

Book Reviews

WILD POLITICS

Susan Hawthorne.
Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002.

BY EVELYNE ACCAD

Susan Hawthorne is a feminist activist and creator with innovative ideas that have had a great impact on our world today. She is the co-founder of a Feminist press, Spinifex, which has had a tremendous influence on feminist publications, a writer of many talents (novels, poetry, essays), and a performer (she is the founding member of the Older Women's Circus). In this incredibly compelling analysis of what is wrong with our world system today, she lays the foundations of how we could turn it around into a viable one, one in which life sharing, giving, and exchange would replace violence, oppression, and ultimately the destruction of the planet.

It is called *Wild Politics*, a metaphor for a new kind of politics based on "diversity, context, interaction, locality, justice and change." It is a world inspired by biodiversity. It comes about through "risky scholarship" because it stirs feminists away from the "ivory tower" into the real world for real in-depth change.

Hawthorne starts with a feminist critique of western global culture with its profit-making ideology, escalating into violence and a "fortress mentality" culminating in the events of September Eleven. *Wild Politics* aims at reexamining our ways of relating to the world, to other people, and to nature. Hawthorne examines the principle of diversity and biodiversity that would organize the

world very differently from the profit-driven world of globalization as we know it today. She notices the difficulties dominant groups have of seeing and understanding marginalized groups when it is often marginalized knowledge, partly constituted by feminist thinking, which could help us move in the right directions. This leads her to discuss power and knowledge and to analyze how dominant groups ignore the importance of powerless social systems.

She analyzes the process of globalization that occurs through the appropriation of world resources, the incorporation of these appropriate resources into western frameworks, the commodification and privatization of these products into western systems, the export of whatever is "exotic" and their dislocation, leading to displacement and disconnection from the local. All this brings poverty and dispossession with increase of power and wealth in the hands of those who already have it. It is very much like what happened with colonization, but now it is on a world scale. She gives examples of processes of disconnection from production, like feeding meat to herbivores, or planting exotic trees in places where they don't belong. She makes an important distinction between land as relationship and land as possession. Using feminist examples and analysis, she shows how land has often been equated with woman, and the use of her body with that of nature. An example of one of the worse uses of land is tourism which is another way for the wealthy, mobile westerner to appropriate yet another corner of the land along with its culture, while dispossessing the in-

digenous peoples of their land.

Hawthorne grew up on a farm. She watched how the women members of her family, particularly her aunt, engaged in home-produced goods. It gave her a keen awareness on how "women play a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity, both as active conservers of ecosystems and as activists in preventing environmental damage." On the other hand, corporations aim at maximizing profit through exploiting new technologies such as trees with increased growth rates, insect-resistant genes, resistance to herbicides, terminators genes, increased tolerance to salt for certain soils, etc., all goals leading to an ever-increasing spiral of homogenization and commodification. Women all over the world constitute the vast majority of the maintenance workforce. They have been increasingly resistant to join the market economy. In *Wild Politics*, Hawthorne asks important questions about other ways of thinking and organizing interaction between humans and the natural world, social systems that would be more equitable.

Finally, Hawthorne looks at power that tends toward disconnection, along with authority which is dependant on disconnection. They lead to violence and dissociation from the environment and from nature. She makes an appeal for biodiversity that "implies activity and participation as opposed to disconnected domination." Wild politics economics is based "not on decontextualisation and profit, but on embeddedness and sustaining life." Goods produced solely for profit would not survive in this environment. In the system

Hawthorne is proposing, things done for short-term profit with destructive long-term consequences would be discarded. She beautifully calls for a world in which relationship, reciprocity, and diversity are central to social interaction. There lies the sustainable survival of our planet (for at least 40,000 more years, she tell us)! Is it too much to ask?

FOR-GIVING: A FEMINIST CRITICISM OF EXCHANGE

Genevieve Vaughan.
Austin, TX: Plain View Press, 1997.

BY MECHTHILD HART

For-Giving is an exciting and difficult book. It moves the reader through the intricacies, multi-layered complexities, and emotional, spiritual and intellectual turmoils of two fundamentally different paradigms. Both the exchange and the gift paradigm shape our “world picture,” our language and culture, and how we live and survive in this world. In *For-Giving* Genevieve Vaughan describes and analyzes these paradigms and places them in the cultural context of western thinking where the *homo donans* is devalued (and exploited) and the *homo sapiens* has become the “masculated” norm. She describes how past experience and practice are transmitted through language and culture. They encompass economic structures and practices which today are omnipresent manifestations of exchange, making the market appear (and operate) as the most natural, rational foundation of our existence.

Vaughan’s analyses are rooted in a passionate call for unburying the giftgiving principle of life, culture, and language, and for re-discovering the logic of a paradigm that is older

and more fundamental than the exchange paradigm. Where the latter creates the un-community of competing, warring and killing masculated egos, the gift paradigm entails the possibility of creating and maintaining peaceful and abundant communities.

Giftgiving unfolds the principle of the Mother whose direct, non-calculated response to a child’s needs is paradigmatic for the “female value” of other-orientation. The good of the other is the ultimate life premise of the mothering model. The logic of exchange is, however, not “need-driven” but “availability-driven.” It is ruled by effective demand, not the need of the other. Throughout the book Vaughan describes how due to the forced coexistence of the two logics giftgiving becomes coopted, instrumentalized, or distorted. Exchange is dependent on the gift, and gift labour is necessary for profit where the many give to the few, not to each other. “Male values” such as self-interest, self-aggrandizement, competition, dominance, and hierarchy characterize the ego structure of the exchange paradigm.

Vaughan leaves few stones unturned, and certainly no space for sentimentalizing the “giftgiving grain” whose inner and outer working she describes, and how the exchange paradigm “drains it, blots it out, cancels it.” She shifts her focus back and forth between the two paradigms, and between the cultural, philosophical, psycho-social, and linguistic levels of analysis. Each new chapter makes the previous ones appear in a new light where it takes on new shades and colours and becomes more solid and fine-grained. Many points may at first strike a reader as rather difficult if not impossible to fully understand—especially if she doesn’t have the corresponding disciplinary background—but they become much clearer in the following chapters.

Vaughan has a powerful political agenda. Again, she connects multiple levels of experience and analysis

by addressing the difficulty of “maintaining ourselves in the gift logic” internally, and the importance of collectively (and globally) re-constructing and building a gift economy. Giftgiving subverts the economic structure of exchange, and it calls for a general, not an individual solution. Vaughan calls for a global, transnational feminist movement where all “unmasculated agents of change unite across the unprivileged categories.” In her final chapter she describes different ways of practicing her theory, individually as well as collectively, and she uses the Foundation for a Compassionate Society (an organization she founded) as an example.

Vaughan is right when she points out that we do not have a meta-language for giftgiving. Many of her insights have been articulated, however, by other feminist writers motivated by the same political-ethical desire but writing within different theoretical frameworks. It is especially the feminist sociologists of the “Bielefeld Approach” such as Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia von Werlhof who for more than three decades have written about very similar if not identical concerns. Their language, such as “production of life” or “subsistence,” seems to use the master’s tools, but they are re-defining, re-appropriating this language, thus revealing its underlying giftgiving character. Above all, their writings are firmly anchored in a political economy that centres around the materiality of creating or producing the goods and services—the gifts—that satisfy human needs rather than a phallically-invested profit motive. By reading Vaughan’s book I kept looking for places where this material ground of giftgiving is explored. It is, however, mainly mentioned here and there, despite the claim that “beneath the surface of language and the givens of perception lies the free labour of the centuries, consisting of women’s free maintenance of things, as well as all the unpaid ‘other-tend-