

Ecofeminism as Gendered, Ethnicized Class Struggle: A Rejoinder to Stuart Rosewarne

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Stuart Rosewarne's comment on our essay "We Want Our Land Back," underlines the need for clarification of the relationship between the exploited, both waged and unwaged, on the one hand, and between all within the hierarchy of the exploited and capital, on the other. Hence, our response addresses the fundamental struggle between classes over enclosures of the commons and the defense (and extension) of life-centered, subsistence relations. To bridge the divide that Rosewarne identifies between ecosocialism and ecofeminism, we proceed by critiquing James O'Connor's analysis of the "second contradiction of capitalism," offering an alternative perspective—gendered, ethnicized class analysis.

The Hierarchy of Labor

O'Connor stopped short of theorizing the gendered class interests and social power arising from the experience of women in general, as well as the experience of women and men who are peasants, migrant laborers, casual and part-time workers, or otherwise outside the waged relationship of proletarian labor. O'Connor marked but did not transcend the limitations of capitalist hegemony. Taking his silence as our starting point, we develop a counter-hegemonic framework to reveal the specific gendered class interests of those individuals and groups whose labor is primarily defined by the relationship of producing goods and services needed for the reproduction of their own labor power and the labor power of others. We argue that these unwaged (but exploited) workers have a direct interest in preventing capitalist commodification of communal relationships, the environment and public space. Furthermore, they have a unique social power to appropriate and abolish the technical and political divisions of the working class in the struggle against capitalist enclosure.

This position is already intuited in Claudia von Werlhof's 1988 observation that capital depends for its profits—overwhelmingly—upon the world's unwaged:

Eighty to ninety percent of the world population *consists* essentially of women, peasants, craftsmen, petty traders and such wage laborers whom one can call neither free nor proletarian. [This is] a fact that should have received the attention that is only now beginning to be afforded to it: in the debate on women's work, Third World discussions and the revived discussion on agriculture and peasants, that is, on discussions on those who, in principle, are not free wage laborers.... Now I ask: is capitalism so inept that so far it has failed to integrate these masses in its system...? This seems unlikely. The solution of the puzzle is very simple: everything is opposite to what it appears. *Not the 10 percent [of] free wage laborers, but the 90 percent [of] unfree, non-wage laborers are the foundation of accumulation and growth*, are the truly exploited, are the real "producers," the "norm," the general condition in which human beings find themselves under capitalism.

The term "social movement" is widely used to describe a range of popular struggles prominent in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, such as the various green and environmental movements, the international indigenous peoples' movement, and the diverse struggles that today comprise a resurgent women's movement. While such struggles now occupy a central place in

theories of social transformation, by and large both mainstream Marxist scholars and their “post-Marxist” critics have interpreted these struggles as taking place *outside* the relations of capitalist production. In this symposium, we develop an alternative framework for theorizing popular struggle in general and grassroots ecological struggles in particular. This ecofeminist framework reveals both the plurality of subject groups engaged in the contemporary cycle of struggles and shows how the social power of these subject groups is constituted within and against capitalist relations of production. “If capitalism is all-pervasive,” the Midnight Notes Collective writes, “the struggle against it must operate on many fronts. Instead of evacuating the working-class content out of various ‘social movements,’ we must attempt to deepen this content.” As the quotation from von Werlhof suggests, our starting point for deepening the working-class content of movement theory is a recognition that the work of “women, peasants, craftsmen, petty traders and such wage laborers whom one can call neither free nor proletarian” is both central to and typical of capitalist relations of production.

Extending this standpoint to the analysis of contemporary struggles, we argue that these struggles are the direct expression of the social power and the gendered class interests of the diverse subject groups that make up a non-proletarian (that is, unwaged but exploited) working class, one embracing the majority of the world’s workers. Our argument develops the ecofeminist literature on reproductive labor as the site of gendered class struggles in relation to non-proletarian workers, particularly women, and in relation to the natural and built environments that serve as part of their subsistence resources. Our emphasis reflects the fact that a wide range of analyses place women’s struggles to reappropriate land and urban space at the center of contemporary movements for social change but fail to theorize women’s critical agency.

Contemporary Cycle of Struggles

We use the term “contemporary cycle of struggles” in lieu of “new social movements” to refer to a wide range of working-class struggles—proletarian and non-proletarian—characteristic of the past two decades. From our perspective, this cycle of struggles has two defining characteristics. The first is the wide range of protagonists engaged in these struggles. Women in general, as well as women and men who are unemployed (unwaged), students, migrant workers, urban squatters and peasant farmers are especially prominent; so are indigenous peoples and North American and European communities of color. Keeping in mind that many of these subject groups are either by definition not free wage labor and historically have largely been excluded from the relatively high paying and secure waged work typically characterized as proletarian, we can, at least contingently, characterize the contemporary cycle of struggles as representative of predominantly non-proletarian interests within the broader working class.

The second defining characteristic of the contemporary cycle is that the struggles express both a desire for and a conviction in the possibility of retaining or re-appropriating popular control over the means of subsistence and of exerting locally defined values, meanings and forms of social relations. “Reproductive labor” here refers not only to the labor of childbirth and rearing but also to the work involved in producing all the “conditions of production,” including nature itself. This is the area to which O’Connor’s “second contradiction” refers, although it is articulated in very general

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terms. The fruits of this broad construction of reproductive labor include the production and maintenance of all human and non-human animal life and plant life. We have elsewhere characterized this as a “fight for fertility.” By fight for fertility we mean a struggle amongst three parties—capitalists, exploited but collaborating men, and women themselves—for control over the processes and products of fertility, including all aspects of life. We also characterize this struggle as “a defense of the civil commons” (all collective and universal life supports) from capitalist enclosures.

O'Connor and writers around *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, including Rosewarne, have tried to explain the ways in which contemporary social movements, particularly the environmental movement, are embedded within the specific historical development of the international organization of capital. Two elements of this eco-Marxist analysis are of particular importance: the identification of social movements as struggles over the conditions of production (land and air, public infrastructure and labor power), and the elaboration of a structural theory explaining the historic tendency of capital to exhaust these conditions. We will summarize these two arguments, then present a critique based on the relatively limited scope of social struggle actually allowed for in O'Connor's model.

For O'Connor there are three general categories of social movements: environmental and ecology movements; urban and citizen rights movements; and feminist, sexual politics, and body politics movements. Each category of movement corresponds to a particular site of struggle: the natural environment, the built environment of public infrastructure and urban space, and the reproduction of labor power, which includes “the definition of labor power, the politics of the body, the distribution of child care labor in the home, and similar issues.” The significance of this categorization is that the three general sites of social movement organizing—land and air, public infrastructure, and labor power—are for O'Connor, the conditions of capitalist production. Thus, as Rosewarne points out, this categorization opens up new possibilities for analyzing the new social movements as struggles constituted within and against the capitalist mode of production.

Commons as Condition of Production

As defined by O'Connor, the “conditions of production” include everything that capital exploits as a commodity but which is not produced in accordance with market value. Stated another way, the term defines a particular relationship that allows capital to exploit land, infrastructure and labor power, even though it does not pay the full price of their reproduction. There are two implications of this relationship: 1) since capital does not pay the full price for the reproduction of the conditions of production, they must be reproduced by household labor, the state, or nature itself, or the conditions will be exhausted; 2) during periods of economic crisis, capital will attempt to lower costs and restore accumulation both by intensifying its use of non-commodified inputs and by further reducing its contribution to the reproduction of these inputs. Thus there is a systemic tendency of capital to exhaust the conditions of production. O'Connor calls this tendency the “second contradiction” of capital.

While O'Connor has succeeded in bringing the primary concerns of the new social movements under one roof and has clearly demonstrated one concrete, historically specific connection between these concerns and the operations of international capital, his analysis remains fundamentally incomplete. Let us return to the two consequences of the particular way in which capital exploits the conditions of production: the first is that if capital does not pay the cost of their reproduction, someone else has to; the second is that intensified exploitation of the conditions in times of crisis will lead to their exhaustion. Of these two implications, O'Connor explicitly theorizes only the second; that the conditions of production are produced outside the commodity nexus is explained by him almost wholly by the needs of capital. The consequences for the construction of social interests and the location of social power of the fact that the actual labor of reproducing these conditions is performed by women, peasants, tribal peoples, and others—that is, by the primary protagonists of the contemporary cycle of popular struggles—are noted by O'Connor but given no theoretical priority.

As stated above, O'Connor stops short of theorizing the specific gendered class interests and social power of the actual subject groups carrying out the contemporary cycle of struggles. While his analysis of capitalist exploitation allows us to make the first, albeit partial, step in exploring the articulation of popular struggles to capitalist relations of production, O'Connor pays little attention to ways in which the working class may be divided or united through the technical and political character of production and reproduction, including the gendered and racialized division of labor. In this sense, the theories of O'Connor are significant as indicators of the outer limits of a debate that although critical of the capitalist model of accumulation, ultimately reproduces in its theoretical frameworks “the same divisions of the class which characterize the capitalist division of labor.”

Rosewarne's commentary on our work does not address its significance with respect to class struggle, especially with respect to women and other unwaged peoples as protagonists. While he notes African village women's use of the “vulval flash” as a gendered tactic in their struggle for subsistence, he passes over its wider implication in terms of gendered class analysis. To spell this out: the labor and survival of these diverse subject groups are doubly linked to the defense of the commons against capitalist exhaustion or enclosure in that a) the commons is the product, the site and the necessary basis for the survival of these groups; and b) capital's access to land, labor power and social infrastructure as conditions of production is predicated on the distinct material and ideological relationship within which these diverse subject groups are exploited. The labor involved in the reproduction of human life and nature takes many forms, including cultivating and preparing food; caring for the land; providing for the physical needs of children and the aged; teaching skills, attitudes and forms of behavior to young people; and providing psychological and emotional services.

The Male Deal

Under capitalism, all of these actions have a double meaning. While on the one hand, they are part of the “use value” of sustaining human life and society; on the other hand—as was recognized and politicized by the Wages for Housework movement in the 1970s—under capitalism this labor is necessarily organized for the purposes of producing the central commodity of capitalist

production: disciplined labor power. A central dynamic through which work is organized is the division of the working class along gender lines. Commenting on the power of male proletarians to use their wages to command the labor of women and other “shadow workers,” as we name them, von Werlhof writes that:

Every wage worker receives as compensation for his alienation and exploitation the right and the guarantee to a woman, that is the right to exploit her as a “natural” object. So far, very few wage workers have rejected this non-collectively bargained, life-long bonus.

Turner uses the term “the male deal” to suggest that—to the contrary—there is indeed an element of cross-class (and often cross-race) collective bargaining among men necessary to maintain the hierarchical gendered exploitation of labor power over time. The “male deal” describes the imperative under capitalist relations of production whereby exploited men, such as male wage earners (or male peasant land title holders), serve as intermediaries eliciting, coercing, supervising and regulating the exploitation of shadow labor. From this perspective, popular struggles by women and other unwaged workers are necessarily constituted both within and against the relations of capitalist production, including the gendered division of the working class. For example, if we view the male export crop or cash crop producing peasant as similar to a waged worker, we can view his wife or wives and children as shadow workers. The male small farmer or peasant typically “owns” the land, signs a contract to receive money on delivery of specified amounts of agricultural produce and through these relations commands the labor of family members.

Tightly bound to the various acts of male dealing is the creation and perpetuation of symbols and ideological representations of women in general, as well as of women and men among diverse ethnic groups at specific historical moments that link femininity, wantonness, hyper-sexuality, savagery and nature. Such constructions not only justify the oppression of the targeted identity groups, but also more fundamentally mask their actual relationship to capital and to the proletarianized sector of the working class. Rosewarne acknowledges some ecofeminist writing on political identity and the woman-nature link, but he does not seem to connect the hegemonic function of “nature metaphors” under capitalist relations to its economic function as materialist ecofeminists do.

We argue that gendered, ethnicized class interests and the social power of unwaged workers are constituted not only in relation to capital and to a wage-earning proletariat but also in relation to these shadow workers’ access to and control over the commons. This is because while the shadow worker and the proletarian are intimately linked, the shadow worker has a distinct relationship to both the natural and built environment. There are three aspects to this. Firstly, as we pointed out in the discussion of O’Connor’s theory of the conditions of production, the shadow worker reproduces not only labor power but also to some degree both the natural and the built environments. Secondly, while the proletarian’s wage entails a degree of power over both the commodity nexus and the shadow labor of his wife and kin, the shadow worker to a much larger degree depends on access to non-commodified or public goods both for subsistence and for expanding her autonomy from wage-earning kin (and capital). Thirdly, as we have already noted, the

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ideological construction of those identity groups assigned to shadow work is deeply linked to constructions of nature.

Counterplanning from the Commons

To reproduce labor power, both the natural and the built environment must be transformed. Not only must food be prepared for consumption, the land itself must be prepared to produce food and other necessities. As revealed by recent investigations by ethnobotanists, as well as self-investigation by indigenous peoples, all societies, including so-called “hunting and gathering” cultures, engage in some form of cultivation of nature. Before the genocidal onslaught of the late 19th century California goldrush, the indigenous peoples of the U.S. Pacific Northwest would carefully burn the understory of the redwood forest. They did this to encourage the growth of shoots that they used for weaving and to clear land for deer, which they hunted. Today in the Amazon, the Kayapo create habitat for specific species of bees so that later they can gather their honey. Thus it appears that the formulation “non-human nature,” beloved of the deep ecology movement, is misleading, for there may be no nature that does not in some way bear traces of human cultivation.

A similar argument may be made in relation to those aspects of the public commons constituted by social infrastructure. On the surface, such infrastructure lies outside the commodity nexus only in that it is produced by the state and hence is designated a public good. The social utility of public infrastructure, however, is not simply a given. Welfare recipients must have the skill and endurance to negotiate the attendant bureaucracy. Public space must be transformed into community space both by filling it with a network of social relations and by physically transforming it, sometimes covertly, to a more hospitable form. The reproduction of labor power thus implies a high degree of experiential knowledge of the social and natural environments from which subsistence is drawn. The point has often been made in relation to rural women’s knowledge of how to cultivate the land for maximal sustainable yield. We suggest that the same point can also be made about the knowledge of many urban shadow workers, whose social networks and bureaucracy-manipulating skills turn urban services to best advantage. On the basis of this knowledge as well as access to the resources of subsistence, women are often able to forge a degree of autonomy in their relations with wage-earning kin. The same skills and access to the commons that form the basis of shadow workers’ relative autonomy vis-à-vis wage-earning kin, may also serve as a basis for the relative autonomy (from capital) for the family unit or the community as a whole in times of economic crisis and restructuring. Critical to counterplanning from the commons is the forging of solidarity between women and men in what we call gendered, ethnicized class alliances to break the hierarchy of the gendered, ethnicized division of labor under capital. Alliances of the waged and unwaged are potentially powerful amalgams.

What is distinctive about gendered, ethnicized class analysis is that it is a “revolutionary ecofeminism.” The revolutionary agents who are central in this perspective are women, and frequently, peasant and indigenous women. Their resistance is capable of challenging capital in a systemic sense. Those resisting exploitation within an unwaged relationship can be allies of other social forces amongst whom waged workers are a crucial element. However, waged workers are

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organized by capital into the ambivalent relationship of, on the one hand, exploitation by capital through the wage, and on the other hand, the facilitation of exploitation by capital of the unwaged (who typically are wives and children). Hence, waged workers can join in revolutionary alliances only if they first sever the reproductive relationship in which they assist capital by ensuring that unwaged workers' labor and acquiesce to capital do enhance corporate profits. As we have seen, such enforced acquiescence entails the destruction of both human and natural relations.

We call the project of realizing the social power of women and other shadow workers against the power of capital and cross-class collaboration of men “counterplanning from the commons.” The ecofeminist core of this approach was outlined by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in 1993 and deepened as the “subsistence perspective” by Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen in 1999. Subsistence political economy is the world of commoners. These multitudinous commoners are everywhere evident, especially with the rise of the world democracy movements and the fight against International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank restructuring from the early 1980s and, beginning in the early 1990s, against the World Trade Organization's agenda of global corporate sovereignty. The ecofeminist fight against policies of the World Bank follows directly from their misogynist and ecocidal character.

A gendered, ethnicized class analysis enables us to see inside the so-called “new social movements” and to distinguish them from old unions of waged workers and their political parties of liberal and social democratic reform. The contemporary cycle of struggles arose as offspring of the globalizing mass mobilizations of the 1960s—anti-war, anti-nuclear, youth culture, sexual freedom, liberation struggles, civil rights and anti-apartheid, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles, as well as the budding second wave of feminism.

The ecofeminist politics of counterplanning stands against the (usually, but not exclusively, white male) leftist prejudice denigrating the agency and revolutionary capacities of the unwaged, in general, and of housewives, indigenous peoples, peasants, students, and rural Third World women, in particular.