

Time to Pay the Piper: The Accumulation of Debts in Patriarchal Capitalism

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Ariel Salleh, editor, *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 324 pages, \$34.00, paperback.

In 2001, Dr. Wilma Dunaway wrote that the “tentacles of the world-system are entwined around the bodies of women.” Yet her literary analysis revealed a profound silence about the role of women in reproductive labor, subsistence households, and commodity chain analysis. Dunaway characterized this as an omission, “the greatest intellectual and political blunder” in her field.¹

Nearly ten years later, Dr. Ariel Salleh has answered this unspoken call with the resounding voices of seventeen feminist scholars who address transdisciplinary issues of global political ecology. The anthology *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* brings together authors from multiple theoretical frameworks to address why the regenerative activities of humans and nature have been devalued, as well as how various forms of resistance could reclaim their centrality in theory and practice. Salleh offers both “deconstructive critique and reconstructive remedy” with impressive clarity and comprehensiveness, allowing the collection to achieve Salleh’s ambitious goal of providing context for both people’s struggles and academic relevance. As an extension of her earlier work in *Ecofeminism as Politics* (1997), Salleh continues to advance the field of materialist ecofeminism by promoting the idea that gender and class are crucial in the struggle against ecological collapse and social inequality.

Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice offers an expanded understanding of ecological/embodied debt, the social relations of subsistence, and a Marxist conception of metabolism. Salleh’s introductory chapter begins with a model of debt that integrates socialist, feminist, and ecological

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perspectives. She outlines (1) the *social debt* owed by capitalist employers for surplus value extracted from the workers, (2) the *ecological debt* owed by the global North to the South for direct extraction of the natural means of production, and (3) the *embodied debt* owed by both the North and South to unpaid reproductive workers who produce use values and regenerate the conditions of production. Understanding these interlocking forms of debt provides leverage for academic debate as well as reflection for people's struggles within a worldwide system of capital accumulation.

Salleh focuses her analysis on the embodied debt of workers who perform "meta-industrial labour," which goes beyond the wage-dependent work of industrial society to encompass the labor of women and men who work off the land, raising children, caring for family members, and generally engaging in social relations of subsistence. Meta-industrial laborers include householders, mothers, peasants, indigenes, and others whose daily work is directly connected to biological growth and regeneration. Salleh suggests that the meta-industrial labor of both women and men achieves a "metabolic fit" between human needs and natural cycles, thereby offering a model of eco-sufficiency.

Salleh presents a clear and consistent materialist argument, stating that the day-to-day experience of negotiating humanity-nature relations is a "standpoint grounded in labor—not for instance, an ideological or sociobiological argument about women being closer to nature or better than men." This materialist foundation allows her to circumvent such essentialist ecofeminist arguments and offer an extension of Marx's concept of metabolism. Salleh successfully describes how the social relations of subsistence can provide an alternative to metabolic rift.

Metabolic rift, as introduced by Marx and expanded by John Bellamy Foster, is created through capitalist exchange as biogeochemical cycles are severed and workers become disconnected from the natural cycles of production.² By building off these theoretical developments in eco-Marxism, Salleh introduces the concept of metabolic fit for discussion and debate. Once Salleh lays this epistemological groundwork, she offers an expansive variety of readings from feminist authors to help amplify her critiques and provide meaningful alternatives.

Salleh states that the anthology is "inspired by life at the peripheries of power," and these regions are given voice in numerous chapters of the book. For example, Nalini Nayak provides a socio-ecological analysis of displaced fishers in India, and Zhol de Ishtar explains the economic, social, and cultural fallout of nuclearized bodies in Marshall Islands. Interspersed among these case studies are theoretical essays

addressing issues such as Silvia Federici's history of the devaluation of women's labor and Mary Mellor's discussion of ecofeminist political economy. While the anthology provides impressive breadth, it also tasks the reader with some analytical work to pull it all together. Salleh admits that "the project involves multiple levels of arguments and cannot be treated systematically in a book of readings such as this." Perhaps a short discussion at the beginning of each of the five sections could have helped provide the reader with a compass.

Many of the chapters offer informed critique of current sustainability models, and the authors pull no punches. Ecological economics, ecofeminism, eco-socialism, social ecology, world-systems theory—all are critically discussed and open for debate. For example, Susan Hawthorne questions the "politically conservative character of some ecological economics" that uses natural capital analysis, while Ana Isla demonstrates how designated conservation areas can act as enclosures. To balance their critique, Salleh includes works that highlight alternatives to the underlying structure of capitalism. Mary Mellor explains how a "provisioning" economy "would start from the embodiment and embeddedness of human lives [so that] patterns of work and consumption would be sensitive to the human life-cycle." Marilyn Waring provides thoughtful recommendations for the type of accounting systems that would "make women count." She suggests radically interpreting data in nonmonetary terms, such as time-use scales. By simultaneously providing selections that critique and remedy, Salleh presents an engaging account of dialectical reasoning.

Perhaps the most impressive accomplishment of this diverse set of readings is the ability to place intellectually demanding concepts in the context of timely current events. Mary Mellor provides a sophisticated analysis of the financialization crisis from a feminist political economy perspective. This will be of interest to anyone following the analytical developments of monopoly-finance capital. Second, an entire section of the anthology is dedicated to energy and climate change. Given the recent Copenhagen spectacle, the themes raised by several of the book's authors provide a new look at climate justice and the "development rights" debate. It is this section that provides some of the most thought-provoking terrain.

Confronting the causes and consequences of climate change requires urgent, radical action, especially given the potential for positive feedback loops to create even more drastic global transformations. The anthology rightly critiques the band-aid approaches of commodified

“debt-for-nature” swaps and “win/win” market mechanisms. Various authors suggest that an “epistemology of the South,” manifested through meta-industrial laborers, should lead the way for capacity-building and social change in the North. For example, Brownhill and Turner provide a case study in which Nigerian subsistence-based women lead international resistance efforts to shut down Big Oil.

After reading this case analysis, I was left wondering: what of the relation between the meta-industrials and the industrial classes? How should these social relationships be united to achieve the massive change necessary in economic and social structure? Will the knowledge and skills gained from subsistence labor stand alone, or join with Western science and industrial workers? Cuba provides one example of this sort of alliance where, faced with massive energy shortages during the Special Period, traditional farming knowledge/practices were combined with modern science to create a new system of organic food production. Can this dialectical approach to biology and nature be supported in the prioritization of meta-industrial labor?

Although the anthology rightfully centers on the concept of meta-industrial laborers, its lack of discussion of just how meta-industrial and industrial classes could unite left me wondering. But perhaps giving readers new questions like this is itself more than enough at this stage of our knowledge.

Following the logic of the metabolic fit associated with meta-industrial labors, Salleh asserts that “people in many locations do understand their material embodiment in nature, and they know how to practice eco-sufficiency.” This transforms the apologetic “There is No Alternative” mantra to a more comprehensive viewpoint that “Alternatives are Everywhere”—we just need to open our eyes and listen. Again, a sense of urgency hits us, as we remember how colonization and imperialism have ravaged many subsistence societies. Is it too late for these cultures to reclaim this knowledge, as languages are lost and land is appropriated on a daily basis? The insights provided in this anthology lead to questions regarding how best to preserve human rights and sovereignty in light of the modernist and developmentalist paradigm. How would this emphasis on preserving nonmonetary, subsistence labor speak to the climate justice activists who promote Greenhouse Development Rights?³

The conceptual tools and detailed analyses provided throughout *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice* serve two purposes. First, they respond to the academic and NGO discourse that has attempted to marginalize materialist feminist analysis by providing an impressive collection

of arguments and examples demonstrating the relevance and saliency of an embodied materialist perspective. Second, they provide a starting point for continued discussion and questions to refine how these concepts can be applied in the service of social and ecological justice.

Numerous scholars within ecological economics have pointed to the Greek origin of both the word economy (*oikos nomos*—household management) and the word ecology (*oikos logos*—household knowledge) to speak of their implicit connection. Similarly, in this book, Salleh brings together the concepts of meta-industrial labor and metabolism, both sharing the Greek root, *meta*. A quick look at this etymology offers a telling analogy: while *meta*-industrial implies an organizing force beyond wage-dependent laborers, *metabolism* means to overthrow and produce change. Clearly, these themes inspire Salleh's work—opening a dialogue beyond the classical understanding of labor to include the social relations of subsistence and, at the same time, reveal the potential for overthrowing a system of patriarchal capitalist exploitation.

Notes

1. Wilma Dunaway, "The Double Register of History: Situating the Forgotten Woman and Her Household in Commodity Chain Analysis," *Journal of World-System Research*, VII (Spring 2001), 23.

2. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

3. Activist/scholars such as Tom Athanasiou and Paul Baer promote development rights described as the following: "The Greenhouse Development Rights framework is designed to support an emergency climate stabilization program while, at the same time, preserving the right of all people to reach a dignified level of sustainable human development

free of the privations of poverty," <http://ecoequity.org>, retrieved March 15, 2010.