08 2005

The Subsistence Perspective

Maria Mies

translated by Lisa Rosenblatt

Transcription of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Cologne, Germany, 26 min., 2005

I'm Maria Mies, a retired sociology professor. I started working at the Fachhochschule here in the Department for Social Pedagogy in 1972. I am also quite active in various social movements: initially in the women's movement, but then also the ecology movement, the peace movement, and recently, since 1997, I've been active in the anti-globalization movement.

First of all, I have to say that we are not talking specifically about subsistence economy. When I say "we," I am referring to my two friends Claudia von Werlhof and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, with whom I developed this approach in the mid-1970s. We aren't speaking of a subsistence economy, but of a subsistence perspective. That is to say, it's not an economic model, but rather, a new orientation, a new way of looking at the economy. That means something entirely different. It doesn't just apply to the economy, but also to society, culture, history, and all other possible areas. The second thing is that a lot of people ask: What do you mean by

subsistence? I usually say: For us, subsistence is the opposite of commodity production. Commodity production is the goal of capitalist production, in other words, a general production of goods, everything that there is, has to be transformed into a commodity. It is possible to observe that today, especially in the course of globalization. Subsistence production has an entirely different goal, namely, the direct satisfaction of human needs. This isn't accomplished through money and the production of goods. For us, quite essential is that it is a direct production and reproduction of life. That's why we talk of "life production" rather than "commodity production".

I would also like to add that we discovered this perspective – that's what we really have to call it – at a point when we were just beginning to deal with housework in the women's movement. At the time, a worldwide discussion was going on, feminists everywhere were involved. The issue was: what does housework mean in capitalism? Why isn't this work seen as work? Why isn't it paid? Why is it non-paid labor? We recognized that in capitalism this work can't be paid, because if it were, the accumulation model would collapse. That doesn't mean that there wouldn't be any capitalism anymore, as some thought, but that it would definitely be much too expensive if all of the work done in the household were paid for: bearing children, raising them, reproducing the man – as it was called at the time – taking care of the old and the infirm. If that were paid labor that had to be paid like regular paid labor, then it would be impossible to pay for it and that would fundamentally alter the entire model of capitalism.

So we arrived at the concept – which actually doesn't stem from us, since the subsistence concept is an old concept – that what we call life production is actually necessary as a prerequisite for all types of paid labor. At the time, we stated: Without subsistence labor,

there would be no paid labor. But without paid labor, there is still subsistence labor: It is the undying prerequisite for not only every type of life, but also every type of work – that food, housing, and immediate life concerns are taken care of. This work is extremely valuable, but it is never paid for monetarily. That was the point where we saw this connection. And then we also saw that, in addition, housework is not the only type of work that is exploited in this way at practically no cost to capitalism. Instead, there is similar work among small farmers who, everywhere in the world, work for their own subsistence. They sell things at the market, too, but they aren't wage laborers. And what is interesting about this, is that they are just as absent as women are in the gross national product or gross domestic product. They don't count, as one women from New Zealand, Marilyn Waring described in a very interesting book, *If Women Counted* – If women counted, what then? And then we discovered, third, that the small farmers' work also has something to do with housework and both have something to do with the work in the colonies.

Then this concept emerged, as all three of us were in the Third World for extended periods. I was in India for many years, my two friends were in Latin America, and so we realized: if entire countries hadn't been exploited as colonies for long periods of time, then there wouldn't be any capitalism. And if they were treated equally today, all of the work in the "colonies" – I still call them "colonies" – well, then there wouldn't be much to accumulate. And that's why we call all of these relations colonial relations. The man-woman relationship is colonial, the relationship between the small farmer and industry is also colonial, and naturally, the colonial relationships between metropolises and colonies are definitely colonial.

First of all, I would like to emphasize that the subsistence perspective and the subsistence societies and economies didn't disappear by themselves; but instead, that was done to them, those were entirely intentional policies. Subsistence societies existed all over the place prior to World War II, both out in the country and in the city. Here, in Germany, the small farmers were the ones who produced the majority of the foodstuffs and supplied the population. But then again, to my surprise, there was also a wide range of subsistence production in the cities, even in the U.S. An American feminist did research into that and discovered that until the 1960s, a great deal of subsistence activities continued to exist in the neighborhoods in major industrial cities. First, there was the neighborly, mutual aid. This principle of mutual assistance, of reciprocity was in place. Vegetables and fruits were preserved; either one had a little garden somewhere or you bought the produce inexpensively at the market and preserved it. This was mainly a household activity and the same goes for tasks such as sewing, small repairs, whereby a neighbor or a friend always helped out. The working class would probably not have been able to survive in these cities without the prolonged presence of these forms of reciprocity. But then the American government implemented from above an entirely new economic model with the newly emerging Fordism. First, wages for industrial workers went up. If you compared what you could buy for these wages with what you could make yourself, well, there was a huge difference. So, people gradually stopped making things.

Through certain measures, the farms then gradually went into debt and could no longer be maintained. At the time, people said: "You can't live off of farming anymore, I'm leaving." These same policies continue today. The other thing is that there was a push to change the entire agricultural business to monoculture, mass production,

chemical fertilizers, and pesticides; to bring in big machines, as that was again something that promoted industry. All of this was based on petroleum. The farmers were meant to mass-produce milk, butter, meat, eggs, etc., and so we now have these huge agrarian factories everywhere. They then got subsidies in order to produce a surplus and this surplus was subsequently dumped on the Third World, as we all know.

This opportunity barely existed for the Third World. The same agricultural policies were implemented there, for example, with the Green Revolution, and the small farmers lost their land or they had to sell it because they couldn't compete with the large ones or because they couldn't pay back debts. But when they moved to the cities, then they landed in the slums. And there they practiced subsistence production. That was, by the way, the starting point for our interest in the idea of subsistence. At this conference in Bielefeld, it was about subsistence production in the Third World. A lot of people had observed what people did in the slums in Africa, and in a number of other countries. The people had to survive somehow, but they didn't have any land anymore. They did everything they could, like casual labor, and they stole, too; they did this and that or they were servants somewhere. No one really paid attention to them. There was no social net to catch them, and there still isn't today. What that means is that subsistence production was necessary in the rural areas to be able to pose resistance against all of these policies, and in the cities it became a politics of survival.

Now you ask me, quite justifiably, how can a life, which is often so wretched, provide a perspective for a better society? At first it sounds a bit absurd. But if we look closely at how people survive and everything that they do, then we discover that the old principles I spoke of previously were reactivated: there is mutual

assistance and people are again willing to do everything they possibly can do by themselves. That is a new and positive perspective, since with these activities – even if they take place at a very low level – people rediscover their sovereignty, their own authority to produce their lives, as we call it. That is no shortcoming, it is something very positive to discover, that we are entirely capable of collectively producing and organizing our lives together with others.

Naturally, you also need money. I don't want to deny that at all, but exclusively working for money is not the best thing – that is only one side of it. The other is that subsistence production, or subsistence orientation, satisfies needs in a much more comprehensive way than purchased products ever could. These purchased goods actually don't contain anything. It is dead labor that is materialized there. They are used, then they're gone, then you have to buy new goods and people are never satisfied. That is, namely, the point. That begins with all of the appliances and technical achievements: first you have a black and white television, then that isn't enough, then you have to have a color television, then you need a computer, then a cell phone, now children have to have cell phones and it goes on and on.

But can we say that we have a happy, satisfied society? I've heard of a movement in the U.S. that is searching for the good life. That is an old economic concept, already established by Aristotle as the goal of the economy. The goal of the economy is the good life. The people in the U.S. say, we work and work, but the good life never arrives. Where is the good life? That's why we say that that is the goal of subsistence. Subsistence is not shortcoming and misery, as we are constantly made to believe. If it is understood correctly that is, and not as individual subsistence – which is not possible – then you always have to get together with others to do something,

not only to survive, but to live well. Then it is actually possible to create the good life. You experience that you are your own authority, that together with others, you're sovereign. That is an entirely different type of satisfaction than when you have your eight-hour day behind you and perhaps also earned quite a bit. The good life is meant to arrive at the age of sixty-five, but even then it doesn't come. I think that is one of the reasons why people in our society are so unhappy. The alienation of paid labor can't be neutralized by even such great sums of money. But in the subsistence perspective, that is entirely possible. I can prove that based on a few examples.

Friends of mine in Bangladesh began to defend themselves against what the major multinational concerns were doing in the agricultural industry. They found out that the soil is destroyed, that the water is full of arsenic and the yields are sinking. The promise of the Green Revolution was that in monoculture everything would be produced in great amounts. They found out that that wasn't true. Then they realized that earlier, it wasn't the case at all. And, they founded a new farmers' movement called Nayakrishi Andalon, started by women. The women realized that since the Green Revolution, the men had started to beat them. They hadn't known such violence before, as they were the guardians of the seeds. The seeds were in their control, they stored them, told the farmers when it was time to sow, etc.

So they got together and decided they wanted to change things. The entire initiative was started by women to regain a fulfilling and happy life. That was their first explicit goal. We want to have a happy life! If you ask the farmers in this movement, then all of them will tell you that they want a happy life. Just ask a farmer here in Germany if his work makes him happy... The first thing the women said was that there would be no multi-national

corporations allowed in. They declared the villages as non-toxic villages. No multi is going to come in here with all of the poisons that they spray. I forgot to say that many of the women, because they were so unhappy, committed suicide by drinking the pesticides that were standing around and poisoning themselves. Now today, the same principles are back in practice again, actually, old principles, but also new ones allowing agriculture to be fruitful and productive without putting in all of the inputs from industrial countries. There are a lot of things that they rediscovered, such as diversity. They aren't practicing monoculture, they use their own compost, they help each other, and they don't purchase seeds anymore. In almost all villages they have seed houses, and these are again under the control of the women who store and preserve the seeds. They are sovereign again; they have what the Via Campesina, an oppositional, worldwide small farmers' organization that calls for nutritional sovereignty. I think that all subsistence begins with nutritional sovereignty. That is an example and that's now a huge movement in Bangladesh.

There are also many examples here, in our country, which aren't so well known. There are the communes, those are more well-known, such as Niederkaufungen or Longo Mai, that have already worked for a long time as communes in a subsistence lifestyle. But what impressed me most are the communal international gardens that have existed in Germany for some time now. They were founded by refugee women in Göttingen. The first ones were planted in Göttingen when the women said that they weren't happy there and didn't want to just get charity the whole time. A social worker asked them what was missing, what do you want most? They said that what they missed most were their gardens. Then they got land from the Evangelical Church and began to garden together. Not allotment plots, but communal gardens where the different groups

of migrant women and men (men joined in later) do their gardening. Meanwhile, there are already seventy of these communal, international gardens in different cities in Germany. There are also a few in Cologne.

It is very, very essential that we look at the whole picture nowadays. We can't just set up a little subsistence island somewhere in a village or in the city and then be satisfied with that. Instead, we need to maintain a global view since today we have a globalized economy. That is simply a fact.

There are a few principles that are just as modern today as they were before. I have already mentioned a few of them. If these principles were at the center of the economy rather than individual egoism, as is the case today – all of economics is based on the assumption that at the center is individual use, individual interest. If instead, there were something there such as mutual aid, reciprocity, communality, collective work, and also collective enjoyment, then that would be another matter. When consumption and production are no longer so strongly separated, then that is also another matter. Those are thoughts that first must enter our minds. That is not so simple, and I can see that myself. It is difficult to step down from this consumption model that we have now, although people know that it hasn't made us happy.

If we had a subsistence orientation, then we would need different technology. Built everywhere into our technology is wear and tear, work stress is built into the technology and, as I always say, our technology is not system neutral. It is capitalist. Apart from that it is patriarchal, but I don't want to go into that now. We need a different way of thinking about technology. We have to also ask what type of technology we need to actually make our work easier and not to simply throw more goods onto the market.

The idea that industrial society and industrial monoculture are the most productive systems continues to dominate. That applies not only to agriculture, but also to all other forms of monoculture, that this type of work is the most productive and subsistence production is entirely unproductive. That's why it isn't included in the gross national product, for example. It is not productive; only what can be measured monetarily is productive. Of course, that's not true even with this well-known productivity concept, which is much too narrow to grasp the true productivity of labor and of subsistence production.

This diversity, this symbiosis between various forms of life – animals, plants, and people – all living together in a certain area, all with their livelihood and good life, you couldn't achieve that by putting together as many monocultures as you like.

The text has been edited by Harald Otto in the course of the project transform *(http://transform.eipcp.net).*