

Vision and Strategy: Questioning the Subsistence Perspective

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Maria Mies, in her conversation with Joel Kovel at the Mumbai World Social Forum, January 2004, comes straight to her central point: “Instead of globalization we want localization.” Her further remarks amplify this point in a variety of dimensions, ranging from a critique of waste (e.g., too much air travel) to the call for a “moral economy” (markets framed by direct human relationships) to a general denunciation of “the technology of speed.” She clearly targets “the permanent capitalist accumulation process” as the main destructive force, but her response focuses more on the need to undo what has been done than on the question of how any such undoing could be brought about. Thus the concrete measures she proposes entail above all, on the one hand, nurturing and recovering lost practices (such as growing one’s own food) and, on the other, trusting that if enough people do such things, then “we the consumers” will be able to stop the capitalist growth process in its tracks.

Technologies Have a Dual Aspect

I find this scenario at once appealing and dissatisfying. I share the vision of a more human scale and pace of transactions, and I agree that the prevailing capitalist conception of efficiency is pernicious. But I also know that the earlier practices, for all their qualities, were unable to withstand the ideological (not to mention the military) battering ram of capital—an assault which, reinforced and intensified by the witch-hunts of the 17th century, left in its wake a society stripped of community and steeped in maxims of acquisitiveness and self-reliance. I further remind myself of the fact that the earth now holds more than six times as many humans as it did at the dawn of the capitalist era. Not just the numbers but also the accumulated experience and assumptions mean that any effort to restore lost qualities of life will have to be made on a largely new conceptual and structural basis. This is what the communist project has been about from the beginning. It recognized a certain ethical affinity with hunter-gatherer society (which Engels called “primitive communism”), and it noted the physical and the spiritual toll exacted by industrialization; but it sought its practical grounding in the historical evolution of the working class (and, more broadly, of human society as a whole).

This evolution encompassed, among other things, the development of capitalist technology. As Mies rightly observes, technology is not neutral. At the same time, however, we must note that it often has a dual aspect. Marx thus weighed new inventions both for their liberatory potential and for their attributes as weapons against the working class. Although ecological radicals (including ecofeminists) are sometimes tempted to denounce even the harnessing of electricity, I cannot conceive of a majoritarian movement—let alone an entire future social order—that would embrace a return to the pre-electric age. Mies, for her part, while rejecting the cell-phone, accepts the “traditional” telephone. What we need as a movement, though, is the capacity to formulate a systematic underpinning to such choices. This requires on the one hand a high level of public information and, on the other, an ample and well-structured arena for democratic debate. It is not enough for us to say what we

consider beneficial or harmful; we must inquire into the framework within which the activities we judge to be harmful can be reduced or eliminated. This includes not only alternative physical arrangements but also the conditions affecting people's preferences.

The ecological impulse, considered as a social movement, has drawn energy and inspiration from uncompromising visions. But for all the firmness of principle thus embodied, the impact of the movement has still been, up to now, minuscule relative to the scope of the life-changes that are needed. None of the macro-level destructive trends have been reversed, least of all the buildup of greenhouse gases. What we have to imagine, considering the world as a whole, is how an ecological awareness can take root not just in a political movement of millions, but in the daily lives of hundreds of millions (in every region), so that eventually one's consideration of the ecological implications of an act becomes inseparable from consideration of its effect on one's own well-being. For this to be possible, however, there has to be some kind of "negotiating space" between the satisfaction of personal needs and compliance with macro-level ecological guidelines.

Setting Socialist Priorities

Such space is the only possible setting in which to engage society-wide discussion of ecologically based criteria for consumption and production. Creating this space means exercising caution in issuing pronouncements as to what activities or technologies should be abolished outright. Even where calls for abolition are justified, they would have to be accompanied—except with regard to purely destructive technologies (especially military)—by careful explanation of how the benefits attributed to a given practice could be otherwise obtained. There is a vast sphere of practices, however, ranging from long-distance travel to computer use to air conditioning, which for certain purposes have become, as a matter of historical fact, indispensable—not simply for buttressing particular power structures but for carrying out socially necessary tasks (including those associated with our own work in fostering radical alternatives). For this whole category of pursuits, the issue has to be posed not in terms of abolition but rather in terms of what one might call socialist prioritization.

Socialist prioritization, unlike the capitalist version, is not narrowly goal-oriented. That is, it does not fixate on one particular objective and treat all inputs (whether human or non-human) merely as instruments or "externalities." Instead, it keeps in mind at all times the whole—referring not just to society but to the natural environment as well. Within this framework, any particular environmentally dubious product or service has to be considered in terms of two key questions: a) to what extent can the need for it be reduced? and b), independently of such reduction, what alternative mechanisms (especially power sources) are available for keeping the product or service available under those limited conditions in which its continued use can be justified?

Mainstream environmentalism has traditionally focused more on changing the way needs are met than on questioning the "needs" themselves. Even when urging conservation, it has looked primarily to the mechanical efficiency of such processes as insulation, power transmission, and locomotion. It has faltered before the challenge of distinguishing universal or basic needs from particularistic and often exploitative prerogatives. It has failed to recognize the fact that doing justice to everyone's needs does not necessarily mean giving

everyone simultaneously the same instrument (e.g., a car) or the same access to certain opportunities (e.g., long-distance travel). Reducing the need for a given amenity (e.g., air conditioning) does not mean denying in a blanket way its importance. It means first of all modifying the physical conditions giving rise to that need and, secondly, establishing an order of priority as to the situations in which the need is relatively more and relatively less acute, so that access to the amenity—and even the dosage in which it is made available—can be determined not on the basis of financial clout (of either consumers or providers) but rather on the basis of actual human requirements, such as the comfort of hospital patients. In the case of air conditioning, a key consideration, beyond the general problem of global warming (which air conditioning, ironically, aggravates), is the concentration of excessive heat in particular zones as a result of over-paving and the destruction of shade.

If mainstream environmentalism errs in not questioning prevailing assumptions about need, ecofeminism has tended to err in the opposite direction. It has too easily taken the approach of simply wishing artificial or excessive “needs”—and the resultant waste—out of existence. Mies, in her “subsistence perspective,” appears to embrace an extreme version of this approach. Despite the appealing quality of the cooperative society that she calls for, grounded in what Marx would call “use values,” she offers a vision that does not take into account people’s present-day starting points and that therefore cannot lead toward a realizable political strategy. Her scenario justly reminds us that we have to re-frame individual needs, but it gives insufficient attention to the dialectic of needs and structures.

Toward a Realistic Praxis

The process of redefining needs that are experienced at the personal level cannot be the same for everyone. Some people will be more amenable to such redefinition than others, and there will be certain regularities or patterns to such differences. The challenge is, in a sense, pedagogical, although the universe of learners encompasses every age group. While individual differences will always come into play, the patterns that emerge will reflect a whole array of social and cultural factors. It will be tempting for the environmentally aware “teacher” to project a strong moral stance, but we know that such an approach can easily backfire. The people one is trying to reach must be able to grasp any new approach on terms that they can recognize as their own. The most one can do to hasten this process—and it must be hastened—is to bring the alternatives to their attention in such a way that they can examine them without feeling threatened or denigrated (or unfairly targeted) by those who are trying to get them to think differently.

The real threat to everyone’s well-being comes not from the pro-ecology movement but rather from the objective situation, i.e., the environmental crisis itself. The challenge is to enable people to recognize this crisis as a defining factor in their lives. Such recognition can come about in a variety of ways. In some cases it may flow from general knowledge and awareness of such things as climatic catastrophes, public health disasters (e.g., epidemics), or species loss. In others, it may involve finding oneself cast, suddenly, in the role of direct witness to or victim of such occurrences. An effective political response entails being conscious of these starting points and encouraging communication that cuts across them. This is where a strong theoretical grounding, drawing on Marxian political economy, becomes particularly important, for only through such analysis can one relate each

phenomenon to all the others—and to the constellation of power out of which they have emerged.

As we begin the process of piecing together an alternative, it is important not to neglect the power dimension. A world that is freed—or becoming freed—of capitalist waste will still have to address the interdependence of social and ecological processes across regions. Notions like decentralization and subsistence may provide some benchmarks for what we are trying to achieve, but they do not tell us about the framework within which the unavoidable decisions of wider scope will have to be made—if not in the society of our dreams, then at least in the process of getting to it. In this context, it is unfortunate that Mies' remarks are peppered with swipes at socialism, which at one point she associates with a commitment to "accumulation." Her discussion of socialism is completely colored by its first-epoch expressions. She seems unwilling to imagine that a socialist approach could take any other form, i.e., that it could ever free itself of what was retrograde about its hitherto existing versions.

Overcoming this conceptual block is a task for an entire movement. Ecological activists have been trying for more than a decade to formulate a theoretical framework for such a process, but we may even be overtaken by some of the popular forces now arising, especially in Latin America. Many of them embody localized priorities which are emphatically in tune with Mies' vision, but they cannot escape the need to define themselves vis-à-vis the global capitalist juggernaut, so it is not surprising that they identify their goals as socialist. But one should not read into such a labeling the same meaning it might earlier have had, in terms of a country's economic priorities. The socialist banner may encompass a variety of specific agendas; the banner itself, therefore, does not point us to what socialism actually is. What it is, at a minimum, is the negation of capitalism, in the sense that there is no present-day alternative to private or corporate ownership that does not entail social ownership. This is far from constituting, however, a full characterization. Beyond this minimum requirement, socialism is what those who build it will make of it. In shaping any such eventual outcome, Mies' core agenda, which includes not only promoting localism but also overcoming patriarchy, can play an important positive role.