

Environmentalism of the Poor

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Ariel Salleh (ed.), *Eco-Sufficiency & Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology*, Pluto Press, 2009.

This book is a very important contribution to a radical alternative to mainstream and androcentric thinking on the issues of ecology and economics. It includes a wide diversity of essays, most of which share an ecofeminist perspective and challenge the established wisdom of neoliberalism and productivism. In her introductory essay, “Ecological Debt: Embodied Debt,” the editor, Ariel Salleh, researcher in Political Economy at the University of Sydney, Australia and a member of the editorial collective of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, points to some common strategic viewpoints shared by the essays: the importance of eco-sufficiency based on local autonomy, resource sovereignty, and global justice; the rejection of androcentric and eurocentric economics and the need for an alternative “embodied” gender perspective; and the importance of the great Global Justice—or *altermundialista*—movement, which brings workers, women, peasants from the *Via Campesina* network, and various post-colonial and ecological activists together in the struggle for radical change.

In her paper, “How Global Warming has been Engendered,” Meike Spitzner emphasizes the need to break with androcentric data, concepts, policies, and regulatory instruments that purport to provide “solutions” to global warming. Coming, as they do, from the (male) ideologists of the corporate interests, such solutions incorporate profit-making, focusing on so-called “win-win” projects such as carbon trade, carbon sequestration, and nuclear power. But these are nothing more than pseudo-solutions that leave intact the productivist economy and consumer lifestyle of the global North, and thus ignore the aspirations of women, particularly in the global South.

Silvia Federici’s paper, “The Devaluation of Women’s Labor,” highlights an aspect of primitive accumulation absent from Marx’s analysis: the transformation of the female body into an instrument for the reproduction of labor and the expansion of the workforce. Ideologically, this came to be treated as a natural breeding process, though it required the brutal destruction, via the so-called “witch-hunts,” of a whole world of female practices and knowledges that had been the foundation of women’s power in pre-capitalist Europe. It took two centuries of State terror to impose a new model of women: the passive, obedient wife and her complement, the maid, at the service of the employers.

Ana Isla’s essay, “Who Pays for the Kyoto Protocol? Selling Oxygen and Selling Sex in Costa Rica,” chronicles a new form of primitive accumulation taking place in Costa Rica. According to Isla, peasant communities are being expelled from their lands, because their lands are targeted for so-called “reforestation” under the “Clean Development Mechanism” (CDM) of the Kyoto Protocol. The CDM allows countries in the global North (the “Annex 1” countries under Kyoto) or individual companies within them to invest in ventures that supposedly reduce emissions in developing countries as an alternative to more expensive emission reductions in their own countries. However, many CDM projects—including the “reforestation” projects—are anything but clean. The new “forests” are sterile monocultures of teak and eucalyptus that destroy water resources, soil fertility and biodiversity, which are sacrificed for paper manufacturing opportunities. The expelled families are then forced to migrate to the towns, where many of the women become prostitutes in order to support their children.

In contrast, in “Women and the Abuja Declaration for Energy Sovereignty,” Leigh Brownhill and Terisa E. Turner report on a successful struggle by women and indigenous people

against Big Oil companies, whose criminal responsibility in war, dictatorship, pollution, militarization, environmental disaster, and climate chaos is well-documented worldwide. Unlike the tactics used in this struggle, they point out that liberal feminism has nothing to propose beyond “gender-sensitive adaptation, coping and mitigation” in dealing with ecological destruction. Liberal feminism ignores women’s resistances and their place in the forefront of ecological life-and-death struggles against capitalist corporations. An alternative, life-centered approach is subsistence politics, as exemplified by the Nigerian women and indigenous people who crafted the Abuja Declaration. These women reject corporate enclosures and capitalist productivism and instead defend ecosystems, representing a perspective of social justice and ecological sustainability in the spirit of a revolutionary ecofeminism.

In Nigeria, the Ogoni people—most of them women—have been struggling since the 1990s against Shell Oil, which is responsible for horrendous ecological destruction in the Niger Delta, including choking air pollution as a result of continual, massive gas flares. In 1995, in a blatant example of State-sponsored murder, Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his friends, organizers of the Ogoni struggle against Shell, were hanged by the Nigerian military dictatorship. However, Ogoni women continued their non-violent struggle, and with the support of ecologists and feminists in London, they were able to seriously hamper Shell’s activities in Nigeria. In the same year, an International Conference on Climate Change sponsored by Friends of the Earth convened in Abuja, Nigeria and adopted a historical resolution, the Abuja Declaration for Energy Sovereignty. The Declaration called for democratic control of energy and natural resources, a world moratorium on new oil and gas exploration, and the redirection of the superprofits of the oil multinationals towards clean-up reparations and the transition to clean energies, such as wind and solar energy.

In her conclusion, Ariel Salleh highlights the importance of “meta-industrial workers”: indigenous peoples, peasants, and care-giving workers (mainly women)—those currently on the lowest rungs of the capitalist system. In order to meet their needs, an “environmentalism of the poor,” which promotes eco-sufficiency, must supplant the economics currently driving globalization. Even mainstream ecological economics, using systems theory and cybernetic analogies, reifies “the economy” as much as neoliberalism. It devalues the marginal workers mentioned above, who engage in regenerative labor to produce real use-value, instead of production for exchange. Thus, from an ecofeminist viewpoint, the life and struggles of Indian forest dwellers, Australian Aboriginals, and European household workers are important components of a 21st-century model of social justice and sustainability.

How to build an alliance between “meta-industrial” and industrial workers? What should be done from a social and ecological perspective with the existing market-oriented productive apparatus? And what is the relation between eco-sufficiency and ecosocialism? Despite the fact that these and other questions are not discussed in the book, its contribution to an anti-capitalist, and therefore, ecosocialist strategy, is nevertheless crucially important.