

The Door to the Flower and the Vegetable Garden (2002)

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WTO Protests, Seattle 1999.

Editorial Introduction

The following talk by Mariarosa Dalla Costa was delivered at the “Operaismo a Convegno” conference, held in Rome at the Rialto Occupata social center on June 1-2, 2002. The conference was part of a series of events held around Italy that summer to celebrate and discuss the publication of Futuro anteriore, a significant study of the trajectories of Italian workerism authored by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, and Gigi Roggero (DeriveApprodi: Roma, 2002). An ambitious undertaking, the book was conceived as a historical practice of “co-research.” In-depth interviews with almost 60 participants in the workerist orbit formed the basis for the book, from the leading theorists (Antonio Negri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati) to those militants from the intermediate political layers, who coordinated and relayed between the local and national initiatives of organizations like Potere Operaio. An accompanying CD-ROM contained transcripts of these interviews, an important bibliography, and a survey of the radical journals which flourished in this period.

Steve Wright has written extensive review essays of Futuro anteriore and its 2005 companion volume, Gli operaisti, an edited book collection of the original interviews, while Enda Brophy has provided a valuable account of the conferences and seminars around the book launch. ¹ A notable shortcoming of Futuro anteriore was its relative neglect of the feminist current within operaismo. Of the 58 participants, only five were women (including Silvia Federici and Alisa del Re), a number that is not representative of the powerful influence the Italian strand of Marxist feminism developed during this period continues to have, both in terms of theoretical innovations (the attention paid to reproductive labor and gendered exploitation under capitalism) and political effects (the slogan and campaign around Wages for Housework, the strategic implications of a social reproduction perspective).

Indeed, Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s absence from the initial Futuro anteriore interviews due to other commitments left a considerable gap. ² In Brophy’s report of the Rome event, he describes her presentation, translated in full below, as “what the project had been missing,” namely a “long discussion of her personal history and path” as an integral member of both Potere Operaio and founder of the important radical feminist organization, Lotta Femminista. With a specificity and urgency akin to Leopoldina’s Fortunati’s crucial narrative published in Viewpoint a few years ago,

Dalla Costa reconstructs the political context for the feminist activists during the Italian red years, that space she has called the “training ground of militancy, the arena where many of us learnt to struggle and analyze that perverse thing that is capitalist development.”³

Dalla Costa further recounts her efforts throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to broaden the scope of autonomous feminism to the international level: from the control of women’s bodies and reproductive rights, to domestic labor, to movements over land, the commons, privatization, and environmental and agricultural policies in the Global South. She weaves these reflections on the close relationship between capitalist strategies of accumulation and the conditions of reproduction together with considerations on the ebbs and flows of political action, and the simultaneous difficulties and possibilities of linking social struggles across borders. In many ways, the pressing problems of the conjuncture in which this text was written – at a certain peak in activity of the alter-globalization movement – remain our own.

Excerpts of this talk have been previously translated by Arianna Bove and Pier Paolo Frassinelli for generation-online.org. The present translator has benefited from consulting this existing translation. A bibliography of Dalla Costa’s major texts, and others by leading Italian Marxist feminists, is included as an appendix.

– Patrick King

The door to the garden creaked

And a footstep rustled the sand...

(Tosca)

It’s often said that the most typical languages of femininity are silence and emotions. I will not use the first one because our political movement doesn’t yet have the tools to understand it. On the other hand, you will have to put up with me using a bit of the second one.

This said, I’m grateful to the authors of *Futuro Anteriore* for taking on successfully the hard work of clearing the path of remembrance for many thinkers coming from the tradition of workerism, myself included. I did not contribute to the book, not for lack of interest but because at that moment I didn’t have the time to do so. I was, in fact, in the process of defining a strategy for what I consider, after birth and abortion, to be the third big battlefield between women’s bodies and the medical body: the overuse of hysterectomy. I will later briefly talk about this and give it precedence to the other issues, because it is the one that most closely interfered with my possibility to contribute to this book. It required, in fact, all my attention and prevented me from confirming my intention to contribute in due time.

First of all, though, I need to explain where I come from. By the way, I just finished reading the book the other day. It had been presented to me as a study of subjectivity but obviously it ended up including, in the course of its development, other important themes that I didn't have the time to think about as much as I would have liked. I'm sorry then if my lecture will be out of focus regarding some of the issues that I find very important for the school of feminism that derived from workerism.

However, I'm very happy to participate in this conversation. How come I'm still here after 30 years? The answer is simple: this is my home. I was born here. Here is where I was first politicized and, most importantly, this is the experience I had been looking for, the one capable of answering my urge for understanding as well as for action. You can't ever forget your roots and I never even wanted to. This is where my thinking fits. Here I find the people who speak my language, even though it is a language I had to modify slightly, in order to be able to communicate with different kinds of people. After this, there was no other home for me. After this, there was only a long road, along which I identified the few issues that I will present to you today and where I fought a few battles.

Besides its successes and its failures (personally I participated in Potere Operaio Veneto), workerism has had the considerable power to determine my life journey and not only mine, it seems, since many of us are gathered here today. It would be therefore useful to investigate further this profound sense of belonging that workerism originated in so many of us. I have the feeling, in fact, that we would have at our disposal more tools than we think, if we only took into consideration the efficacy of the political discourse of the past.

First of all, workerism gave us a method, together with the determination and the passion to act so as to engender a transformation into the existing structure. These are only three of the foundational elements I can identify in that experience, but I relied on all of them when traversing other territories in the following years. From 1967 to 1971, I was active in Potere Operaio and then in the Feminist Movement. The area of the Feminist Movement that I contributed to promoting and organizing, Lotta Femminista or Wages for Housework, is no doubt, therefore, the child of Potere Operaio.

Mixing together my memories with the current conversation, I would like to call your attention to three topics, all pertaining to the sphere of reproduction:

- *the overuse of hysterectomy, which I consider a form of devastation of the flower and vegetable garden of reproduction, inside women's bodies: the destruction of the places for life and pleasure;*
- *the work of reproduction meant as that work capable to produce and maintain life: a problem that was left with no answer;*

- *the exploitation of the land and the destruction of its reproductive powers, seen as the devastation of the flower and vegetable garden of reproduction outside our bodies*, because the land is not only our source of nourishment, but from the land bodies gather meaning, sensations, collective imagination: here too, then, exploitation and destruction of the land are equivalent to the devastation of the places for the creation of life and its pleasures. This issue becomes central in the radical fringes of the political debate during the '90s and has its origins in the struggles that were organized in Third World countries during the '80s. Of course those struggles have a story that spans across five centuries of capitalism. It is an ancient story.

Let's start then with the devastation of the flower and the vegetable garden inside the female body through the *abuse of hysterectomy*, traditionally performed together with the *ovariectomy* of healthy ovaries. It has been not easy at all to deal with this issue, since I had to dig through it alone and build for myself a knowledge of the relative pathologies, together with their possible remedies, the plausible as well as the implausible ones. However, I have an inclination for the act of solitary introspection and for the full contact fight with whatever monster comes out. A confrontation with doctors shortly followed.

Delving into an issue, even by themselves, if there's nobody else available at that moment, uncover it and build new knowledge to then circulate it and inform the public: this, I think, is the method that more and more *Vittattivisti*,⁴ those who operate in the sphere of the production and reproduction of life, will have to undertake. At stake is the ability to stand up against the multiplying attacks that, in the grip of a pressing siege, are jeopardizing the integrity and the well-being of our bodies, by undermining the powers and the inner workings that regulate the reproduction of life. Of course I'm available to discuss this issue more deeply, to which I have been committed for years, together with women and doctors, if the occasion arises. I decided to provide today at least a few numbers, considering the extreme seriousness of the abuse, one that both women and men should be aware of. When a man needs surgery, in fact, there are usually women to help him gather information, advise him and assist him. In the case of this procedure, on the other hand, women are often left alone to decide together with the doctor. When their partners give them an advice, it is often, due to misinformation or in the attempt to appease them, the wrong one: "Come on, get rid of that uterus. You don't need it anymore anyway!"

In Italy the rise of hysterectomies goes from 38,000 in 1994 to 68,000 in 1997, so that one every five women, one in every four in some regions like Veneto, are at risk of being subjected to it. Not even the black plague had so many fatalities. In 1998 and 1999 we are almost at 70,000.

This procedure has serious negative consequences on the physical, emotional and relational level. In 50% of the cases there are complications that can be fatal to one or two women (depending on the procedure) out of every 1000 (a considerable risk therefore). For

these reasons, it should be taken into consideration only for those few pathologies that do not allow an alternative healing approach. It is also very important to have full knowledge of the different procedures available today, because the safeguarding of a woman's body and her future quality of life might depend on that relative choice. If we compare the statistics on the use of hysterectomy in Italy with that of our neighbor France, and analyze closely the instances in which this procedure is used, even for those pathologies that present the possibility of an alternate route, 80% of them, as I reported to the Department of Public Health, seem to be unfounded. In France one woman out of every twenty is at risk of being subjected to a hysterectomy, one out of every twenty-five in Paris and its surroundings, and the tendency is toward a further decrease of its use. Therefore in Italy and other countries, the USA first of all, we are witnessing a gratuitous and massive amputation of women's bodies. It is essential to defend the integrity of our bodies (many relationships, inside the family or the couple, are damaged or even destroyed as a consequence of this procedure), and campaigning, within our movement as well, could contribute to creating awareness, knowledge, and a support network. What is at stake is the scientific ideology we embrace, the interests of the medical associations, the further deformations produced in the field of public health by the pressure of big financial corporations that, in alignment with the neoliberal paradigm, commodify our life and the physical and social body that contains it. Reclaiming basic medical knowledge is essential in order to resist and oppose, not only this particular procedure, but an array of aggressive medical practices that generate morbidity, disability, and unhappiness, as well as poverty, as a result of the increasing dependency on the market-laboratory and to the detriment of our vital creative energies and economical resources. Hence the scarcity of health and the privatization of the mechanisms that reproduce it, operated as they are by our medical system.

It is important that I take advantage of this venue in order to raise awareness around what is happening to women's bodies. Let's look at what's going on with the practice, which is also widespread Italy, of **prophylactic surgery, the preventive amputation of both healthy breasts and the removal of healthy ovaries**, performed on those women who, as carriers of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 chromosomes, are considered at high risk of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer: even doctors recognize that there is no certainty that these women would indeed develop those forms of cancer or that they won't anyway, in spite of such mutilations.

The second topic concerns the **work of reproduction**, also referred to as domestic work, even though reproductive work includes a lot more than what we commonly think of as domestic. On the subject, I'd like to call attention to thirty years of literature produced by workerist feminists or derived from their work. It is worthwhile here to recall a few key points. During the 1970s in Italy there were two different schools of feminism: the feminism of self-awareness and the workerist feminism of Lotta Femminista, which later evolved into the groups and committees of Wages for Housework. Lotta Femminista spread nationally, especially in the regions of Veneto and Emilia, while less so in cities like Milan, where self-

awareness feminism was predominant, or Rome, where we had two groups anyway. We were even present as far south as Gela, in Sicily, where we had one group. Most importantly, starting in 1972, when we founded the Collettivo Internazionale Femminista in order to promote both debate and actions in other countries, we created a large international network, especially in the USA and Canada, were also present in a few European countries, particularly Britain, Germany, and Switzerland. We often held international conferences so that we could organize actions in concert. Afro-american women were also part of our circuit. They would say that the presence of Italian women made it conceivable for them to join the network because Italian women have little power (sort of like women from the Third World in their eyes). Had there been only American or English white women, they would not have participated. I remember traveling, starting at the beginning of the 70s, a few times through the United States and through some major cities in Canada, to spread our view on housework from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts (I was even robbed of the little money I had in El Paso). My travel budget, either by plane but also, often, by bus, was made up of one dollar contributions given by our American comrades. At the same time, various universities, many of which would then adopt *Potere femminile e Sovversione Sociale* [*Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*] as a feminist classic, invited me to talk. In this way I was able to make some more money to travel. One particular university in New York offered me a teaching position and I even had an interview with a board of professors so that I could start teaching right away at the beginning of the new semester. Once back in Italy though, I wrote them turning down the offer. I could not possibly give up my political work (Lotta Femminista was still small and I couldn't abandon it). They did not understand my position and got really angry. To this work and political research I subordinated all my other life choices. In this also I bore the mark of Potere Operaio: I have always been a militant.

How was it that some women left Potere Operaio to form Lotta Femminista?

When I joined Potere Operaio, an older comrade, Teresa Rampazzo, asked me "What made you join Potere Operaio?" and then answered her own question: "You also had an urge for justice, right?" "Yes," I said. She had guessed. The answer seemed obvious to me as well.

If, on the other end, I had to say why I left Potere Operaio, putting together in June 1971 that group of women who would then form the first core of Lotta Femminista, I would have to say: "An urge for dignity." The relationship between men and women at that time, especially among our intellectual comrades, was on a level that I did not consider sufficiently dignified. So I wrote and circulated a pamphlet that later, with a few revisions, would become *Potere Femminile e Sovversione Sociale*, the little book that the international feminist movement basically adopted right away and translated into six languages.

Thus I started the first chapter of an autonomous organization with women coming from the tradition of workerism. Soon, others with different backgrounds joined us, some with no political background, evidently because things between men and women were not going

well at any level.

Another reason had to do with what was then called the need for self-identification. Women were starting to define themselves through a process of the construction of their own identity, and no longer through the eyes and expectations of men. I remember a document coming from the US with an odd title, "Woman identified by woman," and many more with the same tone. After we saved our dignity and our identity (in more of an emotional rather than a temporal sequence), we started reasoning and wondering about the evil origin of our discomfort, of our condition, the origin of the exploitation and oppression of women. We found it in the work of reproduction, the unpaid domestic work that was ascribed to women during the capitalistic division of labor. This doesn't mean that some of us, driven by the need to go further back and track the ancient origins of the misfortunes of women, didn't also study the relationship between men and women in prehistory, focusing on matriarchal vs. patriarchal societies, and these studies are still around. The urgency, however, to provide an analysis that would be useful for immediate action (in perfect workerist tradition) made us focus almost exclusively on the capitalist era. We unveiled the mystery of reproduction, investigating how the production and reproduction of the labor force constituted the hidden phase of primitive accumulation. We unveiled the mystery but not the secret. In fact, I must say, all respectful reproduction hides a secret. We expanded the concept of class so that it would include women, as producer and reproducer of labor force. We were mostly interested in working class proletarian women.

Behind the closed doors of their houses, women work without any compensation, a schedule, or time off, at a job that occupies all of their time. It is a job made up of material and immaterial tasks and it conditions all their choices. We defined the family as one of the places of production, because of its daily production and reproduction of labor force. Up until then, others had maintained or continued maintaining that the family was exclusively a place for consumption and the production of use value or a mere reservoir of labor power. We declared that a job outside the house cannot eliminate or substantially transform domestic work; that it merely adds a new master to the existing one: the job the husband already has. For this reason, entering the job market was never our goal. Neither was equality with men. To whom are we to be equal, burdened as we are with work men do not have to do? Besides, in a moment when the conversation around the refusal of work took center stage, why should we have aimed for something that men were rejecting? From within the Fordist society of those years, we revealed that production sprang essentially from two sources, the factory and the house, and that women, precisely because their work produces the most important merchandise for capitalism, labor power, had at their disposal a key factor to leverage social power: they could refuse to continue producing. Because of this, women are a central figure in the process of "social subversion," as we called it back then, a struggle that could potentially end in the radical transformation of society.

Despite the profound transformation in production, the core of women's responsibility of women for reproduction and the impervious nature of the work of reproduction remain unsolved problems, bringing back the persistence of a fundamental duplicity. This duplicity however, especially between the masculine and the feminine, is, I think, inscribed in the universe. Maybe we should observe it in order to understand it better, rather than considering it as a phenomenon that is dying out, while, at the same time, we invest ourselves in trying to fix its inner injustice.

We recruited working class proletarian women, as I was saying, but the work of reproduction is the foundational aspect of the female condition in general. Fighting against this condition required first of all the refusal of this work, as unpaid and as primarily ascribed to women. It also meant opening up a negotiation with the state, in order to obtain part of the wealth produced, both in the form of financial retribution and services made available. It meant demanding that the work of reproduction be destined to a specific space and time, instead of pretending that it was an option, that it could be easily combined with a job outside the house. The refusal, of course, concerned both the material and the immaterial work of reproduction. Essentially women were replacing a femininity characterized by the care of others, by the enormous willingness to live in the service of others, with a femininity in which all of this took second place and made room for the reproduction of oneself. Besides, the issue of domestic work was closely connected to that of a sexuality that had been distorted by the function of procreating/reproducing. Struggles around work, sexuality, health, and violence were then closely intertwined. Some of our comrades completed very incisive works of research about this, which, of course, are still around. Bodies are in question in the work of reproduction and therefore relationships and emotions.

We took our struggle to the neighborhoods (a beautiful campaign for housing, our first one and the only one that was not documented), to hospitals, schools, and factories. In Padua on June 5, 1973, we started a campaign for abortion rights, jump-starting a political mobilization out of a trial against a woman for having an abortion. After years of mobilization, in 1978 we obtained, along with the entire Feminist Movement, the approval of Law 194, a law that recognized women's right to terminate any pregnancy and to do so in proper medical facilities. Again in Padua, in 1974, we organized the Center for Women's Health, a self-managed feminist clinic, the first in Italy, followed by many more similar ones in other cities. This experience was meant to set an example and, at the same time, to gain momentum for the redefinition of the relationship between women and medicine, particularly in the field of gynecology, considering also that the law for the institution of family clinics, Law 405, was about to be approved and went into effect in 1975. We led important campaigns inside hospitals, in many ob-gyn units, the so called "maternity lagers" (I remember mostly Padua, Milan and Ferrara).

Among the campaigns organized inside the factories, an exemplary one was that at Solari (which then became a model for the struggle in other factories), where the women workers demanded paid time off and medical coverage for routine gynecological care, so that they did not have to choose between losing work days and taking care of themselves. We even organized an important campaign in a town in Veneto against a factory that released terrible fumes and polluted the water.

As I was saying, we had a national and an international network, but the amazing thing was that we could do all of it with such an extremely small budget. Our means of communication were basically flyers and a newspaper that was called, in true workerist fashion, "Le Operaie della Casa" ["Household Workers"]. The rhythms of so much activism were so intense and totalizing that there was no room left for anything else in our lives. Our attitude towards militancy certainly derived from the experience of militancy in Potere Operaio, but, I suspect, in other groups the situation was very similar and even more extreme for those of us who had a leading role.

At the end of that decade we were worn-out. All our reproduction margins had been erased and they were already notoriously much smaller than those that men normally enjoyed, including our comrades. After so many struggles and so much time spent organizing, we couldn't detect even the outline of a transformation of our society. Not one radical enough to meet the demands for which we had struggled, or able to contain the sweeping change of female individuality that our political journey had induced. We could no longer fit into the mold for relationships and in the organization of society offered by capitalism.

It's important to also keep in mind that the women who participated in the Feminist Movement at the beginning were not young girls. Often in their thirties or even older, they were women who had left crippling marriages in order to reclaim the right to feel again (I remember many of them telling me that what they were mostly missing with their husbands and pre-school children was not so much sexual freedom but rather the possibility of falling in love. Thinking back I realize that the premarital youth of those women had probably been too miserable). Really, at that point, we would have needed to come up with a strategy capable of generating an effective transformation of our society, as well as the resources necessary to carry it out, since it would have been impossible for us to do so on our own. However this had always been the most feeble part of our discourse, the one we couldn't even pinpoint, because the strategy was to be determined by the power of our struggle in itself. In the end, it didn't happen that way and we didn't have the strength to fight anymore. I remember, however, that the problem of identifying an outlet, "the Transition," had been on my mind for years, since Potere Operaio, but when I mentioned it to one of my comrades, Guido Borio, his answer had been vague, as if it were impossible to even outline a solution. I just thought that maybe I didn't have enough experience, that I wasn't yet ready to tackle such an important problem. The reason I posed the question in the first place was, however, that I couldn't even imagine spending the rest of my life getting up at 4:00 in the

morning to canvass Porto Marghera or the Montedison in Crotona, in the attempt to generalize the struggle. Until when, until where? And then what? I would, of course, encounter the same dilemma in the Feminist Movement, again unable to find anybody to share it with.

After about ten years, the biological clock in our bodies, even militants have a body, as negated as it often is, started clicking. There were women who wanted a child and felt that it was already late. They had to decide with whom they wanted it and in what kind of context they wanted to raise it.

In the absence of a transformation of our society radical enough to integrate the new subjectivity of women, we started giving up. Many had to capitulate. To what extent depended on how much money these women had at their disposal, on how much free time they could count on, and on what kind of job they were able to find. The old problem of the lack of financial means, around which we had organized so much, came to light in all its gravity.

Right then the repression started and, with it, the total erasure, accomplished mostly by leftist women in the fields of sociology and history, of our feminist current, its struggles and its accomplishments. Poldina [Leopoldina Fortunati] and I, however, documented all the struggles and all the campaigns, as well as the issues that came to light during our debates, in booklets meant for activists, in pamphlets, and in the newspaper, sacrificing Saturdays, Sundays, and many holidays. All that material is still around. During the 1980s, years of repression and normalization, the feminism of the great struggles was replaced by a fundamentally cultural current of feminism, with the function of controlling and filtering demands and voices. We were blacklisted. With great difficulty, considering the circumstances, some of our comrades completed works of theory or historical research. These works had been conceived in the 70s as parts of an overall project that was never realized. Their circulation was ostracized, to use an euphemism. They basically disappeared (except for when I used them in my teaching), submerged by a hostile political climate and by the proliferation of studies on the female condition with a different approach. What we had produced was also co-opted and domesticated. Institutions turned up to be very supportive of the study of the female condition, investing money, creating networks and research grants, which were all carefully managed. They created sham foundations and projects. The problem of the work of reproduction remained unanswered. The discourse on wages for housework blacklisted as well. The issue would eventually find a partial and false solution with the introduction of migrant workers who would themselves leave behind tragedies of reproduction (for instance young children who, left with their grandparents, don't want to go back to live with parents who they don't recognize anymore, and grandparents who go crazy with grief when, left to raise their grandchildren, see their children come back and take them away forever).

At a certain point in the 80s, during which, by the way, I had some personal problems (even

activists have a life, although removed), I felt the need to reevaluate the previous years and test them through the infallible filter of emotions. I had to recognize that during my activism first in Potere Operaio and then in the Feminist Movement I didn't experience even a single moment of joy. I remember just a big sense of fatigue. A fatigue that was necessitated in Potere Operaio by a need for justice and in the Feminist Movement by a sense of dignity and by the urge to acquire an identity. Of course, through the experience of Potere Operaio I acquired some important tools for the interpretation of reality, while the Feminist Movement gave me and many other women, along with other interpretative tools, a strength, a solidity, and an equilibrium that no man could ever shatter again. It put the land under our feet. I remember many comrades saying that the Feminist Movement had saved them from insanity. Yet I couldn't remember a single moment of joy. A lot of suffering, in both experiences. How come? Regarding the Feminist Movement, I tried to take everything into account, even the melancholy caused by the shattering of a sense of belonging; after all, as I was saying, I was born and raised in Potere Operaio and the complete separation hurt me. The male comrades, who didn't know anything about the issues that were central to the theories we were developing, were left behind and, every time we crossed paths with them, could articulate only very primitive answers. At the same time, we were left in the dark about their internal debate, while we should have joined the discussion on themes that were of increasingly pressing importance. At least I had this need. It would have been important, while maintaining our autonomy, to have some level of common discussion. I don't know how and to what extent it would have been possible in those years in Italy, while I never had any problems communicating with the American comrades, those of Midnight Notes for example. That group had formed after the emergence of Wages for Housework in the US and had redirected the debate and the understanding of the development of capitalism in the world on the basis of the centrality given to the issue of the work of reproduction. They had already therefore been exposed to our feminist analysis and knew it very well. These comrades are still doing compelling research and organizing significant political actions.

While I was looking for the reasons behind my lack of joy, I was forced to admit that the field of my struggles during the 70s, be it in front of factories or inside women's houses, failed to move me deeply and let my vital energy flow. They were all, in fact, struggles around the pair **time/money**, even when combined with the issue of the harm done by factories in themselves or, within the Feminist Movement, with campaigns around reproductive rights, sex work, violence, and much more. That's why I didn't experience joy (and I'm not feeling it even now, while struggling against the medical abuse of women's bodies). What I was missing was something capable of moving me in a positive way, to inspire a strong imagination, capable of disclosing different landscapes. I needed to encounter **different questions** and **new actors**, longing and effectively able to imagine a different world. So for part of the 80s I went on migrating from room to room in the house of reproduction. Then finally I found the door that opened into the **flower and vegetable garden**: I realized the importance of the question of the **land**. That door was thrown open for me by the new

actors I was looking for, the protagonists of indigenous rebellions, the farmers, fishermen, the people fighting against dams or deforestation, the women of the Global South (but luckily also more and more men and women of industrialized countries). They were all treating the issue of land as central. They were all fighting against its privatization and exploitation, and the destruction of its reproductive powers represented by the Green Revolution (of which GMOs represent the last phase), The White Revolution and the Blue Revolution; initiatives that all take on the destruction of the flower and the vegetable garden of reproduction outside our bodies.

These were the people I was looking for. They converged with my research and my feelings, moved me and gave me joy because **they let me have a glimpse of a different world, starting from the ways in which life is produced and reproduced, the life of plants, animals and humans.** The land is not only our source of nourishment, but it is from the land that bodies gather meaning, sensations, collective imagination. Here I crossed path with the voices and actions of Rigoberta Menchù, Vandana Shiva, Marcos. Together with Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Farida Akter and many others, and together with the Network of La Via Campesina, already in 1996 here in Rome, we organized an alternative conference to that of the FAO on food. It was our first counter-summit, which will be followed by a second one in just a few days.

The third question therefore, that of the land, finally gave me some joy, emotions, and inspiration. In those years I often traveled to various Third World countries, many times to Africa, so that I understood directly what it meant to live there, not only in terms of the harshness of the living conditions but also in the presence of a power capable of evoking a different world. I found that world because I needed it, I was looking for it.

The question of the land overwhelmingly forced us to rethink that of reproduction: the reproduction of humanity as a whole, if we want to think in global terms. In industrialized countries reproduction happens essentially through the work of managing money, not the money of its own retribution, which was never granted, but the money coming from the husband's paycheck or, in more post-Fordist terms, from the two precarious paychecks of his and her jobs outside of the home. In Third World countries, on the other hand (and they remain Third World even when they enter the First World or vice versa), reproduction happens first of all through the work in the fields. In other words, through farming for sustenance or local consumption, according to a system of collective ownership or small property.

In order to appreciate this issue in all its seriousness, both regarding the privatization and the exploitation and destruction of the reproductive powers of land, we need to reconsider what happened during the 80s. While there's no doubt that those were years of repression and normalization in Italy, in Third World countries those were the years of the draconian adjustment dictated by the IMF. The adjustment involved all countries, Italy included, but in Third World countries, it called for particularly draconian measures. For instance the cuts to

subsidized staple foods, and most importantly, the strong recommendation to put a price on land, thus privatizing it wherever it was still a commons (as it was for most of Africa), basically making subsistence agriculture impossible. This measure (made even more dramatic in those years in the context of other typical IMF adjustments) represents, in my opinion, the major cause of world hunger, and it creates the illusion of overpopulation, while the real problem is that of landlessness. **As the implementation of the adjustment policies of the 80s became more severe, reproduction regressed at a global level.** This was the **preparatory phase** of neoliberalism. In fact, creating poorer living conditions and fewer life expectations and a level of poverty without precedent, it provided **the prerequisites for the launch of the new globalized economy:** for the deployment of neoliberalism worldwide, requiring workers to sacrifice so that corporations can compete on the global market; for the endorsement of new models of productivity with smaller salaries and deregulated working conditions; for the stabilization of an international hierarchy of workers with an ever larger and more dramatic gap, both in the fields of production and reproduction. Starting in the 80s, the wave of suicides among farmers in India reached 20,000 cases in the last three years. All of them couldn't pay back the debts they had incurred to buy seeds and pesticides. A genocide!

As mass suicides give us the measure of the amount of hunger and death brought upon people by the Green Revolution and by IMF policies, the 80s were also the years that saw the rise of struggles against these policies (from South America to Africa and Asia), against the expropriation and poisoning of the land, against the distortion and the destruction of its reproductive powers. The protagonists of these struggles created networks, organizations, and movements that we found again in the 90s as components of the big anti-globalization movement, which was called, not accidentally "the movement of movements." The first moment of unification of these different entities, and with it, the launch of the anti-globalization movement, happened at the end of July and beginning of August '96 in Chiapas, when the Zapatistas called for an Intercontinental meeting for "humanity against neoliberalism." The central demand in the Zapatistas' insurrection was that of land. There was also the issue of the revision of the article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, along with all that was included in NAFTA. I always say that Marcos's mere appearance in '94 freed the horses and opened the fence that kept the western debate confined and unable to see or take into consideration the question of the land. Activists from all over the world went to Chiapas to offer their coöperation because Marcos had freed their imagination: he was a man on a horse, with a ski mask the color of the earth and grass under his feet. Besides, he could talk about poetry. The land, humans, and animals, separated and counterposed in the capitalistic scheme of nature, in the industrialization of agriculture and animal farming, were reunited, thus disclosing a different landscape.

These brief considerations about the centrality of the question of land within the conversation about reproduction have implications for the issues that we are returning to today. First of all, any discourse about so-called “**political recomposition**,” if it wants to be up to the challenge of the new global economy, needs to recognize the centrality of this problem and to find a way to relate to existing struggles, because the expulsion of great masses of people from their land **is what makes the continuous refounding and the re-establishment of a hierarchy inside the global economy possible**. Evidently, in fact, only a small portion of these expropriated people will be able to find a job, more or less under the table and for a minimal compensation. The vast majority is destined to be wiped out by wars, harsh economic conditions, starvation, the spreading of contagious diseases, police and military repression. It is almost like all the political work done all over the world were continuously thrown inside a bottomless pit. We need to start wondering about how to close that pit.

I started dreaming about the change in the stratification of work that would take place if a considerable portion of the expropriated multitudes were to reclaim their land, and about what would happen to capitalism then. After all, capitalism started there, with the expropriation of land. That's why I don't understand the accusation of Third Worldism or of Third Worldist tourism. I always tell my students that they should travel to Third World countries, even just for tourism. Tourism is better than nothing. It is an essential step, if we want to understand the relationship between development and underdevelopment in capitalism. When it comes to militancy, on the other hand, it is very important that we start projects of serious political coöperation, “**vitattivita**,”⁵ (there are enough projects for coöperation in Third World countries that are not serious). Those projects carried out in Chiapas, for instance, the construction of an electric turbine and of various hospitals. It's true, in fact, that you need to stay alive in order to fight and not die or be weakened by diseases that would be curable with the proper medical structure. Seriousness also means showing the locals how to maintain these structures in an uncomplicated and timely manner, so that, once the comrades leave, the structure doesn't become unusable, as regularly occurs with less serious projects of coöperation. During this work, knowledge is transmitted and hybridized but most importantly relationships are created and go beyond any single project. It's a part of that political recomposition that, in different ways, is creating opportunities for organization, networks of communication, and coöperation. These are the building blocks of a project, of a cluster of projects that could effectively make a different world possible. It is possible that this is nothing but a glimpse of light coming in, but at least it's something.

Another myth that we need to bust is that “we should never look back,” which is like branding as inadequate or backward everything that has been produced, thought, and planned before the most recent evil deeds of capitalism. It is like playing the game of the evildoers: they do the deed and we are left ambivalent. Particularly when it comes to the question of land and water, this strategy doesn't hold. The struggle of Cochabamba in

Bolivia, standing up and forcing the opposition to give back the ill-gotten gains, is exemplary of the opposite tactic: against the privatization of water approved by the government to the benefit of a company that was going to have an exclusive monopoly. The city's Coordinadora in Defense of Water and Life fought hard and won: not only was the water reinstated as a commons, but also as collectively managed, restoring that organization the Incas had perfectly devised and that had been maintained up until the attempt at privatization. In the same way, the organization of farmers in Colombia was able to take back a great amount of land and to recover many species of beans and edible plants, the memory of which had almost been lost. They reactivated ancient farming and culinary traditions, going back to recuperate spirit and life and opposing the destructive logics of capitalist production. There is an ever bigger network of farmers across the continents going in the same direction. **These are the strong protagonists who decided to change the world starting from that essential and too often ignored question: how to live?**

One initiative was able to meet these demands better than others, even though it came from official institutions this time: the restitution of the forest to its community in Nepal, through a system of state concessions. It turned out to be the best solution to the problem of poverty because it reinstated that relationship between humans and land that guarantees the possibility of a sustainable life for both. During the 80s there were many actions organized with the purpose of reclaiming the forest as a source of livelihood. Even before then, there was the Green Belt Movement (which reconstituted stretches of forest around cities, wherever before there were only empty open spaces). It was started in '77 by the Kenyan Wangari Maathai with the idea of "reforestation for life."

I was glad to find in the introduction to the seminar the idea that we need to imagine an alternative science, different machines. I've been thinking the same thing for a while. The ones we use are such carriers of death that it's impossible to be "against them from within." At this moment, of course, I'm thinking a lot about farming technology. Right here in Veneto, farmers of the Steiner tradition were able to obtain, through biodynamics and interbreeding, a species of wheat that produces taller sheafs with more grains; which demonstrates yet again that it's possible to create great agricultural progress without resorting to genetic manipulation and thus endangering public health. Many farms are following suit and finding it even financially sounder.

I emphasized many times how the problem of **land** also has to do with the **destruction of its reproductive powers**. This is a crucial problem for Third World countries as well as for us. We must **reopen and redefine the conversation about reproduction. What are we going to do with a paycheck if all we can buy is toxic?** What will guarantee the continuation of life on Earth, money or the viability and salubrity, and therefore the reproductive capability, of the land? It's such a level of extortion and lack of freedom for

humanity to have to depend only and exclusively on money for survival. Are times ripe enough to start making a connection between a guaranteed salary, the availability of land, and the protection of its reproductive powers?

A great process of organization has started all over the world, a process in which many questions (like those related to the Green, the White, and the Blue Revolutions, to the expropriation of land and the way it's used), require the demolition of the false and the explanation of the truth about the new and continuous monstrosities-miracles. These questions require group work or on target solitary work in order to drive out the monsters, expose them and get rid of them. At the same time, they require the willingness to discover or recover alternative knowledge and a different kind of technology. The big change, in my opinion, is set in motion by the strong protagonists who are figuring out how life is produced and reproduced: by these movements of farmers, of fisher people, of indigenous people; by networks of women who pose the problem of the relationship with the land as central; by new inventors. We are not dealing with isolated campaigns anymore, people struggling to connect and be heard, as it used to be several years ago, also because of a certain deafness or of a stale default way of dealing with these issues on the part of the left and the militants of industrialized countries. On the contrary, intercontinental communication and interconnection between industrialized and non-industrialized countries were established with an efficacy and a convergence of themes that involves the entire planet. Against the expropriation and devastation of the land, the rivers, the oceans, the new protagonists said *ya basta* and are devising **key points** for an **alternative project**, for the establishment of a different kind of relationship with the flower and vegetable gardens of Earth.

– Translated by Fulvia Serra

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