

Patriarchy and Progress

A Critique of Technological Domination

Ariel Salleh
Maria Mies

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The eco-feminism of Maria Mies stands at the crossroads of feminist, ecological and colonial liberation movements. Mies attempts to bring Marxian theory face to face with the newly emerging political crises of the late 20th century. This has involved further investigation of Marx's texts in the light of modern anthropology and what she calls "object-relations." But Mies is as much an activist as academic sociologist. Her concerns range from prescriptive essays on methodology in social science and empirical studies of exploitation among Indian women lacemakers, to organized campaigns against pornography and the reproductive-technology industry in West Germany.

Her work includes: *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986); "Sexist and Racist Implications of the New Reproductive Technology," *Alternatives*, XII (1987) 323–342; *Women, the Last Colony* has also recently been released by Zed Publications. Australian eco-feminist Ariel Salleh spoke with Mies in Cologne, Germany in September 1987 and this interview was subsequently revised by correspondence.

It has been slightly abridged by the *Fifth Estate*.

Ariel Salleh: Plainly, feminism is in crisis: Third World workers are divided from middle-class Western housewives, and both of these, from the feminist movement per se. The feminists, in turn, are split between the socialists and those who would organize autonomously. But your analysis in *Patriarchy and Accumulation* gives a new unity and coherence to women's struggles world-wide. What experiences in your own life brought you to this insight? Or was it already deducible from your reading of Marxism?

Maria Mies: Well, I don't think that feminism itself is in crisis. The divisions you mention are objectively part and parcel of the capitalist patriarchal "divide and rule" strategy. Under capitalism, there emerge not only a sexual division of labor, but also a particular social division between private and public and an international division of labor. All these divisions are hierarchically structured and connected, although they appear as autonomous entities. What binds them together is a dependency relationship based on violence, commodity production and money. The dependent sector in each of these divisions I call "colonies."

I did not gain these insights by reading Marxism. First came my experience in India, where I worked and lived for six years; second, was my involvement in the German women's movement since 1968. While trying to find a satisfactory explanation for the ongoing exploitation of women here, and the colonies "down there," I began to read Marx. But, as argued in my book *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, Marxism did not offer an explanation. The central constitutive relationship studied by Marx and Engels was wage labor and capital, and this excludes all non-wage labor relations. The latter are shoved into the realm of "nature" or called "pre-capitalist"; it amounts to the same. This is particularly true for the life-giving and life-sustaining work of women.

Ariel: One result of this, which you take up in the book, is the fact that structuralist Marxists shout—"the woman question" into the realm of "ideology"; the net result being that they are as politically ineffectual as they claim middle-class "cultural" feminists to be! Is this problem connected with what you describe as the "biologically loaded" concept of labor in Marx? What do you mean when you say this?

Maria Mies: The Marxist concept of labor was certainly not intended to be biologically loaded. Following Adam Smith, Marx stresses that the concept of "productive labor" under capitalism no longer simply means work for the satisfaction of human needs, but rather surplus producing labor. This concept comes to be the dominant one and all other forms of labor are left outside the realm of capital accumulation.

By calling wage labor "productive" and all other types of non-wage labor "non-productive" or natural, Marx contributed to what I see as the "naturalization" of women's work. Women's labor henceforth disappears from the social or human sphere and becomes invisible, locked up in the family, the "realm of nature" or even the "realm of death" as Hegel put it.

The problem with this Marxian concept of labor is not only its dualistic division between "nature" and "society," but the dominance relation existing between these two poles—society dominates nature, culture dominates nature, man dominates woman, etc. Woman now appears as a biological category as a result of 18th and 19th century discourse. Marx and Engels did not break entirely with this discourse. In fact, they expected the reconciliation of Man with Nature to arrive from a further extension of men's domination over it through their development of technology and science as productive forces.

Ariel: How does all this relate to your argument about differences between men's and women's object-relation to nature; your observation that men and women are productive in different ways?

Maria Mies: This argument is often misinterpreted as being biologicistic, because it starts with the recognition that the human being appears in two sexes and that men and women interact with nature in bodies which are, at least partly, qualitatively different. Biological difference, however, is not the only given. Maleness and femaleness are differently defined in each historical epoch, differently interpreted and valued, according to the dominant mode of production. In matrifocal societies, femaleness was interpreted as the paradigm of all productivity and creativity. Capitalist patriarchal society defines femaleness as devoid of productivity, activity, subjectivity, humanity, historicity.

Ariel: Well, let's come at the question of object-relations this way: I think you see men's reliance on "tools" to mediate their relation with "external" nature as basic to the logic of an appropriative economy—the predatory model.

Maria Mies: I do say that men cannot experience their bodies as "productive" in the same way as women, that they need "tools" to mediate their relationship with nature as a productive or creative one. But this instrumental relationship of men to their bodies would not have led to an appropriative or predatory economy if the tools men invented had remained "productive" in the true sense. With the invention of arms and the monopoly of some men over these arms, the relationship of men to their bodies, to each other, to women and to external nature, changed fundamentally. Arms are not means of production, but means of destruction and coercion. By means of arms, a relationship of exploitation and dominance can be established and maintained. Only as hunters became warriors and where conquest became a regular economic activity, could men's productivity, based on a monopoly over arms appear as an independent process from women's productivity and nature's productivity.

Ariel: Eventually, "colonization" and "housewifization" become two faces of the one "coin" in the rise of international capital, violence against women being essential to the maintenance of this international division of labor. What are examples of this, Maria?

Maria Mies: Abundant examples can be found in the history of colonialism, in the politics of slavery, in the violent destruction of self-sufficient survival systems, in the process of the witch hunt in Europe and its accompanying historical counterpart in the colonies. But even today, violence against women is the "necessary" method for maintaining the exploitative international and sexual division of labor. Housewifization and colonization are part of the world market system. Both are necessary for capital accumulation.

In the modern colonies, this violence takes the form of mass rapes, dowry killings, forced sterilization, sex tourism, use of Third World women as guinea pigs for testing drugs, pro-natal and anti-natal technology by transnational concerns.

Another recent example of neo-patriarchal violence against women is the revival of Sati in India. As I said, these manifestations are neither the result of some inborn sadism in men, nor remnants of feudal backwardness. They are the result of the ongoing process of primitive accumulation of capital, which has always been dependent on direct violence. In this process, the men play the role of agents for capital; the mediators. Most men in the "Third World" cannot hope to rise to the standard of living of their big white brothers by means of wage labor. But they still want to get access to the consumer goods the world market offers, the TV sets, cars, motorbikes, videos, computers, which all serve as symbols of modernization and progress. Neither individual men, nor Third World governments, can reach this material level by means of non-violent exchange. The debt trap is one direct outcome of this impossibility. Governments who have embraced a policy of modernization in the face of actual dependency will have to sell their women, or their land, or both.

The case of Sati in India is revealing. As Madhu Kishwar has shown, the men who campaign for the revival of Sati are not "backward" peasants, but modern, urban educated young men who want to get rich quickly, supported by powerful industrial interests which invest a lot of money in temples and religion. By burning a widow, a new Sati-shrine can be established, a new cult can be created. Pilgrims flock to the new shrine and bring money.

Neo-patriarchy and religious fundamentalism go smoothly together with modernization and capital accumulation: they are not in contradiction. It's not only in the neo-colonies or the south that violence against women is increasing. We all know about its increase in the industrialized countries: wife battering, rape, pornography. Even the emergence of reproductive technology which turns women into marketable reproductive raw-material is not possible without virtual vivisection of the female body.

Ariel: You claim that "naturalization" is the ideological lynch-pin in this economic process. How does it work?

Maria Mies: The concept of "naturalization" cannot be properly understood without its other pole, namely "humanization" or "civilization." Humanization here implies becoming independent from nature by means of science and technology. Domination over "Nature" in this sense is always a destructive and coercive relationship. "Naturalization" hence means that not only external nature, but also women and the peoples of the "South" are seen as "nature." So defined, they are robbed of subjectivity, spiritual value, dignity and sovereignty. These "colonies" become mere objects or raw material for the process of "humanizing" the working class in the Western metropolises.

Those who have been "civilized" or "humanized" obviously cannot forget their "lost paradise." They yearn for what they have destroyed. Ironically, this very yearning is the strongest motive force for the present round of capital accumulation: Third World sex tourism, eco-marketing, etc.

Ariel: The feminist concept of "gender" unwittingly collaborates in this naturalistic ideology too.

Maria Mies: Indeed. The feminist concept of "gender" collaborates with this dualism and reinforces the polarization between "nature" and "culture." It shares in the concept of progress developed by white men, and in the hegemony of culture over nature. It also shares the evolutionist view of this process as inevitable. Because of the distinction made by some feminists between "gender" and "sex," it is easy now for reproductive engineers to say that the realm of sexuality and reproduction is only "biology," hence it is their domain. Meanwhile the symbolic manifestations of these areas are called "gender" and are said to belong to the social, cultural, or truly "human" sphere.

Ariel: This device of "naturalization" continues to be important for the self-definition of the male proletariat, doesn't it?

Maria Mies: Yes, the European labor movement, at least from the second half of the 19th century onwards, aspired to reach the cultural level of the bourgeoisie. The leaders of the German Social Democrats, then still strongly influenced by scientific socialism, saw clearly, that for the rise of the German working class from a miserable proletarian existence to a civilized one, an industrial nation like Germany needed colonies. Colonies were necessary for the cheap import of more raw materials, of more labor and for an extension of markets.

But for the "humanization" or civilization of the German male proletariat, a decent family was necessary, where the man was breadwinner and woman the housewife. Hence colonial policy and family policy in imperial Germany were basically accepted by the Social Democrats and by the trade unions. In England and other industrialized countries, the situation was more or less the same.

Ariel: I suppose the technological optimism of Marx, Engels and many present-day socialists would be influenced by men's specific object-relation to nature as well.

Maria Mies: Today we have reached a stage where we can speak of an ideological convergence of the male proletariat and the capitalist. Both expect more “progress” from further domination over nature by high tech. Both collaborate in the further destruction of our natural base of existence. The Western working class has been strongly opposed to the ecology movement and also to the women’s movement.

But it’s not only the Western working class who shares a technocratic utopia with capital. Workers in present-day socialist countries share the same paradigm of technological progress as key to all happiness. Its theoretical roots have indeed to be found in the technological optimism of Marx, and particularly Engels, who see domination over nature as precondition for the liberation of mankind from the “realm of necessity” and for the beginning of the “realm of Freedom.”

Ariel: What would a feminist concept of labor and economics look like, in your view?

Maria Mies: A feminist concept of “labor” cannot be based on domination. Women cannot expect liberation to come from continued exploitation of nature and other colonized peoples. One colony cannot be de-colonized at the expense of other colonies. A feminist concept of labor has therefore to replace the predatory economic relationship of Man to “nature” by a cooperative one. The model of a cooperative, reciprocal relationship between woman and nature is also the only way in which women will restore their bodily integrity and wholeness, their dignity and their sovereignty over life processes.

A feminist concept of labor has to reject the notion that all “necessary labor” is a burden that should be done by machines or robots. We have to maintain a concept of labor in which “enjoyment,” as well as the “hardness” of work are united. This would require a different economy from the one we know today. I have elaborated on this in the last chapter of *Patriarchy and Accumulation*. The main characteristic of such an economy would be emphasis on the maintenance of self-sustaining survival systems: “a subsistence perspective.” It would be a “moral economy,” based on principle, not merely on supply and demand.

Ariel: Women have nothing to gain from a continuation of the prevailing “growth” ethic, have they? By the way, when you developed your subsistence perspective in *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, were you consciously trying to provide a theoretical bridge between eco-feminism and Green politics? Without a thorough-going emancipation of both Third World and Western women from their sustaining position in the predatory division of labor, Green politics won’t even reach first base; will it?

Maria Mies: I agree that Green politics will not reach first base unless the growth and accumulation ethic is consistently rejected and a ‘subsistence perspective’ put in its place. However, Green politics in West Germany at present, is far from such. When Greens began to enter the parliaments, a process of redefining their goals began. It ended by drastically reducing their criticism of the industrial growth model and talking rather about an “ecological reconstruction of the industrial system.” This means they expect a solution of the ecological and social crisis to come not so much from a radical change in people’s daily life, but from technological innovations, like solar energy, etc. But, since the Social Democrats pursue a similar strategy of harmonizing capitalist accumulation with ecological reconstruction, it is possible that the Greens will not even last very long as a parliamentary party. I put my hope not so much on the Greens or any other party but on the broadening movement among people, particularly women who are ready to challenge the growth model by consumer resistance. We need a strategy combining the goals of the ecology movement, anti-colonialism and women’s liberation simultaneously.

Ariel: In your favor here is the fact that feminism is much more healthy now in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Originally, colonial women were loath to identify with the feminist movement at all; why the turn around?

Maria Mies: While the old prejudice that “feminists are all single women, lesbians, man-haters and home-breakers” still exists among some Third World women, increasingly they find themselves confronted with the same manifestations of capitalist patriarchy as we do. The rise in violence against women has renewed feminist rebellion in many Third World countries. It can no longer be labeled a Western import. Third World sisters also need an answer to the question “Why has capitalism or modernization not liberated women?” So we are finding a keen interest in feminist theory now among women in Asia, South America and Africa.

Ariel: Changing tack Maria: I notice that your thesis makes use of Carolyn Merchant’s eco-feminist deconstruction of Baconian science. Is the critique of science developed by English speaking feminists such as Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, Hilary Rose and others well regarded in Europe?

Maria Mies: Carolyn Merchant's and Evelyn Fox Keller's books have been translated and are discussed in Germany by women and men who, since Chernobyl, have begun to criticize the foundations of science and technology. The critique is spearheaded in West Germany by the women's movement against reproductive and genetic engineering. Women begin to understand that this technology amounts to a revival of the eugenics movement of the Nazis, but now activated on a world scale. In other European countries, the resistance against these developments is not so strong. Recently I heard French feminists saying, "After we have rationalized production, we rationalize reproduction." In France the faith in instrumentalism is fairly unbroken.

Ariel: Can you tell us a little about the police raids on your German feminist colleagues who are actively opposing reproductive technologies and genetic engineering? This harassment on the part of the State seems to underscore the structural significance of the patriarchal need to appropriate and control women's reproductive labor "resource."

Maria Mies: The December 1987 raids on women in the movement against reproductive and genetic engineering were a reaction to the erosion of public acceptance for these new techniques. Since 1985, our women have mobilized over their anti-woman, indeed anti-human, effects. Industry is keen to launch biotech as one of the main "future technologies," so the police raids were meant to intimidate the protest movement and thus create a better climate for investment there. Clearly these new technologies cannot be 'profitable unless the state steps in to enforce total control over women's reproductive capacities.

Here we see the unity of patriarchy and capitalism again. In West Germany, we have always insisted on linking up our critique of reproductive technology to that of genetic engineering and the issue of population control policy in the Third World. Only by showing the interconnectedness of these areas can we expose the basically racist, sexist and ultimately fascist, implications of techniques.

Ariel: Among the feminists I encountered working with Die Grunen, some have endorsed *A Mother's Manifesto*, others are fiercely opposed to what they perceive as the naturalism of that same document. In my view, this "debate" marks a significant new stage in our developing feminist consciousness. If only the movement will be mature enough to work through the political antagonisms posed by the *Manifesto*.

Maria Mies: The Mother's Manifesto group began by pointing out the many grievances of mothers with small children in the women's movement. These grievances are real and there has not been very much solidarity with mothers on the part of our movement. But it is wrong, as the Manifesto women do, to say that the non-mothers are "career women," or even that a career means emancipation. This position was already rejected quite early by the women's movement.

On the other hand, the women who criticize the Manifesto for its "biologism" are equally superficial. They usually argue that the Nazis also put "motherhood" on a pedestal with their "Blut und Boden" ideology. I consider both positions wrong.

The Manifesto women treat motherhood as an existential antagonism but forget that it is only one part of a woman's life. The anti-Manifesto women, on the other hand, do not take the trouble to go deeper than their anti-fascist rhetoric; a rhetoric by which any new movement in Germany can be denounced. They thus commit the same mistake which communists and social democrats committed in the Weimar Republic before Hitler came to power. These groups denounced all feelings of discontent centering about topics such as "nature," "motherhood," "land" and "home" as irrational, out of tune with the modern world. And in doing so, gave this whole dimension of human reality over to the Nazis.

Given its commitment to enlightenment discourse, scientific socialism was not able to accommodate these so-called "irrational" yearnings within its theoretical body and policies. However, by basing their utopia exclusively on rationalization and class struggle, communists and social democrats were not able to understand the "rumblings under the factory floor," as my late friend Christel Neususs put it. These rumblings stemmed from the emotional alienation of the industrial working class and Hitler exploited these feelings for his own purposes.

Yes, I also hope that the discussion around the *Mother's Manifesto* will be able to transcend the facile pattern of "right" and "left," and come to grips with what lies underneath the rebellion of mothers in the women's movement.

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