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MARIAROSA DALLA COSTA

Some Notes on Neoliberalism, on Land and on the Food Question

THE PROBLEM of the growing degradation of the food system owing, among other things, to its genetic manipulation, relates to research technology directed at enhancing nature's productivity and has as its counterpart the expropriation and privatization of land and the development of agrarian reforms aimed at re-stratifying labour worldwide.

These measures seek to impose in an increasingly pervasive way class relations and models of production that are peculiar to today's concept of development. Thus, agrarian reforms and policies implemented in the twentieth century have guaranteed better nutrition to a few, malnutrition or hunger to many, and in particular, have been used as a powerful tool to disrupt organizational networks that various sections of the world's population have created in their struggle to assure themselves better nutrition and a better life. We, therefore, fully agree with the assertion that food crises are fundamentally products of the political economy of capitalism (Cleaver).

This is also true of "technological miracles" concerning food production. On one hand, as they simulate the source of abundance, they destroy the biodiversity and the reproductive powers of nature, the only real source of abundance (Shiva). On the other hand, through the genetic manipulation of food and the industrial and commercial policies that sustain it, they make food increasingly inaccessible to the vast majority of humanity.

This leads not only to a progressive destruction of nature's reproductive capacity, but also to the progressive annihilation—through wars, repression, epidemics, and hunger—of populations rendered superfluous by the expropriation and poisoning of land due to the use of pesticides or landmines. The uprooting, "ghettoization," and enclosure of populations, deprived of their fundamental means of subsistence—above all, land—and ultimately confined to slums, refugee camps, and jails, have as their counterpart the "enclosure" of food. Food is, in fact, already inaccessible to many because of the combined policies of land expropriation, technological innovation in agricultural methods, and the relationship between prices and wages (when there is one). In addition, food is always more subject to further manipulation,

made unavailable for use by privatization, monopolization, or technological patents.

But, what role do policies play regarding land and food in the so-called new globalization of the economy (Wallerstein; Mies)? It is necessary to clarify some premises. The neoliberalism that characterizes the latest phase of accumulation, contrary to what is often assumed, is not a spontaneous process where the productive forces of the economy are simply set free to compete among themselves. In reality, neoliberalism is a capitalist strategy planned as much as the Keynesian economic strategy was. Its planning resides in that gigantic operation of underdevelopment of social reproduction represented by the policies of structural adjustment. Such policies were implemented in substantially identical ways around the world during the '80s and '90s. They were intended to clear the way for the unfolding of neoliberalism. The institutions assigned to "plan" this underdevelopment of reproduction, which above all is an attack on labour and on the struggles of women, are the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Today, these institutions represent the government without borders of international capital. If the former presides over the formulation of directives regarding adjustment policies, the latter launches development projects which are their corollary.

The current phase of accumulation rests in fact on two fundamentals. The first consists of the new international division of labour, which concerns not only the sphere of production but also reproduction (Federici). As a result, more Third World women than ever perform domestic work for the first world, either by remaining in their countries of origin or by emigrating to so-called advanced nations. Such a division and restructuring of labour would not occur if adjustment policies, with the dramatic poverty which they provoke, did not lead to the migration of many. The second fundamental consists of the new economic liberalism, which in seeking the deregulation of labour to allow increased corporate competition in the new globalized economy, assumes that reduced contractual power is a result of increasing poverty caused by adjustment policies.

However, the underdevelopment of reproduction created by such policies, the foundation on which international division of labour and economic neo-liberalism rests, resulted in the international cycle of struggles that unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s. From the '80s onward, structural adjustment policies have contributed to widespread misery and become the terrain for growing struggles and rebellion (George; Midnight Notes Collective; Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1995, 1996).

Paradoxically, in particular in Italy, the political debate, whether institutional or not, does not usually mention adjustment policies, thereby hiding how continuing cuts in public spending for social consumption and privatizations belong to a concerted strategy at the international level. But to an even lesser extent does the debate address the privatization and expropriation of land, which are at the heart of the underdevelopment of reproduction and which constitutes the main source of world hunger and of policies of annihilation and enclosures of always larger sectors of population. From my point of view, the other side of

the hidden attack on social reproduction is the progressive poisoning of the land. This is because land, ever further outside the control and knowledge of local populations, must guarantee an always higher productivity and always higher profit for the international food industry. In the same way the expropriations of land and forced migration of populations (to which improbable resettlements are promised), play a central role in the various programs of the World Bank, and have remained unmentioned in the Italian debate.

If *these operations on the land* and consequently *on the populations*, are *crucial constants* in the policies by which the IMF and World Bank, as institutional summits of international capital, guarantee the further expansion of capitalist relations that leads to the increasing encroachment on and devastation of the reproductive powers of nature, what are the implications for us? I will mention here only a few points while directing your attention to a more detailed study elsewhere (Dalla Costa M. 1996).

Because the expansion of capitalist relations leading to the commodification of every form of life constitutes a state of siege that threatens us all, such operations must be *at the center of our political thinking and activity*. These operations continually restructure class relations around the world, thus, to express an anti-capitalist resistance capable of confronting this new phase of accumulation, to defend ourselves as working class of the global economy means, first of all, supporting the struggles over land in ever more regions of the planet, and developing a political reunification around this question (of the land) in all its varied aspects at the international level.

In this sense, it is fundamental to learn and tell others about the struggles against this process all over the world, and to act in support of them. This may help to dam an overflowing river rushing towards us. We need to spread word of the victories that have already occurred. It helps us to shake the belief in the inevitability of capitalist development. Above all, it is of fundamental importance that we pose ourselves the question (even in advanced nations) of how we relate to the land/earth.

Lessons from Indigenous and women's movements in the South have revealed that there are no mechanical or chemical short cuts, to say nothing of biotechnological ones, when it comes to the land. There are no simple technological solutions to guarantee the fruits of the earth and the renewability of its forms of life. The earth needs reproductive work—it is necessary to care for it through human presence and activity and it is necessary correspondingly to give back as much as is taken. This is just as true for human beings who are, after all, a part of the life of the earth. Technology in both cases can only perform a marginal role. It can serve to cut grass in the same way that a washing machine can do the laundry but not to raise a child. This understanding compels us to rethink the working day, just as we do when we take into account the reproductive work involving human beings. The lack of any serious response on this issue, combined with the lack of any serious response over the question of land, can only render even more tragic the difficulty of human reproduction. But if the technological approach is

not the solution; then liberation from agricultural work-based on technological advancement is a false liberation. This false liberation should have resulted in a labour force that on one hand is unemployed, and on the other, supposedly free for more intensive use on other fronts. Yet, to re-localize development here means, above all, to restore a human presence which, beginning with new relations among humans and between humans and nature, will also be able to invent a technology appropriate to the new relations between living things. The abandonment of the countryside by women in Italy was not only a refusal to do hard work but also of hierarchical control by the elderly and by men in the isolation of the village life. Today more and more women and men all over the world are experimenting with practical alternatives in land-use, beginning with practical alternatives among themselves and within a context rich in potentialities for communication and exchange without frontiers. In this sense also, the rising in Chiapas (Esteve) has constituted a great laboratory.

But the question of what kind of relation with the land/earth, according to the Indigenous lesson, forces us to address the problem of what are in effect our commons, commons that we want to preserve or reconquer. In my opinion, they are the earth as public space (against policies that increasingly restrict space for collective activity), the earth as source of biodiversity, and the earth as source of natural evolution.

The struggle over time and wages, so much in discussion in recent years in the advanced countries,¹ is myopic if it is not linked to the land question and attempts to change current agricultural policies, including those regarding animal husbandry, in a way that preserves the biodiversity, integrity, and renewability of nature. If not linked to all these questions, the victory on the struggle for higher wages will leave in our hands only the possibility to buy more poison and with it our extinction. The reproductive powers of nature and its biodiversity, as Indigenous communities teach, multiply instead of reducing our possibilities of life, making them always more monster-like, as is increasingly happening. The development of practical alternatives must gain strength from the struggles, refusals, and protests against current policies.

It is important to know that these practices are developing with many articulations even in the advanced nations, as in, for instance, in the United States. While the waged economy, through a growing unemployment, dooms ever more women and men to live on the street without food or hope, those seeking alternative solutions to feed themselves and have a roof over their heads are discovering new social relations that put into place other economies and other relations with the land. I am alluding to those movements and those initiatives which we can group under the name "social ecology," "bioregionalism," or "community economy" (Dalla Costa M. 1996). Here the need to assure one's own nutritional requirements is linked to attempts to re-localize development not only to keep at the local level the availability of the land, but also the guarantee of healthy food, work skills, and financial resources without letting them be devoured by the uncontrollable reign of the global economy.

One of the more meaningful examples is the city of Binghamton in the State of New York. Of 40,000 inhabitants, 15,000 were fired by IBM, a firm which had never before fired large numbers of people, but which was transferring production to the Third World. A short time later, the supermarkets also closed. This collapse corresponds to what has happened in many other U.S. cities hit by high unemployment. One safety valve for the community, to be able to eat and live, was to rediscover the land, to create at the borders of the city community biological gardens that could count also on an internal market. On the basis of the recovered time and land, people could build new relationships and elaborate a new culture with nearby Native communities and reservations. This experience with community gardens following factory closings has happened on a larger scale in the former automobile capital of Detroit.

These are only two examples. But many others are developing and becoming widespread. Cities and communities are also constructing alternative circuits of local money, organizing, on a large-scale, alternative networks of labour and professional exchange. There are also movements, as in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Vermont, around the question of bovine growth hormone, uniting animal rights activists, ecologists, and family farmers against agro-business. The abuse of animals is also the abuse of small-scale economies and the environment. In Arizona, the question of land has for the first time united family farmers and Native Americans against agri-business that wants farm land and against mining companies that want the uranium, coal, and oil underneath Native reservations.

These examples, from my point of view, are very significant and full of implications, which will become clearer in the near future. They are examples to which we will turn in our search for alternative economies and struggles. What is certain is that our planet, the Earth, under a multiplicity of perspectives, is emerging as an increasingly important issue capable of uniting in a powerful circuit of struggles her many diverse children.

This paper was presented at the session "Feminist Critique of the Food Globalization, Production and Trade" held at the "Women's Day on Food" alternative conference at the Fao Summit held in Rome, Italy, the 15th November 1996.

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of Gynocide: Capitalist Patriarchy and the Medical Abuse of Women (2007); and editor of, with Giovanna F. Dalla Costa, Women, Development and Labor of Reproduction (1999); and with Monica Chilese, Nostra madre oceano: Questioni e lotte del movimento dei pescatori (2005) (forthcoming in English, *Our Mother Ocean: Questions and Struggles for the Fishers' Movement*).

¹See the appeal of 35 intellectuals published in the newspaper, *Il manifesto*, the 27 of October 1996. To this matter, I dedicated further considerations in my article, "L'indigeno che è in noi, la terra cui apparteniamo."

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NANCY C. M. HARTSOCK

Women and/as Commodities

A Brief Meditation

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN this article with a brief feminist mythic story derived from the Ancient Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*:

One day, towards the end of his rather miserable life, the old blind hero of the tragedy sensed the presence of the Sphinx. He asked her why things had turned out so badly for him. "Well," the sphinx explained, "your answer to the riddle was only partially correct." "Wait a minute," he said. "You asked me, 'what walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?' I answered Man—who crawls as a child, walks upright as an adult, but upon reaching old age must use a cane. That's a perfectly good answer." "Well," said the Sphinx, "what about Woman?" "Come on," said Oedipus, "when you say Man, of course that implies Woman too. Everyone knows that." The Sphinx smiled as she replied, "That's what you think." (Rukeysan qtd. in Folbre 1992: xxiii)

I want to suggest here that attention to the question, "What about women?" can provide important insights for understanding the operation and trajectories of global capitalism. Even more than that, I want to suggest that the situation of women in the new global economy—especially third world and migrant women—may hold the key to understanding political economy and capital/labour dynamics—but only insofar as we begin theorizing from women's lives.

Women have been both included and excluded in different ways in different locations. To the extent that they have been drawn into wage labour the conditions and structure of their work have been systematically different from that of men. In the new global economy, however, these conditions are being generalized to more and more workers. That is, the global labour force is being feminized in several ways. First, more women are working for wages. Second, more men are being subjected to the kinds of labour discipline initially practiced on women. Third, there are changes in the structure of labour itself—i.e., many work processes are becoming more like the work women have done in the past

Women in a Globalizing World
Transforming Equality, Development,
Diversity and Peace

edited by
Angela Miles



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*For Rosalie Bertell (1929-2012)
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