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## 11 Global alternatives and the meta-industrial class

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A glance at emerging forms of resistance in the current era of globalization and ecological crisis suggests that the appropriate “agents of history” may now be “meta-industrial workers,” rather than the industrial proletariat. In exploring this thesis, I will not spend time on exegesis, sifting through definitions of class or revisiting old debates in socialist feminism or left anthropology. For, as Bertell Ollman (1992: 48) has pointed out, even Marx did not define class, but varied his usage of the term according to the context of his discussion. So, in daring to speak of “a meta-industrial class,” I take courage from this pragmatic attitude. Even so, I do adopt a rule of thumb on class as a material relationship, and often a self-conscious joining together, of people who share a similar place in systems of production (or reproduction). This chapter destabilizes reified notions of class which have prioritized productive labor and marginalized socially and ecologically reproductive activities. Most analyses of capitalism have tended to treat workers as waged white men, whereas reproductive labor is deemed the province of the unwaged – women domestics and carers, peasant farmers, and indigenous hunter-gatherers. However, the latter meta-industrial groupings, nominally outside of the economic system, actually constitute the majority of workers in 21st-century global capitalism.

The case for recognizing meta-industrial workers as “a class,” and even as “agents of history” in the current conjuncture, rests on at least six interlocking assumptions:

- 1 Dominant discourses from religion to economics are culturally hierarchical, and devalue meta-industrial workers by ideologically positioning reproductive labor at the lowly interface of humanity with nature.
- 2 Meta-industrials reproduce necessary biological infrastructure for all economic systems, but under capitalist globalization this labor is undertaken at ever increasing cost to that material base and to the reproduction of their own lives.
- 3 A phenomenological analysis of meta-industrial practices, whether household, farming, or hunter-gathering, highlights their ecologically benign quality as forms of human provisioning which sustain metabolic linkages in nature.

- 4 This hands-on reproductive labor interaction with habitat creates lay knowledges of an economic and ecological kind. It represents a thoroughly reality-tested and "embodied materialism."
- 5 Observation of anti-globalization movements and forums indicates that despite cultural differences, reproductive labor groupings have a common material stake in challenging capitalist notions of development.
- 6 A shared meta-industrial class perspective can provide a basis for unifying socialist, feminist, postcolonial, and ecological concerns. This politics is synergistic, addressing class, race, and gender injustices, as well as species and habitat, simultaneously.

### Lay knowledges and political thought

The human relation to "nature" has become a focus of social thought in recent decades, with a new "eco-politics" given over to it. Eco-Marxists, social ecologists, and deep ecologists each offer unique narratives, but debates about the humanity-nature problematic still provoke public confusion and intellectual hostility. Meanwhile, an insurgent global opposition to neo-liberalism and its ecological crisis receives little help from academic theory. Sociologist Peter Dickens (1995: 1) suggests that the difficulties educated people have in thinking about the humanity-nature connection result from the modernist industrial division of labor and its inevitable knowledge fragmentation. Like ecofeminist subsistence theorists – Maria Mies (Mies and Shiva 1993), Vandana Shiva (1989), and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999) – Dickens argues that the marginalization of lay and tacit forms of knowledge under industrialization means that people lose a sense of their own organic nature. Environmental abuse is one effect of this disembedding.

Materialist ecofeminists and Dickens both see the capitalist division of labor alienating individuals and pulverizing social relations. Following Sohn-Rethel (1978), Dickens observes that the abstract professional knowledges informing modern labor processes become fetishized – information technology, genetic engineering, public policy, and even environmental economics are contemporary instances of this. Under capitalism, this "expertise" is traded as a commodity, dislocated from its material ground in social and ecological relations, and often inaccurate (Dickens 1995: 142–3). The ecofeminists Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies arrive at their theory from hands-on womanist and ecological praxis. But they too recommend taking a "view from below":

to demystify the delusions created by those "on top" that their life and lifestyle are not only the best possible ones but also the image of the future for everybody on this planet...[In fact] the so-called good life is possible only for a minority and...[enjoyed] at the expense of others: of nature, of other peoples, of women and children.

(Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999: 3)

Ecofeminists focus on complex synergistic interactions between economics, sexuality, race, and environmental habitat; and their critique of the eurocentric scientific hegemony privileges embodied knowing. Certainly, Marxist analyses of nature's commodification can deal with the humanity-nature metabolism, but in ecofeminism there is a shift of interest from production towards reproduction – of economic relations, of cultural practices, and of biological processes. The Marxist theory of labor by which humans negotiate their social relation with nature is suggestive, but not sufficiently articulate on the functions of reproductive labor. This has led to absurd sociological claims like Habermas' (1989) surmise that ecology and feminism belong to civil society and are therefore not class-based movements. Younger Marxists like Sean Sayer (1992) do see production and reproduction, gender, and class as mutually determining. But this level of theoretical awareness is unusual among Marxists, and combining it with an ecological perspective, as ecofeminists do, is even less common.

During the 1970s socialist feminists engaged in what became known as "the domestic labor debate," trying to explain the precise character of reproductive labor as an essential component of a capitalist system based on surplus value. But their efforts were inconclusive and were largely ignored by subsequent generations (Sargent 1981). Moreover, these earlier feminist analyses still tended to reason in terms of industrial growth and redistribution of the social product. Since that time, environmental crisis and postcolonial struggles have broadened the emancipatory agenda, so that the concern for equality needs to be integrated with cultural diversity and with sustainability. In this new historical context, the subsistence perspective in ecofeminism emerged, interrogating the very foundations of Marxist materialism and its supposedly transhistorical concepts of history, nature, and labor. Ecofeminists asked whether there might not be deeper causal structures, general processes, and particular contingencies formative of old gender-innocent Marxist understandings. Ecofeminists address reproduction as materially and logically prior to production, and the implications of this destabilize taken-for-granted concepts of class and contradiction (Mies 1986; Salleh 1997).

### Reproductive labor under globalization

The claim that once self-sufficient meta-industrial labors are increasingly indispensable to the infrastructure of global capitalism was established long ago by International Labor Organization statistics (ILO 1980). This phenomenon has been revisited in Hilikka Pietila's (1984) analysis of domestic productivity as the free economy, Marilyn Waring's (1988) gender critique of the UN System of National Accounts, and Silvia Federici's (1999) deconstruction of the "New International Division of Labor." All these ecofeminist scholars demonstrate how women's reproductive labor is systematically eliminated from the capitalist equation. Meanwhile, Shiva *et al.* (1997) have shown how prior to colonization small farmers and hunter-gathering communities

were able to manage subsistence economies and protect major global reserves of biodiversity at the same time. Yet today the consumerist North, whose footprint spans 80 percent of global resources, hypocritically blames these "impoverished" groupings for the global environmental crisis.

Sophisticated meta-industrial resourcing techniques are invisible to the eurocentric eyes which frame World Bank "development" programs. Typically, the Financing for Development Summit, which met in Monterey, Mexico, in 2002, was more about free markets and investment opportunities than about development. Diplomatic rounds such as this, and the foundational Uruguay meetings, have simply enhanced the appropriation of local reproductive resources by transnational corporations. The latest of these neo-liberal moves to restructure global agriculture and trade is the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Harbinson proposal, soon to be promoted by governments and challenged by people at Cancun, Mexico (Via Campesina 2003).

The shared stakes of culturally diverse meta-industrial workers are made very clear in an International Women's Day email posting from the Peoples' Caravan. Here, the Malaysia-based Pesticide Action Network (2002) reports research into the impacts of neo-liberal trade regimes on food security in Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. Peasant women are found to suffer most under newly introduced agricultural schemes, because these are cash based, requiring machines, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. Moreover, with national tariff protections abandoned, these vulnerable Asian states are overwhelmed with cheap imported food. The same thing has happened in Mexico, a country once self-sufficient in grains and now 95 percent reliant on imports. But destroying local subsistence economies results in farmer bankruptcy, landless refugee populations, and prostitution. Rural men leave villages for cities to supplement family incomes with factory work, but lone women farmers are rarely extended credit. Many must put in 10-hour days at cash cropping under the competitive free market, their soils and their bodies damaged by exposure to imported pesticides.

Reading between the lines of the UN Human Development Report (UNDP 2001), global economic pressure on farmers to develop marginal lands for export crops deprives indigenous foragers of their habitat, in turn. And it leads to a general scarcity of firewood, fodder, and clean drinking water. Private investment in capital works like dams, brokered as development aid by Export Credit Agencies, may leave thousands homeless and close to starvation. Other indigenes and smallholders are coerced from their land by transnational mining ventures and oil extraction, often backed up by military violence. Displaced populations arrive in urban centers, only to find welfare, health, and education services decimated by International Monetary Fund conditionalities for structural adjustment. Increasingly, access to drinking water supplies is privatized and put beyond reach of the poor. But the heavy social costs of global free markets are easily matched by environmental damage. With subsidies for the affluent North and deregulated trade regimes for the South, the intensified global movement of products means more accidental oil spills affecting the

livelihood of fisher folk; more transfer of disease organisms in foods shipped across continents; and more greenhouse-induced climate disturbances, leading to floods.

While mothers worldwide are concerned about loss of food quality, transnational corporations impose genetically engineered crop seed on farmers and urge governments to deregulate standards. The public health and ecological risks of genetically modified (GM) products are unknown. But GM seed stocks also pose an economic burden to farmers, as many are sterile and must be purchased annually from their monopoly source. Beyond agribusiness, communities in the South continue traditional practices of seed-saving, sharing and cultivating medicinal plants. But the non-elected, non-transparent WTO facilitates the biopiracy of indigenously developed foods and medicines. This international theft has been legalized by the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights mechanism of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. In the face of this outrage, an alliance of tropical nations in South America, Africa, and Asia is pressing governments to register local plant and animal resources and secure indigenous intellectual property rights against invasive corporate patenting.

The protective clauses of the Convention on Biological Diversity have been subject to prolonged dispute between nations and the document remains unsigned by the USA. The debate on genetically engineered organisms is now focused on the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol 2000. This adheres to a "precautionary principle" but is threatened with dilution by the standards monitor Codex Alimentarius, whose members include powerful business representatives. And bio-colonization does not end here. At the turn of the millennium, people of the isolated Pacific island of Tonga found themselves struggling to hold on to their own blood tissue, as their government considered a pharmaceutical company deal to patent this "natural resource" in exchange for a hospital and research center. Technico-legal arguments about lack of informed consent by patients or absence of risk assessment surely miss the point. A Tonga National Council of Churches Centre statement (2001) on bioethics emphasizes the reproductive labor values of reciprocity and respect for all life forms. And it reiterates the right of indigenous peoples to preserve their traditional knowledge and protect their lands and their bodies from bio-colonial exploitation by scientific, business, and governmental partnerships.

But neither are the urban-dwellers immune to the effects of free trade. Across the world these show up as unemployment, stressed family relations, alcoholism, diabetes, and cancer. Housewives, *campesinos*, and indigenous peoples increasingly reject global capitalism and its culture of individualistic consumerism. In response to the WTO imperative known euphemistically as the Agreement on Agriculture, grassroots campaigners are calling for a new right to "food sovereignty." These voices include the international ecofeminist network Diverse Women for Diversity, Via Campesina, the Federation of Indonesian Peasant Unions, the Community Forest Network, Assembly of Moon River Watershed, Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et des

Producteurs (ROPPA) West Africa, and the Association de Mujeres Rurales e Indigenas from Chile. The key point is that productivist mega-economies externalize social and ecological costs. Self-reliant subsistence economies anticipate and pre-empt them by intelligence and adaptability.

### Working between “humanity” and “nature”

The practical skills and holistic understanding of meta-industrial workers should be taken seriously by those seeking political alternatives to global capitalism. The hands-on lay knowledge of women domestic providers, small farmers, and hunter-gatherers can be characterized as an “embodied materialism” (Salleh 1997). This usage deepens the classic Marxist meaning of materialism, for it involves an ecologically embodied knowing. Ecofeminist thought inspired by this learned sensibility traces the socially constructed and deformed linkages between men and women and nature. Historically, these terms have been essentialized and valorized hierarchically, male-dominated societies using female bodies as a “natural” resource for reproductive ends. That material practice was rationalized by ideologically positioning women somewhere between humans and nature in the “God-given” order of things. As if in parallel to gender subordination, the bodies of colonized peoples have been resourced also for their sexuality, their slave labor, and their DNA.

These masculinist practices point to a fundamental structural contradiction of capitalism: a node of crisis not yet included in the conversations of political economy. An embodied materialist analysis grounded in reproductive labor is strong political medicine for those infected with the intellectual alienations and confusions of the industrial division of labor. For while productive labor is historically contingent, reproductive labor is universal, necessary, integral, attuned to general causal processes within the ecosystem. Among Australian indigenous peoples this humanity–nature (body–land) partnership is conveyed by the word “country.”

The notion of a meta-industrial class defies given sociological constructs of gender, class, and race. Both women and men from all societies will undertake reproductive labor – economic, cultural, biological – at some stage in their lives. This ecofeminist thesis is not therefore a sociobiological argument that “women are closer to nature” or “better than men” – or a celebration of “the essential feminine,” as superficial readers of ecofeminism sometimes assume. Rather, it is based on an intimate empirical observation – a phenomenological reading – of how people go about meeting their needs. The texts that follow represent three kinds of reproductive labor – subsistence farming, housework, and parenting. In considering these exemplars the reader should bear Marx’s early anthropology in mind. As Dickens puts it, “[h]uman beings ...make something new of themselves as a result of humanizing nature. They realize new powers with which they were born but which they did not know they had” (1995: 104).

A classic statement of material agency in scientific complexity occurs in Vandana Shiva’s study of Indian women subsistence farmers:

It is in managing the integrity of ecological cycles in forestry and agriculture that women’s [re-]productivity has been most developed and evolved. Women transfer fertility from the forests to the field and to animals. They transfer animal waste as fertilizer for crops and crop by-products to animals as fodder. This partnership between women’s work and nature’s work ensures the sustainability of sustenance.

(Shiva 1989: 45)

The German ecology activist Ulla Terlinden spells out the tacit systems epistemology behind domestic reproduction carried out by urban housewives:

Housework requires of women [or men] a broad range of knowledge and ability. The nature of the work itself determines its organization. The work at hand must be dealt *within its entirety*....The worker must possess a high degree of personal synthesis, initiative, intuition and flexibility.

(Terlinden 1984: 320)

Contrast this total engagement with the fragmented industrial division of labor and the numb inconsequential mindset that it gives rise to.

In discussing parental skills, the American philosopher Sara Ruddick introduces a notion of “holding” labor, which again embodies the principles of good ecological reasoning:

To hold means to minimize risk and to reconcile differences rather than to sharply accentuate them. Holding is a way of seeing with an eye toward maintaining the minimal harmony, material resources, and skills necessary for sustaining a child in safety. It is the attitude elicited by world protection, world-preservation, world repair.

(Ruddick 1989: 75)

Paradoxically, while minimizing risk, “holding” is the ultimate expression of adaptability. As against the positivist separation of fact and value, space and time, which marks science as usual, interconnectedness is common sense in this embodied materialism.

Barbara Adam (1998) offers yet another analysis of engagement with nature in terms of interlocking cycles of human and ecological time. She describes how people’s sensitivity to nature’s implicate timings is colonized by the clock of capitalist production and its administering state. But when the material substrate of life is processed by manufacture and put up for a price, the socially contrived focus on “things” misses the myriad of exchanges and reverberations that hold matter together. Citizen consumers are disempowered by the one-dimensional economic landscape and are only able to grasp “what is,”

in contrast to "what can be." In other words, appearance subsumes essence – the unrealized potential of nature.

Each of these ecofeminists describes non-violent and non-alienating ways of objectifying human energies in labor. An embodied materialism highlights the relational logic of this labor form and knowledges that have been marginalized, censored, and repressed by the vanities of modernity. As noted already, meta-industrial labor as a process of human partnership with nature is not necessarily gender specific. Ecological holding is found in both genders among indigenous peoples. By custom, Australian Aboriginal workers practice a kind of holding, nurturing sustainability as they move through country (Rose 1996). The hunter-gathering mode of production is reproductive labor, in that it does not take more than it needs. In this most efficient of all subsistence economies, the seasonal walk through country is made in the knowledge that with careful harvesting each habitat will replenish and provide again on the return.

The argument being made here is not about romancing "the noble savage"; its focus is entirely practical. Self-managed Aboriginal economies generate lay knowledges that are not only environmentally benign, but creatively social. Besides subsistence, they foster learning, participation, innovation, ritual, identity, and belonging. Indigenous peoples are known to achieve a high quality of life with only three hours' work a day. On the other hand, as Manfred Max-Neef (1991) reminds us, the engineered satisfiers of modern industrial societies – like bureaucracies or cars – cost much time and energy, often sabotaging the very convenience they were designed for. Reproductive labor is a metabolic bridging of human and natural "cycles." But productive labor is "linear" and pursues a single goal, whether in agribusiness, mining, manufacture, or "controlled" laboratory science. This instrumental rationality collides with complex patterns of material exchange, leaving disorder in nature, and human poverty as collateral to it.

### The meta-industrial class

To reiterate: in principle, holding labors transcend differences of class, race, gender, and age, though in practice, under the modernist division of labor, they have become the province of low-status groups like women domestic caregivers, subsistence farmers, and indigenes. Each of these workers occupies an unspoken space in the industrial division of labor and in Marxism, its theoretical mirror. This is a remarkable omission and an especially salient one in today's ecological crisis. In the rural hinterlands of the South and in the domestic hinterlands of the North, meta-industrial provisioning models simple ways of adapting nature to meet human needs, without ecologically damaging industrial forces of production or socially oppressive capitalist relations of production. As the exemplars drawn from Shiva, Terlinden, and Ruddick reveal, this way of working literally embodies the precautionary principle. Ecofeminist activists apply this logic beyond home and neighborhood to

politics at large. Another commitment of materialist ecofeminists like Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, myself, and others is to validate existing "moral economies" as they start to resist the depravities of neo-liberalism at an international level.

At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, and 10 years later at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the "other" experience of housewives worldwide, poor farmers, and indigenes was treated as cultural not economic, and located outside the mainstream white middle-class masculine government and UN agency dialogue. The World Economic Forum (WEF) held by global capitalist leaders at Davos and elsewhere continues this subterfuge. But WEF discourse is now dual-powered by a World Social Forum meeting in Porto Alegre and Hyderabad. Additionally, the losers of capitalist globalization are initiating a plethora of interim conferences, direct actions, and websites challenging the WTO. In this context, women and men of the Seattle People's Caucus convened by the Indigenous Environmental Network USA/Canada, Seventh Generation Fund USA, and many more nongovernmental organizations wrote:

we believe that it is also us who can offer viable alternatives to the dominant economic growth, export-oriented development model. Our sustainable lifestyles and cultures, traditional knowledge, cosmologies, spirituality, values of collectivity, reciprocity, respect and reverence for Mother Earth, are crucial in the search for a transformed society where justice, equity, and sustainability will prevail.

(Seattle People's Caucus 1999)

Dominant discourses from religion to economics have positioned women, peasants, and indigenes in/with nature and treated their bodies as a resource. But this bifurcated existence, the experience of living between humanity and nature, makes for dialectical thinkers well equipped for moving beyond the political double binds that mark the era of bio-colonialism. On one side, stands the allure of sovereign nationhood and "catch-up" development, as defined in the hollow international codes of neo-liberalism. On the other, is material belonging and identity, grounded in a sense of place, and the integrity of "holding" materially reproductive ecosystems together for future generations. A manifesto from a gathering organized by the Tebtebba Indigenous Peoples' International Center for Policy Research and Education in Manila (Tebtebba Foundation 2001) bespeaks the political sophistication of people who must negotiate dialectically, both their own cultural meanings and the dominant worldview: "When we seek redress for the grave injustices that still confront us, we utilize agencies of international and domestic law but continue to reclaim and revalidate our indigenous ways.... At the same time, this conference seeks support from non-indigenous partners." From a position of ethical strength, meta-industrials keep the door open for conversations with the North.

It is my contention that the basis for an alternative 21st-century socialist vision exists already across the earth in the myriad of meta-industrial practices that remain uncaptured by market and plan. Ecofeminists call this guiding utopia an earth democracy – because it is inclusive of all life forms. This approach reverses the classic Marxist prioritization of production over reproduction, and more, it aims to render modes of production (as we have known them) obsolete altogether! In fact, many people in the North are already setting up bioregional economies, communal farms, local exchange and trading systems or LETS schemes, and eco-villages, and designing their lives around the principles of diversity and reciprocity. Progressive thinkers, even Marxists, now admit that the current global crisis is exacerbated by the abstract, disembodied, and inaccurate knowledge base of white masculine middle-class decision-makers – in business and government alike. But too few progressive thinkers are clear about how to build positive human links with nature. This is where they can learn from “the view from below.”

The site at which reproductive labor and its lay knowledges physically mediate humanity and nature is the best vantage point for framing an ecologically literate class politics. Here, ecopolitical strategies for ecology, feminism, postcolonial, and socialist movements find common ground. Given the new insurgency of meta-industrial voices, their global majority status, their pivotal role in capital accumulation, and their unique models of sustainable provisioning, this class may well be the most appropriate “agents of history” at this time. The claim for their being “a class” is surely an overdetermined one. But their solidarity is vulnerable to being undermined by capitalist-identified and/or productivist elements in the anti-globalization movement – old-style socialists, liberal pro-development feminists, and assimilationist indigenous elites. In this conjuncture, once-radical political positions become reactionary by failing to grasp their own parasitic dependency on a worldwide system of non-renewable accumulation. For prudential reasons, then, as much as social-justice and ecological ones, it is crucial to encourage a deeper awareness of the shared interests of meta-industrial labor groupings. My chapter is offered as just this kind of reinforcement to a class in its own right.

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