

Marxism & Ecofeminism: An Exchange

Mies vs. Marx—Round Two

Jack Straw
Ariel Salleh
Will Guest

FE NOTE: The following exchange concerns an interview done by Ariel Salleh with German ecofeminist author-activist Maria Mies, titled “Patriarchy and Progress: A Critique of Technological Domination,” and printed in FE #338, Winter 1992.

Dear Fifth Estate,

In a generally excellent issue, FE #338, Winter 1992, the interview with Maria Mies was disturbing in a number of ways. I would like to focus here on one major problem, her distortion of Marx’s ideas, which enables her to present him as a patriarchal techno-fixated materialist with no moral principles (as if he were indistinguishable from your average capitalist).

It has been my experience over years of reading Marx that you get out of him what you bring to him, and Mies confirms this. She supports her case for a “feminist,” “moral” economy (i.e., a reformed capitalism) by claiming that Marx says the exact opposite of what he actually says! Her claim that Marx provides the “theoretical roots” of capital’s “technocratic utopia” requires an amazing distortion of his ideas.

Mies refers to “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’.” In fact, Marx never made this claim, but said the reverse, that the need to produce the means of life (the “realm of necessity”) will always be with us regardless of the form of society (whether capitalist or communist). Permit me to quote Marx in his defense:

The realm of freedom really begins only where labor determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. This realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, regulate their interchange with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite.” (*Capital*, vol. 3, chap. 48)

Clearly Marx is not saying that technological development will liberate us from the “realm of necessity.” He is saying that we cannot begin to liberate ourselves, that is, to become fully human, until we associate or socialize as free individuals and proceed to relate to nature rationally. Furthermore, Marx is not promoting the idea of “domination over nature,” but of control over our relationship to nature, our “interchange with nature.” Obviously under capitalism this relationship is out of our control, with the resulting destruction of the planet. Marx is saying we have to get our human relationships under our control, so that our relationship with nature can become rational, i.e., life-sustaining. On this basis alone may we then proceed to explore the “realm of freedom” in which we discover our full humanity.

Unfortunately, Maria Mies has not taken advantage of Marx’s insights. Her position is actually a regression from his humanism, for she splits the species into two opposed halves, men vs. women. Her ideas about different male and female “object relations” are so much mumbo jumbo. We all contain both the feminine and the masculine principles within us. The challenge is for us to find the capacity to come together, not to fashion ideologies of our inevitable separateness. All such ideologies are regressive and anti-life, whether couched in terms of sex by some “radical” feminists, of race by racists or of nation by nationalists.

Will Guest
Berkeley, CA

To The Fifth Estate:

In the interview with Ariel Salleh (see FE #338, Winter 1992), Maria Mies attempts to put forth a critique of Marx’s analysis of capitalism, based on his acceptance of human domination over nature and his uncritical association of technology with human progress. These are definitely substantial shortcomings in Marx’s work. But, in the process, Mies makes a glaring error, and consequently advances a disturbing proposal regarding post-capitalist society.

Marx’s views on post-capitalist society were generally vague, beyond implying the abolition of commodity relations and the measuring of wealth by free time rather than work time. He was way too enamoured of technology and interference with nature, although he did note the already present signs of environmental degradation (land depletion). And, his practice was frequently nothing short of manipulative reformism and often marked by shameless opportunism. Yet his analysis of capital’s dynamics represents a kernel of understanding that is worth incorporating into our analysis.

Mies contends that Marx’s term “productive labor” meant within the context of capitalist society not work for the satisfaction of human needs, but rather “surplus producing labor.” Wage labor is thus called productive, while all other types of non-waged labor are called non-productive or “natural,” outside society, and hence, devalues women’s work. Thus, she contends, Marxist terminology/analysis plays a part in the maintenance of patriarchal domination.

What Marx actually defined as “productive labor” (this he was very specific on) was “surplus-value-producing-labor.” The distinction is not as minor as it may appear. It refers to profit production, rather than material production. He even specified that not all wage labor is productive—only that which is involved in the production and transportation of commodities, that is, whatever work is needed to transform goods and services from raw material to a consumable form ready to be sold for profit.

Two people may perform the same job, yet vary in whether they are “productive” or not. For example, a teacher working for a private school functions in a profit-making operation and therefore is “productive,” while a public school teacher is not. A sales clerk is “productive” unloading a delivery or stocking shelves, but not when s/he runs a cash register. All that s/he is doing there is transferring title to the goodies. Likewise, bank employees are merely facilitating circulation, the sale of commodities, and/or the payment of debt.

In no way did Marx imply that the work performed by “non-productive” workers was less valuable to society. In fact, he specifies otherwise. Much of such work, he noted, was necessary for the functioning of society, but was simply not productive of profit. He saw a tendency for the “non-productive” sector to grow relative to the profit sector, and forecast this would be one of several tendencies which would put a strain on the ability of the system to function.

Marx was not at all unaware of the role of unpaid work in the accumulation cycle, as Mies asserts, even though he didn't discuss it much. He assigned it not to "nature" or the "pre-capitalist" realm, but to the personal sphere of life. He predicted it would increasingly turn into wage work under capitalism, which to some extent has happened (e.g., child care). In general, he emphasized how the most important product of capital accumulation is the reproduction of capitalist social relations on an ever-growing scale.

Mies' assertion regarding the role of unpaid labor is even less true of (some) modern marxists. The autonomist Marxist tendency has come up with the concept of the "social factory": society as a whole functions as a capital accumulation machine, with everyone playing a part in this process, whether they directly produce surplus value (profit), or help maintain conditions which assure its continued production.

During the 1960s, Selma James and Mariposa Dalla Costa wrote quite a bit on the role of housework in the production and reproduction of labor power, the source of surplus value. They were major initiators of the Wages for Housework movement (though I'm not too sure this is a worthwhile goal in itself apart from propagandistic purposes).

Out of her misunderstanding of Marx's terminology and analysis, Mies proceeds to reject Marx's analysis of capitalism as just one more 19th century Euro-centered, patriarchic critique. Instead, she advances a case for a "different economy," a "moral economy" based on principle, not merely on supply and demand." Gone is the communist movement's (and Marx's) project of abolishing the economy as a separate sphere of life, something it is only in class society.

The "merely" strongly suggests the continuation of 'supply and demand', categories which have a meaning only in the context of commodity relations. As Mies should know from reading Marx, supply and demand only influence fluctuations in prices. They do not determine the point around which the fluctuations occur, nor can they explain why things have prices in the first place. The very fact that they do means people are separated from one another, to be connected via the money system and the market. This is a form of social relations which sets all against all, no matter how much 'morality' is brought to bear on the situation.

Mies implies that women in charge could somehow keep a market fair, in that they don't need tools to make their relationship with nature a productive and creative one, which I suppose makes them more in tune and hence inherently fairer. It's extremely doubtful (impossible, dare I say) that women could run a money economy in a benign and self-sustaining way simply because they are biologically different. As Marx showed well, the capital accumulation system manages its managers. The so-called socialist countries (Mies still uses this mislabel) always were merely company-nations which obey the same rules of competition and capital accumulation as private companies. That's why their ecological record is no different.

Quite contrary to Mies' assertion that leaders of Europe's Social Democracy were influenced by 'scientific socialism,' these opportunist bureaucrats in fact rejected the core of Marx's analysis. They believed capitalism could be reformed bit by bit into socialism, a system they identified as state control of productive resources, with commodity relations staying intact. This approach, of course, dovetailed smoothly with the goals of imperialism. Indeed, they promised things would be different under their control because they would function morally and rationally. Strangely enough, the Nazis also promised to restore morality to its proper place in economics, as do today the Moral Majority and people like right-wing Presidential aspirant, Pat Buchanan.

I cannot approach the project of supplanting this decrepit, deadly society with a complete blueprint. Besides the fact that time won't let me, it would be wrong to impose a plan when the crux of our vision revolves around autonomous self-determination. Again, I agree with Harry Cleaver, who feels that the very term "socialism" is a 19th century leftover which refers strictly to a system of production relations, a program which is to be implemented instead of capitalism. Human society is more than production relations. And at this point in history we should all be wary of any plan which is advanced as a solution for every single locale. But, this should not deter us from identifying what we have to get rid of. Foremost on our list is commodity relations in any form. They are inherently oppressive, anti-human, ecologically destructive and unnecessary. A moral market is as likely as a non-deadly nuclear bomb.

Jack Straw
Berkeley, CA

A. Salleh responds:

Dear Fifth Estate friends,

Thanks for an opportunity to reply to readers of my discussion with Maria Mies, "Patriarchy and Progress: a Critique of Technological Domination," in FE #338, Winter 1992.

While neither Will Guest nor Jack Straw are comfortable with Mies's socialist ecofeminism, they are also at loggerheads with each other over whether Marxism implies the technological domination of nature. Straw affirms that the tendency is there in Marx, and Guest argues that it is not. But Guest's quote from Capital undermines his own position, I think, and so lends support to Mies's thesis.

What I find odd in Straw's response to "Patriarchy and Progress," is its antagonistic tone. He writes as if in disagreement with Mies on a whole clutch of questions, when, in fact, so many of their attitudes are shared. Both reject biological determinism; see reform socialism as handmaid to imperialist expansion and wages-for-housework as largely a propagandist exercise; both abhor the commodity form and value autonomous self-determination; both see socialism as a 19th century residue and human society as more than production relations.

More puzzling is the fact that Straw's main argument with Mies is about Marxist usage. He would develop an immanent critique around her use of the phrase "surplus production," which he takes as a corruption of "surplus value." Now he is right to point out that the meaning of surplus value is narrowly specific to the system of capitalist production relations. But since Straw himself regards socialism as a "19th century leftover" and "society as more than production relations," what stake does he have in a technical argument with Mies? Since neither profess to orthodoxy, this kind of objection is something of a red herring.

Further, if Straw looked into Mies's 20th century reading of Marx, as opposed to holding her against a rod he concedes is spent, he would find that "surplus production" has a special sense in her work: it points to the moment of domination. The production of a surplus by others—some possibly women cultivators, and its appropriation by others—possibly male raiders, sets in train a history of hierarchy of men over women and over nature. Until this time, Mies conjectures that production was carried out by women in reciprocity with nature, taking no more than needed, and putting back in accord with a cycle of subsistence.

In agriculture, but even more so with industrialism, extraction of a material surplus from nature (nothing to do with profits and wages) breaks the equitable exchange of life energies that bond men and women and nature together in a sustainable way. This is the context of Mies's talk about a "moral economy": a far cry from the capital based liberal-reformist moralism that currently prevails. Mies intends a morality that is materialist and profoundly radical. A "moral economy" is one that is socially just and ecologically sustainable at the same time.

In line with Straw's perception that "human society is more than production relations," eco-feminists have begun to work with a broader theoretical canvas than Marx's humanism. This has been made necessary by the conditions of feminist and environmental struggle in our time. As an activist but also a teacher of Marxism, I began to see the need for this shift some 15 years ago, hence the interest in Mies's effort to broaden the political canvas. Women like Vandana Shiva in India are contributing similar analyses from observations of their own cultural context.

Will Guest reminds us that Marx says "we have to get our human relationships under our control, so that our relationship with nature can become rational, i.e., life-sustaining and life-enhancing." Given neoMarxist critiques of instrumental reason, the word "control" is unfortunate here, but Guest is more or less right. The trouble is, it's not quite as straightforward as he thinks. Human beings have constructed complex webs of meaning that play tricks on rationalists who believe it is enough to get our production relations sorted out.

To enlarge on this, while Marx's focus is on man's relation to man, Mies and other eco-feminists place equal emphasis on at least three more kinds of relationship: man's relation to woman; man's relation to nature; and woman's relation to nature. (For simplicity, I use "man," "woman" and "nature" here in an uncritical, given sense. This, after all, is what people have to rely on in the everyday political work of deconstructing corrupt political practices.)

Eco-feminists observe that in patriarchal cultures, man's relation to nature is psychosexually, structurally and discursively interlocked with man's relation to woman. For an example of the first lock-in, take common perceptions of women's reproductive role; for the second, look at how women's work traditionally mediates nature; for the third, think of metaphors like Mother Nature, bitch, rose, etc.

To come at this another way. Eco-feminists see a triangulation of man, woman and nature in patriarchal discourse, but one without equal weighting of the three elements. Now this is where we come back to Will Guest on Marx. The very political changes which may fix man's relation to man, will not necessarily make man's relation to nature or man's relation to woman any less exploitative. Moreover, eco-feminists are convinced that in order to resolve ecological problems, patriarchally conditioned men (and women) will need to work through deeply interconnected attitudes to women simultaneously.

Eco-feminists who have had the pleasure of reading Marx, have had to open out his problematic, to account for the asymmetry between men and women and nature. And they link that asymmetry with patriarchal modes of domination and control—including technology and associated notions of progress. The “gendered halves” and “splits” that Guest worries about in Mies, are already with us thanks to patriarchal relations. By wanting to suppress the views of halves and minorities because they may prove divisive, Guest unwittingly joins hands with Alan Bloom and moralists of the right.

All this has been spelled out to help situate Mies's reading of Marx in a far broader politics than either Guest or Straw have envisaged. The vocabulary of socialism, concepts of “value” and “production” are being held up against a different light now. This new problematic is taken for granted by eco-feminist readers, but we sometimes forget that it is not yet obvious to everybody that a major conceptual shift has begun.

So, to conclude: it is inconceivable that a thinker of Mies's caliber could say “Marx provides the theoretical roots of capital's technocratic utopia”—as Will Guest claims she does. Nor is Jack Straw's paraphrase that Mies thinks “women could run a money economy in a benign and self-sustaining way simply because they are biologically different,” anywhere near the mark. Using the eco-feminist preamble outlined above, both respondents might do well to go back to ‘Patriarchy and Progress’ and give Mies a more careful second read.

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Jack Straw
Ariel Salleh
Will Guest

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