

# Some Notes on Neoliberalism, on Land and

by Mariarosa Dalla Costa

*Dans le contexte d'une restructuration globale, l'auteure établit le lien entre la lente détérioration de la chaîne alimentaire et l'expropriation à la hausse, la pollution des sois, et le développement des réformes agraires.*

*Agrarian reforms and policies implemented in this century have been used as a powerful tool to disrupt organizational networks which various sections of the world's population have created in their struggle to assure themselves better nutrition and a better life.*

The problem of the growing degradation of food system owing, among other things, to its genetic manipulation, belongs to that sphere of research technology directed at enhancing nature's productivity and which has as its counterpart the expropriation of land and the development of agrarian reforms aimed above all at restratifying labour worldwide.

These measures seek to impose in an increasingly pervasive way class relations and models of production which are peculiar to today's concept of progress. In this context, agrarian reforms and policies implemented in this century have guaranteed better nutrition to a few, malnutrition or hunger to many, and in particular, have been used as a powerful tool to disrupt organizational networks which various sections of the world's population have created in their struggle to assure themselves better nutrition and a better life. We, therefore, fully agree with the assertion that food crises are fundamentally products of the political economy of capitalism (Cleaver).

This is also true of "technological miracles" concerning food production which, simulating the discovery of the source of abundance, on the one hand destroy the biodiversity and the reproductive powers of nature and thereby the only real source of abundance (Shiva 1990), while on the other, through the genetic manipulation of food and the industrial and commercial policies that sustain that manipulation, make food increasingly inaccessible to the vast majority of humanity.

This leads not only to a progressive destruction of nature's reproductive capacity, but also to the progressive annihilation—through wars, repression, epidemics, and hunger—of populations rendered superfluous by the expropriation and poisoning of land due to the use of pesticides or landmines. The ghettoization and enclosure of populations, deprived of their fundamental means of

subsistence—land—and ultimately confined to slums, refugee camps, and jails have as their counterpart the "enclosure" of food. Food is, in fact, already inaccessible to many because of the combined policies of land expropriation, technological innovation in agricultural methods, and the relationship between wages and prices (when there is one). In addition, land is always subject to further manipulation, made unavailable for use by privatization, monopolization, technological patents, or put in various kinds of banks under the control of multinational corporations of other subjects.

But, what role do policies play regarding land and food in the so-called new globalization of the economy (Wallerstein; Mies)? It is necessary to clarify some premises.

The neoliberalism which characterizes the latest phase of accumulation, contrary to what is often assumed, is not a spontaneous process where the productive forces of the economy are simply set free to compete among themselves. In reality, neoliberalism is a capitalist strategy planned as much as Keynesian strategy/economics was. Its planning resides in that gigantic operation of underdevelopment of social reproduction represented by the policies of structural adjustment. Such policies were implemented in substantially identical ways around the world during the '80s and '90s. They were intended to clear the way for the unfolding of neoliberalism. The institutions assigned to "plan" this underdevelopment of reproduction, which above all is an attack on labour and on the struggles of women, are the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Today, these institutions represent the government without borders of international capital. If the former presides over the formulation of directives regarding adjustment policies, the latter launches development projects which are their corollary.

The current phase of accumulation rests in fact on two fundamentals. The first consists of the new international division of labour, which concerns not only the sphere of production but also reproduction (Federici). As a result, more Third World women than ever perform domestic work for the first world, either by remaining in their countries of origin or by emigrating to so-called advanced nations. Such a division and restructuring of labour would not occur if adjustment policies, with the dramatic poverty which they provoke, were not the cause of these migration movements. The second fundamental consists of the new economic liberalism which in seeking the deregulation of labour to allow increased corporate competition in the new globalized economy, assumes that reduced contractual power is a result of increasing poverty caused by adjustment policies.

However, the underdevelopment of reproduction cre-

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ated by such policies, and that is the foundation on which international divisions of labour and economic neo-liberalism rests, has been the reply to that international cycle of struggles which unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s. From the '80s onward, structural adjustment policies have contributed to widespread misery and have become the

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terrain for growing rebellion (George; Midnight Notes Collective; Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1995; 1997).

Paradoxically, in particular in Italy, the political debate, whether institutional or not, does not usually mention adjustment policies, thereby hiding how continuing cuts in public spending for social consumption and privatizations belong to a concerted strategy at the international level. But to an even lesser extent does the debate address the privatization and expropriation of land which are at the heart of the underdevelopment of reproduction and which constitutes the main source of world hunger. From my point of view, another example of the hidden attack on social reproduction is the progressive poisoning of the land. This is because land, ever further outside the control and knowledge of local populations, must guarantee an always higher productivity and always higher profit for the international food industry. In the same way the expropriations of land and forced migration of populations (to which improbable resettlements are promised), play a central role in the various programs of the World Bank, and have remained unmentioned in the Italian debate.

If these operations on the land and consequently on the populations, are crucial constants in the policies by which the IMF and World Bank, as institutional summits of international capital, guarantee the further expansion of capitalist relations, the increasing encroachment on and devastation of the reproductive powers of nature, what are the implications for us? I will mention here only a few points while directing your attention to a more detailed study elsewhere (Dalla Costa).

Because the expansion of capitalist relations leading to the commoditization of every form of life constitutes a state of siege which threatens us all, such operations must be at the center of our political thinking and activity. These operations continually restructure class relations

around the world, thus, any expression of anti-capitalist resistance capable of confronting this new phase of accumulation (the global economy), means supporting the struggles over land in ever more regions of the planet, and developing a political reunification around this question (of the land) in all its varied aspects at the international level.

In this sense, it is fundamental to learn and tell others about the struggles against this process all over the world, and to act in support of them. This may help to dam an overflowing river rushing towards us. We need to spread word of the victories which have already occurred. It helps us to shake the belief in the inevitability of capitalist development. Above all, it is fundamental to pose seriously to ourselves the problem, even in advanced nations, of our relation to the land.

Lessons from the indigenous movements and the women's movements in the South have revealed that there are no mechanical or chemical short cuts, to say nothing of biotechnological ones, when it comes to the land. There are no simple technological solutions to guarantee the fruits of the earth and the renewability of its forms of life. The earth needs reproductive work—it is necessary to care for it through human presence and activity and it is necessary correspondingly to give back as much as is taken. This is just as true for human beings who are, after all, a part of the life of the earth. Technology in both cases can only perform a marginal role. It can serve to cut grass in the same way that a washing machine can do the laundry but not to raise a child. This understanding compels us to rethink the working day, just as when we take into account the reproductive work involving human beings. The lack of any serious response on this issue, combined with the lack of any serious response over the question of land, can only render even more tragic the difficulty of human reproduction. But if the technological approach is not the solution, than liberation from agricultural work based on technological advancement is a false liberation. This false liberation should have resulted in a labour force which on one hand, is unemployed, and on the other, supposedly free for more intensive use on other fronts. Yet, to relocalize development here means, above all, to restore a human presence which, beginning with new relations among humans and between humans and nature, will also be able to invent a technology appropriate to the new relations between living things. The negation of the countryside by women in Italy was not only a refusal to do hard work but also of hierarchical control by the elderly and by men in the isolation of the village life. Today more and more women and men all over the world are experimenting with practical alternatives in land-use, beginning with practical alternatives among themselves and within a context rich in

potentialities for communication and exchange without frontiers. In this sense also, the rising of the Chiapas (Esteva) has constituted a great laboratory.

But the question of what kind of relation with the land, according to the indigenous lesson, forces us to address the problem of what are our commons, commons that we want to preserve or reconquer. In my opinion, they are the land as public space (against policies that increasingly restrict space for collective activity), the land as source of biodiversity, and the land as source of natural evolution.

The struggle over time and wages, so much in discussion in recent years in the advanced countries (see Dalla Costa), is myopic if it is not linked to the land question and attempts to change current agricultural policies and those regarding raising animals in a way to preserve the biodiversity, the integrity, and the renewability of nature. The reproductive powers of nature and its biodiversity, as indigenous communities teach, multiply instead of reducing the possibilities of life. The development of practical alternatives must gain strength from the struggles, refusals, and protests against current policies.

It is important to know that these practises are developing with many articulations in the advanced nations. While the waged economy, through a growing unemployment, dooms ever more women and men to live on the street without food or hope, those seeking alternative solutions to feed themselves and have a roof over their heads, are discovering new social relations which put into place other economies and other relations with the land. I am alluding to those movements and those initiatives which we can group under the name "social ecology," "bioregionalism," or "community economy" (Dalla Costa 1997). Here the need to assure one's own nutritional needs is linked to attempts to relocalize development to keep the availability of land at a local level, and to also guarantee healthy food, work skills, and financial resources without being devoured by the uncontrollable reign of the global economy.

One of the more meaningful examples is the city of Binghamton in the State of New York. Of 40,000 inhabitants, 15,000 were fired by IBM, a firm which had never before fired large numbers of people, but which was transferring production to the Third World. A short time later the supermarkets also closed. This collapse corresponds to what has happened in many other U.S. cities hit by high unemployment. One safety valve for the community, to be able to eat and live, was to rediscover the land, to create within the city community gardens, and on the basis of the recovered time and land, to build new relationships with nearby Native communities and reservations. This experience with community gardens following factory closings has happened on a larger scale in the former automobile capital of Detroit.

These are only two examples. But many others are developing and becoming widespread. Cities and communities are also constructing alternative circuits of local money, organizing on a large-scale alternative networks of

labor and professional exchange. There are also movements, as in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Vermont, around the question of bovine growth hormone, uniting animal rights activists, ecologists, and family farmers against agrobusiness. The abuse of animals is also the abuse of small-scale economies and the environment. In Arizona the question of land has united for the first time family farmers and Natives against agrobusiness which want farm land and against the mining companies which want the uranium, coal, and oil underneath the Native reservation.

These examples, from my point of view, are very significant and full of implications which will become clearer in the near future. They are examples to which we will turn in our search for alternative economies and struggles. What is clear is that our planet, the Earth, under a multiplicity of perspectives, is emerging as an increasingly important issue capable of uniting in a powerful circuit of struggles her many diverse children.

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