

Socialist Ecology's Necessary Engagement with Ecofeminism

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James O'Connor's formulation of "the second contradiction" of capital invites consideration of the problems that capitalism presents to social actors other than the working class. It provides inspiration for understanding the complexity and breadth of capitalism's inherent contradictions beyond the sphere of waged work.¹ This broadening of the subject of Marxian analysis to reflect on the deleterious impact of capital accumulation on other spheres of our material existence invites consideration of theoretical interventions that are not specifically preoccupied with capital and class. It prompts reflection on social struggles that are not formed in terms of class, and this opens the way for socialist discourse to engage more directly with theorists of struggles like "new social movements." The conceptual concerns that these address, in turn, lead to more serious reflection on the making of a socialist ecological politics.

The object of a "socialist ecology" project is the critique of an accumulation process that undermines the integrity of material well-being outside of the circuit of capital, as it engenders environmental degradation. I use the term socialist ecology, rather than ecosocialism, to capture an ambition for a socialist discourse and socialist politics that is more inclusive of and engages more critically with new social movements. As this object is shared by ecofeminist critique, it is especially important that serious consideration be given to how ecofeminism can contribute to the socialist ecology project. Indeed this is now emerging as a noteworthy focus of attention within *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. In responding to the invitation to reflect on recent contributions by Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill, and also by Jean Grossholtz, this review is written as an endorsement of that theoretical undertaking.

The Second Contradiction and its NSMs

The analytic and political strength of the socialist ecology project, which has been formed around the conception of the second contradiction, lies in a politics of hope. This moves beyond economistic variants of orthodox Marxism that foretell humanity's liberation through working-class challenge and reconstruction of the process of production. The second contradiction recognizes the increasingly vocal calls by environmentalists and other social movement activists to regulate capital's incursions on all facets of the world that impinge upon our material well-being. This has necessitated moving beyond the different stages of the capital accumulation process to consider the systemic ways in which accumulation undermines the integrity of all sites of production and reproduction. Encapsulated in O'Connor's construct, "conditions of production," is an appreciation of the impacts of capital accumulation on the production and reproduction of labor power on a daily and generational basis. These conditions include the family, the built environment and the natural environment, each of which capital erroneously takes for granted. Likewise, capital assumes that they will be reproduced in a manner comparable to that of commodities produced within the capitalist production process.

In opening up this field of study, socialist ecology has also been required to reflect on the place of other social forces, new social movements (NSMs), which are

spawned in defending conditions of production. These progressive forces consist of feminists campaigning for a range of rights including the social and material well-being of the family, citizen movements fighting to defend public spaces and the built environment, and environmental movements. A new appreciation of the value of these conditions makes for both a dialectics of hope and a broader conception of the reach of what might go into the making of a transformative politics.

However, as much as O'Connor's formulation of the second contradiction has meant that consideration is afforded these other social movements, there remains a conviction within the classical Marxist tradition that regards the working class as continuing to carry any transformative politics to effect capitalism's demise. This privileging of the working class is manifest in a number of respects. In the first instance, it is premised on the classical Marxist proposition that it is wage labor and the "universality" of conditions that define wage labor, namely the sale of labor power and exploitation, that stands in the most direct opposition to capital. In the second instance, the unity of the working class is founded on these conditions being generalized and of not being restricted to site, locality or issue-specific foci. Moreover, the competitive urge that defines capitalism engenders the tendency for contradictions in capital accumulation. It also drives the intensification of exploitation and promotes material insecurity. These tendencies act as catalysts in the mobilization of labor as an industrial political movement. Once again, it is the universality of these conditions that define wage labor and the tendency for capitalism's contradictions to become generalized. It is this universality that frames the potential reach of labor's mobilization as being limited only by the reach of capitalism.

The ecosocialist formulation that privileges the working class also shapes consideration of the deleterious impacts of capital accumulation on the integrity of the conditions of production. This then influences an understanding of the formation of the new social movements. In O'Connor's early exposition, the second contradiction posits the emergence of new social movements as specific responses to how the integrity of the material world constituted outside the circuit of capital is compromised. The new movements, whether organized to defend the family, the built environment or the natural environment, are considered as being formed in response to and having a *raison d'être* defined in terms of issue-specific concerns.

Universality of the Working Class

For O'Connor, herein lies the qualification of the political purchase of the new social movements. "Particularity" defines their politics, whereas in contrast, working peoples are generally less likely to be in a position to quarantine themselves from the impact of the assault on the conditions of production. Working peoples across communities are considered more likely to be touched by the effects of capitalism's contradictions beyond the waged workplace in ways that other social groups are not. As varied as these impacts are, or could be, the effect will manifest as a generalized and more comprehensive erosion of the material well-being of working peoples compared with other social groups. The latter are more likely to feel the effects of "particular" incursions on their well-being.

The corollary of this is that the generalized nature of working people's experience is held to provide a more comprehensive foundation both for building a political force and for sustaining the unanimity of purpose that is necessary for mounting a challenge to

capitalist hegemony. The political import of new social movements is limited, because 1) they tend to be formed in response to particular material challenges, 2) their political organization is generally framed specifically to respond to environmental and/or other challenges, and 3) they tend to be formed in given political spaces. The argument developed by O'Connor in *CNS* is that the capacity of the movements to forge broadly based and enduring coalitions that seek to build responses to both the first and second contradiction in the struggle against capital's hegemony will necessarily be precarious. It is in this context that the universality of the experience of working peoples is held to provide the most constructive axis around which those social movements campaigning against capitalist hegemony might coalesce. The working class *oeuvre*, because it is held to extend beyond particular issues and locales, is regarded as the most powerful instrument for marshalling the various oppositional forces, for sustaining the struggle of the coalition of the new social movements, and for assuming leadership in forging a transformative politics.

O'Connor's formulation of the second contradiction has provided a decisive leap in repositioning socialist discourse within debates on the state of the natural environment as well as within contemporary progressive politics. It has sought to provide intellectual leverage against the postmodernist turn, which with its preoccupation with particularity, identity politics and new social movements, had jettisoned most concerns with class. However, in keeping with an orthodox Marxist tradition that is fixed on the generalization of capitalism and the pervasive dynamic of capital accumulation, and which then places the working class at the forefront of capitalism's assault on material well-being, the degree to which the movements are accommodated is qualified. The mantle for carrying us forward in the construction of a socialist political ecology remains resting largely on the shoulders of the working class. O'Connor's resolve to adhere to this orthodoxy diminishes the purchase of both the engagement with non-Marxist intellectual endeavors and the identity politics and social movements with which these are preoccupied.

The politics of hope held out by O'Connor's ecosocialism rests on an understanding of the generalization of capitalist production and the contradictions that this engenders and how this fosters a sharing of experiences among working peoples across capitalist space. And because these universally shared experiences reach into sites beyond the capitalist labor process, working-class politics engages with new social movements, providing the foundation upon which a social unity is mapped. Nevertheless, it is a unity that is rooted in the constitution and exploitation of wage labor, a material foundation that O'Connor argues is not present for any other social groupings.

Yet this thesis of the universality of the working-class experience reflects but one tendency within the Marxist tradition. Less economic renditions have been concerned with capturing the diversity of working people's experiences, and as a corollary, the diversity of working-class politics. This more fluid conception of class structure, communities and politics, in contrast with the emphasis of the second contradiction, does not portend the promise of a necessary social unity, but rather points to a politics of labor movements that is colored by complexity and punctured with tensions and contradictions. Albeit, in my view, these are characteristics that may serve to frustrate the formation of a transformative politics. The tenor of this critique can be extended further by noting the considerable intellectual energy within Marxism that has been devoted to

systematic research on how working-class politics is itself framed by gender, race, ethnicity and other social forces, as well as by a range of political dispositions.

Rethinking Marx, Subjectivity, Identity

Such analytical endeavors to capture the unique articulation of class and social groupings and the associated array of political forces that define the distinctiveness of a social formation extend the purview of the Marxist method. However, the emphasis of these endeavors has continued to be on comprehending the distinct form of an essentially class-dominated political dynamic, so that the primary occupation shifts away from interrogating this/these other subject/s. For instance, critics associated with the journal *Rethinking Marxism* have sought to redress this by introducing a postmodern inflection into Marxist method, a move that counterposes complexity, uncertainty and multiple sources of identity in the constitution of the subject to the universal working-class subject celebrated within orthodox Marxism.³ This broadens the consideration of the character and complexity of social forces that are constituted within capitalist social formations. Its conceptual reach is more inclusive than would seem to be the case in the conceptualization of the second contradiction. In opening up the field for understanding class identity, this approach also broadens the scope of what may be considered class politics.

This more conscious focus on subjectivity and identity within radical discourse is not unique to the *Rethinking Marxism* project. Subjectivity and identity are defining focuses of concern for ecofeminist politics. The universal (masculine) subject is set aside, and difference, the relational positioning of women vis-à-vis the masculine subject, is invoked. This has been moved by the determination to escape the productivist emphasis of Marxist discourse so as to focus on reproduction. In a parallel vein, a desire to focus on matters beyond production proved a critical ingredient in the formulation of the second contradiction, viz. to construct an alternative appreciation of systemic pressures bearing on the natural world. The ecofeminist project also proclaims the need for a life-centered vision that charts different ways of interacting to lead us out of this mire. But there are elements of this project that remain problematic to the articulation of socialist ecology.

The ontological thread that is shared across ecofeminist discourses and genres is the common purpose to effect the recovery of “the Otherness—of woman and of nature.” But to speak of a project is somewhat misleading, for ecofeminist arguments have rested on diverse epistemological foundations. One tendency that binds together this dual-faceted ecofeminist political purpose is premised on summoning the authority of the feminine to venture women’s natural affinity with nature.⁴ The idea that this is founded on the experience of shared cosmic rhythms or energies, or on the perceived mutuality of women and nature’s oppression, could not be expected to invite the confidence of socialist ecologists. For one, the conceptual orientation of this tendency does little more than substitute one universalist privileging with another.

A more nuanced tendency within ecofeminism is formed around the idea of “difference” in order to map not so much the hierarchical opposition of Man/Woman as well as the Man/Nature juxtaposition, but rather the relational nature of the gendered construct. This emphasis, I would suggest, moves us beyond the shortcomings of a universalist program, or an essentialist one as the case may be, to chart a constructive way forward. One aspect of this has been the exercise to expose dichotomous

constructions and how these frame social and material relations, with all of their observed concretely experienced, devastating consequences. Some ecofeminist writing very deliberately seeks to inform a politics aimed at contesting these constructs and the relations they inscribe to ensure that difference is not eclipsed in the projection of this politics.⁵ This formulation points to a political project that embraces difference and particularity in the recovery of the subject as well as in the exercise of human agency. It posits a subjectivity that is not founded on a particular essence, as the first mentioned ecofeminist tendency would prescribe. It is subjectivity that does not stand alone but is relational.

Solidarity in Difference

Interestingly, the recovery of this subject engenders a human agency that elicits connections with others that, while drawn together through a commonality of experiences or shared purpose, does not presume a singular or universal identity. Solidarity is thus conceived as the product of an exercise of human agency that embraces difference. This is not a solidarity rooted in a sameness that is contingent on the positing of a united working class, whose union is molded by their shared alienation from the product of their labor, and who are called upon to lead a broad coalition of social movements. Nor is it reliant upon the leadership of female counterparts charged by a particular and universal feminine essence. This ecofeminist conceptualization elicits a solidarity premised on a unity in difference, affording the hope of a solidarity across the social spectrum.⁶

Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill contribute to this project in important ways. Turner and Brownhill adopt a “gendered class analysis,” drawing onto the political stage those social groups who generally remain hidden from much mainstream inquiry. This is not simply a taxonomic exercise. Those who are viewed at the bottom of “the hierarchy of labor powers” come into sight because they are activated by global capitalism’s assault on their livelihood. The Turner and Brownhill intervention is significant, because it highlights the distinctive strategic initiatives that give birth to a feminist-informed progressive politics in African contexts. This speaks volumes to what is not generally spoken in socialist ecology at all: the role of “the body” as both site and instrument of political contestation. Their article describes women’s protests against dictatorship in Kenya and big oil in Nigeria and how village women under threat of state violence frighten police off by using “the vulval flash” as a political strategy. As Turner and Brownhill write:

Women’s nakedness ... is concerned with birth, regeneration, the womanly source of life and subsistence. By exposing their vaginas women publicized their power to revoke life they have bestowed...⁷

The authors’ point is a valuable one. It forces Marxists to confront the significance of the body as a politically constituted field. As evidenced by the tactical maneuvers of these African women, dominant constructions of that which should remain hidden from men (though not necessarily the gaze of the husband) can be successfully contested.

The symbolic force in this projection of “the curse of nakedness” appears to have been quite telling politically, because it reveals a truth that cannot be denied. It is conceptually striking, because it encapsulates boldly and powerfully a dimension of the sexual politics beneath the second contradiction’s appeal to the conditions of production. This ecofeminist essay provides a pointer to perhaps one of the lacunae in the second

contradiction, namely, the import of sex and gender in framing subjectivity and power relations more generally.

However, I would suggest that the manner in which sexual politics is presented by Turner and Brownhill is not unproblematic. There is a tendency to universalize the female condition and the politics launched around exposing the curse of nakedness and to overlook the markedly different contexts in which nakedness is politically revealed. For example, in the East African ideological milieu, the silencing of women is bound up with such practices as circumcision, infibulation and clitoridectomy. In this context, exposing the vagina could be expected to have so much more symbolic significance than the display of the naked body in the peace protests of the advanced industrial world. In considering the import of tactical self-exposure as political strategy, I reflect back on Mary Daly's earlier feminist writing about the body.⁸ Daly touches on the oppression of African women as this is effected through the exercise of gynecological control over their bodies. Turner and Brownhill highlight the fact that this hegemony is contestable. However, the force of and particular ways in which patriarchy is manifest in Africa seems underplayed in their article.

This is not to deny the inspiration that such displays of the body may engender for progressive politics, and the strength of Turner and Brownhill's analysis lies in illustrating how such acts inspire and fit into campaigns to secure production and reproduction rights for all. And while these are in the immediate instance principally struggles launched to secure the integrity of local life, because they confront global forces such as the Niger Delta oil field of the transnational Shell, they also necessarily extend beyond these local domains. These ecofeminist struggles take up a raft of concerns that go to defining our conditions of existence, and they move into the national political sphere as well as the global in their political purchase. The politics of the curse of the vagina is celebrated as offering a new politics of hope. It is held to provide the inspiration for the march towards unity in the hierarchy of labor. It overrides "the divisions capital has constructed along ethnic and gender lines, which have in the past resulted in the defeat of class struggle."⁹ In place of the working class, Turner and Brownhill present a hierarchy of labor forming around this women's political initiative, one that is united in opposition to corporate globalism and its neoliberal foundations.

A Hierarchy of Labor?

This act of transporting the political subjects to the world stage is reminiscent of a Marxism that finds unity in a global working class. It is also reminiscent of a post-colonial literature that locates a politics of hope in the mobilization of the subaltern, as a substitute for the working class. Globalization and neoliberalism can be sensibly substituted for the Marxist preoccupation with alienation and exploitation, because these forces are impacting on more than just the wage workers of the world's people. Yet I would argue that at the same time, the *motif* of reclaiming the commons as the unifying theme of the hierarchy of labor tends to erase the different political meanings that this "commoning" has across the social spectrum. It is here that Jean Grossholtz' appreciation of the cotton campaign by Diverse Women for Diversity is especially prescient. The study details one particular campaign to analyze how trade liberalization and the globalization of production is undermining the viability of cotton cultivation and the livelihood of small croppers in many parts of the world. The campaign is quite particular in its focus, petitioning against globally enforced free trade in cotton and lauding the merits of the diverse ways in which culturally different communities engage

in cotton production. The particular focus of the campaign, which engaged more than just cotton, has provided a rallying point for women around the world and this, in turn, provided leverage for contesting WTO negotiations around the liberalization of trade in cotton.

In a number of respects, this points to a different form of political engagement than that advocated in the universalist model of the second contradiction. It is one that is explicitly particularist in its purpose, albeit the particularist concern has much broader political purchase beyond cotton and the communities whose livelihood is dependent on cotton cultivation. Class, ethnic, and gender diversity become embodied in this ecofeminist political analysis, and the unity of political actors is formed around a particular project. This practical unity bridges the “think globally, act locally” metaphor by building the local into the global. An internationalism is forged—one that is both more ambitious, since it has discrete and tangible ambitions, and less ambitious, because it is not premised on the promise of the shibboleth of a united working class or a movement formed around womanhood exclusively—even as it is led by Diverse Women, Vandana Shiva among them.¹⁰

This positing of a politics of diversity forces us to ask critical questions about how a progressive politics is formed around coalitions of different groups. We can draw on the successes of the coalitions that have campaigned against the World Trade Organization, the transnational corporation meetings, and the gatherings of the World Social Forum. Herein lies a new politics of hope, but it is important to be mindful that this politics is one that is complex and fragile and now facing considerable challenges. And because it embraces difference and diversity, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise.

For a socialist ecology, the main challenge is how to provide the space and flexibility to facilitate the union of progressive social movements into meaningful political coalitions. Our project must preserve and promote the politics of particularity and difference while simultaneously putting in place an enduring organizational structure. Such a framework would seem to be imperative if we are to move beyond a coalition of movements, each defined by its particular concerns and responding reactively to the oppressive thrust of globalization and neoliberalism. This is, I would suggest, the task that confronts a transformative socialist ecology: how best to accommodate and incorporate diversity and to open up the spaces to give voice to different and varied communities in our struggle to build a better world.