

Reviews

As ISIS CELEBRATES ITS 25TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY IN 1999, WE ARE PRINTING A SERIES OF REVIEWS OF GROUNDBREAKING BOOKS ON FEMINISM PUBLISHED IN THE LAST 25 YEARS.

Toward a Feminist Alternative Economy

A review of Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* by Patricia Fe C. Gonzales

I got hold of *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* only in 1995, almost ten years after it was published. Perhaps, this is because my old views and attitudes prevented me from accessing new theoretical materials. For a long time, I was imprisoned in a closed worldview and was slow to grasp and adjust to new ideas. Now after a protracted process of opening up to change, I consider myself a new feminist, in the way that I now understand feminism.

The book was published in 1986. A fast-track process of convergences and alliances that caused the fall of the Marcos dictatorship characterised Philippine politics at this time. For the Philippine Left, this year marked a political defeat as Cory Aquino's yellow camp and the Ramos and Enrile factions of the military got hold of the reins of power. The low period for the Philippine Left can be likened to a woman's miscarriage. Along with many comrades, I felt a frustration for being robbed of the birthing of Philippine democracy.

The decade of the '80s was a period of reckoning for Left governments, parties and movements the

world over. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the ensuing wars, the confirmation of news about the massive killings in Cambodia, the shift in policies in China and later on even in Vietnam that subsumed these economic systems into the dominant capitalist system in the world. The crisis of vision that these events created became the main reason for the splits that tore apart the socialist and other social movements in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Maria Mies, I dare presume, was influenced by these events. Her book definitely helped me read these events in a new light.

I stumbled upon this book while preparing a concept paper for Sarilaya. As a new organisation of women, Sarilaya was in a collective search for a fresh articulation of its activism. I am not a bookworm but this book is one of the few books that I read from cover to cover in one sitting. From here onwards, the core message of the book became for me a theoretical guide in summing up my own involvement in social change. For me, this core message is one key to discovering

the new road to social transformation.

In this work, Maria Mies carefully analyses old concepts and views them in a completely new, sharper, deeper and more comprehensive way.

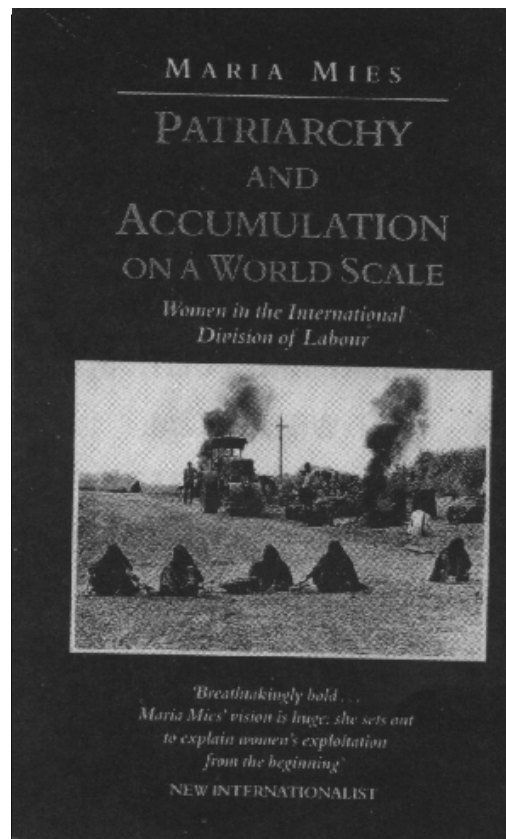
She proceeds to do this through a historical dissection of issues. Mies identifies the paradigm of Man-the-Hunter as the origin of the paradigm of the Patriarchal Growth Model of Development. She also delves into the political economy of housewifisation. She shows her readers how the whole process of pushing women out to the margins, and out of the sphere of “productive labour” actually served the whole international process of capital accumulation and perpetuated violence against women in the light of the capitalist accumulation process. Mies’ critical eye does not spare socialist countries as she briefly reveals how this same accumulation process happened in these countries.

The core message of Mies’ work is capsulised in this portion of her book:

“A look at the brief history of the feminist movement can teach us that the rejection of all dualistic and hierarchical divisions, created by capitalist patriarchy, viz., between public and private, political and economic, body and mind, head and heart, etc., was a correct and successful strategy. This was not a preplanned program of action, but the issues raised were of such nature that feminists could expect success only by radically transcending these colonising divisions... for it became increasingly clear that the capitalist mode of production was not identical with the famous capital-wage labour relation, but that it needed different categories of colonies, particularly women, other peoples and nature, to uphold the

model of ever-expanding growth...”

“At present, I think it is neces-



sary that feminists worldwide begin to identify and demystify all colonising divisions created by capitalist patriarchy, particularly by the interplay between the sexual and the international division of labour... Feminists everywhere would do well to give up the belief expressed by scientific socialism that capitalism through its greed for never-ending accumulation or ‘growth’ has created the preconditions for women’s liberation, which can be realised under socialism. Today, it is more than evident that the accumulation process itself destroys the core of human essence everywhere because it is based on the destruction of women’s autarky over their lives and bodies. As women have nothing to gain in their humanity from the continuation of the growth model, they are able to develop a perspective of society

which is not based on the exploitation of nature, women and other people.”

At first glance, these concepts seem not new at all, or at least not contradictory to old analyses. The analysis made by national-democrats about the semicolonial, semifeudal character of Philippine society for instance, seems to agree with the argument that there are other areas of exploitation outside the capital-wage labour relations (notably, the movement’s position on class analysis includes other sectors and classes like the peasantry, the semiproletariat and women). A closer look into Mies’ arguments would reveal an essential difference, however. This is most vividly expressed in her concept of labour and labour value.

Marxist theory focused on wage-labour relations as the key arena of exploitation and oppression in the capitalist mode of production. It has traditionally looked at other economic relations as backward forms of social relations and therefore will be superseded or negated by the more advanced mode of production. For this reason, the socialist utopia is also built on the transcendence of this mode in the all too familiar linear view of economic development. It has denied the fact that the continued existence of “nonfree” labour of women, nature and the colonies had been the bases for the persistence of the capitalist growth model.

Socialism as practiced also fell into the same trap and started on an accumulation process fed by the surplus production of peasants, women and other nonproletarian classes. The utopia was to be experienced with the height of technological progress when all the technological gadgets would free humans from the burden of work.

Socialists focus on wage-labour-capital relations as the principal contradiction and therefore the sphere around which the fulcrum of systemic change will occur. In this context, women can achieve liberation only if they are freed from domestic labour and participate in socially productive labour. This view, according to Mies, “puts in the shadows” the intrinsic value of women’s work—the production of life.

This is true also of the way both capitalism and socialism regarded nature as an object of domination and exploitation and a complete denial of the value of nature’s work in the production and reproduction of life. It is also a manifestation of the dualistic attitude towards humanity and nature, where human is considered higher and natural as lower. This makes nature a dominion of humans, completely vulnerable to their exploitation and control.

I still remember old discussions among comrades on labour value. We used to illustrate this concept with the following example: “A log is a useless object unless man applies labour power to it and transforms it into something of value – a chair, a table, etc.” You will notice here that we completely ignored the work of nature in growing a tree and the value that should be given to that “work.”

In the final sections of her book, Mies proceeds to describe some of the features of an alternative economy whose basic assumption consists of a total rejection of the “growth model.” The first component is a change to a greater autarky of overdeveloped and underdeveloped countries. This means greater self-sufficiency in food, clothing and shelter.

A feminist conception of an alternative economy will place the transformation of the existing sexual division of labour at the cen-

ter of the restructuring process.

Feminists do not start with external ecology, economy and politics, but with social ecology, the center of which is the relation between men and women. Autonomy over our bodies, our lives, is therefore the first demand of the international feminist movement. The search for

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an alternative economy therefore starts with the respect for the autonomy of women’s bodies and their productive capacity to create new life. This would require the abolition of the violence that characterises the patriarchal man-woman relationship worldwide. It also demands the rejection of state control over women’s fertility. Women have to be freed of being a natural resource for individual men as well as for the state as the Total Patriarch.

In an alternative economy, Mies contends that men have to share the responsibility for the immediate production of life, for children, for housework and for caring for the sick and the aging. The

liberation of men and women are interrelated. It is not possible for women in our societies to totally break out of the cages of patriarchal relations unless men began a movement in this direction. A men’s movement against patriarchy should not be motivated by benevolent paternalism but by the desire to restore unto themselves a sense of dignity and respect.

At the end, she presents a new economic alternative and the intermediate steps to achieve the main goals. She clarifies, however, that concepts are important as “struggle concepts” and not based on theoretical definitions worked out by any “theoretical mastermind” of the movement. She thinks that it has not been helpful for feminists to confine groups or trends in thinking into different “isms”—liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism or socialist transformation. Her whole book however presents a very rich, deep and comprehensive system of ideas, that I am tempted to call the views she presents as a new world view— an “ism.”

What I find most valuable about Maria Mies’ theses are their great explanatory value for social realities, especially the reality of women in both developed and underdeveloped countries. While I still detect gaps in her discussion about the alternative economy, an open mind must assert the author’s own principle that these concepts are struggle concepts and are therefore shaped along the way to true social transformation.

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