

## ***ECOFEMINISM***

### **No Critique of Capitalism Without a Critique of Patriarchy!**

#### **Why the Left Is No Alternative**

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#### **Feminist Research and The Left**

In the second half of the 1970s, a unique political understanding emerged within the new women's movement: one that questioned not only the foundations of Right-wing politics and those of the Left, but also the basis of modern science. In Germany, this new and profound critique of capitalism and patriarchy was led by Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and myself, Claudia von Werlhof. It was known initially as the Bielefeld School and later as a variety of ecofeminism. It did not take long, however, before the women's movement at-large was beset by the fate of most social movements and became divided—in this case, into “Left-wing” women on the one side and “feminist” women on the other. In the 1980s, feminist research began to be replaced almost exclusively by “gender studies” imported from the U.S. The result was a de-politicization of both the feminist movement and women's studies. This did not mean that women were now less present in science or in politics. In fact, the opposite was the case. However, the edge and radicalism of women's studies all but disappeared.

The phenomenon called “globalization” has caused such a rapid deterioration of the living conditions of most people on this planet that it seems inexplicable that science and politics—and most women involved in both—seem to stubbornly ignore the issue. This seems particularly peculiar, since the right questions had long been asked, and an understanding had been reached to a degree that not only made proper analyses possible but also opened up discussions about real alternatives. It has to be assumed, though, that it was exactly this achievement that caused the well-orchestrated drives, from the Left as much as the Right, to undermine the women's movement and feminist research. Despite the Left's rhetoric, the Bielefeld School contends that the Left does not—and cannot—pursue an alternative to the system we are living in. This essay examines why.

#### **What Does Capitalism Really Mean?**

Among the first issues the new women's movement and its research focused on were violence against women and the economic exploitation of unpaid domestic labor. The “woman question” was addressed as a part of the wider social and ecological context. The intent was to explain how these phenomena could exist in the midst of alleged peace and democracy, a capitalist regime of wage labor, and allegedly ever increasing standards of living within industrialized nations—what passes for “Western civilization.” However, a look beyond the confines of the so-called “First World” expanded the question further: How was it possible that despite its incorporation under “progress” and “development,” the so-called “Third World” remained characterized by underdevelopment and a lack of wage labor—not to mention dictatorship, war, and violence? And how was it possible that the supposedly anti-capitalist “socialism” of the so-called “Second World” (apparently engaged in a “competition of systems” with the

West) did not even allow pseudo-democratic political conditions and never reached its “target plan.”

Following deliberation on all these matters, socio-economic research by Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and myself focused significantly on the so-called “Third part” of the world. The result was theorization of a *new, extended notion of capitalism*. What follows is a summary statement of that theoretical position.

### **On Capitalist “Relations of Production”**

- The main contradiction in capitalism is not that between wage labor and capital but that between all labor—life—and capital.
- A capitalist economy is not understood by those who understand wage labor but by those who understand unpaid labor, especially modern domestic labor/“house work.” Capitalism follows the credo that labor—just as natural resources or house work—should be as free and “fruitful” as possible.
- It is not the proletarianization but “housewifization” of labor (including a great deal of the labor of white men) that characterizes capitalist development.
- Tendencies for the normal wage labor system to disappear do not mean a disappearance of capitalism, but, to the contrary, its deepening and expansion.
- Even more than the wage labor system, it is the forms of unpaid labor (or at least forms of non-regular wage labor) that define capitalism: domestic labor; new forms of slavery, forced labor, and serfdom; “marginality” and various hybrid forms of these precarious relations of production, which include subsistence production as well as commodity production.
- None of these relations of production are to be misunderstood as pre-capitalist—they are all inherently capitalist! Capitalism is not about wage labor but about the cheapest possible forms of commodity production.
- Capitalism has created the modern “sexual division of labor.” This division is its foundation and is reproduced in the international division of labor within the capitalist world system. Peasants and colonial labor forces take on the role of women. No real value is attached to their labor, so it does not have to be equitably remunerated, or in many cases, remunerated at all.

### **On the “Accumulation of Capital”**

- The objective of capitalism is not the transformation of all labor into wage labor but the transformation of all labor, all life, and of the planet itself into capital—in other words, as Marx observed, into money, commodity, machinery, and the “command over labor.” The accumulation of capital not only happens by exploiting wage labor but by exploiting all labor as well as nature and life itself. It is not the “socialization” of labor by “free contract” that allows the devaluation of labor and life and hence the accumulation of more capital. It is labor’s and life’s “naturalization” and their transformation into a “natural resource” for exploitation/extraction (their “natural resourcization”) that does so.

- The so-called “original” or “primitive” accumulation (the separation of the producers from the means of production) does not only play a role in capitalism’s beginnings. It finds itself constantly reproduced in capitalism and is hence not pre- or non-capitalist but an integral part of capitalism.
- The “continued” original accumulation consists of theft. It is accumulation by expropriation. Those who are expropriated are predominantly women who are—*anew* with every generation and in an organized manner—separated from the control over their bodies as their “means of production,” from the results of their labor, from their children, and from their vital powers.
- All aspects of original accumulation are characterized by systems of violence. This “secret” of original accumulation, which Marx described, explains the permanent violence against women, nature, and the colonized. What we are facing here is a perpetual war.

### **On the Capitalist “Mode of Production”**

- Capitalism as a mode of production is based on an array of different relations of production that are often misunderstood as separate “intertwined modes of production.” Capitalism is a global mode of appropriation and expropriation, and an equally violent mode of transformation and destruction. War is no exceptional state; it has always been a necessary and permanent aspect of the political economy of capitalism.
- War in capitalism does not only mean war of conquest, colonial war, or war of aggression. The capitalist mode of production itself always means both war against humanity and war between humanity and nature.
- The capitalist mode of production has—contrary to common perception—an ongoing colonial character. Methods of internal and external colonization are its typical characteristics. This is precisely what defines its “modernity,” “progress,” and “civilization.”
- Intrinsically connected to the capitalist mode of production are not only imperialistic but also imperial tendencies that are based on the modern world system and that demand totalitarian world domination. Democratic political conditions are only a temporary expression of the capitalist mode of production and are by no means necessarily linked to it.
- Capitalism as a “mode of production”—truly of destruction—has always been based on the whole of the globe. Reversing the common notion, this is why, as Wallerstein points out, it is the entire world that has to be the “unit of analysis”—not a “First,” “Second,” or “Third” World nor an individual nation state, since the nation state is only a consequence and perpetuation of the international division of labor, or “world order.” This is what we call “the illusion of the nation state.”

Since the shock caused by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986—which marked the beginning of the Soviet Union’s downfall—some of us have focused increasingly on a critique of the so-called “development of the productive forces,” in

other words, on a critique of technology in capitalism. This happened parallel to an intensified critique of patriarchy. It soon became apparent that the latter was, in fact, a precondition of the former.

### On the “Development of the Productive Forces” in Capitalism

- The development of the productive forces has always been tied to the needs of war, hence to the needs of inherently destructive forces.
- Labor that corresponds to these technologies has to be “war-like” or “soldier-like.” It has to enter into both obedient and aggressive relations with its “enemy,” the object of labor. No “humanization” or “democratization” can be expected from such technologies.
- The factory is modeled after the military camp. Its technology is not that of the artisan, but that of a machine geared for war. There is nothing “neutral” about such a technology.
- Contrary to artisanship, the technology of the machine is based on the notion of *divide and conquer*. It thereby follows the logic of the “alchemical” tradition, which, unnoticed by most, has always implied the principle of the machine. Today, the technology of the machine is alchemy’s modern and total implementation. Nonetheless, alchemy has so far failed in its ambition to separate productivity and creation from nature and women as part of its quest for world domination.
- The machine is a “closed system.” It is like a total(itarian) institution. It has nothing to do with artisanship, which was the prevailing standard for workmanship in precapitalist times and allowed workers sovereignty over their tools. As an objective, anonymous, impersonal factual constraint, the machine is “congealed domination” and “congealed war.”
- The output of the machine—the commodity—is (as capital/money is in general) “congealed, past life,” as Marx noted. Hence, as Bloch later observed, the commodity is “corpse-like”—not only in the sense of being dead, but also in the sense of having been killed. The commodity serves the accumulation of capital and not the satisfaction of human needs. This satisfaction has therefore little to do with the consumption of commodities.
- Today’s “new” technologies are particularly harmful to women and mothers, the creation of life, and to life itself. Nowadays “machinization”—the transformation of life into machines—violently penetrates the bodies of women, men, and nature.
- It is the modern scientific notion of nature that provides the foundation for the development of the productive forces. Within this notion, nature is reduced to a dead object, to lifeless material and spiritless matter. It is seen as an incessantly exploitable resource. Treated like this, nature finally becomes what it was always supposed to be within the logic of an unrestricted human “productivity” that aims at dominating it: namely, a socially constructed “second nature” instead of a self-creative “first (wild) nature.” This self-fulfilling prophecy, of course, denies

the violence and destruction this process means for nature as a living—and therefore precisely not incessantly exploitable but destructible and finite—entity.

- Seen as a system, nature appears as a mechanism, a machine. Finally, the machine itself is seen as nature and manages to pretend to have taken first nature's place.
- Women have been seen as a part of this “machine nature” since the Enlightenment. Only male labor is regarded as “productive,” especially when using machines (and women—as part of the machine). Female labor—for example, the “production of human life”—is denied any value. The same goes for any non-machine related activity and the productivity of nature itself.
- It is not surprising that the reasons for today's ecological disaster, which is also a human disaster, are not understood. They are rooted in the fact that the truly productive forces—those of life (“first nature”)—have essentially been destroyed by their transformation through capitalist “production.” Yet, instead of recognizing this, it is still nature that is made responsible for the ecological crisis, even for bringing further measures of its oppression upon itself—as if it was nature that is threatening man rather than man destroying nature.
- A true male productivity could only arise where it was not bound to the machine. Currently, however, man is working on fortifying the machine using a sort of alchemical “vitalization,” be it in the form of a robot (artificial intelligence) or as a bio-machine of reproduction (e.g., “reproductive technologies;” cyborgs; genetically modified organisms, or GMOs; nanotechnology). Life becomes “programmed” into the machine, or—seen the other way round—the machine is “forced onto” life. The intention is to coerce life into sustaining the machine and to make both inseparable so that finally the machine itself can appear as truly “productive” and “creative.” This way, the machine becomes an “open system,” no longer “under” but “out of” control. The machine is supposed to reproduce itself as an allegedly highly superior substitute for mothers and nature.

### **Feminist Research: Globalization and Full Capitalization**

This analysis of capitalism replaces the reductionism of both the natural sciences and political economy (and the “critique” thereof). It thereby sees much further than the Left. The Left does not even want to see the true contradictions of actually existing capitalism. Our analysis, on the other hand, turns capitalism “from its head on to its feet.” Seen from “below” and from “the outside,” capitalism looks very different (at times even antithetical) to what it has so far been presented and criticized as by the Left. From this perspective, notions that long served as guidelines for a better future lose their meaning: the proletariat, the unions, Left politics, technological progress, the “development” of industrialized nations, the leading role of the North, the superiority of men over women. If we were to follow these notions, nothing would await us but a dead-end road.

Since capitalism is an inherently global enterprise, it comprises the “Second World” and “Third World” rather than embodying an alternative to the allegedly “feudal” South or the “red” East. Capitalism, or the “First World,” seems to have emerged as the sole winner of the last 30 years of “globalization.” “Socialism,” understood as a “post-capitalist” world, has almost entirely vanished. However, since

1989, the victorious West/North faces a crisis (“illusion of the welfare state”) into which it has maneuvered itself by plundering and destroying the world. The so-called “battle of production” proves to be much more battle than production. It has become impossible for anyone with open eyes to ignore the parasitic and counter-productive character of the capitalist world system.

Hence, the collapse of the actually existing socialist state system did not mean the end of any “competition of systems.” It merely marked the collapse of one part of the capitalist world system, and other parts can be expected to follow. The South is already caught in a downward spiral. And in the North, due to “reform politics” and the growing “precarity” of working conditions, many of the system’s pillars have begun to unravel: the bourgeois institutions, the wage labor system, the loyalty of the masses. Rather than liberating people from suffering, capitalism is what makes people suffer in the first place. “Development” for some inevitably means underdevelopment for others. Instead of creating prosperity for all, capitalism exploits and destroys the riches of the earth (“privatization”). “Progress” means nothing but the improvement of violent methods of appropriation, expropriation, and destruction. “Growth” means war on all levels.

The consequences drawn from this analysis of capitalism have to be uncompromising. What is at stake is how to stop the capitalist world system and its development from reaching its logical conclusion as a global war system. This implies leaving commodity production behind and reviving a subsistence economy that has long been oppressed and largely destroyed. This goes for both the North and the South. As developed by Bennholdt-Thomsen, Mies, Shiva, myself, and others in our international debates, *the subsistence perspective* formulates possibilities for a successive liberation of subsistence, life, existence, work, gender relations, politics, nature, and culture. It means liberation from the permanent war against humanity and nature waged by commodity production and the continued original accumulation. The subsistence perspective has long been practiced and discussed as a viable alternative in the South and is increasingly considered in the North as well. What has to be pursued is a politics of “the self-evidence of an existence without domination,” which means the recreation of egalitarian social relations.

Our proposals have always been provocative for the Left. The concept of “subsistence” was seen as nothing but a regress to “traditionalism” and “underdevelopment” and regarded as unworthy of discussion—despite the obvious fact that it is precisely modern commodity production that causes *real* underdevelopment. The ecofeminist perspective of a different relation to nature struck the Left as “romantic,” because by patriarchal reasoning, nature was deemed violent, and man allegedly had to control and dominate it. Yet, the natural catastrophes that we are witnessing today are nothing but the result of this so-called “domination of nature”—i.e., instead of reflecting nature’s violence, they reflect the violence of those trying to dominate nature. As far as alternative gender relations are concerned, the male Left could not even conceive of any. And when it tried, it always saw itself instantly overpowered by women (instead of feeling overwhelmed by women’s contributions!) The critique of the machine seemed to be an outright affront and was decidedly rejected—as if “Man” loses his identity without his machine world. Finally (and strangely enough, it would seem), our vision of social relations without domination seemed to cause fear within the Left. Our critique of domination was seen as a critique without a theory—as “anarchy.” What a betrayal! Does theory have to establish and maintain domination in order to be considered “scientific” or “political,” or to be “relevant”? Does “Man” base his identity

solely on his role as one who dominates? It seems to be so. However, true feminists will never be involved in a state project, as the state has been invented for domination.

It has been the experience of the Bielefeld School that the Left is not interested in real alternatives. The alternatives proposed by the Left are, indeed, none. They reduce to one agenda: the mere redistribution of capital = command, money and commodities. The Left's only question has always been: How do we come to power? The goal was never to topple the system (maybe to "reform" it) or to pursue a real alternative. When were real alternatives ever implemented from above? So, why does the Left not want an alternative?

### **What Does Patriarchy Mean, and What Does It Have to Do with Capitalism?**

The Left's analysis of capitalism is limited: one, because the Left exists, thinks, and feels *within* capitalist logic; and, two, because it is deeply entrenched in patriarchy. Only as the limits of capitalism come into sight can we look at the before and the after of capitalism. And once we do this, we encounter (non- or pre-capitalist) patriarchy and matriarchy. The analysis of these concepts as theoretical concepts (and not only as polemical ones) has characterized our work more and more since the 1990s. Women have long spoken of patriarchy, especially since capitalism is so obviously hostile to women and exploits them in specifically unscrupulous ways. It has remained unclear, though, what patriarchy really meant. For most women, it has simply meant the rule of men or fathers—within the family, the work place, or the state. It is known that patriarchy is older than capitalism. But some on the Left thought that patriarchy was mainly a quasi-irrational historical remnant that would eventually be discarded by capitalism and "progress." However, in this respect, too, things are not always what they seem to be.

### **Thesis I: Patriarchy is the Foundation, "Tiefenstruktur" or "Deep Structure" of Capitalism**

If one goes beyond capitalism and explores historical depths, one finds patriarchy and with it many realities that characterize capitalism, too: war as a means to plunder and conquer; systematic domination (the state system); the categorical submission of women; class divisions; systems of exploitation of humanity and nature; ideologies of male "productivity" and religions of male "creation"; alchemical practices that are supposed to "prove" them; and dependence on the real productivity and creative forces of others—a thoroughly "parasitic civilization." Patriarchy has been known to reach back for at least 5,000-7,000 years. During this time, Europe experienced several waves of patriarchalization. These are variously described as "Kurgan" invasions, Romanization, Christianization, and the Feudalism that followed it.

What are the differences between patriarchy and capitalism, and what do they have in common? Capitalism has old and far-reaching patriarchal roots; capitalism is, in fact, patriarchy's latest expression. In this sense, capitalism and patriarchy belong together. The differences lie in what is specific to capitalism: the extension of wage labor; the invention of unpaid house work (which is directly tied to the former); the generalization of commodity production (in various ways); the guiding role of capital as abstract wealth; the creation of a "world system" that replaces the former "empires"; and the globalization of the entire capitalist enterprise to the point of its possible collapse due to reaching the limits of what the earth can take and what can be transcended through

technology. Yet all these specific developments still lie within the general patriarchal trajectory.

## **Thesis II: Capitalism Attempts to Realize the Utopia of Patriarchy: a World Without Nature or Mothers (“Full Patriarchalization”)**

The one aspect that is entirely new to the patriarchy of modernity is the attempt to turn the ideologies of male “productivity” and male-divine “creation” into material reality. This transition from patriarchal idealism to patriarchal materialism—which first occurred in Western Europe—is what truly distinguishes capitalism from all other forms of patriarchy and all other modes of production. However, this transition is still not to be misunderstood as a rupture in patriarchal history. To the contrary, it brings it to its end and full realization by proving once and for all (in “reality”) that it was indeed the *ruler, father, man, god*, who has created the world and is the true creator of life. Capitalism is the utopian project of modern patriarchy. Its aim is to make an ideological justification of domination unnecessary. It is now the material achievements of capitalism themselves that are supposed to prove that the patriarchs are indeed “creators.” The ultimate objective is to end the dependence on who will always be the only *true* creator and producer: *nature*, the *goddess*, the *mother*. The idea is to find a substitute for her in something supposedly superior.

What is at least implicit in these efforts is the fact that there has never been any true patriarchal creation. In fact, until modernity, the notion of patriarchal creation was a mere abstract claim. What distinguishes the modern or capitalist-patriarchal project from its predecessors is that it no longer contents itself with trying to appropriate or imitate the creation of nature (an obviously futile attempt), but that it actively tries to substitute this creation by something entirely new. What we are facing today is a “real utopian” project directed against the order of life. This is what I call patriarchy as an “alchemical” or “war system.” The capitalist form of patriarchy is the apex of patriarchal development, of the “evolution” that patriarchy itself has invented. It tries to establish a “pure,” “complete,” and “eternal” patriarchy as a new paradise, bereft of all matriarchal and natural traces. The intention is to go beyond the world as we know it and to reach an allegedly superior one—by a process of metaphysical “birth-giving” of tangible “things,” artificially constructed relations, and new kinds of living beings, which include a “post-human” humanity.

## **Thesis III: Patriarchy Will Not be Overcome by Progress, Since it is Progress Itself in its Capitalist Form**

From its beginnings, modern science stood in relation to nature “as an army in enemy territory, knowing nothing about it.” In the form of modern technology—namely, in the form of the machine—modern science set out to virtually extinguish (“substitute”) not only life, death, and the creation of life as we know it but also humanity, women, and mothers; the earth, plants, and animals; and matter itself.

The new technologies—“nuclear alchemy,” biochemistry, nanotechnology, reproduction technology, and genetic engineering, or “algeny” as Rifkin calls it, clearly reveal the intentions of this modernized form of patriarchal alchemy: to prove the alleged existence of male creation/production. But of course, this project is carried out not in cooperation with women and nature but in opposition to them. The machine itself represented the first attempt to substitute humanity and nature (the machine of killing,



work, sex, and reproduction). Now it is complemented by a “machinization” of nature itself. The machine as an “open system” does not substitute for nature by a mere apparatus. Rather it forces nature to do by itself what genetic modification and “information” induced by the molecular-machinist means demand.

For instance, the trick of the machine as an “open system” instead of a closed one, is to use technologies like genetic engineering or nanotechnology to replace the information of cells with new information resulting from forced genetic combinations or mini-pics (molecular-sized machines). Once introduced into the living body, these reproduce themselves therein. But natural cycles are partially put out of order as this other order, a programmed one from outside, is installed. Thus, this technology does away with the “gestalt,” the forms of life themselves.

So far, these attempts have fallen short of men’s aspirations for control. In fact, for those of us with a non-capitalist/non-patriarchal understanding of nature and the body, it seems obvious that any attempt to produce an immortal, better, higher, superior, more perfect being or form of “life” is doomed to fail. All that the current capitalist attempt has done is unleash forces of violence that are destroying ultimately all natural relations and cycles—both from outside and from within. Recent plans for “trans-human” or even “post-human” life illustrate the system’s ludicrousness and danger: if human beings cannot be artificially created, they might as well be eliminated! Modern capitalist patriarchy obviously knows no moral restrictions and has already done a lot of irreversible harm to life on this planet.

#### **Thesis IV: As Long as Capitalist Patriarchy Remains the Utopia of the Left, the Left Can Provide No Alternative**

Analyzing patriarchy makes it much easier to understand why the Left has such difficulties in finding alternatives to capitalism. Capitalism is capitalist patriarchy, and if the former vanished, so would the latter. Patriarchy would then only survive in a pre-capitalist form, one that does not imply the notion of “utopian materialism.” However, it is highly unlikely that the Left would ever forsake technological progress—the heart of capitalist patriarchy. Hence, the “liberation” of patriarchy from capitalism is not in sight. The reverse is, of course, utterly impossible: capitalism can never be liberated from patriarchy, because without patriarchy, no capitalism would ever exist. It is the utopia of patriarchy and the attempt at realization that has allowed capitalism to appear. *There is no capitalist mode of production outside of patriarchy.*

A true alternative to capitalist patriarchy would have to be an *alterna-depth*. This is to say that scholars would no longer deal with 500 years of capitalism—rather, we would take on 5,000 years of patriarchy! We need to free ourselves from a religion that counts even atheists amongst its followers and that is characterized by a firm belief in the systems of violence that have defined patriarchy’s history since its beginnings. Especially in the North, Leftist and academic men have long adhered to this belief, and these days increasing numbers of women do so as well. The Left needs to find entirely new ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. We have to follow the iceberg from its tip to the enormous depths that really define it. Only this will allow modern humanity, the Left, and the many feminists within it to turn the iceberg upside-down and reveal the hidden truths of our society.

Thus, the question of whether the Left can find an alternative is even more fundamental than we had suspected. The Left is not interested in an alternative to actually existing capitalism, because capitalism intends to realize the patriarchal utopia, and patriarchy itself is firmly inscribed into the Left's "collective subconsciousness." What needs to be addressed is the *whole*, the *alterna-depth*, which shines through historical matriarchy (the "maternal order") as well as the remnants of matriarchy that still exist even in the midst of patriarchy. To this day, the Left does not acknowledge the recent research confirming that the world's matriarchal societies—contrary to capitalist modernity and all patriarchal societies—have never known a state, domination, classes, war, gender conflicts, or ecological catastrophes. We can draw no conclusion but that we should let go of all hope that the Left can be of any support for us as we face future challenges. Hence we will not waste our energies any longer trying to explain our point of view. We will focus on the *alterna-depth* instead.