the care crisis is volunteers coming to a nursing home to read books or play backgammon with the residents. Despite the best intentions and the joy that this gesture might bring to elderly residents, the volunteers *also* cushion the symptoms of precarious working conditions for nurses, who have strict limitations on how much time they can spend with their patients (Winker 2015). However, the precarious working conditions in the care sector can also be (re)politicized. For example, a variety of care strikes in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland have gathered under the label of a “care revolution” to fight for better working conditions in the paid care sector, to make visible the invaluable contribution of unpaid care work to human well-being, and—more generally—to transform care as the basis for a society grounded in solidarity (Winker 2015, 2021). In these cases, not only the symptoms but also the structural origins of precarious working conditions in the paid care sector are tackled, thereby opening a window of opportunity for a transformative reorganization of care.

But what about the frequent critique that commons are niche practices that cannot promote societal transformations at large? In this regard—and also for later discussion on care income—it is noteworthy that Fraser emphasizes that:

the affirmative/transformative distinction is more complicated than it seems at first. This is due to the possibility of struggles that are affirmative by any strict measure, but that nevertheless give rise to transformative effects because they alter relations of power and thereby open a path for further struggles that become increasingly radical over time. (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 174)

Hence it is important to acknowledge that small, possibly affirmative steps of many kinds contribute to pathways that can be transformative. While it is true that commoning practices often arise in niches, what carries transformative potential is that many of these niches pop up and, through “polycentric connectivity” (Euler 2019), contribute to prefiguring a non-patriarchal, egalitarian, democratic, and sustainable organization of care work from below that gradually democratizes the from above (Dengler and Lang 2022). Instead of framing strategies for transformation in a simplified bottom-up vs. top-down logic, it seems more promising to envision a multiscalar *bottom-linked* transformation that asks what is needed for bottom-up initiatives to flourish (Oosterlynck et al. 2019). Filka Sekulova and colleagues deploy the metaphor of “fertile soil” for commoning initiatives, where “places with high soil fertility give rise to multiple and large initiatives and can hold or sustain groups for a longer time” (Sekulova et al. 2017, 3).

Such fertile soil on which commons can flourish certainly also involves strategies that change wage relations. The argument that commons and collective forms of care have a “pronounced middle-class character” (van Dyk 2018, 536) raises awareness of the fact that in our current economic system, the question of who has the time and capacity to engage in commoning and/or political activism has a class, race, and gender bias. For example, single mothers in underpaid jobs or—more generally—everybody who has to spend 40 hours/week in wage work to sustain a living, and who may also be responsible for unpaid care and housework in a “second shift” (Hochschild 2003), is certainly disadvantaged (if not excluded) from spaces of participation (e.g., in social movements). While a thorough reorganization of care *by design and not by disaster* thus certainly requires or at least substantially benefits from a redistribution of wealth and income, it is important not to forget that rather than being an asset for the privileged, commons have historically been and continue to be a mode of organizing livelihoods in

marginalized communities (Banks 2020) and/or in situations of crisis (Varvarousis and Kallis 2017). Manuela Zechner (2021) uses the example of the informal reproductive commoning of (single) mothers in WhatsApp groups as an inherently feminist political praxis that, in sharing and collectivizing care work, satisfies urgent needs.

A care income—especially if it contributes to breaking the link between livelihood security and wage work and draws upon WfH as a broader political perspective—can thus serve as an enabler and vehicle for reproductive commons to flourish. While (especially the non-universal form) is partially affirmative in reproducing capitalist money relations, it can give rise to transformative effects and create time and space for care and participation that lie at the core of a thorough re-organization of care. This holds even more when a care income is regarded as a leverage point for broader debates on redistribution, following in the footsteps of the IFC and WfH in the 1970s. Most notably, early programmatic writings (e.g., Lotta Femminile 1972; James 1973) focused on a redistribution of income characterized by a guaranteed income for *everyone* in combination with a redistribution of time by arguing for a reduction of time spent in wage work *per day* as a basis for the collective reorganization of care work. Expanding the vision of a care income to such a holistic policy package (which should also include a social wage in the form of Universal Basic Services, see Bärnthaler and Dengler 2023) could contribute to the tripartite strategy of changing wage relations, redistributing time, and reorganizing societies around collective care (Dengler et al. 2022).

In an interview, Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah (2020, 154) ask Federici: “So, the point is that it’s not necessarily a contradiction to make a claim for the value of reproductive work—for instance, child-rearing—through demanding a recognition of its economic value in the form of a wage, and at the same time, working towards the decommodification of this activity?” and Federici agrees. In this sense, rather than upholding a juxtaposition of the two positions, a rereading of WfH shows that the positions stand in fertile tension with and could possibly complement each other. In terms of Rosa Luxemburg’s (1903) concept of “revolutionary realpolitik,” affirmative steps in their “transformative relatedness” (Sekulova et al. 2017, 6) can pave the way for a transformation if their utopian horizon ventures beyond mere steps, thereby creating a

strategic temporality that is the deployment of the movement in the present tense. It manages to work within existing contradictions without waiting for the emergence of absolutely liberated subjects, neither in ideal conditions of struggles nor in the belief in a single space that totalizes all social transformation. In that sense, it appeals to the potential of rupture of each action and does not limit the rupture to a spectacular final moment of strictly evolutionary accumulation (Gago 2020, 154, emphasis in the original).

Redistribution of income and time as fertile soil for caring commons

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, namely, *how does a rereading of the international Wages for Housework campaign contribute to feminist degrowth debates on commoning care and a care income?*, it is certainly possible to state that feminist degrowth debates have plenty to learn from WfH. As a political perspective, WfH always ventured beyond a monetary demand and instead emphasized the foundational role of care work for capitalist accumulation, offering versatile leverage points for social reproduction as a field of political struggle. Additionally, the early

programmatic writings partially rehabilitated in this paper called for a redistribution of time (via a substantive reduction of wage work per day) and income (via a basic income paid to everybody) and thus offered a policy perspective rather than a stand-alone policy proposal. It is upon this rich heritage that current feminist degrowth debates on commoning care and a care income can draw.

This paper took as a starting point the fact that two of the pioneers of WfH nowadays diverge in their ideas of how to re-actualize the transformative potential of the campaign to bring their perspectives on a care income and reproductive commons into conversation with each other. I have argued that re-actualizing WfH today means first of all acknowledging the tension between the two proposals: While commoning care focuses on decommodified, collective modes of caring in the spheres of the commons, a care income calls for monetary compensation for those who care and thus puts a focus on material redistribution. In a second step, however, I have shown that this tension is—at least potentially—a fertile one. While practices of commoning care have always existed at the margins, in a capitalist growth paradigm in which the majority of people depend on a wage to secure their livelihoods, certain (partially affirmative) policies enable reproductive commons to flourish. Bottom-linked strategies that change wage relations and time regimes, a universal care income that makes *everyone* less dependent on wage work, and a reduction of time spent in wage work per day provide fertile soil for such an endeavor.

Against this background, the main contribution of this paper is to create an opening for debate on the (potential) complementarity of the two proposals. While I would argue that feminist degrowth visions need to focus on decommodified versions of care and reproductive commons, I see a universal care income that disentangles livelihood security from wage work as a possible means and leverage point toward this end. Importantly, policy proposals such as universal basic services, which could not be discussed here due to space limitations, are a social wage and hence could reduce dependency on individual wages. Despite the importance of these policy discussions, which could take inspiration from the WfH campaign and the radical political roadmap it set out, it is crucial to acknowledge that feminist degrowth transformations must not exhaust themselves in a call for feminist policies.

WfH (as well as various strands of Marxist feminism, Black feminism, ecofeminisms, etc.) makes it indispensable to acknowledge that policies are embedded in and substantially constrained by political structures (e.g., neoliberal, patriarchal, and structurally racist nation states), which puts the role of a “partner state as an enabler” (Eskelinen et al. 2021, 17) at least into question. Moreover, (feminist) degrowth must not forget its roots and grounding in social movements that fight for systemic alternatives. Bottom-linked strategies start from, and put focus on, the bottom. In so doing, feminist degrowth futures must decidedly foreground social reproduction and the sustainability of life, and this major endeavor requires a variety of strategies, steps, actors, and allies along the way.

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Notes

- 1 While there are (rare) cases of absolute decoupling, they focus only on carbon emissions (not, e.g., material use, biodiversity issues) and hence deliver an incomplete picture of the environmental impact of growth. Additionally, they have nowhere near the required speed or scope to cope with the climate crisis (Keyßer and Lenzen 2021).
- 2 For example, degrowth was prominently discussed with 1,350 on-site and 4,848 remotely registered participants at the Beyond Growth Conference, which took place in the European Parliament in May 2023.
- 3 The 5th International Degrowth Conference, which took place in 2016 in Budapest, was the birthplace of the international scholar activist network Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), which is an important culmination point for feminist degrowth discussions.
- 4 For example, some authors dig for the roots of degrowth scholarship in materialist ecofeminisms (Pérez Orozco and Mason-Deese 2022), feminist economics (Gregoratti and Raphael 2019), and other strands of thought at the intersection of feminisms and the environment (Dengler and Strunk 2022). Other authors focus on questions of the patriarchal roots of the growth paradigm and offer notions such as “ecological masculinities” (Hultman and Pulé 2018) or “caring masculinities” (Scholz and Heilmann 2019) as ways of transforming subjectivities.
- 5 Sylvia Walby (1990) later criticized and refined the original contributions by speaking of a triple systems theory with the “racial structure” as a third independent but interrelated sphere that must not be neglected.
- 6 The debate certainly had precedents. For example, the British suffragette Eleanor Rathbone demanded wages for mothers in the mid-1920s, a demand also taken up by Virginia Woolf in her 1938 essay *Three guineas* (Nakai 2022).
- 7 Though often structurally forgotten, women have been involved in labor strikes since the industrial revolution. In many cases, women were the main actors in these strikes; for example, in an 1893 strike in Vienna, 700 female employees from three textile factories collectively left the factories and went on strike for three weeks, demanding a reduction in working hours and a minimum wage. The core difference is that earlier strikes commonly occurred in the context of wage work (i.e., women acted as collective actors in labor struggles), whereas feminist strikes since the 1970s (in line with the WfH focus on social reproduction) have also focused on laying down unpaid work.
- 8 Taking feminist insights into account, the reduction in working hours per day, as proposed by early WfH activists, should be preferred to proposals for a shorter working week (e.g., Friday Off) that predominate in the degrowth discourse, as most care work occurs on a daily basis (Dengler and Strunk 2018).
- 9 The Italian WfH groups around Dalla Costa and the New York WfH Committee around Federici did not attend the 5th IFC Conference 1977 in Chicago. The concrete reasons have not been publicly discussed. Toupin, who up until this day has written the most comprehensive account of WfH, vaguely writes, “It seems that, over time, ideas about the organization of the international campaign, the functioning of group’s autonomy, and the links that were to unite them with the campaign—the conception of the campaign’s coordination, in fact—began to diverge among the points of reference—that is, the leaders” (2018, 127). In the introduction to James’ 2021 anthology, *Our Time is Now: Sex, Race, Class, and Caring for People and Planet*, Margaret Prescod, who co-founded Black Women for Wages for Housework, implies that this split was about race. She writes: “Perhaps we should have written about it at the time, but we didn’t see the point of putting our resources into a public fight that would have distracted from the organizing we were learning to do” (Prescod 2021, xiv). Although this paper cannot contribute to this discussion, I believe that retracing this thread could be instructive for future intersectional debates on WfH.
- 10 WfH activists around James have coordinated the Global Women’s Strike (GWS) since 1999, and the former subgroups Wages Due Lesbians and Black Women for Wages for Housework merged into the Queer Strike and Women of Color GWS, respectively.
- 11 The “Kinderläden” in 1970s Western Germany are a good example of that (Hamm 2016).
- 12 It is certainly important to acknowledge that the debates around a care income are rather new and that this analysis, based on what is currently publicly available, can therefore be only preliminary. However, I hope that this paper opens space for debate on the continuities and ruptures of WfH and a care income.
- 13 In practice, having to prove eligibility for a care income would also carry problematic dimensions of monitoring, surveillance, humiliation, and bureaucracy (Baker 2008; Levasseur et al. 2018).
- 14 A universal basic income refers to universal, regular, and often age-dependent cash transfers paid out to individuals (Torry 2019).

15 Even Friedrich Hayek campaigned for an equal minimum income for all.

16 Feminist degrowth scholar Anna Saave (2019) discusses the “care levy” as a form of progressive taxation that puts an emphasis on the social recognition and redistribution of unpaid and undervalued care work. This intriguing proposal could be usefully explored in further research placing a care levy and a (universal) care income into conversation with each other.

17 It is not only Marxist feminists who have picked up on Luxemburg’s assumption of an ongoing primitive accumulation. A famous example is critical geographer David Harvey (2003), who takes ongoing primitive accumulation as a starting point for his conceptualization of “accumulation by dispossession.”

18 Certainly, open-source software is the best example to show that commoning is not limited to small scales (e.g., when more than 2 million R users worldwide contribute to developing the software, blog/tweet about problems, share their solutions online, etc.). Cecosola and the CICS show that, even in the sectors of food provisioning and health care, where interpersonal relationships remain central, commoning has the potential to fundamentally change the way societies organize social provisioning processes.

19 Similar distinctions (yet somewhat different in the details) have been put forward by other authors. For example, Rosa Luxemburg (1903)—whose concept of revolutionary *realpolitik* will be introduced later in the section—distinguishes between reform and revolution, while Erik Olin Wright (2010) differentiates between ruptural (e.g., revolutions), symbiotic (e.g., policy proposals), and interstitial (e.g., prefigurative politics in niches) logics of transformation.

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