

On the Birthmarks of the Old Society: A Reflection on the Exchange between Maria Mies and Victor Wallis

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I am a biological male with Romani (gypsy) and Greek “*lumpen* proletariat” roots. I have been a committed member of a number of Marxist, socialist, communist, and other left formations since my adolescence in the late 1960s. For the past 25 years, I have been working as both an academic and a popular educator with indigenous communities in the South Pacific, West Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. During my life, I have had the great privilege to participate actively alongside a number of incredibly talented and committed people from every conceivable background in movements for social justice and popular sovereignty as a militant participant in struggles against capitalism, the continuing genocide directed against indigenous peoples, patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, environmental plunder, enclosures, war, and the implementation and internationalization of ever more insidious forms of apartheid, slavery, and colonialism under the guise of corporate globalization. In countless community projects, dialogue exchanges, meetings, study groups, educational campaigns, training programs, classes, research activities, and workshops, my comrades and I have constantly tried to make theoretical sense of our practical experiences as activists from and in communities fighting for power and control over our labor, bodies, land, subsistence, fertility, identities, sexualities, languages, cultures, beliefs, our loves and our lives.

I feel very fortunate to be able to say that the Marxist, communist, and socialist traditions have undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the development of my political praxis. But I consider myself similarly fortunate to be able to say that feminist, anti-racist, national liberation, indigenous, queer, and other revolutionary traditions (as well as their respective critiques of the dominant currents in Marxian thought and practice) have played an equally central part in equipping me to both critically question and radically transform the oppressive realities of my life, as well as of the lives of other members of the communities in which I live and work. For these and other reasons, the discussions and debates between ecofeminists and ecosocialists that have appeared in recent issues of *Capitalism Nature Socialism* are of crucial interest to me, in particular the conversation between Maria Mies and Victor Wallis.

I would therefore like to begin this commentary where the last contribution to that exchange left off, specifically where Wallis reminds us that “a regime or movement with a socialist agenda cannot help being stamped at the outset, as Marx wrote, ‘with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.’” Because I wholeheartedly endorse the idea put forward by many ecofeminists that politics should be *embodied*, I have no fundamental disagreement with either Wallis or Marx on this point. To the contrary, I feel that that feminism in general and ecofeminism in particular have provided us with a consistent and profoundly revolutionary framework for:

- 1) increasing our awareness of these “birth marks,” especially of those that have been masked over or made invisible by dominant capitalist and socialist discourses such as the reliance of both on thoroughly patriarchal forms of philosophy, science, and politics;
- 2) deepening our understanding of the significance of these “birthmarks,” both in relation to what they reveal on the one hand about the erasure and naturalization in dominant capitalist

and socialist discourse of the absolute and perennial reliance of capitalism on the plunder of the unwaged labor, the unpatented knowledges, and the unenclosed ecosystems of women, indigenous peoples, subsistence producers, and youth, as well as in relation to what they reveal about the enormous actual and potential contributions to struggles against capitalism and all other forms of domination by these same workers and producers who have been systematically excluded from classical socialist definitions of “working class”; and

3) ensuring that our attention remains focused on monitoring these “birthmarks” so they do not become the cancerous melanomas which, whenever they continue to be trivialized as the subject of what Wallis calls “non-existent disagreements,” whenever they remain untreated because they represent what he refers to as “unjustified polarizations,” or whenever they are simply ignored in the interest of what he terms “unity,” have gutted the revolutionary impetus of so many movements “with a socialist agenda.”

I agree with Wallis that “being male, like being female, is a biological and not a social trait ... so it is unacceptable to suggest that men have an inborn stake in maintaining structures of exploitation and domination, whether over women in particular or over nature in general.” Mies and other ecofeminists have consistently argued that it is the social construction of maleness as “masculinity” under patriarchy (rather than any particular biological makeup) that has made most men more susceptible than women to cooptation by systems of domination. Moreover, both ecofeminists and indigenous peoples have taken this analysis further to show that in fact, what men lose by accepting the “male deal” is far greater than anything they gain, so that not only is male complicity with domination not “inborn,” it is also based on patriarchal illusions, such as the notion that domination is power, and on patriarchal addictions, such as violence and alcoholism.

I therefore find it hard to understand how Wallis can interpret remarks made by Mies, von Werlhof, and other proponents of the subsistence perspective as indicating that they hold what he terms the “supremacist” view that “women are the exclusive victims, in a human sense, of ‘the growth model,’ and that a non-exploitative vision of human existence resides somehow uniquely in them.” I look in vain through the writings of Mies and the other ecofeminists with whose work I am most familiar to find the “essentialism” and “biologism” that Wallis and my other male comrades have all too often accused them of in the pages of this journal and elsewhere.

Anyone with all but the most superficial and limited experience of past and present struggles against capitalism and other systems of domination worldwide cannot help but have borne witness time and time again to countless examples of women’s markedly lower rate of allegiance to (and cooptation by) such oppressive systems when compared to men. Ecofeminists attribute this difference primarily to the fact that as a society becomes more and more defined by systems of domination, the knowledge, labor, bodies, and productive powers of women are more and more intensively “mined” as an ever more “natural” and therefore ever less compensated, recognized, and visible “resource” in order to keep these dominant systems (as well as the illusions and addictions upon which they are based) afloat. The only connection made by ecofeminists between women’s biological makeup, on the one hand, and this pattern of ever increasing dependence of systems of domination on the colonization of women, on the other hand, is the fact that women’s biological power to give and sustain human life is used against them to justify their relegation to a sphere of “reproduction” which has been systematically and artificially severed from the sphere of “production” by the dominant paradigms of both capitalist and socialist theory and practice.

But ecofeminists rarely put forward this analysis of how women are colonized by capitalism and other systems of domination without immediately pointing out that women are not the only ones who are exploited as a “natural” resource in this way. As formulated by Mies and other ecofeminists, the subsistence perspective demonstrates how the labor of the great majority of humanity (which is primarily dedicated to the production of life-affirming use-value rather than “dead” exchange-value) is colonized, appropriated, and rendered an invisible part of “nature” which capitalism as well as patriarchal socialism freely plunder without any concern for its renewal. Far from attributing to women some inborn and essentialist “supremacy” in struggles against domination, ecofeminism uses its lucid and profound understanding and analysis of how women are exploited under capitalism to shed light on how capital also exploits indigenous peoples, peasants, craftspeople, petty traders, youth, children, educators, students and other subsistence producers, as well as to provide clear explanations as to how capital plunders the commons and the natural environment that makes all life possible. Unfortunately, this willingness on the part of ecofeminists to both, 1) consistently reject a counter-discourse to patriarchy that essentializes and idealizes some exclusive or inborn capacity on the part of women to resist domination, and 2) continually stress the connectedness of women’s struggles against capital to the struggles of the majority of men on the planet (whose labor cannot be characterized as principally proletarian), has yet to be acknowledged—let alone appreciated—by Wallis and many of the other ecosocialist men who have contributed to the current debate.

Mies and other ecofeminists have dedicated enormous amounts of time and energy to the monumental task of documenting and denouncing the colossal and all-sided violence that has been unleashed against women by the forces of patriarchal domination over the past few millennia and which continues unabated to the present day. Their work has revealed an invisible and unfinished history of the most unimaginably brutal and merciless plunder of women’s knowledge, labor, and bodies. Despite the unbearable weight of this legacy, ecofeminists have not written off men and the patriarchal mainstream of the socialist and environmental movements, but instead they have consistently sought to engage males with socialist and environmentalist leanings by challenging us to recognize, confront, and change our patriarchal ways of thinking, being, and acting, in order that we as men come to realize that in the eyes of capital, we are ultimately just as much of a resource to be used up and discarded as are women and the natural environment. However, ecofeminists do not reach out to us by politely pandering to our patriarchal illusions, addictions, and world-view, but rather by advancing a principled, carefully considered, and extremely convincing critique of patriarchy in all of its forms. If the interventions of Wallis and many of the other ecosocialist men who have recently contributed to the ongoing discussions with ecofeminists in *CNS* are anything to go by, our somewhat “masculinist” response to these initiatives by our ecofeminist sisters has been fairly disappointing thus far.

When Mies attempts to put forward a critique of the patriarchal roots of socialist thought, she is accused by Wallis of taking “swipes at socialism.” In the first place, this reaction demotes feminist argumentation from the historically grounded, empirically verifiable, and intellectually consistent challenge that it poses to the entire edifice of “Western” thought (including mainstream socialism) to some kind of arbitrary, petty, and unprincipled ranting. Secondly, the constructive, inclusive, and generous posture assumed by ecofeminists toward men who have neither seriously questioned nor relinquished their patriarchal positioning in society is taken for granted and rendered invisible against the backdrop of Wallis’s accusations that Mies and other ecofeminists have “slighted” and “overlooked” “hopeful” developments within the socialist movement. Thus Wallis sustains the unexamined patriarchal underpinnings of socialism as well as an environmentalism that

is complicit in the current enclosures of the commons, which displace women and indigenous peoples in the name of conservation. When Wallis attempts to list what he considers to be some of the most important of these developments, it becomes rapidly apparent that all are peripheral to mainstream socialist thought and practice, and none amount to anything that could even remotely be described as a systematic critique of the patriarchal roots of the socialist project.

Finally, Wallis has recourse to the ultimate means of silencing those whose cries for justice and criticisms of the status quo can no longer be ignored—what ecofeminists have called the TINA (“There Is No Alternative”) tactic. Thus, he writes:

I am particularly concerned by charges ... that Marxism and socialism are intrinsically tainted by technophilia and patriarchy and are therefore irrevocably committed, no less than capitalism, to the domination of nature ... [I]f this were all there is to socialism, then the struggle against existing oppressions and depredations (notably patriarchy, technological frenzy, and environmental breakdown) would have no chance of success, since that struggle has been from the beginning integrally bound up with the agenda—Marxist whether one admits it or not—of opposition to capitalism.

Has Marxism been as central to the agendas of resistance to capitalism in the world today (as well as in the past) as Wallis would lead us to believe? Ecofeminists such as Mies invite us to open our eyes to the massive and multifaceted resistance to capitalism represented by the daily struggles for subsistence and survival of the great majority of humanity—women, indigenous peoples and other subsistence producers, etc.—who have traditionally been marginalized by (or entirely left off) the dominant socialist agenda of opposition to capitalism.

Wallis’s explicit denial of the intrinsically patriarchal nature of Marxism and socialism in the passage quoted above reveal how unprepared he is to take on the thoroughgoing and radical critique of the patriarchal foundations of the socialist project that ecofeminists demand. It also reveals the tenuous nature of his claim that the differences between ecosocialists and ecofeminists have been grossly exaggerated by Mies. For example, he says that: “understanding, and especially linking, the demands of the various popular sectors requires the insights of Marxian political economy ... above all for addressing the ‘constellation of power’ that frames their interaction.” Then he criticizes Mies for paying too much attention to local struggles, warning that: “Unless there are revolutionary changes on a larger canvas, local triumphs will wither. This is why socialism ... remains on the agenda ...” Here is an example of fundamentally different conceptions of power and political geography. Patriarchy (including mainstream socialism and environmentalism) views power relations as part of a top-down process that exerts its influence from a dominating or colonizing center or state to a dominated or colonized local periphery. Thus Marxism and socialism have traditionally seen their goal as the seizure of the “commanding heights of (state) power.” Implicit in this conception of society is the idea that domination and hegemony are natural facts of life and that the key question is who will control the institutions that dominate and control society. This assumption makes possible such formulations as “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” If change can be made at the top (at the center), then the base (the “local”) will follow.

Ecofeminists and indigenous peoples tend to view power relations as a part of a bottom-up process that begins with peoples’ sovereign control over the identification, analysis, and resolution of the problems that confront them in their day-to-day struggles for subsistence and survival. Implicit in this conception of society is the idea that domination and hegemony are relatively recent phenomena in human history, and even then, occur in only a small minority of patriarchal cultures.

Through the perfection of technologies of death, illusion, and addiction, these cultures of domination have spread like a predatory cancer over the past few thousand years and are now threatening our survival as a species because of their absolute and implacable dependence on: 1) ever-accelerating rates of inequality and predatory exploitation of human knowledges, labor, and bodies; 2) ever-escalating destruction of the commons and the environment; and 3) ever-increasing levels of war and other forms of violence. An embodied resistance to domination starts here and now based on the myriad traditional and new strategies for subsistence that people constantly find themselves obliged to rely on for their own survival and well-being as well as those of their families and communities. By fostering a sovereignty preserved in the face of domination, and by expanding and strengthening that sovereignty, movements can be formed with the power to defeat domination from the bottom up. Power has its base in people, and the transformation of power relations starts and ends there.

In their critique of socialism, Mies and other ecofeminists have been doing what most human beings have done since the beginning of the socialist project—expressing a frustration with the patriarchal science, philosophy, and political economy that undergirds socialism and prevents it from seriously incorporating everyday struggles, concerns, and energies into an effective and inclusive movement against all forms of domination. If the goal of socialism—and indeed, of ecosocialism—is to overturn the overt dictatorship of capital over waged labor without overturning the covert dictatorship of *both* capital and waged labor over subsistence and other forms of unwaged labor, then the transition to socialism will mean little more to the majority of the peoples of the world than did the transition to capitalism. The ecofeminist project and the ecofeminist critique of dominant discourses within the socialist tradition have the potential to bring about a fundamental and profoundly revolutionary deepening and sharpening of socialist analysis, theory, and practice, which could play a major part in moving socialism from the sidelines to center stage in present day popular movements against capital and other systems of domination. But if we as men are unwilling or unable to actively and systematically challenge the patriarchal foundations of our scientific, economic, and revolutionary theory and practice (including those based in the work of Marx, Engels, and the majority of socialist thinkers and activists, past and present) socialism will remain as dead and death-seeking as the capital and the proletarian labor that it has so obstinately fetishized.