ON ELDER CARE WORK AND THE LIMITS OF MARXISM (2009)

Introduction

"Care work," especially eldercare, has come in recent years to the center of public attention in the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in response to a number of trends that have put many traditional forms of assistance into crisis. First among these trends have been the growth, in relative and absolute terms, of the old age population, and the increase in life expectancy, that have not been matched, however, by a growth of the services catering to the old.[1] There has also been the expansion of women's waged employment that has reduced their contribution to the reproduction of their families.[2] To these factors we must add the continuing process of urbanization and the gentrification of working class neighborhoods, that have destroyed the support networks and the forms of mutual aid on which older people living alone could once rely, as neighbors would bring them food, make their beds, come for a chat. As a result of these trends, for a large number of elderly, the positive effects of a longer life span have been voided or are clouded by the prospect of loneliness, social exclusion and increased vulnerability to physical and psychological abuse. With this in mind, I present some reflections on the question of eldercare in contemporary social policy, especially in the United States, to then ask what action can be taken on this terrain, and why the question of elder care is absent in the literature of the radical Left.

My main objective here is to call for a redistribution of the social wealth in the direction of elder care, and the construction of collective forms of reproduction, enabling older people to be provided for, when no longer self-sufficient, and not at the cost of their providers' lives. For this to occur, however, the struggle over elder care must be politicized and placed on the agenda of social justice movements. A cultural revolution is also necessary in the concept of old age, against its degraded representation as a fiscal burden on the state, on one side and, on the other, an "optional" stage in life that we can overcome and even prevent, if we adopt the right medical technology and the "life enhancing" devises disgorged by the market.[3] At stake in the politicization of elder care are not only the destinies of older people and the unsustainability of radical movements failing to address such a crucial issue in our lives, but the possibility of generational and class solidarity, which for years have been the targets of a relentless campaign by political economists and governments, portraying the provisions which workers have won for their old age (such as pensions and other forms of social security) as an economic time-bomb and a heavy mortgage on the future of the young.

The Crisis of Elder Care in the Global Era

In some respects the present crisis of elder care is nothing new. Eldercare in capitalist society has always been in a state of crisis, both because of the devaluation of reproductive work in capitalism and because the elderly are seen as no longer productive, instead of being treasured as they were in many precapitalist societies as depositories of the collective memory and experience. In other words, elder care suffers from a double cultural and social devaluation. Like all reproductive work, it is not recognized as work, but unlike the reproduction of labor-power, whose product has a recognized value, it is deemed to absorb value but not to produce it. Thus, funds designated for eldercare have traditionally been disbursed with a stinginess reminiscent of the nineteenth century Poor Laws, and the task of caring for the old who are no longer self-sufficient has been left to the families and kin with little external support, on the assumption that women should naturally take on this task as part of their domestic work.

It has taken a long struggle to force capital to reproduce not just labor-power "in use," but the working class throughout its entire life cycle, with the provision of assistance also to those who are no longer part of the labor market. However, even the Keynesian state fell short of this goal. Witness the Social Security legislation of the New Deal, enacted in 1940 in the United States, and considered "one of the achievement of our century"; only partly did it respond to the problems faced by the old, as it tied social insurance to the years of waged employment and provided elder care only to those in a state of absolute poverty.[4]

The triumph of neoliberalism has worsened this situation. In some countries of the OECD, steps have been taken in the 1990s to increase the funding of home-based care, and provide counseling and services to caregivers.[5] In England the government has given caregivers the right to demand flexible work schedules from employers, so they can "reconcile" waged work and care work.[6] But the dismantling of the "welfare state" and the neoliberal insistence that reproduction is the workers' personal responsibility, have triggered a countertendency that is gaining momentum and the present economic crisis will undoubtedly accelerate.

The demise of welfare provisions for the elderly has been especially severe in the United States, where it has reached such a point that workers are often impoverished in the effort to care for a disabled parent. One policy in particular has created great hardships. This has been the transfer of much hospital care to the home, a move motivated by purely financial concerns and carried out with little consideration given to the structures required to replace the services that hospitals used to provide. As described by Nona Glazer, this development has not only increased the amount of care-work that family members, mostly women, must do.[7] It has also shifted to the home "dangerous" and even "life threatening" operations that in the past only registered nurses and hospitals would have been expected to perform.[8] At the same time, subsidized home-care workers have seen their workload double, while the length of their visits has increasingly been cut,[9] forcing them to reduce their jobs "to household maintenance and bodily care."[10] Federally financed nursing homes have also been "Taylorized," "using time-and-motion studies to decide how many patients their workers can be expected to serve."[11]

The "globalization" of elder care in the 1980s and 1990s has not remedied this situation. The new international division of reproductive work, that globalization has promoted, has shifted a large amount of care-work on the shoulders of immigrant women. This development has been very advantageous for governments, enabling them to save billions of dollars they otherwise would have had to pay to provide services catering to the elderly. It has also enabled many elderly, who wished to maintain their independence, to remain in their homes without going bankrupt. But this cannot be considered a "solution" to elder care, short of a total social and economic transformation in the conditions of care workers and the factors motivating their "choice" of this work.

It is because of the destructive impact of "economic liberalization" and "structural adjustment" in their countries of origins that millions of women from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Islands, and the former socialist world, migrate to the more affluent regions of Europe, the Middle East and the United States, to serve as nannies, domestics, and caregivers for the elder. To do this they must leave their own families including children and aging parents behind, and recruit relatives or hire other women with less power and resources than themselves to replace the work they can no longer provide.[12] Taking the case of Italy as an example, it is calculated that three out of four *badanti* (as care workers for the elderly are called) have children of their own, but only 15 percent have their families with them.[13] This means that the majority suffer a great deal of anxiety, confronting the fact that their own families must go without the same care they now give to people across the globe. Arlie Hochschild has spoken, in this context, of a "global transfer of care and emotions," and the formation of a "global care-chain."[14] But the chain often breaks down: immigrant women become estranged from their children, stipulated arrangements fall apart, relatives die during their absence.

Equally important, because of the devaluation of reproductive work and the fact that they are immigrants, often undocumented, and women of color, paid care workers are vulnerable to a great deal of blackmail and abuse: long hours of work, no paid vacations, or other benefits, exposure to racist behavior and sexual assault. So low is the pay of home care workers in the United States that nearly half must rely on food stamps and other forms of public assistance to make ends meet.[15] Indeed, as Domestic Workers United—the main domestic/care workers organization in New York State, promoter of a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, has put it, care workers live and work in "the shadow of slavery."[16]

It is also important to stress that most elderly people and families cannot afford hiring care-workers or paying for services matching their real need. This is particularly true of elderly people with disabilities who require daylong care. According to statistics of the CNEL of 2003, in Italy only 2.8 percent of elderly receive nonfamily assistance at home; in France it is twice as many, in Germany three times.[17] But the number is still low. A large number of elderly live alone, facing hardships that are all the more devastating the more invisible they are. In the "hot summer" of 2003, thousands of elderly people died throughout Europe of dehydration, lack of food and medicines or just the unbearable heat. So many died in Paris that the authorities had to stack their bodies in refrigerated public spaces until their families reclaimed them.

When family members care for the old, the tasks fall mostly on the shoulders of women,[18] who for months or years at times live on the verge of nervous and physical exhaustion, consumed by the work and the responsibility of having to provide a care and often perform procedures for which they are usually unprepared. Many have jobs outside the home, though they have to abandon them when the care work intensifies. Particularly stressed are the "sandwich generation" who are simultaneously raising children and caring for their parents.[19] The crisis of care work has reached such a point that in low-income, single-parent families in the United States, teenagers and children, some no more than eleven years old, take care of their elders, also administering therapies and injections. As the *New York Times* has reported, a study conducted nationwide in 2005 revealed that "3 percent of households with children ages eight to eighteen included child caregivers."[20]

The alternative, for those who cannot afford buying some form of "assisted care," are publicly funded nursing homes, which, however, are more like prisons than hostels for the old. Typically, due to a lack of staff and funds, these institutions provide minimal care. At best, they let their residents lie in bed for hours without anyone at hand to change their positions, adjust their pillows, massage their legs, tend to their bed sores, or simply talk to them, basic elements in their maintaining a sense of their sense of identity and dignity and still feeling alive and valued. At worst, nursing homes are places where old people are drugged, tied to their beds, left to lie in their excrements and subjected to all kind of physical and psychological abuses. This much has emerged from a series of reports, including one recently published by the U.S. government in 2008, which speaks of a history of abuse, neglect, and violation of safety and health standards in 94 percent of nursing homes.[21] The situation is not more encouraging in other countries. In Italy, reports of abuses in nursing homes perpetrated against disabled or chronically ill elders are very frequent, as are the cases in which needed medical assistance is denied.[22]

Eldercare, the Unions, and the Left

The problems I have described are so common and pressing that we would imagine that eldercare should top the agenda of the social justice movements and labor unions internationally. This, however, is not the case. When not working in institutions, as it is the case with nurses and aides, care workers have been ignored by labor unions, even the most combative like Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).[23]

Unions negotiate pensions, the conditions of retirement, and healthcare. But there is little discussion in their programs of the support

systems required by people aging and by care workers, whether or not they work for pay. In the United States, until recently, labor unions did not even try to organize care workers, much less unpaid house-workers. Thus, to this day, care workers working for individuals or families have been excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act, a New Deal legislation that guarantees "access to minimum wages, overtime, bargaining rights and other workplace protections."[24] As already mentioned, among the fifty states, only New York State has so far recognized care workers as workers, with the passing of a Bill of Rights, in November 2010, that Domestic Workers United had long fought for. And the United States is not an isolated case. According to an ILO survey of 2004, "cross-national unionization rates in the domestic service sector are barely 1 percent."[25] Pensions too are not available to all workers, but only to those who have worked for wages, and certainly not to unpaid family caregivers. Because reproductive work is not recognized as work and pension systems compute benefits on the basis of the years spent in waged employment, women who have been fulltime housewives can obtain a pension only through a wage-earning husband, and have no social security in case they divorce.

Labor organizations have not challenged these inequities, nor have social movements and the Marxist Left, who, with few exceptions, seems to have written the elderly off the struggle, judging by the absence of any reference to elder care in contemporary Marxist analyses. The responsibility for this state of affairs can in part be traced back to Marx himself. Elder care is not a theme that we find in his works, although the question of old age had been on the revolutionary political agenda since the eighteenth century, and mutual aid societies and utopian visions of recreated communities (Fourierist, Owenite, Icarian) abounded in his time.[26]

Marx was concerned with understanding the mechanics of capitalist production and the manifold ways in which the class struggle challenges it and reshapes its form. Security in old age and elder care did not enter this discussion. Old age was a rarity among the factory workers and miners of his time, whose life expectancy on average, in industrial areas, like Manchester and Liverpool, did not surpass thirty years at best, if the reports of Marx's contemporaries are to be believed.[27]

Most importantly, Marx did not recognize the centrality of reproductive work, neither for capital accumulation nor for the construction of the new communist society. Although both him and Engels described the abysmal conditions in which the working class in England lived and worked, he almost naturalized the process of reproduction, never envisaging how reproductive work could be reorganized in a postcapitalist society or in the very course of the struggle. For instance, he discussed

"cooperation" only in the process of commodity production overlooking the qualitatively different forms of proletarian cooperation in the process of reproduction which Kropotkin later called "mutual aid."[28]

Cooperation among workers is for Marx a fundamental character of the capitalist organization of work, "entirely brought about by the capital[ists]," coming into place only when the workers "have ceased to belong to themselves," being purely functional to the increase in the efficiency and productivity of labor.[29] As such, it leaves no space for the manifold expressions of solidarity and the many "institutions for mutual support"—"associations, societies, brotherhoods, alliances"—that Kropotkin found present among the industrial population of his time.[30] As Kropotkin noted, these very forms of mutual aid put limits to the power of capital and the State over the workers' lives, enabling countless proletarians not to fall into utter ruin, and sowing the seeds of a self-managed insurance system, guaranteeing some protection against unemployment, illness, old age and death.[31]

Typical of the limits of Marx's perspective is his utopian vision in the "Fragment on the Machines" in the *Grundrisse* (1857–58), where he projects a world in which machines do all the work and human beings only tend to them, functioning as their supervisors. This picture, in fact, ignores that, even in advanced capitalist countries, much of the socially necessary labor consists of reproductive activities and that this work has proven irreducible to mechanization.

Only minimally can the needs, desires, possibilities of older people, or people outside the waged workplace, be addressed by incorporating technologies into the work by which they are reproduced. The automation of eldercare is a path already well traveled. As Nancy Folbre (the leading feminist economist and theorist of eldercare in the United States) has shown, Japanese industries are quite advanced in the attempt to technologize it, as they are generally in the production of interactive robots. Nursebots giving people baths or "walking [them] for exercise," and "companion robots" (robotic dogs, teddy bears) are already available on the market, although at prohibitive costs.[32] We also know that televisions and personal computers have become surrogate *badanti* for many elders. Electronically commanded wheelchairs enhance the mobility of those who are sufficiently in charge of their movements to master their commands.

These scientific and technological developments can greatly benefit older people, if they are made affordable for them. The circulation of knowledge they provide certainly places a great wealth at their disposal. But this cannot replace the labor of care workers, especially in the case of elders living alone or suffering from illnesses and disabilities. As Folbre

points out, robotic partners can even increase people's loneliness and isolation.[33] Nor can automation address the predicaments—fears, anxieties, loss of identity and sense of one's dignity—that people experience as they age and become dependent on others for the satisfaction of even their most basic needs.

It is not technological innovation that is needed to address the question of elder care, but a change in social relations, whereby the valorization of capital no longer commands social activity and reproduction become a collective process. This, however, will not be possible within a Marxist framework, short of a major rethinking of the question of work, of the type feminists began in the 1970s as part of our political discussion of the function of housework and the origin of gender-based discrimination. Feminists have rejected the centrality that Marxism has historically assigned to waged industrial work and commodity production as the crucial sites for social transformation, and they have criticized its neglect of the reproduction of human beings and labor power. The feminist movement's lesson has been that not only is reproduction the pillar of the "social factory," but changing the conditions under which we reproduce ourselves is an essential part of our ability to create "self-reproducing movements."[34] For ignoring that the "personal" is "political" greatly undermines the strength of our struggle.

On this matter, contemporary Marxists are not ahead of Marx. Taking the Autonomist Marxist theory of "Affective" and "Immaterial Labor" as an example, we see that it still sidesteps the rich problematic that the feminist analysis of reproductive work in capitalism uncovered.[35] This theory argues that in the present phase of capitalist development, the distinction between production and reproduction has become totally blurred, as work becomes the production of states of being, "affects," and "immaterial" rather than physical objects.[36] In this sense "affective labor" is a component of every forms of work rather than a specific form of (re)production. The examples given of the ideal-type "affective laborers" are the fast-food female workers who must flip hamburgers at McDonald's with a smile or the stewardesses who must sell a sense of security to the people she attends to. But such examples are deceptive, for much reproductive work, as exemplified by care for the elderly, demands a complete engagement with the persons to be reproduced, a relation that can hardly be conceived as "immaterial."

It is important, however, to recognize that the concept of "care work" is also to some extent reductive. The term has entered the common usage in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the emergence of a new division of labor within reproductive work, separating the physical from

the emotional aspects of this work. Paid care workers have held on to this distinction, wishing to specify the jobs that can be expected of them from their employers, and establish that the work they provide is skilled labor. But the distinction is untenable and care workers are the first to recognize it. For what differentiates the reproduction of human beings from the production of commodities is the holistic character of many of the tasks involved. Indeed, to the extent that a separation is introduced, to the extent that elderly people (or for that matter children) are fed, washed, combed, massaged, given medicines, without any consideration for their emotional, "affective" response and general state of being, we enter a world of radical alienation. The theory of "affective labor" ignores this problematic and the complexity involved in the reproduction of life. It also suggests that all forms of work in "postindustrial" capitalism are increasingly homogenized.[37] Yet, a brief look at the organization of elder care, as currently constituted, dispels this illusion.

Women, Aging, and Elder Care in the Perspective of Feminist Economists

As feminist economists have argued, the crisis of elder care, whether considered from the viewpoint of the elders or their care providers, is essentially a gender question. Although increasingly commodified, most care work is still done by women and in the form of unpaid labor that does not entitle them to any pension. Thus, paradoxically, the more women care for others the less care they can receive in return, because they devote less time to waged labor than men and many social insurance plans are calculated on the years of waged work done. Paid caregivers too, as we have seen, are affected by the devaluation of reproductive work, forming an "underclass" that still must fight to be socially recognized as workers. In sum, because of the devaluation of reproductive work, almost everywhere women face old age with fewer resources than men, measured in terms of family support, monetary incomes, and available assets. In the United States, where pensions and Social Security are calculated on years of employment, women are the largest group of elderly who are poor and the largest number of residents of low-income nursing homes, the concentration camps of our time, precisely because they spend so much of their lives outside of the waged workforce, in activities not recognized as work.

Science and technology cannot resolve this problem. What is required is a transformation in the social/sexual division of labor and, above all, the recognition of reproductive work as work, entitling those performing it to remuneration, so that family members providing care are not penalized for their work.[38] The recognition and valorization of reproductive work is also crucial for overcoming the divisions that exist among care

workers, which pit, on one side, the family members trying to minimize their expenses, and, on the other, the hired care-givers facing the demoralizing consequences of working at the edge of poverty and devaluation.

Feminist economists working on this issue have articulated possible alternatives to the present systems. In *Warm Hands in Cold Age*, Nancy Folbre, Lois B. Shaw, and Agneta Stark discuss the reforms needed to give security to the aging population, especially elderly women, by taking an international perspective, and evaluating which countries are in the lead in this respect.[39] At the top, they place the Scandinavian countries that provide almost universal systems of insurance. At the bottom there are the United States and England, where elderly assistance is tied to the history of employment. But in both cases, there is a problem in the way policies are configured, as they reflect an unequal sexual division of labor and the traditional expectations concerning women's role in the family and society. This is one crucial area where change must occur.

Folbre also calls for a redistribution of resources to rechannel public money from the military-industrial complex and other destructive enterprises to the care of people in old age. She acknowledges that this may seem "unrealistic," equivalent to calling for a revolution. But she insists that it should be placed on "our agenda," for the future of every worker is at stake, and a society blind to the tremendous suffering that awaits so many people once they age, as it is the case with the United States today, is a society bound for self-destruction.

There is no sign, however, that this blindness may soon be overcome. In the name of the economic crisis, policy makers are turning their eyes away from it, everywhere striving to cut social spending and bring state pensions and social security systems, including subsidies to care work, under the ax. The dominant refrain is the obsessive complaint that a more vital and energetic elderly population, stubbornly insisting on living on, is making even the provision of state-funded pensions unsustainable. It was possibly with in mind the millions of Americans determined on living past eighty, that Alan Greenspan in his memoirs confessed that he was frightened when realizing that the Clinton Administration had actually accumulated a financial surplus![40] Even before the crisis, however, for years policy makers had been orchestrating a generational war, incessantly warning that that the growth of the sixty-five-plus population would bankrupt the Social Security system, leaving a heavy mortgage on the shoulders of the younger generations. Now, as the crisis deepens, the assault on assistance to old age and elder care is bound to escalate, whether [illegible] inflation decimating fixed incomes, or the partial [illegible] age. What

is certain is that no one is arguing for an increase in government funding for elder care.[41]

It is urgent, then, that social justice movements, including radical scholars and activists, intervene on this terrain to prevent a triage solution to the crisis at the expense of the old, and to formulate initiatives capable of bringing together the different social subjects who are implicated in the question of elder care—care workers, the families of the elders, and first of all the elders themselves—who are now often placed in an antagonistic relation with each other. We are already seeing examples of such an alliance in some of the struggle over elder care, as nurses and patients, paid care workers and families of their clients are increasingly coming together to jointly confront the state, aware that when the relations of reproduction become antagonistic, both producers and reproduced pay the price.

Meanwhile, the "commoning" of reproductive/care work is also under way. Communal forms of living based upon "solidarity contracts" are currently being created in some Italian cities by elders who, in order to avoid being institutionalized, pool together their efforts and resources when they cannot count on their families or hire a care worker. In the United States, "communities of care" are being formed by the younger generations of political activists, who aim at socializing, collectivizing the experience of illness, pain, grieving and the "care work" involved, in this process beginning to reclaim and redefine what it means to be ill, to age, to die.[42] These efforts need to be expanded. They are essential to a reorganization of our everyday life and the creation of nonexploitative social relations. For the seeds of the new world will not be planted "online," but in the cooperation we can develop among ourselves, starting from those of us who must face the most vulnerable time in our lives without the resources and help they need, a hidden but no doubt widespread form of torture in our society.

WOMEN, LAND STRUGGLES, AND GLOBALIZATION: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE (2004)

Despite a systematic attempt by colonial powers to destroy female systems of farming, across the planet, women today constitute the bulk of agricultural workers and are in the forefront of the struggle for a noncapitalist use of natural resources (land, forests, waters). Defending subsistence agriculture, communal access to land, and opposing land expropriation, women internationally are building the way to a new nonexploitative society, one in which the threat of famines and ecological devastation will be dispelled.

> How can we ever get out of poverty if we can't get a piece of land to work? If we had land to plant, we wouldn't need to get food sent to us all the way from the United States. No. We'd have our own. But as long as the government refuses to give us the land and other resources we need, we'll continue to have foreigners running our country. —Elvia Alvarado[1]

Women Keep the World Alive

Until recently, issues relating to land and land struggles would have failed to generate much interest among most North Americans, unless they were farmers or descendants of the American Indians for whom the importance of land as the foundation of life is still paramount, culturally at least. For many land issues seemed to have receded to a vanishing past.

In the aftermath of massive urbanization, land no longer appeared to be the fundamental means of reproduction, and new industrial technologies claimed to provide the power, self-reliance, and creativity that people once associated with self-provisioning and small-scale farming.

This has been a great loss, if only because this amnesia has created a world where the most basic questions about our existence—where our food comes from, whether it nourishes us or instead, poisons our bodies—remain unanswered and often unasked. This indifference to land among urban dwellers is coming to an end, however. Concern for the genetic engineering of agricultural crops and the ecological impact of the destruction of the tropical forests, together with the example offered by the struggles of indigenous people, such as the Zapatistas who have risen up in arms to oppose land privatization, have created a new awareness in Europe and North America about the importance of the "land question," not long ago still identified as a "Third World" issue.

As a result of this conceptual shift it is now recognized that land is not a largely irrelevant "factor of production" in modern capitalism. Land is the material basis for women's subsistence work, which is the main source of "food security" for millions of people across the planet. Against this background, I look at the struggles that women are making worldwide not only to reappropriate land, but to boost subsistence farming and a noncommercial use of natural resources. These efforts are extremely important not only because thanks to them billions of people are able to survive, but because they point to the changes that we have to make if we are to construct a society where reproducing ourselves does not comes at the expense of other people nor presents a threat to the continuation of life on the planet.

Women and Land: A Historical Perspective

It is an undisputed fact but one difficult to measure that in rural as well as urban areas, women are the subsistence farmers of the planet. That is, women produce the bulk of the food that is consumed by their families (immediate or extended) or is sold at the local markets for consumption, especially in Africa and Asia where the bulk of the world population lives.

Subsistence farming is difficult to measure because, for the most part, it is unwaged work and often is not done on a formal farm. Moreover, many of the women who do it do not describe it as work. This parallels another well-known economic fact: the number of house-workers and the value of their work are hard to measure. Given the capitalist bias toward production for the market, housework is not counted as work, and is still not considered by many as "real work."

International agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Association (FAO), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the United Nations have often ignored the difficulties presented by the measurement of subsistence work. But they have recognized that much depends on what definition is used. They have noted, for instance, that "in Bangladesh, [the] labour force participation of women was 10 percent according to the Labour Force Survey of 1985–86. But when, in 1989, the Labour Force Survey included in the questionnaire specific activities such as threshing, food processing and poultry rearing the economic activity rate went up to 63 percent."[2]

It is not easy, then, to precisely assess, on the basis of the statistics available, how many people, and women in particular, are involved in subsistence farming; but it is clear that it is a substantial number. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, "women produce up to 80 percent of all the basic foodstuffs for household consumption and for sale."[3] Given that the population of sub-Saharan Africa is about three-quarters of a billion people, with a large percentage of them being children, this means that more than a hundred million African women must be subsistence farmers.[4] As the feminist slogan goes: "women hold up *more* than half the sky."

We should recognize that the persistence of subsistence farming is an astounding fact considering that capitalist development has been premised on the separation of agricultural producers, women in particular, from the land. It can only be explained on the basis of a tremendous struggle women have made to resist the commercialization of agriculture.

Evidence for this struggle is found throughout the history of colonization, from the Andes to Africa. In response to land expropriation by the Spaniards (assisted by local chiefs), women in Mexico and Peru in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ran to the mountains, rallied the population to resist the foreign invaders, and became the staunchest defenders of the old cultures and religions, which were centered on the worship of nature-gods.[5] Later, in the nineteenth century, in Africa and Asia, women defended the traditional female farming systems from the systematic attempts that the European colonialists made to dismantle them and to redefine agricultural work as a male job.

As Ester Boserup (among others) has shown with reference to West Africa, not only did colonial officers, missionaries, and later agricultural developers impose commercial crops at the expense of food production, but they excluded African women, who did most of the farming, from the study of modern farming systems and technical assistance. They invariably privileged men with regard to land assignment, even when absent

from their homes.[6] Thus, in addition to eroding women's "traditional" rights as participants in communal land systems and independent cultivators, colonialists and developers alike introduced new divisions between women and men. They imposed a new sexual division of labor, based upon women's subordination to men, which, in the colonialists' schemes, included unpaid cooperation with their husbands in the cultivation of cash crops.

Women, however, did not accept this deterioration in their social position without protest. In colonial Africa whenever they feared that the government might sell their land or appropriate their crops, they revolted. Exemplary was the protest that women mounted against the colonial authorities in Kedjom Keku and Kedjom Ketinguh (northwestern Cameroon, then under British rule) in 1958. Angered by rumors claiming that the government was going to put their land up for sale, seven thousand women repeatedly marched to Bamenda, the provincial capital at the time, and in their longest stay camped for two weeks outside the British colonial administrative buildings, "singing loudly and making their rumbustious presence felt."[7]

In the same region, women fought against the destruction of their subsistence farms by foraging cattle owned by members of the local male elite or by nomadic Fulani to whom the colonial authorities had granted seasonal pasturage rights expecting to collect a herd tax. In this case too, the women's boisterous protest defeated the plan, forcing the authorities to sanction the offending pasturalists. As Susan Diduk writes,

> In the protests women perceived themselves as fighting for the survival and subsistence needs of family and kin. Their agricultural labor was and continues to be indispensable to daily food production. Kedjom men also emphasize the importance of these roles in the past and present. Today they are frequently heard to say, "Don't women suffer for farming and for carrying children for nine months? Yes, they do good for the country."[8]

There were many similar struggles, in the 1940s and 1950s, throughout Africa, by women resisting the introduction of cash crops and the extra work it imposed on them, which took them away from their subsistence farming. The power of women's subsistence farming, from the viewpoint of the survival of the colonized communities, can be seen from the contribution it made to the anticolonial struggle, in particular to the maintenance of liberation fighters in the bush (e.g., in Algeria, Kenya, and Mozambique).[9] In the postindependence period as

well, women fought against being recruited in agricultural development projects as unpaid "helpers" of their husbands. The best example of this resistance is the intense struggle they made in the Senegambia against cooperation in the commercial cultivation of rice crops, which came at the expense of their subsistence food production.[10]

It is because of these struggles—which are now recognized as the main reason for the failure of the agricultural development projects of the 1960s and 1970s—that a sizable subsistence sector has survived in many regions of the world, despite the commitment of pre- and postindependence governments to "economic development" along capitalist lines.[11]

The determination of millions of women in Africa, Asia, and the Americas to not abandon subsistence farming must be emphasized to counter the tendency, common even among radical social scientists, to interpret the survival of female subsistence agriculture as a function of international capital's need to both cheapen the cost of the reproduction of labor and "liberate" male workers for the cultivation of cash crops and other kinds of waged work. Claude Meillassoux, a Marxist proponent of this theory, has argued that female subsistence-oriented production, or the "domestic economy" as he calls it, has served to ensure a supply of cheap workers for the capitalist sector at home and abroad and, as such, it has subsidized capitalist accumulation.[12] As his argument goes, thanks to the work of the "village," the laborers who migrated to Paris or Johannesburg provided a "free" commodity for the capitalists who hired them; since employers neither had to pay for their upbringing nor had to support them with unemployment benefits when they no longer needed their work.

From this perspective, women's labor in subsistence farming is a bonus for governments, companies, and development agencies, enabling them to more effectively exploit wage labor and obtain a constant transfer of wealth from the rural to the urban areas, in effect degrading the quality of female farmers' lives.[13] To his credit, Meillassoux acknowledges the efforts made by international agencies and governments to "underdevelop" the subsistence sector. He sees the constant draining of its resources, and recognizes the precarious nature of this form of labor-reproduction, anticipating that it may soon undergo a decisive crisis.[14] But he too fails to see the struggle underlining the survival of subsistence work and its continuing importance, despite the attack waged upon it, from the viewpoint of the community's capacity to resist the encroachment of capitalist relations.

As for liberal economists—their view of "subsistence work" completely degrades it to the level of "uneconomic," "unproductive" activity, in the same way as liberal economics refuses to see women's unpaid

domestic labor in the home as work. Thus, liberal economists, even when appearing to take a feminist stand, propose, as an alternative, "income generating projects," the universal remedy to poverty and presumably the key to women's emancipation in the neoliberal era.[15]

What these different perspectives ignore is the strategic importance that access to land has had for women and their communities, despite the ability of companies and governments to use it at times for their own ends. An analogy can be made here with the situation that prevailed in some islands of the Caribbean (for example, Jamaica) during slavery, when plantation owners gave the slaves plots of land ("provision grounds") to cultivate for their own support. The owners took this measure to save on their food imports and reduce the cost of reproducing their workers. But this strategy had advantages for the slaves as well, giving them a higher degree of mobility and independence such that—according to some historians—even before emancipation, in some islands, a protopeasantry had formed with a remarkable degree of freedom of movement, already deriving some income from the sale of its own products.[16]

Extending this analogy to illustrate the postcolonial capitalist use of subsistence labor we can say that subsistence agriculture has been an important means of support for billions of workers, giving wage laborers the possibility to contract better conditions of work and survive labor strikes and political protests, so that in several countries the wage sector has acquired an importance disproportionate to its small numerical size.[17]

The "village"—a metaphor for subsistence farming in a communal setting—has also been a crucial site for women's struggle, providing a base from which to reclaim the wealth the state and capital was removing from it. It is a struggle that has taken many forms, often as much directed against men as against governments, but always strengthened by the fact that women had direct access to land and, in this way, they could support themselves and their children and gain some extra cash through the sale of their surplus product. Thus, even after they became urbanized, women continued to cultivate any patch of land they could gain access to, in order to feed their families and maintain a certain degree of autonomy from the market.[18]

To what extent the village has been a source of power for female and male workers across the former colonial world can be measured by the radical attack that, since the early 1980s through the 1990s, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have waged against it under the guise of structural adjustment and "globalization."[19]

The World Bank has made the destruction of subsistence agriculture and the promotion of land commercialization the centerpiece of its

ubiquitous structural adjustment programs.[20] In the late 1980s and 1990s, not only has land been fenced off, but "cheap" (i.e., subsidized) imported food from Europe and North America has flooded the now liberalized economies of Africa and Asia (which are not allowed to subsidize their farmers), further displacing women farmers from the local markets. Meanwhile, large tracts of once communal land have been taken over by agribusiness companies and devoted to cultivation for export. Finally, war and famine have terrorized millions into flight from their homelands.

What has followed has been a major reproduction crisis of a type and proportions not seen even in the colonial period. Even in regions once famous for their agricultural productivity, like Southern Nigeria, food is now scarce or too expensive to be within reach of the average person who, in the wake of structural adjustment, has to simultaneously contend with price hikes, frozen wages, devalued currency, widespread unemployment and cuts in social services.[21]

Here is where the importance of women's struggles for land stands out. Women have been the main buffer for the world proletariat against starvation under the World Bank's neoliberal regime. They have been the main opponents of the neoliberal demand that "market prices" determine who should live and who should die, and they are the ones who have provided a practical model for the reproduction of life in a noncommercial way.

Struggles for Subsistence and against "Globalization" in Africa, Asia, and the Americas

Faced with a renewed drive toward land privatization, the extension of cash crops, and the rise in food prices in the age of globalization, women have resorted to many strategies pitting them against the most powerful institutions on the planet.

The primary strategy women have adopted to defend their communities from the impact of economic adjustment and dependence on the global market has been the expansion of subsistence farming also in the urban centers. Exemplary is the case of Guinea Bissau, where since the early 1980s, women have planted small gardens with vegetables, cassava, and fruit trees around most houses in the capital city of Bissau and other towns, in time of scarcity preferring to forfeit the earnings they might have made selling their produce in order to ensure that their families would not go without food.[22] Still with reference to Africa, Christa Wichterich notes that in the 1990s women subsistence farming and urban gardening ("cooking pot economics") was revived in many cities, the urban farmers being mostly women from the lower class:

> There were onions and papaya trees, instead of flower-borders, in front of the housing estates of underpaid civil servants in Dar-es-Salaam; chickens and banana plants in the backyards of Lusaka; vegetables on the wide central reservations of the arterial roads of Kampala, and especially of Kinshasa, where the food supply system had largely collapsed. . . . In [Kenyan] towns [too] . . . green roadside strips, front gardens and wasteland sites were immediately occupied with maize, plants, sukum wiki, the most popular type of cabbage.[23]

To expand food production, however, women have had to expand their access to land, which the international agencies' drives to create land markets have jeopardized. In order to have land to farm other women have preferred to remain in the rural area, while most men have migrated, with the result that there has been a "feminization of the villages," many now consisting of women farming alone or in women's coops."[24]

Regaining or expanding land for subsistence farming has been one of the main battles also for rural women in Bangladesh, leading to the formation of the Landless Women Association that has been carrying on land occupations since 1992. During this period, the Association has managed to settle fifty thousand families, often confronting landowners in pitched confrontations. According to Shamsun Nahar Khan Doli, a leader of the Association to whom I owe this information, many occupations are on "chars," low-lying islands formed by soil deposits in the middle of a river.[25] Such new lands should be allocated to landless farmers, according to Bangladeshi law, but because of the growing commercial value of land, big landowners have increasingly seized them; however women have organized to stop them, defending themselves with brooms, spears of bamboo, and even knives. They have also set up alarm systems, to alert other women when boats with the landowners or their goons approach, so they can push the attackers off or stop them from landing.

Similar land struggles are being fought in South America. In Paraguay, the Peasant Women's Commission (CMC) was formed in 1985 in alliance with the Paraguayan Peasant's Movement (MCP) to demand land distribution.[26] As Jo Fischer points out, the CMC was the first peasant women's movement that went to the streets in support of its demands, and incorporated in its program women's concerns, also condemning "their double oppression, as both peasants and as women."[27]

The turning point for the CMC came when the government granted large tracts of land to the peasant movement in the forests close to the Brazilian border. The women took these grants as an opportunity

to organize a model community, joining together to collectively farm their strips of land. As Geraldina, an early founder of CMC pointed out,

> We work all the time, more now than ever before, but we've also changed the way we work. We're experimenting with communal work to see if it gives us more time for other things. It also gives us a chance to share our experiences and worries. This is a very different way of living for us. Before, we didn't even know our neighbors.[28]

Women's land struggles have included the defense of communities threatened by commercial housing projects constructed in the name of "urban development." "Housing" has historically involved the loss of "land" for food production. An example of resistance to this trend is the struggle of women in the Kawaala neighborhood of Kampala (Uganda) where the World Bank, in conjunction with the Kampala City Council (KCC), in 1992–1993, sponsored a large housing project that would destroy much subsistence farmland around or near people's homes. Not surprisingly, it was women who most strenuously organized against it, through the formation of an Abataka (Residents) Committee, eventually forcing the Bank to withdraw from the project. According to one of the women leaders:

> While men were shying away, women were able to say anything in public meetings in front of government officials. Women were more vocal because they were directly affected. It is very hard for women to stand without any means of income . . . most of these women are people who basically support their children and without any income and food they cannot do it. . . . You come and take their peace and income and they are going to fight, not because they want to, but because they have been oppressed and suppressed.[29]

Aili Mari Tripp points out that the situation in the Kawaala neighborhood is far from unique.[30] Similar struggles have been reported from different parts of Africa and Asia, where peasant women's organizations have opposed the development of industrial zones threatening to displace them and their families and contaminate the environment.

Industrial or commercial housing development often clashes with women's subsistence farming, in a context in which more and more women even in urban centers are gardening (in Kampala women grow 45 percent of the food for their families). It is important to add that in defending land from the assault by commercial interests and affirming the principle that

"land and life are not for sale," women again, as in the past against colonial invasion, are defending their peoples' history and their culture. In the case of Kawaala, the majority of residents on the disputed land had been living there for generations and had buried there their kin—for many in Uganda the ultimate evidence of land ownership. Tripp's reflections on this land struggle are pertinent to my discussion so far:

> Stepping back from the events of the conflict, it becomes evident that the residents, especially the women involved, were trying to institutionalize some new norms for community mobilization, not just in Kawaala but more widely in providing a model for other community projects. They had a vision of a more collaborative effort that took the needs of women, widows, children, and the elderly as a starting point and recognized their dependence on the land for survival.[31]

Two more developments need to be mentioned in conjunction with women's defense of subsistence production. First, there has been the formation of regional systems of self-sufficiency aiming to guarantee "food security" and maintain an economy based on solidarity and the refusal of competition. The most impressive example in this respect comes from India where women formed the National Alliance for Women's Food Rights, a national movement made of thirty-five women's groups. One of the main efforts of the Alliance has been the campaign in defense of the mustard seed economy that is crucial for many rural and urban women in India. A subsistence crop, the seed has been threatened by the attempts of multinational corporations based in the United States to impose genetically engineered soybeans as a source of cooking oil.[32] In response, the Alliance has built "direct producer-consumer alliances" in order to "defend the livelihood of farmers and the diverse cultural choices of consumers," as stated by Vandana Shiva (2000), one of the leaders of the movement. In her words: "We protest soybean imports and call for a ban on the import of genetically engineered soybean products. As the women from the slums of Delhi sing, "*Sarson Bachao, Soya Bhagaa,*" or, "Save the Mustard, Dump the Soya."[33]

Second, across the world, women have been leading the struggle to prevent commercial logging and save or rebuild forests, which are the foundation of people's subsistence economies, providing nourishment as well as fuel, medicine, and communal relations. Forests, Vandana Shiva writes, echoing testimonies coming from every part of the planet, are "the highest expression of earth's fertility and productivity."[34] Thus, when

forests come under assault it is a death sentence for the tribal people who live in them, especially the women. Therefore, women do everything to stop the loggers. Shiva often cites, in this context, the Chikpo movement—a movement of women, in Garhwal, in the foothills of the Himalayas who, beginning in the early 1970s, started to embrace the trees destined to fall and put their bodies between them and the saws when the loggers come.[35] While women in Garhwal have mobilized to prevent forests from being cut down, in villages of Northern Thailand they have protested the Eucalyptus plantations forcibly planted on their expropriated farms by a Japanese paper-making company with the support of the Thai military government.[36] In Africa, an important initiative has been the "Green Belt Movement," which under the leadership of Wangari Maathai has been committed to planting a green belt around the major cities and, since 1977, has planted tens of millions of trees to prevent deforestation, soil loss, desertification, and fuel-wood scarcity.[37]

But the most striking struggle for the survival of the forests has taken place in the Niger Delta, where the mangrove tree swamps are being threatened by oil production. Opposition to it has mounted for twenty years, beginning in Ogharefe, in 1984, when several thousand women from the area laid siege to Pan Ocean's Production Station demanding compensation for the destruction of the water, trees, and land. To show their determination, the women also threatened to disrobe themselves should their demands be ignored—a threat they put in action when the company's director arrived, so that he found himself surrounded by thousands of naked women, a serious curse in the eyes of the Niger Delta communities, which convinced him at the time to accept the reparation claims.[38]

The struggle over land has also grown since the 1970s in the most unlikely place—New York City—in the form of an urban gardening movement. It began with the initiative of a women-led group called the "Green Guerrillas," who began cleaning up vacant lots in the Lower East Side. By the 1990s, eight hundred and fifty urban gardens had developed in the city and dozens of community coalitions had formed, such as the Greening of Harlem Coalition that was begun by a group of women who wanted "to reconnect with the earth and give children an alternative to the streets." Now it counts more than twenty-one organizations and thirty garden projects.[39]

It is important to note here that the gardens have been not only a source of vegetables and flowers, but have served to promote community-building and have been a stepping stone for other community struggles like squatting and homesteading. Because of this work, the gardens came under attack during Mayor Giuliani's regime, and for some years now one of the main challenges this movement has faced has been stopping the

bulldozers. One hundred gardens have been lost to "development" over the last decade, more than forty have been slated for bulldozing, and the prospects for the future seem gloomy.[40] Since his appointment, in fact, the current mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, like his predecessor, has declared war on these gardens.

The Importance of the Struggle

As we have seen, in cities across the world, at least a quarter of the inhabitants depend on food produced by women's subsistence labor. In Africa, for example, a quarter of the people living in towns say they could not survive without subsistence food production. This is confirmed by the UN Population Fund, which claims that "some two hundred million city dwellers are growing food, providing about one billion people with at least part of their food supply."[41] When we consider that the bulk of the food subsistence producers are women we can see why the men of Kedjom, Cameroon, would say, "Yes, women subsistence farmers do good for humanity." Thanks to them, the billions of people, rural and urban, who earn one or two dollars a day do not go under, even in time of economic crisis.

Women's subsistence production counters the trend by agribusiness to reduce cropland—one of the main causes of high food prices and starvation—while also ensuring some control over the quality of the food produced and protecting consumers against the genetic manipulation of crops and poisoning by pesticides. Further, women subsistence production represents a safe way of farming, a crucial consideration at a time when the effects of pesticides on agricultural crops are causing high rates of mortality and disease among peasants across the world, starting with women.[42] Thus, subsistence farming gives women an essential means of control over their health and the health and lives of their families.[43]

We can also see that subsistence production is contributing to a noncompetitive, solidarity-centered mode of life that is crucial for the building of a new society. It is the seed of what Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies call the "other" economy, which "puts life and everything necessary to produce and maintain life on this planet at the center of economic and social activity" against "the never-ending accumulation of dead money."[44]

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF THE COMMON IN AN ERA OF PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION (2010)

> Our perspective is that of the planet's commoners: human beings with bodies, needs, desires, whose most essential tradition is of cooperation in the making and maintenance of life; and yet have had to do so under conditions of suffering and separation from one another, from nature and from the common wealth we have created through generations.
> —The Emergency Exit Collective, "The Great Eight Masters and the Six Billion Commoners" (Bristol, Mayday 2008)

> The way in which women's subsistence work and the contribution of the commons to the concrete survival of local people are both made invisible through the idealizing of them are not only similar but have common roots. . . . In a way, women are treated like commons and commons are treated like women. —Maria Mies and Veronica Benholdt-Thomsen, "Defending, Reclaiming, Reinventing the Commons" (1999)

> Reproduction precedes social production. Touch the women, touch the rock. —Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (2008)

Introduction: Why Commons?

At least since the Zapatistas, on December 31, 1993, took over the zócalo of San Cristóbal to protest legislation dissolving the ejidal lands of Mexico, the concept of the "commons" has gained popularity among the radical Left, internationally and in the United States, appearing as a ground of convergence among anarchists, Marxists/socialists, ecologists, and eco-feminists.[1]

There are important reasons why this apparently archaic idea has come to the center of political discussion in contemporary social movements. Two in particular stand out. On the one side, there has been the demise of the statist model of revolution that for decades has sapped the efforts of radical movements to build an alternative to capitalism. On the other, the neoliberal attempt to subordinate every form of life and knowledge to the logic of the market has heightened our awareness of the danger of living in a world in which we no longer have access to seas, trees, animals, and our fellow beings except through the cash-nexus. The "new enclosures" have also made visible a world of communal properties and relations that many had believed to be extinct or had not valued until threatened with privatization.[2] The new enclosures ironically demonstrated that not only commons have not vanished, but new forms of social cooperation are constantly being produced, also in areas of life where none previously existed, as for example the Internet.

The idea of the common/s, in this context, has offered a logical and historical alternative to both State and Private Property, the State and the Market, enabling us to reject the fiction that they are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of our political possibilities. It has also served an ideological function, as a unifying concept prefiguring the cooperative society that the radical Left is striving to create. Nevertheless, ambiguities as well as significant differences exist in the interpretations of this concept, which we need to clarify, if we want the principle of the commons to translate into a coherent political project.[3]

What, for example, constitutes a common? Examples abound. We have land, water, air commons, digital commons, service commons; our acquired entitlements (e.g., social security pensions) are often described as commons, and so are languages, libraries, and the collective products of past cultures. But are all these "commons" on the same level from the viewpoint of devising an anticapitalist strategy? Are they all compatible? And how can we ensure that they do not project a unity that remains to be constructed?

With these questions in mind, in this essay, I look at the politics of the commons from a feminist perspective, where feminist refers to a standpoint shaped by the struggle against sexual discrimination and over reproductive work, which (quoting Linebaugh) is the rock upon which society is built, and by which every model of social organization must be tested. This intervention is necessary, in my view, to better define this politics, expand a debate that so far has remained male-dominated, and clarify under what conditions the principle of the common/s can become the foundation of an anticapitalist program. Two concerns make these tasks especially important.

Global Commons, World Bank Commons

First, since at least the early 1990s, the language of the commons has been appropriated by the World Bank and the United Nations, and put at

the service of privatization. Under the guise of protecting biodiversity and conserving "global commons," the Bank has turned rain forests into ecological reserves, has expelled the populations that for centuries had drawn their sustenance from them, while making them available to people who do not need them but can pay for them, for instance, through ecotourism.[4] On its side, the United Nations, in the name again of preserving the common heritage of mankind, has revised the international law governing access to the oceans, in ways enabling governments to consolidate the use of seawaters in fewer hands.[5]

The World Bank and the United Nations are not alone in their adaptation of the idea of the commons to market interests. Responding to different motivations, a revalorization of the commons has become trendy among mainstream economists and capitalist planners, witness the growing academic literature on the subject and its cognates: "social capital," "gift economies," "altruism." Witness also the official recognition of this trend through the conferral of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009 to the leading voice in this field, the political scientist Elinor Ostrom.[6]

Development planners and policy-makers have discovered that, under proper conditions, a collective management of natural resources can be more efficient and less conflictual than privatization, and commons can very well be made to produce for the market.[7] They have also recognized that, carried to the extreme, the commodification of social relations has self-defeating consequences. The extension of the commodity-form to every corner of the social factory, which neoliberalism has promoted, is an ideal limit for capitalist ideologues, but it is a project not only unrealizable but undesirable from the viewpoint of the long-term reproduction of the capitalist system. Capitalist accumulation is structurally dependent on the free appropriation of immense areas of labor and resources that must appear as externalities to the market, like the unpaid domestic work that women have provided, on which employers have relied for the reproduction of the workforce.

Not accidentally, then, long before the Wall Street "meltdown," a variety of economists and social theorists warned that the marketization of all spheres of life is detrimental to the market's well-functioning, for markets too—the argument goes—depend on the existence of nonmonetary relations like confidence, trust, and gift-giving.[8] In brief, capital is learning about the virtues of the "common good." In its July 31, 2008 issue, even the London *Economist*, the organ of capitalist free-market economics for more than one hundred and fifty years, cautiously joined the chorus. "The economics of the new commons," the journal wrote, "is still in its infancy. It is too soon to be confident about its hypotheses. But it

may yet prove a useful way of thinking about problems, such as managing the internet, intellectual property or international pollution, on which policymakers need all the help they can get." We must be very careful, then, not to craft the discourse on the commons in such a way as to allow a crisis-ridden capitalist class to revive itself, posturing, for instance, as the guardian of the planet.

What Commons?

A second concern is that, while international institutions have learned to make commons functional to the market, how commons can become the foundation of a noncapitalist economy is a question still unanswered. From Peter Linebaugh's work, especially *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (2008), we have learned that commons have been the thread that has connected the history of the class struggle into our time, and indeed the fight for the commons is all around us. Mainers are fighting to preserve their fisheries and waters, residents of the Appalachian regions are joining to save their mountains threatened by strip mining, open source, and free software movements are opposing the commodification of knowledge and opening new spaces for communications and cooperation. We also have the many invisible, commoning activities and communities that people are creating in North America, which Chris Carlsson has described in his *Nowtopia*.[9] As Carlsson shows, much creativity is invested in the production of "virtual commons" and forms of sociality that thrive under the radar of the money/market economy.

Most important has been the creation of urban gardens, which have spread, in the 1980s and 1990s, across the country, thanks mostly to the initiatives of immigrant communities from Africa, the Caribbean or the South of the United States. Their significance cannot be overestimated. Urban gardens have opened the way to a "rurbanization" process that is indispensable if we are to regain control over our food production, regenerate our environment and provide for our subsistence. The gardens are far more than a source of food security. They are centers of sociality, knowledge production, cultural and intergenerational exchange. As Margarita Fernandez writes of gardens in New York, urban gardens "strengthen community cohesion," as places where people come together not just to work the land, but to play cards, hold weddings, have baby showers or birthday parties.[10] Some have a partnership relation with local schools, whereby they give children after school environmental education. Not last, gardens are "a medium for the transport and encounter of diverse cultural practices," so that African vegetables and farming practices (e.g.) mix with those from the Caribbean.[11]

Still, the most significant feature of urban gardens is that they produce for neighborhood consumption, rather than for commercial purposes. This distinguishes them from other reproductive commons that either produce for the market, like the fisheries of the "Lobster Coast" of Maine, or are bought on the market, like the land-trusts that preserve the open spaces.[12] The problem, however, is that urban gardens have remained a spontaneous grassroots initiative, and there have been few attempts by movements in the United States to expand their presence, and to make access to land a key terrain of struggle. More generally, how the many proliferating commons, being defended, developed, fought for, can be brought together to form a cohesive whole providing a foundation for a new mode of production is a question the Left has not posed.

An exception is the theory proposed by Negri and Hardt in *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and more recently *Commonwealth* (2009), which argues that a society built on the principle of "the common" is already evolving from the informatization of production. According to this theory, as production becomes predominantly a production of knowledge organized through the Internet, a common space is formed which escapes the problem of defining rules of inclusion or exclusion, because access and use multiply the resources available on the net, rather than subtracting from them, thus signifying the possibility of a society built on abundance—the only remaining hurdle confronting the "multitude" being presumably how to prevent the capitalist "capture" of the wealth produced.

The appeal of this theory is that it does not separate the formation of "the common" from the organization of work and production as already constituted, but sees it immanent in it. Its limit is that it does not question the material basis of the digital technology the Internet relies upon, overlooking the fact that computers depend on economic activities—mining, microchip and rare earth production—that, as currently organized, are extremely destructive, socially and ecologically.[13] Moreover, with its emphasis on science, knowledge production and information, this theory skirts the question of the reproduction of everyday life. This, however, is true of the discourse on the commons as whole, which has generally focused on the formal preconditions for their existence but much less on the possibilities provided by existing commons, and their potential to create forms of reproduction enabling us to resist dependence on wage labor and subordination to capitalist relations.

Women and the Commons

It is in this context that a feminist perspective on the commons is important. It begins with the realization that, as the primary subjects of

reproductive work, historically and in our time, women have depended more than men on access to communal resources, and have been most committed to their defense. As I wrote in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), in the first phase of capitalist development, women were in the front of the struggle against land enclosures both in England and the "New World," and the staunchest defenders of the communal cultures that European colonization attempted to destroy. In Peru, when the Spanish conquistadores took control of their villages, women fled to the high mountains, where they recreated forms of collective life that have survived to this day. Not surprisingly, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the most violent attack on women in the history of the world: the persecution of women as witches. Today, in the face of a new process of Primitive Accumulation, women are the main social force standing in the way of a complete commercialization of nature. Women are the subsistence farmers of the world. In Africa, they produce 80 percent of the food people consume, despite the attempts made by the World Bank and other agencies to convince them to divert their activities to cash-cropping. Refusal to be without access to land has been so strong that, in the towns, many women have taken over plots in public lands, planted corn and cassava in vacant lots, in this process changing the urban landscape of African cities and breaking down the separation between town and country.[14] In India too, women have restored degraded forests, guarded trees, joined hands to chase away the loggers, and made blockades against mining operations and the construction of dams.[15]

The other side of women's struggle for direct access to means of reproduction has been the formation, across the Third World—from Cambodia to Senegal—of credit associations that function as money commons.[16] Differently named, "tontines" (in parts of Africa) are autonomous, self-managed, women-made banking systems, providing cash to individuals or groups that can have no access to banks, working purely on the basis of trust. In this, they are completely different from the microcredit systems promoted by the World Bank, which functions on the basis of shame, arriving to the extreme (e.g., in Niger) of posting in public places the pictures of the women who fail to repay the loans so that some have been driven to suicide.[17]

Women have also led the effort to collectivize reproductive labor both as a means to economize on the cost of reproduction, and protect each other from poverty, state violence and the violence of individual men. An outstanding example are the ola communes (common kitchens) that women in Chile and in Peru set up in the 1980s, when, due to stiff inflation, they could no longer afford to shop alone.[18] Like collective reforestation

and land reclamation, these practices are the expression of a world where communal bonds are still strong. It would be a mistake, however, to consider them as something prepolitical, "natural," a product of "tradition." In reality, as Leo Podlashuc notes in "Saving the Women Saving the Commons," these struggles shape a collective identity, constitute a counterpower in the home and the community, and open a process of self-valorization and self-determination from which we have much to learn.

The first lesson to be gained from these struggles is that the "commoning" of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created. It is also the first line of resistance to a life of enslavement, whether in armies, brothels or sweatshops. For us, in North America, an added lesson is that by pooling our resources, by reclaiming land and waters, and turning them into a common, we could begin to de-link our reproduction from the commodity flows that through the world market are responsible for the dispossession of so many people in other parts of the world. We could disentangle our livelihood, not only from the world market but from the war-machine and prison system on which the hegemony of the world market depends. Not last we could move beyond the abstract solidarity that often characterizes relations in the movement, which limits our commitment and capacity to endure, and the risks we are willing to take.

Undoubtedly, this is a formidable task that can only be accomplished through a long-term process of consciousness raising, cross-cultural exchange, and coalition building, with all the communities throughout the United States who are vitally interested in the reclamation of the land, starting with the First American Nations. Although this task may seem more difficult now than passing through the eye of a needle, it is also the only condition to broaden the space of our autonomy, cease feeding into the process of capital accumulation, and refuse to accept that our reproduction occurs at the expense of the world's other commoners and commons.

Feminist Reconstructions

What this task entails is powerfully expressed by Maria Mies when she points out that the production of commons requires first a profound transformation in our everyday life, in order to recombine what the social division of labor in capitalism has separated. For the distancing of production from reproduction and consumption leads us to ignore the conditions under which what we eat or wear, or work with, have been produced, their social and environmental cost, and the fate of the population on whom the waste we produce is unloaded.[19]

In other words, we need to overcome the state of constant denial and irresponsibility, concerning the consequences of our actions, resulting from the destructive ways in which the social division of labor is organized in capitalism; short of that, the production of our life inevitably becomes a production of death for others. As Mies points out, globalization has worsened this crisis, widening the distances between what is produced and what is consumed, thereby intensifying, despite the appearance of an increased global interconnectedness, our blindness to the blood in the food we eat, the petroleum we use, the clothes we wear, the computers with which we communicate.[20]

Overcoming this oblivion is where a feminist perspective teaches us to start in our reconstruction of the commons. No common is possible unless we refuse to base our life, our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them. Indeed if "commoning" has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject. This is how we must understand the slogan "no commons without community." But "community" not intended as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others, as with community formed on the basis of religion or ethnicity. Community as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and responsibility: to each other, the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.

Certainly, the achievement of such community, like the collectivizing our everyday work of reproduction, can only be a beginning. It is no substitute for broader antiprivatization campaigns and the reconstitution of our commonwealth. But it is an essential part of the process of our education for collective governance and the recognition of history as a collective project—the main casualty of the neoliberal era of capitalism.

On this account, we must include in our political agenda the communalization/collectivization of housework, reviving that rich feminist tradition that we have in the United States, that stretches from the utopian socialist experiments of the mid-nineteenth century to the attempts that the "materialist feminists" made, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, to reorganize and socialize domestic work and thereby the home, and the neighborhood, through collective housekeeping—efforts that continued until the 1920s, when the "Red Scare" put an end to them.[21] These practices, and the ability that past feminists have had to look at reproductive labor as an important sphere of human activity, not to be negated but to be revolutionized, must be revisited and revalorized.

One crucial reason for creating collective forms of living is that the reproduction of human beings is the most labor-intensive work on

earth, and to a large extent it is work that is irreducible to mechanization. We cannot mechanize childcare or the care of the ill, or the psychological work necessary to reintegrate our physical and emotional balance. Despite the efforts that futuristic industrialists are making, we cannot robotize "care" except at a terrible cost for the people involved. No one will accept "nursebots" as care givers, especially for children and the ill. Shared responsibility and cooperative work, not given at the cost of the health of the providers, are the only guarantees of proper care. For centuries the reproduction of human beings has been a collective process. It has been the work of extended families and communities, on which people could rely, especially in proletarian neighborhoods, even when they lived alone, so that old age was not accompanied by the desolate loneliness and dependence that so many of our elderly experience. It is only with the advent of capitalism that reproduction has been completely privatized, a process that is now carried to a degree that it destroys our lives. This we need to change if we are put an end to the steady devaluation and fragmentation of our lives.

The times are propitious for such a start. As the capitalist crisis is destroying the basic element of reproduction for millions of people across the world, including the United States, the reconstruction of our everyday life is a possibility and a necessity. Like strikes, social/economic crises break the discipline of the wage-work, forcing upon us new forms of sociality. This is what occurred during the Great Depression, which produced a movement of hobo-men who turned the freight trains into their commons seeking freedom in mobility and nomadism.[22] At the intersections of railroad lines, they organized "hobo jungles," prefigurations, with their self-governance rules and solidarity, of the communist world in which many of their residents believed.[23] However, but for a few "box-car Berthas," this was predominantly a masculine world, a fraternity of men, and in the long term it could not be sustained.[24] Once the economic crisis and the war came to an end, the hobo men were domesticated by the two grand engines of labor-power fixation: the family and the house. Mindful of the threat of working class recomposition in the Depression, American capital excelled in its application of the principle that has characterized the organization of economic life: cooperation at the point of production, separation and atomization at the point of reproduction. The atomized, serialized family-house Levittown provided, compounded by its umbilical appendix, the car, not only sedentarized the worker, but put an end to the type of autonomous workers' commons the hobo jungles had represented.[25] Today, as millions of Americans' houses and cars have been repossessed, as foreclosures, evictions, the massive loss of employment

are again breaking down the pillars of the capitalist discipline of work, new common grounds are again taking shape, like the tent cities that are sprawling from coast to coast. This time, however, it is women who must build the new commons, so that they do not remain transient spaces or temporary autonomous zones, but become the foundation of new forms of social reproduction.

If the house is the *oikos* on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the house-workers and house-prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a center of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation, providing safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions, and above all providing the foundation for collective forms of reproduction. As already suggested, we can draw inspiration for this project from the programs of the nineteenth century "materialist feminists" who, convinced that the home was a important "spatial component of the oppression of women" organized communal kitchens, cooperative households, calling for workers' control of reproduction.[26] These objectives are crucial at present: breaking down the isolation of life in a private home is not only a precondition for meeting our most basic needs and increasing our power with regard to employers and the state. As Massimo de Angelis has reminded us, it is also a protection from ecological disaster. For there can be no doubt about the destructive consequences of the "uneconomic" multiplication of reproductive assets and self-enclosed dwellings, dissipating, in the winter, warmth into the atmosphere, exposing us to unmitigated heat in the summer, which we now call our homes. Most important, we cannot build an alternative society and a strong self-reproducing movement unless we redefine in more cooperative ways our reproduction and put an end to the separation between the personal and the political, political activism and the reproduction of everyday life.

It remains to clarify that assigning women this task of commoning/collectivizing reproduction is not to concede to a naturalistic conception of "femininity." Understandably, many feminists would view this possibility as "a fate worse than death." It is deeply sculpted in our collective consciousness that women have been designated as men's common, a natural source of wealth and services to be as freely appropriated by them as the capitalists have appropriated the wealth of nature. But, quoting Dolores Hayden, the reorganization of reproductive work, and therefore the reorganization of the structure of housing and public space is not a question of identity; it is a labor question and, we can add, a power and safety question.[27] I am reminded here of the experience of the

women members of the Landless People's Movement of Brazil (MST), who when their communities won the right to maintain the land which they had occupied, insisted that the new houses should be build to form one compound, so they that they could continue to share their housework, wash together, cook together, taking turns with men, as they had done in the course of the struggle, and be ready to run to give each other support if abused by men. Arguing that women should take the lead in the collectivization of reproductive work and housing is not to naturalize housework as a female vocation. It is refusing to obliterate the collective experiences, knowledge, and struggles that women have accumulated concerning reproductive work, whose history has been an essential part of our resistance to capitalism. Reconnecting with this history is today for women and men a crucial step, both for undoing the gendered architecture of our lives and reconstructing our homes and lives as commons.

NOTES

Preface

1 bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).
2 Ibid.
3 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1990), 181–82. On pages 180–81, Haraway writes, "Feminists have recently claimed that women are given to dailiness, that women more than men somehow sustain life, and so have a privileged epistemological position potentially. There is a compelling aspect to this claim, one that makes visible unvalued female activity and names it as the ground of life. But the ground of life?"

Introduction

1 A first step in the writing of this history is Leopoldina Fortunati's "La famiglia: verso la ricostruzione" which looks at the major transformations the war produced in the organization of the Italian and European family, starting with the growth of women's autonomy and rejection of family discipline and dependence on men." Describing World War II as a massive attack on the working class and a major destruction of labor-power, Fortunati writes that "it tore the fabric of the reproduction of the working class undermining in an irreparable way whatever benefit women found in sacrificing for the interest of their families. In this sense, the pre-war type of family remained buried under the rubble." In Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Brutto Ciao* (Rome: Edizioni delle Donne, 1976), 82.
2 On this topic see Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
3 For a discussion of Italian Operaismo and the autonomist movement as its filiation, see Harry Cleaver's Introduction to *Reading Capital Politically* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2000).
4 See Karl Marx, "Wages of Labour," in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.
5 See Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 1997); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986).
6 *Midnight Notes* 10 (Fall 1990).
7 See "The New Enclosures," *Midnight Notes* 10 (Fall 1990); George Caffentzis, "The Work Energy Crisis," in *Midnight Notes* 3 (1981); Midnight Notes Collective ed., *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War. 1973–1992* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992).
8 "Mariarosa Dalla Costa," in *Gli Operaisti*, eds. Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, Gigi Roggero (Rome: Derive/Approdi, 2005), 121–22.
9 On this topic, see Team Colors, "The Importance of Support Building Foundations: Creating Community Sustaining Movements," *Rolling Thunder* 6 (Fall 2008): 29–39.