



# Subverting the Present Imagining the Future

Insurrection, Movement, Commons

Edited by Werner Bonefeld

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## Capitalism and Reproduction<sup>1</sup>

Mariarosa Dalla Costa<sup>2</sup>

The sphere of reproduction today reveals all the original sins of the capitalist mode of production. Reproduction must be viewed, of course, from a planetary perspective, with special attention being paid to the changes that are taking place in wide sectors of the lower social strata in advanced capitalism as well as in an increasing proportion of the Third World population. We live in a planetary economy, and capitalist accumulation still draws its life-blood for its continuous valorization from waged as well as unwaged labour, the latter consisting first of all of the labour involved in social reproduction (Dalla Costa and James, 1972), in the advanced as well as the Third World countries.

We find that social "misery" or "unhappiness" which Marx (Marx, 1975, p. 286) considered to be the "goal of the political economy" has largely been realized everywhere. But, setting aside the question of happiness for the time being — though certainly not to encourage the myth of its impossibility — let me stress how incredible it now seems, Marxist analysis apart, to claim that capitalist development in some way brings a generalised well-being to the planet.

Social reproduction today is more beset and overwhelmed than ever by the laws of capitalist accumulation: the continual and progressive *expropriation* (from the "primitive" expropriation of the land as a means of production, which dates from the 16th–18th centuries in England, to the expropriation, then as now, of all the individual and collective rights that ensure subsistence); the continual *division* of society into *conflictual hierarchies* (of class, sex, race, and nationality, which pit the free waged worker against the unfree unwaged worker, against the unemployed worker, and the slave labourer); the constant production of *inequality and uncertainty* (with the woman as reproducer facing an even more uncertain fate in comparison to any waged worker and, if she is also member of a discriminated race or nation, she suffers yet deeper discrimination); the continual *polarisation* of the production of *wealth* (which is more and more concentrated) and the production of *poverty* (which is increasingly widespread).



As Marx writes in *Capital* (1976, p.799):

Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus production or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.

This is true, not only for the population overwhelmed by the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. It is even more accurate today, now that capital's accumulation passes, for example, through factory, plantation, dam, mine, and even carpet weaving workshops where it is by no means rare for children to be working in conditions of slavery.

Indeed, capitalist accumulation spreads through the world by extracting labour for production and reproduction in conditions of stratification which end in the reestablishment of slavery. According to a recent estimate, slavery is the condition in which over 200 million persons are working in the world today (*The Economist*, January 6 1990).

Those macro-processes and operations which economic forces, supported by political power, unfolded during the period of primitive accumulation in Europe with the aim of destroying the individual's value in relationship to his/her community in order to turn him/her into an isolated and valueless individual, a mere container for labour-power which s/he is obliged to sell to survive, continue to mark human reproduction on a planetary scale. The indifference shown by capital towards the possibility of labour-power's reproduction in the first phase of its history was only very partially, and today increasingly precariously, redeemed centuries later by the creation of the Welfare State. Currently, the task being set by the directives of the major financial agencies, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, is to re-draw the boundaries of welfare and economic policies as a whole (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1995) in both the advanced and the developing countries. (The economic, social welfare and social insurance measures recently introduced in Italy correspond precisely to the various "structural adjustment" plans being applied in many Third World countries.) The result is that increasingly large sectors of world population are destined to extinction because they are believed to be redundant or inappropriate to the valorization requirements of capital.

Just as at the end of the 1400s, when the bloody legislation against the expropriated (Marx, 1976, ch. 28) led to the mass hanging, torturing, branding, and chaining of the poor, so today the surplus or inadequately disciplined popu-

lation of the planet is exterminated through death by cold and hunger in eastern Europe and various countries of the advanced West ("more coffins less cradles in Russia" — *La Repubblica*, February 16, 1994); death by hunger and epidemic in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere; death caused by formally declared war, by genocide authorized directly or indirectly, by military and police repression. The other variant of extinction is an individual or collective decision for suicide because there is no possibility to survive. (It is significant that, according to the Italian press reports in 1993–94, many cases of suicide in Italy are due to unemployment or to the fact that the only work on offer is to join a criminal gang, while, in India, the "tribal people" in the Narmada valley have declared a readiness to die by drowning if work continues on a dam which will destroy their habitat and, hence, the basis of their survival and cultural identity).<sup>5</sup>

The most recent and monstrous twist to this campaign of extinction comes from the extreme example of resistance offered by those who sell parts of their body, useless container for a labour-power that is no longer saleable. (In Italy, where the sale of organs is banned, press and TV reports in 1993–94 mentioned instances in which people said explicitly that they were willing to break the ban in exchange for money or a job.) For those impoverished and expropriated by capitalist expansion in the Third World, however, this is already a common way for obtaining money. Press reports mention criminal organisations that traffic in organs and supply perfectly legal terminals such as clinics. This trade flourishes thanks to kidnapping, often of women and children, and false adoption. An enquiry was recently opened at the European Parliament on the issue (*La Repubblica*, September 16, 1993), and various women's networks are trying to throw light on and block these crimes. But this is where capitalist development, founded on the negation of the individual's value, celebrates its triumph; the individual owner of redundant or, in any case, superfluous labour-power is literally cut to pieces in order to re-build the bodies of those who can pay for the right to live to the criminal or non-criminal sectors of capital which profit from it.

During the era of primitive accumulation, when the free waged worker was being shaped in England, the law still authorized slavery (Marx, 1976, ch. 28), treating the vagabonds, created by the feudal lords' violent and illegal expropriation of the land, as "voluntary" perpetrators of the crime of vagabondage and ordaining that, if anyone should refuse to work, he would be "condemned as a slave to the person who denounced him as an idler" (Marx, 1976, p.897). But, if this reduction of the poor to slavery remained on a relatively limited scale in England, not that much later, capital launched slavery on a much vaster scale, emptying Africa of the equivalent of Europe's population at that time through the slave trade to the Americas and the Caribbean.

But slavery, far from disappearing, has remained as one of capitalism's unmentioned, concealed constants. The poverty imposed on a large part of the planet by the major financial agencies chains entire families to work in conditions of slavery so that they can pay their creditors; workers are made to work in con-



ditions of slavery in livestock farms, plantations and mines; children are made to work in conditions of slavery in carpet work-shops; women are kidnapped or fooled into working in the sex industry. But these are only some examples. It is significant that the problem of slavery was raised by the Non-Government Organisations at their Forum in Vienna on June 10–12 that preceded the UN's World Conference on Human Rights on June 14–25, 1993.

Again, in the period of primitive accumulation, with the birth of free waged labour after the great expropriations, there was the greatest case of sexual genocide in history, the great witch-hunts, which, with a series of other measures directed expressly against women, contributed in a fundamental way to forging the unfree, non-waged woman worker in the production and reproduction of labour-power (Federici, 1988). Deprived of the trades and means of production and subsistence typical of the previous economy, and largely excluded from craft-work or access to the new jobs that manufacturing was offering, the woman was essentially faced by two options for survival: marriage or prostitution. Even for women who had found some form of work external to the home, prostitution at that time was also a way of supplementing low family income or the low wages paid to women. Over and above the various regimes and meanings it has gone through in different eras and social contexts, it is interesting that, in that period, prostitution first became a trade exercised by women at the mass level, whence one can say that during the manufacturing period the individual proletarian woman was born fundamentally to be a prostitute (Fortunati, 1981; 1984, p.209).

From this insoluble contradiction in the woman's condition as an unwaged worker in a wage economy (Dalla Costa and James, 1972) sprouted the conditions for mass prostitution in that period — and also the conditions on which the same phenomenon is based today, but on a vaster scale, in order to generate profits for one of the most flourishing industries at the world level, the sex industry. This led the World Coalition against Trafficking in Women to present the first World Convention against Sexual Exploitation in Brussels (May 1993). The women in the Coalition also agreed to work for the UN's adoption of the convention and its ratification by the national governments.

Internationally, in fact, the sexual exploitation of women by organised crime is increasingly alarming. In Italy, these organisations have already brought many women from Africa and Eastern Europe to work as prostitutes. The tricks used to cover up exploitation by prostitution — for example, wife sales by catalogue or "sexual tourism" in exotic destinations — are legion and well-known. According to the Coalition's charges, various countries already accept forms of "sexual tourism" as a planned component in national income. Thanks to individual women and NGOs, studies of the direct government responsibility in forcing women to serve as prostitutes for soldiers during World War II have also begun.

Woman's condition in capitalism is born with violence (just as the free waged worker is born with violence); it is forged on the witches' pyres, and it is maintained with violence (Dalla Costa, 1978). Within the current context of the

population's reproduction, the woman continues to suffer violence as the subject of poverty at the world level (since her unpaid responsibility for the home makes her the weak contracting party in the external labour market), but because of her lack of economic resources, she also suffers a further violence of being sucked increasingly into organised prostitution. The warlike visage that development increasingly assumes simply worsens woman's condition still further and magnifies the practice and mentality of violence against women.<sup>4</sup> A paradigmatic case is the war rape exercised as ethnic rape in the war in ex-Yugoslavia.

I have mentioned only some of the social macro-operations which allowed the capitalist system to "take off" during the period of primitive accumulation. But just as important were a series of other operations (Marx, 1976, chs. 26–33) left unmentioned here for the sake of brevity, but which could also be illustrated today as aspects of the continual re-foundation on a world scale of the class relationship on which capitalist development rests: the perpetuation of the stratification of workers in society based on the separation and counterposition imposed through the sexual division of labour.

All the considerations are designed to lead to one fundamental thesis: capitalist development *has always been unsustainable* because of its *human impact*. To understand the point, all one needs to do is to take the viewpoint of those who have been and continue to be killed by it. A presupposition of capitalism's birth was the sacrifice of a large part of humanity, mass exterminations, the production of hunger and misery, slavery, violence and terror. Its continuation requires the same presuppositions. Particularly from the *woman's* viewpoint, capitalist development has always been unsustainable because it places her in an *unsustainable contradiction*, by being an unwaged worker in a wage economy and, hence, for that reason, denied the right to an autonomous existence. And if we look at the subsistence economies — continually besieged, undermined and overwhelmed by capitalist development — we see that capitalist development continually deprives women of the land and water which for them are fundamental means of production and subsistence in sustaining the entire community.

The expropriation of land leaped to the world's attention in January, 1994 with the revolt of the indigenous people of Chiapas in Mexico. The media could hardly avoid reporting it because of the crucial role played by Mexico's alignment with the Western powers through the agreement for the North American Free Trade Area. The perversity of producing wealth by expropriation and the production of misery was there for all to see. But it is also significant that the dramatic consequences of expropriation of the land led those involved in drawing up the *Women's Action Agenda 21* in Miami in November, 1991 to make a forceful appeal for women to be guaranteed land and access to food. At the same time, the process of capitalist expansion — in this case, with the Green Revolution — led many people to practice the selective abortion of female fetuses and girl-child infanticide in some areas of the Third World (Shiva, 1990): from sexual genocide to preventive annihilation.



The question of unsustainable development has become topical fairly recently with the emergence of evidence for various environmental disasters and forms of harm inflicted on the ecosystem. The Earth, the water running in its veins, and the air surrounding it have come to be seen as an ecosystem, a living organism of which humans are a part-humans who depend for their life on the life and equilibrium of the ecosystem — as against an idea of Nature as the “other” of Humanity — a Nature to be dominated and whose elements are to be appropriated as though they were potential commodities waiting in a warehouse. After five centuries of expropriation and domination, the Earth is returning to the limelight. In the past it was sectioned, fenced in, and denied to the free producers. Now, it is itself being expropriated of its reproductive powers — turned topsy-turvy, vivisectioned, and made a commodity. But these extreme operations (like the “banking” and patenting of the genetic codes of living species) belong to a single process whose logic of exploitation and domination has brought the planet to such devastation in human and environmental terms as to provoke disquieting questions as to the future possibilities and modalities of human reproduction.

Environmental destruction is united with the destruction wreaked on an increasingly large proportion of humanity. The destruction wreaked on humans is necessary for the perpetuation of capitalist development today, just as it was at its origins. To stop subscribing to this general destruction, and hence to approach the problem of “sustainable development,” means, above all, to take into account the struggles that are moving against capitalist development in the metropolises and the rural areas. It also means finding the ways, and defining the practices to set capitalist development behind us by elaborating a different approach to knowledge.

But in interpreting and taking into account the various anti-capitalist struggles and movements, a global vision must be maintained of the many sections of society rebelling in various forms and contexts throughout the planet. To give priority to some and ignore others would mean adopting the same logic of separation and counterposition which is the soul of capitalist development. The cancellation and annihilation of a part of humanity cannot be given as a foregone conclusion. In the metropolises and the advanced capitalist countries in general, many no longer have the waged job which, in their context, is the source of subsistence. At the same time, the welfare measures representing the complex of individual and collective rights that contribute to ensuring survival are being cut back. Human reproduction has already reached its limits: the woman's reproductive energy is increasingly dried out like a spring whose water has been used for too much land, and water, says Vandana Shiva (1990), does not multiply.

Reproduction is crushed by the general intensification of labour, by the over-extension of the working day, amidst cuts in resources whereby the lack of waged work, too, becomes a stress-laden search for work and/or illegal employment, added to the laborious work of reproduction. I have no space to give a more ex-

tensive description of the complex phenomena that have led to the drastic reduction in the birth-rate in the advanced countries, particularly in Italy (fertility rate 1.26, population growth zero). But it should also be remembered that women's refusal to function as machines for reproducing labour-power, demanding instead to reproduce themselves and others as social individuals, has represented a major moment of women's resistance and struggle (Dalla Costa and James, 1972). The contradiction in women's condition — whereby women are at a disadvantage in searching for financial autonomy through waged work outside the home, since they also remain primarily responsible for labour-power's production and reproduction — has exploded in all its unsustainability: women in the advanced countries have fewer and fewer children. In general, humanity in the advanced countries is less and less desirous of reproducing itself.

But women's great refusal in countries like Italy at the same time demands an answer to the overall question we are discussing: it demands a *new type of development* in which human reproduction is not built on an *unsustainable sacrifice by women*, as part of a conception and structure of life which is nothing but labour time within an *intolerable sexual hierarchy*. The “wage” struggle, in both its direct and indirect aspects, does not concern solely “advanced” areas as something distinct from “rural” ones, for there are very few situations in which survival rests solely on the land. To sustain the community, the wage economy is most often interwoven with resources typical of a subsistence economy, whose overall conditions are continually under pressure from the political and economic decisions of the major financial agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1995). Today, it would thus be a fatal error not to defend the wage level and guarantees for the income — in money, goods and services — that it is working humanity's right to demand, since the wealth and power of capitalist society has been accumulated on the basis of five centuries of its labour. At the same time, land, water and forests must remain available for those whose subsistence comes from them, and to whom capitalist expropriation offer only extinction. As different sectors of mankind seek and demand a different kind of development, the strength to demand it grows to the extent that no one accepts their own extinction or the extinction of others.

The question of human reproduction posed by women's rejection of procreation is now turning into the demand for another type of development and seeks completely new horizons. The concept of welfare is not enough. The demand is now for happiness. The demand is for a formulation of development that opens up the satisfaction of the basic needs on whose suppression capitalism was born and has grown. One of those needs is for time as against a life consisting solely of labour, another is the need for physical life/sexuality (above all, with one's own and other people's bodies, with the body as a whole, not just the functions that make it more productive) as against the body as a mere container for labour-power or a machine for reproducing labour-power. Yet another need is the need for sociality/collectivity (not just with other men and women, but



with the various living beings with which can now only be encountered after a laborious journey out of the city) as against the separation/isolation of individuals in the body of society and living nature as a whole. And still another need is for public space (not just the public parks and squares or the few other areas permitted to the collectivity) as against the enclosure, privatisation, and continual restriction of available space. Then there is the desire to find a relationship with the totality of the Earth as a public space as well as the need for play, indeterminacy, discovery, amazement, contemplation, emotion....

Obviously, the above has no pretence to "defining" fundamental needs, but it registers some whose systematic frustration by this mode of production has certainly not served human happiness. But I think one must have the courage to pose happiness as a problem. This requires the reanalysis of the notion of development, in order to think again "in the grand manner," and to reject the fear that raising the question of happiness may appear as too daring or as something too subjective. Rigoberta Menchu (Burgos, 1991) tells how the mothers in her community teach their girls from the start that the life facing them will be a life of immense toil and suffering. But she also wondered why, and the why reflects very precise, capitalist reasons: "We started to reflect on the roots of the problem, and we came to the conclusion that its roots lay in possession of the land. We did not have the best land, the landowners did. And every time we clear new land, they try to take it from us or to steal it in some way" (Burgos, 1991, p.144). Rigoberta has raised the problem of how to change this state of affairs; she has not cultivated the myth of human unhappiness. And the Christian teaching she has used alongside the Mayan traditions, has offered various lessons, including that of the Old Testament's Judith.

In my view, it is no coincidence that, in these last 20 years, the women's question, the question of the indigenous populations,<sup>5</sup> and the question of the Earth have assumed growing importance, for they are linked by an especially close synergy. The path towards a different kind of development cannot ignore them. There is much knowledge still in civilisations that have not died but have managed to conceal themselves, and their secrets have been maintained thanks to their resistance to the will to annihilate them. The Earth encloses so many powers, especially its power to reproduce itself and humanity as one of its parts. These powers have been discovered, preserved and enhanced more by women's knowledge than male science. It is crucial, then, that this other knowledge — of women, of indigenous populations and of the Earth, whose "passiveness" is capable of regenerating life (Shiva, 1990) — should find a way of emerging and being heard. This knowledge appears now as a decisive force that can lift the increasingly deadly siege capitalist development imposes on human reproduction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Italian by Julian Bees.

<sup>2</sup> This essay was first presented as a paper at the seminar, Women's Unpaid Labour and the World System, organised by the Japan Foundation, April 8 1994, Tokyo, as part of the Foundation's "European Women's Study Tour for Environmental Issues." It has since been published in many languages, and was first published in English in *Open Marxism*, vol. III, edited by W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn et al., Pluto Press, London, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> The protest over the Narmada dam has received extensive coverage in international publications and the international media. For a critical interpretation of the proliferation of dams in the world, see Shiva (1990).

<sup>4</sup> Currently, there is a wide-ranging debate on the issue. Michel's essay (1987) remains a good reference-point.

<sup>5</sup> As was stressed by the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples at the NGO Forum in Vienna (June 10–12, 1993), these peoples have worked especially hard during the last two decades to get their voice heard, to make progress on questions concerning them (the question of land, above all), to obtain greater respect for and a formalisation of their rights in written form. Significant stages in the process have been the Kari Oca Declaration, the Land Charter of the Indigenous Peoples, and the Convention of the International Labour Organisation on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO Conv. No. 169). This growing liaison and promotion of their demands was a major factor in the speedy expressions of solidarity from the North American indigenous populations during the rebellion of the indigenous people of Chiapas.

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