

Women, Enclosure, and Accumulation: A Rejoinder to Robert Chapman

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In his comments on my article “Conservation as Enclosure: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Sustainable Development and Biopiracy in Costa Rica,” Robert Chapman raises the question of whether ecofeminists and ecosocialists can find a common theoretical language. Chapman concludes that ecofeminists and ecosocialists have disparate value systems and therefore questions whether they can support one another in a transition to socialism. Most significantly, even the socialist ecofeminist notion of value is ecocentric and lies outside the typical anthropocentric scheme of ecosocialism. Despite this difference, Chapman still expresses hope, because the two positions do share a commitment to the elimination of economic oppression and exploitation. Here, I will focus on two of Chapman’s preoccupations: first, the fundamental contradiction of capitalist patriarchal societies and second, the subsistence perspective as a non-anthropocentric value system.

However, before addressing these themes, I need to correct a misunderstanding between us. Chapman attributes to me a confusion in my use of the term “sustainable development.” Thus, “... clearly the instances she criticizes are not ‘sustainable development,’ but ‘sustainable growth,’ an impossible formulation.” However, for me, both terms, sustainable development and sustainable growth, remain captive to the growth paradigm. That is, they share the vision that industrial society can co-exist with ecological well-being. Likewise, in most Marxisms, growth is considered necessary to raise the standard of living. In this respect, ecosocialists may share a fixation on and support for the inherent growth-logic of industrial capitalists. In contrast, for ecofeminists, growth, development and progress in capitalist patriarchal society are “particular form[s] of creation of wealth, but also of the associated creation of poverty and dispossession.”

To amplify this, I want to present a thumbnail sketch of this growth-centered framework as it applies to my home region, Latin America. There, the indigenous “conditions of production” have been under siege since 1493 when Spain conquered the land and enslaved its people. However, it was not until around 1950 when the U.S. government’s Truman doctrine was implemented, that Western economic development dramatically accelerated a reorganization of indigenous social relations into the money/power dynamic. Then, subsistence economies started to break down. And since then, global economic development has relied on a politics of poverty in which entire societies, peoples and nature’s subjectivity are defined as lacking and seen as the objects of development.

Capitalists conveniently define Latin America as a poor region. But the fact is that its emergence into global capitalism is a story of violence and destruction. The special objects of economic development in the industrial world are Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) growth and the expansion of the spending power of wages. Yet, the special objects of development/industrialization and now “globalization” in Latin America are commodification and privatization of land through:

- active eviction of peasants and indigenous populations, even disappearance or killings;
- privatization of the commons, collective and national property under externally induced debt;
- commodification of a now globally “feminized” labor force; and
- suppression of subsistence livelihoods with an instrumentalist kind of environmentalism.

This instrumentalism enables the environment to be managed in order to maintain opportunities for “sustainable profit-making.”

Since the Earth Summit in 1992, the debt crisis has become entangled with the environmental crisis. The new Western hegemony called “sustainable development” has been used to pressure indebted Latin American powers to share with transnational corporations commercial interests in the material of women’s bodies, in peasant and aboriginal peoples’ subsistence production, and in nature’s commons. The concepts—growth, development and progress—are historically unthinkable without the “masculinist” technology of warfare and conquest on the one hand, and subsistence economies from which resources are violently seized, on the other hand. For these reasons then, and against Chapman’s claim, my ecofeminism embraces neither “sustainable development” nor “sustainable growth.” Instead my own focus is “subsistence”—a set of life-affirming activities that are not motivated by profit but by the drive to enhance vital capacities.

A Basic Capitalist Patriarchal Contradiction

Chapman writes that ecofeminists assume patriarchy to be the principal cause of our ecological crisis, especially in its current articulation—global capitalism. This challenges the usual Marxist conception of the struggle between capital and wage labor as central to explaining progress and development. Socialist ecofeminists look at the system as a whole, shifting the focus from production towards re-production and re-productive, or life-supporting, labor. To describe the economy as a whole, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies use the metaphor of an iceberg, where capital and waged labor form the visible above-water economy, which is counted in GDP and frequently protected by a labor contract. The unseen “feminine” support of this exposed tip of the global capitalist patriarchal iceberg is women household workers in both the global North and South, along with peasants, indigenous peoples, and nature. These “unspoken” or externalized economic sectors are exploited not so much through low wages but by their provision, “free of charge,” of service and material inputs to capital. Their subsistence production is both necessary to capital and necessary to their own survival. Moreover, these products are taken from them with no or very poor compensation, through capitalist patriarchal violence.

Mies contends that capitalism cannot afford equality. Capitalism always needs colonies, external and internal. Women, foreign peoples and territories are the main colonies of this system. Capitalism efficiently incorporates local economies, women, small autonomous producers, and nature by rendering their productivity invisible. As Marilyn Waring argues, by making them invisible, the capitalist can simply count their destruction as growth. Ecofeminists point out that women’s household labor and nature’s gifts are made invisible by being “naturalized.” Describing women, peasants, and indigenous peoples as “closer to nature” is part of this ideological process. At the same time, Mies observes how colonial peasants and indigenous peoples are “housewifized,” or treated as feminine workers—unpaid or poorly paid. In being gendered, sexualized, classed, and raced, they are devalued and stripped of full human status. The devaluation allows for rape and domestic violence against women, genocide against peasants and indigenous peoples, and ecocide against nature.

This theoretical account is spelled out in more detail in my paper, “The Tragedy of the Enclosures: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Selling Oxygen and Prostitution in Costa Rica.” It is a case study of the socio-economic/gendered/ecological impact on local communities in Costa Rica of selling oxygen—that is to say, selling carbon sink capacity. With the introduction of the Kyoto Protocol, the rainforest is valued instrumentally by capitalists who secure carbon dioxide (CO₂) sinks. The absorption of CO₂ by the forest compensates for “developed countries” emissions and is seen as an economic boon by some in indebted Costa Rica. As forests become commodities for selling oxygen to mitigate carbon emissions, the Kyoto Protocol is shown to be

colonial, class-, and gender-biased, and especially harmful to subsistence production and women. This is how the process has unfolded:

- a) Selling the rights to emit CO₂ transformed rainforest land by establishing forest farms, which use foreign forest species of high yield massive chemical fertilizers, and market acceptance. This has negative effects on soil fertility, water retention and on biological diversity.
- b) The capitalist market in rights to emit CO₂ has transformed functioning local communities by expropriating their land. Land that used to sustain peasant livelihoods is reforested to sell oxygen to other countries. As a result, peasant needs are dismissed, and these small farmers are declared enemies of the rainforest. Their eviction comes with the ideology that they will have employment in the cities. Peasants know that jobs and upward mobility in Costa Rica are myths.
- c) When families are displaced and impoverished, rural women are encouraged to migrate to San José and tourist areas in the hope of finding an income for themselves and their dispossessed families. Introduced into the cash-based economy, many impoverished women are forced into prostitution.
- d) The situation of Costa Rica is the same as the situation of its prostitutes—both of them are kept in financial debt by their pimps—the [International Monetary Fund] IMF, the World Bank, commercial banks and powerful countries' governments in the first case, and brothel owners, in the second. They both live in debt bondage, where the arrangements are such that neither the country nor the sexual slaves can ever earn enough to pay off their debts or become autonomous entities or beings.

We cannot look at the ecological crisis as separate from the complex of social crises produced by economic relations. Mies contends that ecofeminists can no longer be satisfied with the Marxist argument that the “first contradiction” is capital versus wages, which, once resolved, would create conditions necessary to resolve secondary contradictions. Salleh proposes a socialist ecofeminist formulation in which the most fundamental contradiction of the capitalist patriarchal system is the annulment of women's full humanity through men's construction of their identity as part of nature. In the process of colonization, this same strategy conveniently serves to justify the devaluation of others whose roles involve the re-production of life forms. So as against the producer-class of wage labor, re-productive labor has been systematically externalized in capitalist patriarchal and Marxist economics, even as the labor of women and peasants and the “gift of nature” is used to support capital. From this ecofeminist viewpoint, all exploited and oppressed groupings will need to be recognized as agents in making social change.

Subsistence and Non-Anthropocentric Values

Robert Chapman is right to characterize the ecofeminist analysis as ecocentric rather than anthropocentric and, as such, consistently opposed to all forms of domination. But he then scrutinizes the works of ecofeminists for the presence of essentialist arguments in which female psycho-biology is presented as superior. However, both Mies and Salleh reject essentialist arguments. Instead their materialist analyses rest on observations of

- a) how most women's re-productive labor is appropriated by men under the capitalist patriarchal accumulation process; and
- b) how entrenched hierarchical dualisms in Western ideology support this appropriation by favoring certain constructions of masculinity over constructs of femininity.

It is women, peasants, indigenous people and re-productive nature that are characteristically “feminized” by capital; that is, they are unwaged, marginalized, and invisibilized.

Mies and Salleh acknowledge biological differences between male and female bodies, but both abhor the dualist ontology of difference between men and women as this is constructed in patriarchal ideology. Chapman does not seem to make this distinction. Where Salleh claims that women's various kinds of labor exploitation puts them in the front line—both as victims and as skilled actors—Chapman reads into this a politics based on innate “feminine” traits. Mies and Salleh both focus on labor experiences as the source of political understanding. More recently, Salleh has used the term “meta-industrial labor” to describe the unspoken class whose unwaged labor involves the hands-on sustaining of natural processes. She argues that this class, including mothers, peasants, and indigenes, is historical agent par excellence in the struggle for life against “capitalist patriarchal globalization.”

Chapman claims that ecofeminism is built on “the feminine principle,” and again, he implies that Shiva's analysis is essentialist. But Shiva also focuses on labor and the history of colonization as a source of political inspiration. Her argument that it is primarily women who hold the key to a sustainable future is supported by an analysis of Third World women's expertise in agriculture, particularly their responsibility for the preservation of biodiversity. Drawing on this empirical context, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies have formulated their “subsistence perspective” as the precondition for survival. This expresses the viewpoint of women and men everywhere engaged in a daily struggle to survive for themselves, family and community.

Ecosocialists from James O'Connor to John Bellamy Foster argue that only a radical restructuring of the conditions of production will avert ecological catastrophe. O'Connor calls for the mobilization of new social movements around the creation of an ecological socialist society, able to integrate sustainability with the needs of human beings in their daily lives in a socially just and equitable way. Foster maintains that only the planned socialization of nature and production will allow for the survival of humanity. He writes:

Since work constitutes the basis of the human relation to nature, the socialization of nature can only be fully realized if accompanied by the socialization of production. Environmental revolution thus necessitates social revolution.

From this eco-socialist perspective, the roots of unsustainability are the class inequality and poverty endemic to capitalist relations.

Towards an Inclusive Class Analysis

Ecofeminists expand the concept of the exploited class to include the unwaged, peasants, indigenous people, household laborers, informal economy workers, students and volunteers. All of these unwaged people are confronted by ever greater enclosure, parasitism, and pimping by capitalists. Resistance by these social forces is now labelled by the U.S. imperial project as constituting terrorism. Here, Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill have developed the construct of “gendered, ethnicized class analysis.” They see this as an extension of Marx's historical materialism in a way that gives weight to the gendered and ethnic character of class relations and includes both the waged and unwaged among the exploited. Like Mies, Shiva, Salleh and others, they recognize the powerful presence in the world today of “actually existing” life-centered activities in what we call subsistence. In contrast to Foster's call for a future socialization of nature and production, these theorists affirm the present reality of “communing” within a subsistence political economy. As early as 1984, Hilikka Pietila was contending that this radical restructuring of the conditions of production already exists “here and now” within subsistence economies.

Capital depends on commodifying the livelihoods of unwaged people. By rejecting commodification, indigenous people are also part of the class struggle. A conversation illustrates this point: Within the Canada/Costa Rica debt-for-nature agreement, INBio (a Costa Rican NGO that benefited from the agreement) organized a conference in 1998 between indigenous people of Canada and indigenous people of Costa Rica. Indigenous people of Canada told the Costa Ricans that they could help them to defend themselves and benefit from bio-diversity negotiations. The Talamanca indigenous people answered:

We do not want to know about making business with bio-diversity, we are happy living like we are. What we want is just to keep and use the land, with the knowledge our ancestors handed down to us...

This is what Salleh means by the “separate reality” of marginalized others. The Talamanca indigenous people defend this subsistence reality within/yet against commodified relations.

Like the ecofeminists discussed here, indigenous people are ecocentric. Worldwide, most indigenous and aboriginal people are active in re-producing and sustaining life. They see bio-diversity as priceless and, therefore, non-negotiable. Bio-diversity is their source of medicine, their source of food, and critically, the source of their myths and customs. Selling their bio-diversity is comparable to selling their culture, and more deeply, their souls—a kind of suicide. Their subsistence livelihood is based in the knowledge of how to read the land, the plants, and the animals. This means listening to what nature says. Development, in this context, signifies separation from the land, so indigenous people do not want to be “developed.” Like those Marxists still committed to the growth ethic, Latin American elites interested in making profits from the land of indigenous people perceive these “commoners” as regressive. The capitalist patriarchal comprador class cannot see that the indigenous model offers a way to stop pollution and halt export pressures on the resources being destroyed by this “war-system.” We know that capital always destroys the commons—part of the problem for ecofeminists in a dialog like this is that much of the Left, like capital, does not value subsistence.

In summary, ecosocialists and socialist ecofeminists both judge capitalism to be oppressive. However, ecosocialists still seem pre-occupied with capital-wage relations, whereas socialist ecofeminists recognize that profits derive also from the unpaid exploitation of women, peasants, indigenous peoples, and nature itself. Ecosocialists tend to see the natural world as a non-subjective condition of production; by contrast, socialist ecofeminists argue that nature has its own subjectivity. Thus, while the major concern of ecosocialists is challenging the existing organization of forces of production, the socialist ecofeminist focus is to make visible existing re-productive labor forms that sustain life. Socialist ecofeminists want to restore value to all forms of life creation and life support. For ecosocialists only waged workers are potential revolutionaries, but for socialist ecofeminists; women, peasants and indigenous people who resist exploitation by defending subsistence are revolutionary forces of social change. Chapman is rather pessimistic about bridging these political differences and he asks: “How can two such disparate value systems support one another in a transition to socialism?” Perhaps we just have to take it one step at a time. For one thing is sure: an ecosocialism that is not feminist is not a socialism!