

# Destabilising the Rhetoric of Production

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## ABSTRACT

In the halls of power, the social and ecological crises of globalisation are mystified by neo-liberal rhetoric; displacing the language of productivist economics is therefore an eco-political act. One strategy for challenging this hegemony exists in opening up a life-affirming discourse around reproductive values—a move that destabilises both neo-liberal and socialist productivism, and destabilises the conventional divide between North and South. To articulate this position, I introduce the notion of “meta-industrial labour” for describing trans-cultural, politically silenced groupings whose work negotiates the socially constructed margins of “humanity” and “nature.” In contesting globalisation, and seeking alternatives to it, we can be guided by the model of meta-industrial labour, which “embodies” grassroots democracy and local sustainability. To our search for healing, this usually unspoken labouring class brings practical “holding” skills, grounded knowledges, and a precautionary ethic.

## KEY WORDS

globalisation  
neo-liberal policies  
industrialisation  
natural capital  
ecosystemic integrity

economic colonisation  
biopiracy  
environmental philosophers  
ecofeminist  
monoculture



### The Rhetoric of Neo-liberalism

At the close of the 20th century, an aggressively global economic system is deepening tensions between class, race, gender, and species interests.<sup>1</sup> A mere one-fifth of the world's population takes four-fifths of all resources for itself. And these are managed so crudely that renewable "natural capital," as it is called—forests, air, water, and soils—is made non-renewable. For "to live sustainably, we must ensure that we use the essential products and processes of nature no more quickly than they can be renewed, and that we discharge wastes no more quickly than they can be absorbed."<sup>2</sup> The impacts of industrialisation on this ecological "bottom line" are now exacerbated by free trade policies and a frenzy of production for competitive export markets. Again borrowing the ubiquitous jargon of economics, the "ecological deficit" grows and the future is "mortgaged." The search for ever more high-tech fixes only multiplies the losses and postpones the day of reckoning.

It is often noted that if the "developed world's" lifestyle were shared by everyone, it would take three planets to meet that consumption. Yet curiously, many environmental philosophers and Greens still work within the assumptions of this irrational global system, configuring technical arguments about this or that small amendment to it. More "efficient" economic growth and development are claimed to be pre-conditions of justice and sustainability. But these judgements reflect an inward looking narcissism by the North. When the word "we" is spoken, for example, it does not include views from the other four-fifths of humanity, let alone species interests. The restricted productivist vision of neo-liberal and even socialists, leads them to believe that all peoples want to live as the North does, and that the affluent must help achieve

this. Certainly, it is said, the privileged have no right to deny others a lifestyle that they themselves enjoy.

This surprisingly common position among environmentalists carries a class, race, gender, and species bias and is a very undemocratic stance. To take the needs of other species first, it is a fact that each day whole species lines become extinct under the pressure of consumerist resourcing. Given what is known now about the thermodynamic dissipation of “natural capital” under industrial production, proposals for more economic growth in order to “fund” good environmental management are simply self contradictory. If a global free trade regime means that the ecological deficit is increasing and the future is being mortgaged, then the ecosystemic integrity needed for animals and plants to survive is simply incompatible with continued pursuit of neo-liberal policies.

In terms of class interests, the resource extraction and manufacture necessary to meet human needs through industrial production actually generate social inequalities by requiring armies of labour, commanded by management, itself responsible to a corporate hierarchy. But beyond this paid labour force exists another class, rarely mentioned. Salaried workers are themselves usually maintained by home workers in the North and women food farmers in the South. This is where gender interests come in. UNDP and ILO publications consistently report that women—half the global population—put in two-thirds of all work for less than one-twentieth of all wages paid. It is therefore incoherent to suggest that equality can be achieved in a predatory system such as this. Squeezing more productivity out of the global economy, in order to allow a trickle-down of benefits to those at the bottom, means that the recipients will have to work harder for less! Besides, recent workplace rationalisations indicate that neo-liberal fine tuning actually distributes income upwards in the class structure. This tacit incentive system, in turn, underwrites the loyalty of governments to the corporate movers of globalisation.

Class and gender structures are interconnected with race and ethnicity in complex ways. Economic colonisation by the North, intensified now by free trade and technology transfer, has always depended on

the creation of a new class structure in the subject country. The foreign power cultivates a new ruling class through business and educational rewards, and these local elites are then relied upon to shift the resources of their community toward the imported lifestyle they share with their colonisers. The establishment of free-trade zones and assisted biopiracy are cases in point. Meanwhile, the resultant displacement of workers from the South, conveniently provides cheap migrant labour in the North, as people leave their homes desperately in search of new means of subsistence. When environmental philosophers from the North argue that people of the South want what they themselves have, they overlook the manifold sociology of colonisation, including benefits which they themselves derive from it. They also essentialise the South as one voice, falsely assuming it to be “naturally poor.”

Colonisation sets up class conflicts, gender strife, and ethnic tensions, between those who succumb to external pressures and those who want to protect their traditions and see cultural diversity flourish. As Indian ecofeminist and former physicist Vandana Shiva notes, under neo-liberalism, governments re-direct subsidies from the poor to transnational corporations and diversity is replaced by the global junk food monoculture. The majority perspective in the South is quite distinct from that of its manipulated ruling class:

perceived poverty may not be real material poverty: subsistence economies which satisfy basic needs through self provisioning are not poor in the sense of being deprived . . . millets are nutritionally far superior to processed foods, houses built with local materials are . . . better adapted to the local climate.<sup>3</sup>

In considering notions of poverty taken for granted by unreflective consumers in the North, it is also worth revisiting sociologist Serge Latouche’s comment on globalisation:

If we were to pursue a true and genuine internationalism, or universalism, the proper approach would be to invite “ex-

perts” from the last remaining “primitive” regions of the world to draw up a list of the “lacks” from which we, the people of the developed countries, suffer: loneliness, depression, stress, neuroses, insecurity, violence, crime rates, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Productivist development actually pulverises communities as much as it decimates ecosystems. Under the dominant neo-liberal ideology, the fracturing of life on earth is expressed politically as many competing voices—ecological, feminist, socialist, indigenous. But the much celebrated pluralism of the metropolitan democracies, is in practice, a series of disheartening tradeoffs, that pit one movement grouping against the other—wedge politics. So far, no unifying political theory has presented class, race, gender, and species domination as inherently joined. But ecofeminism comes very close to this, offering a conceptual frame that addresses these apparently single issue concerns simultaneously. For over two decades, ecofeminist ideas have been emerging from women activists scattered in communities across several continents. Ecofeminism is now both a grassroots social change movement and a form of discourse analysis. It rests on the insight that the current global crisis is an outcome of unreflected eurocentric capitalist patriarchal behaviours and values. Thus, by an ecofeminist standpoint—equality, cultural diversity, and sustainability become interlocking objectives.

In the South, ecofeminist leaders may be peasant or indigenous women in the North, they may be housewives. The people who theorise ecofeminism draw on a variety of conceptual frames but the present argument emerges from a gendered dialogue with Marxist productivism. In my 1997 book *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*, I introduce the term “meta-industrial” to designate a hitherto unrecognised and unvalued social class, whose labours with “nature” position them at the margins of the tele-pharmo-nuclear complex. Strictly speaking, meta-industrial groupings such as wives and unpaid care givers, subsistence farmers and indigenous peoples, are both inside and out of the global economic system. They are in, because they are

essential “resources” but as political “subjects” they are largely outside. At an existential level, this structural contradiction energises critical insight and political motivation in these workers.<sup>5</sup> The word “meta-industrial” thus carries both positive (immanent) and normative (transcendent) meanings.

In philosophical terms, this “embodied materialism” implies an ontology of internal relations, a dialectical epistemology, a precautionary ethic, and a bioregional politics. A priori to it, is an assumption that the industrialised form of provisioning is already empirically demonstrated to be incompatible with social equality, cultural diversity, and ecological sustainability.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the search for an alternative way of satisfying daily needs calls for nothing less than a fresh epistemological orientation—at least in the North, which civilisation is responsible for the global crisis. The argument to be made here suggests that in the South, at least in areas that are relatively uncolonised, other more life-affirming cognitive styles are already practised and that many environmental philosophers might usefully learn from these.

The ecological crisis is at root a social one. Eurocentric philosophy, science and economics, evolved by elective affinity with urban industrialisation and the language of each continues to objectify nature as inert. This reductive anthropocentrism commemorates life as intention and domination above all else.<sup>7</sup> Optics guided men in focusing on discrete objects; the art of aiming the can(n)on in war; perspectival drawing; and causal argument; each would project mastery by linear technique. Thinking by means of sharply bounded identities arranged in an either/or grid became essential to defining humanity over and above the nature that it abusively exploits. Similarly, the rhetorical device of dualism was essential to social control by race and gender demarcations.

This instrumental positivism which typifies knowledge disciplines of the North, is hopelessly inadequate when it comes to sound environmental practice-interventions in complex webs of energy exchange, where each part resonates information from the whole. On the other hand, in everyday life, ordinary humans rarely pursue a single trajectory, but create order out of chaos by calling diverse sets of inter-

nal relations into focus. Women do this as they mediate conflicts in family life. Peasants catalyse biological transfers between hens, cows, and orchard plots. People who work with all their senses together, come to a kinaesthetic awareness of the multiple timings embedded in what is handled. As agents of complexity, they synchronise their labour with the rhythms of organic growth.

### On Meta-Industrial Knowledges

While sensitive to the contributions of poststructuralist and subaltern studies scholars, the present approach to language is guided by Marx's profound understanding of the dialectic between practical action in the world labour, and the corresponding form that thought and language takes.<sup>8</sup> However, Marx's model was biased toward industrial labour and the production of things, "men's factory work" as distinct from women's and peasant's reproductive activities. So, an ecofeminist approach must fill out the gaps in the master's historical materialism: his philosophic silence on "women" and on "nature," marginalised subjects in an otherwise radical analysis. Ecofeminist politics can re-embodiment materialism and in doing this, the notion of reproductive labour becomes central. Reproduction means to be engaged in nurturing living processes by enhancing our human interchange with nature. Such labours give rise to kinds of knowing that defy the eurocentric definition of "humanity" as distinct from "nature." Socially reproductive domestic work for example, is a process by which women have traditionally mediated nature for men as they cook and clean, tend young, old, and sexual bodies. But sustaining reproductive labour is not necessarily gendered.

Subsistence farming and hunter-gathering by men also mediates humanity and nature without turning it into dead matter as industrial workers have been forced to do. Obviously, women and men caught up in urban consumer societies have less direct give and take with so-called external nature than cottage-dwelling folk once did. But in the international division of labour, indigenous peoples and Third World farmers are still bound up in care for earthly cycles, albeit increasingly compromised by technology transfer. In environmental terms, subsis-

tence agriculture is low in energy input and pollution output, and it preserves biodiversity as it goes. Moreover, since four-fifths of the world's food is provided by this meta-industrial class in the South, their labour should be of great significance in the global economy. Why is this not the case?

In conventional political economy, where production of objects for exchange is prioritised, the reproduction of daily needs and the reproduction of future generations remains invisible. It is reduced to a taken for granted background "condition of production." Even so, the socially reproductive labours of mothers, wives, housekeepers, or slaves, continue to be an essential backup to industry and business. At further remove in the global economic gestalt, are colonised others, whose labours and lands generate the resource surplus from which First World citizens (like ourselves) draw leisured hours for speculation and conferencing. Whether domestic care givers or peasant farmers, these meta-industrial workers have hands-on knowledge of sustaining labours in a remarkable metabolism with nature. Additionally, if democracy still means anything at all, this sociologically nameless reproductive class constitutes a statistical majority globally. So in the search for an ethical discourse that is at once just and practical, it makes sense to hear its voice.

With Green politics and disciplines like environmental ethics succumbing to the abstracted futility of neo-liberalism, an epistemology based on "working in/with nature" makes good sense. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the word "indigenous" means: native, belonging to the soil. So women's various reproductive labours almost universally mediate nature for men—she tends the herb garden, shakes out the mat where he rests his feet. This nature-woman-labour nexus generates hands-on knowledges that are externalised and devalued by urban industrial productivist economics—even in an era of biopiracy, when the results of such patient labour are often appropriated and patented by corporations in the North.

Among housewives, and increasingly househusbands, the nexus of reproductive activities may include growing food, historically assigned domestic chores, birthing and suckling labours, creating and



implanting meanings in the next generation. Similarly, peasants and indigenous men and women are organically and discursively implicated in the energy exchanges of their habitat, and like domestic workers, they develop practical expertise attuned to that materiality. In the labour transaction between humanity and nature (so-called), good farmers foster the earth to metabolise these connections; women give up their bodies as alchemists to make life. This is why I argue in *Ecofeminism as Politics* that in the North, it is usually grassroots housewives, as opposed to so-called emancipated feminists, who are the strongest fighters for ecology. Likewise, in the Third World, it is subsistence farmers and indigenous hunter-gatherers who come to environmental politics with a grounded clarity and conviction from their communities.<sup>9</sup>

Workers skilled in sustaining care, have a language and moral sensibility finely honed by experiences of exploitation and suffering in a world economy designed primarily to benefit metropolitan middle class men. Epistemologically speaking, the enduring time frame of meta-industrial workers is simply not compatible with the truncated horizon of a profit-driven market. Nor do they find the reductive and controlling practices of eurocentric science appropriate to the maintenance of living things. It is plain that the idealised separations of subject and object, fact and value, have a common history with the rise of liberal individualism and positivist law. But in contrast to the self-interested maximisations known these days as “best practice,” sustaining labours involve following through long-term goals in complex socially and ecologically interrelated systems. In contrast to planning with crude statistical indicators, the indigenous labour process in the South and gendered labour processes in the North, know their material intimately.

A finely reasoned account of vernacular labours immersed in details of the physical world can be found in several ecofeminist texts. Here I refer to writing by Vandana Shiva, German ecology activist Ulla Terlinden, and American philosopher Sara Ruddick. As the latter reminds us, maintaining a household requires harmonising a complex of subsystems, as well as considerable decision making and diplomatic

skills. Note too, that to re-appraise the labour of social reproduction is not to argue from victim hood, that oppressed women have a monopoly on good behaviour; nor to fall back into unreconstructed masculinist readings of some innate essential naturalness or pro-family assertions about moral superiority of the female sex. This ecofeminist analysis uses a materialist analysis based on forms of embodied labour.

In this sense, Shiva's account of Indian forest dwellers is a paradigmatic statement of material agency in complexity:

It is in managing the integrity of ecological cycles in forestry and agriculture that women's productivity has been most developed and evolved. Women transfer fertility from the forests to the field and to animals. They transfer animal waste as fertiliser for crops and crop by-products to animals as fodder. This partnership between women's work and nature's work ensures the sustainability of sustenance.<sup>10</sup>

In a parallel vein, Terlinden describes the implicit system's epistemology of domestic workers in the North:

Housework requires of women [or men] a broad range of knowledge and ability. The nature of the work itself determines its organisation. The work at hand must be dealt with *in its entirety* . . . The worker must possess a high degree of personal synthesis, initiative, intuition and flexibility.<sup>11</sup>

Contrast this total engagement with the fragmented industrial division of labour and the numb inconsequential political voice that it gives rise to.

While exploring parental skills, Ruddick introduces a concept of "holding" labour which embodies knowledges that are quintessential to good ecological reasoning:

To hold means to minimize risk and to reconcile differences rather than to sharply accentuate them. Holding is a way of

seeing with an eye toward maintaining the minimal harmony, material resources, and skills necessary for sustaining a child in safety. It is the attitude elicited by world protection, world-preservation, world repair. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, at the same time that it minimises risk, holding is the ultimate expression of adaptability. As opposed to the physicist's separation of space-time, interconnectedness is commonsense in the matter/reality. With ecofeminism, this precautionary principle comes to be applied beyond home and neighbourhood to moral action in society at large.

### An Embodied Discourse

Holding living webs together is equally apparent among indigenous peoples in their reproductive labours to ward off environmental entropy. Australian aboriginal workers traditionally balance and integrate natural flows as they move through the country.<sup>13</sup> Hunter-gathering peoples do not package land into legal titles for fear of losing it. They make their sustainable walk in the knowledge that each land will replenish and provide for them again when they return. Self-managed aboriginal provisioning is not only ecologically benign, it creatively meets many social needs at once—subsistence, learning, participation, innovation, ritual, identity and belonging, freedom, partnership with nature. Indigenous peoples are known to achieve their high quality of life with only three hours' work a day. On the other hand, the engineered satisfiers of modern productivist societies like bureaucracies or cars, cost great effort and frequently end up sabotaging the very convenience they were designed for.<sup>14</sup>

The fragmenting and dissociated discourse of neo-liberalism cannot embrace humanity and nature as a single thermodynamic web. By contrast, meta-industrial labour is embedded in a matrix of social relations, and sustained by subsistence activities embedded in cycles of biological time. In the care-giving work that Ruddick names mothering practice, a woman, or man, has no choice but deal with material before her. Unlike the economist, she cannot invent categories to deny what is

natural. What characterises her understanding is a dialectic of reciprocity with what her environment provides. Marxist feminist Nancy Hartsock has noted how this gentle labour by mediation distinguishes life affirmative work from proletarian labour, which under the North's free market growth ethic must break nature's back at the master's command. Historian of science Evelyn Fox Keller's notion of non-gendered research echoes the theme of subject-object collaboration. Here, nature is understood as a subject with a heart of its own, and one that pulses through our own body cells.<sup>15</sup>

Some critics have charged that such an ethic of care is undemocratic because it privileges qualities of a particular group. But the learned skills of holding labours are open to anyone who chooses to work at the socially constructed margin where culture meets nature. In fact, a respect for the enduring time frames of reproductive labour is profoundly democratic. It displaces all existing political stratifications, including the split between men's and women's traditional labour roles, as much as it destabilises the speciesist split between humanity and "other nature." In making a case for an embodied ecological discourse grounded in meta-industrial nurture, I also emphasise that while we are all environmentally determined to a degree, we also daily remake the conditions of our existence. This ecofeminist argument is neither essentialist, nor assuming any fixed end-state for human society. The dialectical notion of praxis implies a continuous historically mediated physical conversation between our bodies and their milieu.

Living things are joined across time as well as space, an indwelling structure invisible to positivist science and economics which prioritise sight over all other senses and counting over all other cognitive capacities. Seemingly oblivious to the pulse of life, eurocentric reason, words and instruments cut across nature's intricate score. Consider, agroforestry, mining, nuclear weapons, road transport, genetic engineering, where the plan is management, but complex metabolic rhythms are disrupted and degradation results. Under capitalist patriarchal industrial production, dis/located knowledges, and abstract terminologies called expertise, generate merely an illusion of human choice and control. Meantime, the North's myth of management is protected

by a professional elite's labelling of unanticipated consequences as "accidents."

Conceptualising the ecosystem as a web of internal relations calls for a radical non-identitarian logic where process replaces fixed categories. Everything is both this/and that. But how do we talk about this dialectic in everyday life? Typically, in caring for sick infants and aging parents, women workers become highly skilled in coping with linguistic non-identity, permeability and contamination. Human bodies, being ecologies, ooze, wither, and snap, but sustaining labours hold these moments of transformation in the bedroom or in the field. Since the advent of industrialisation, metropolitan men have been taught to be contemptuous of bodily flows, waste, and soil. Eurocentric languages and institutions offer an armoury of externalising, idealising gestures to bolster masculine separateness from matter. But what our brothers can end up with is desensitisation, a false sense of individualism, crippling loneliness, and destructive compensatory drives.

Different ways of living and working yield different psychologies. Thus, holding labours open people to an embodied self-consciousness quite at odds with the cogito of the masculine unitary subject. Women, says ecofeminist methodologist Maria Mies, are inclined to work out their ethical responsibilities integrating thought and feeling in relational contexts.<sup>16</sup> This meta-industrial sensibility calls us away from strategic calculation of optimisations and abstract formulae like rights. Holding as epistemology and ethic rests neither on instrumental control of others, nor suddenly "waking up" deep ecological style to some ephemeral cosmic fusion. An embodied discourse rests on practical deferral to the matter at hand and as such it is intrinsically precautionary. Meta-industrial labour exemplifies a strong and flexible de-centred subjectivity, implicated in many layers of time at once: a relational self, grounded in place.

As suggested above, an embodied materialism implies an ontology of internal relations, a dialectical epistemology, a precautionary ethic, and a bioregional politics. It celebrates the shared qualities of engagement that an unnamed class—housewives, subsistence farmers, and forest dwellers, bring to their provisioning in partnership with na-

ture. In contrast to the profoundly alienated labour of conventional political economy, these workers carry an alternative way of knowing and doing. In fact, it is this experience outside of the dominant productivist time-frame, that provides the possibility of a grounded political vision and solidarity between North and South. These insights and skills are sorely needed for building an earth democracy beyond the divisive single-issue politics—ecological, postcolonial, feminist—that neo-liberal pluralism promotes.

This transvaluation of reproductive labour coincides with the respect that development critic Wolfgang Sachs accords to “societies which live graciously within their means, and for social changes which take their inspiration from indigenous ideas of the good and proper life.”<sup>17</sup> But more, it supports the crucial insight that in the face of global colonisation by a productivist monoculture, the protection of biodiversity will depend on the protection of cultural diversity. This bare-foot deconstructionism does not mean walking backwards in history as neo-liberals, mainstream feminists, and high-tech fundamentalists, may claim. In fact, their very notion of linear progress is itself part of the problem. Rather, this ecofeminist destabilisation means questioning old industrial habits of thought and being more fully sensitive to where we tread.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Ecofeminist Reasoning: Toward Sustainability with Equity” delivered at the Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice Conference, Mansfield College, Oxford, 29 June 1999. The former will appear as “The Meta-Industrial Class and Why We Need It”, *Democracy and Nature*, 2000, Vol. 6.

<sup>2</sup> David Orton, “Commentary on the Ecological Footprint”, *Ecopolitics Digest* 345 (ecopolitics@efn.org), 1 August 1999. Orton is citing Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1996) 7.

<sup>3</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Develop-*

ment (London: Zed, 1989) 10.

<sup>4</sup> Serge Latouche, *In the Wake of the Affluent Society*, trans. M. O'Connor and R. Arnoux (London: Zed, 1993) 201.

<sup>5</sup> This micro-political or psychological dimension is argued more fully in chapter 11 of Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the postmodern* (London: Zed, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Ted Trainer, *Abandon Affluence*: (London: Zed, 1985). See also Orton, Wackernagel and Rees, Guha and Martinez-Alier.

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, the problem is "androcentrism." See Ariel Salleh, "Deeper Than Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 339-45.

<sup>8</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism* (London: Earthscan, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Shiva (1989) 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ulla Terlinden, "Women in the Ecology Movement", in E. Altbach et al (eds.), *German Feminism* (Albany: SUNY, 1984) 320.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996) 68.

<sup>14</sup> Manfred Max-Neef, et al. *Human Scale Development* (New York: Apex, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power* (Boston: North Eastern UP, 1985); Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, *Global Ecology* (London: Zed, 1994) 4.

