

Climate Change Coalition/DFG Dossier on Alternative Climate Change Policies. 2009

Draft paper

Ewa Charkiewicz <ewa\_charkiewicz @ yahoo. com>

### **A feminist critique of the climate change discourse. From biopolitics to necropolitics?**

Global ecology and global markets interact in a number of ways, to the point of indistinction between life and market. On the one hand, global expansion of markets increases demand for resources and puts more pressures on ecosystem integrity, with results including global climate change. On the other hand, the measures to address climate change rely on market instruments for environmental policy. Cap and trade measures contribute to create new virtual financial markets. Markets not only draw in resources and throw out waste, as pointed out by Georgescu Roegen (1971), one of the founding father of ecological economics. Neoclassical model of the market is now offered as a compelling conceptual model to think of solutions to the problems of environmental degradation.

Close to half a century ago Michal Foucault, a social philosopher from France, coined the concept of biopolitics to point out to the problem of how human life as such is managed, or administered. In Foucault's take, biopolitics is a historically contingent mode of mutually constitutive implication of power over life with knowledge of human life with the effect of differential adjustment of human bodies with the forms of accumulation of capital (Foucault, [1976], 1990). Neoliberal biopolitics expands the notion of the economic to include the social (Foucault, 2004, Rose and Miller, 1990). Such domains of government as social security systems and other public forms of social provisioning, such as education or health care, as well as public administration (the state itself) are reorganized on terms of economic rationality. The firm becomes a regulatory ideal, a beauty model, for state, school or hospital. Environmental policy has been subsumed under economic rationality, too.

The way the interactions between markets and environment are governed has far-reaching consequences for human and non-human life. Framed in economics as environmental and human resources, the pair has been neatly captured by Teresa Brennan as "living nature".<sup>1</sup> The work of

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Brennan's revision of labor theory of value was first published in the ISEE journal, Ecological

Teresa Brennan and many others exemplifies a new feminist social critique that puts new light on relationships between people, nature and capital. These relationships, like all social institutions are fundamentally gendered, that is production of knowledge, access to resources, division of labor, responsibilities and entitlements are founded, signified and legitimised with the concepts of gender and gender relations (Scott, 1987). While for decades concerns have been raised about ecological and social limits to growth, with the latter focused on poverty, feminist political thinkers point to the effects that neoliberal marketisation has had on social reproduction or the economy of care, where people's lives are sustained, maintained and reproduced on the level of everyday life and generational reproduction (Bakker, 2004, Elson, 1994, Luxton, 2006, Sen, 1994,). Neoclassical model of economics is blind to the maintenance of life in the households, or thinks of households as firms, maximising its unitary advantage (Bergman, 1996). The concept of care economy shows how markets and states depend on the reproduction of life of subjects (configured as taxpayers, workers, soldiers, consumers) that takes place in the economy of the households. The prevailing part of caring and reproductive work is done by women. The expansion of the concept of care economy to include relationships with nature opens up new possibilities for linking feminist and environmental agendas. In this short think piece I will show how the relationships between nature and human reproduction have been captured by neoliberal *biopolitics*, and discuss the possibilities for strategic interventions in the current global conjuncture.

### **From managerialism to marketization**

In the period from the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the Rio summit in 1992 up to today, global environmental politics have been fundamentally reframed in line with the rationality of the market, and have become one of the avenues through which the neoliberal revolution came affect more and more areas of human life. The changes in environmental policy were effected in two steps: first, the techno-managerial and fiscal instruments gained ground; second, a shift from material to virtual took place.

Thirty years ago, after the demise of attempts at control and prevent measures, the solutions to global environmental crisis were framed with multilayered concept of sustainable development. The peak point of these debates was global program of action known as Agenda 21 (Agenda for the twenty first century), formulated at the UN conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Agenda 21 was a multilayered document, that accommodated different vocabularies, including changing consumption

---

Economics (1997). She further worked on the concept of living nature in her book *Exhausting Modernity. Ground for a New Economy* (2000). More on her work later in this paper.

patterns, linking poverty eradication with safeguarding of environment, as well as techno-economic language of clean technologies and fiscal instruments. While the strategy of offering women as better environmental managers was debatable, nevertheless the intergovernmental Agenda 21 gave unprecedented visibility to women. At the time, political space of UN global conferences made possible the articulation of dissent in the form of alternative treaties from Rio, or Women's Agenda 21 which represented an alternative vision of social and ecological justice and participatory democracy with women.

In the course of only 10 years, former critics of Rio who in 1992 had rejected the summit's compromise between 'the environment' and 'development' by 2002 turned into defenders of *Agenda 21*. The turning point was the 'Rio+10' conference on sustainable development in Johannesburg (WSSD), where the battle for the North-South deal on environment and development, and for keeping the Agenda 21 intact was lost. In Johannesburg, at World Conference on Sustainable Development in 2002 (Rio + 10) the question of ecological and social limits of economic growth was displaced from the summit agenda. In the final documents of the Rio + 10, the conceptualization of sustainable development was reduced to global environmental management, poverty was no longer an issue of access to sustainable livelihoods. With two minor exceptions women disappeared from final document. Sustainable development morphed into global environmental management, the threads of which were already in the Agenda 21. To quote the former general secretary of the U.N., Kofi Annan (2001), in the preparation of the "Rio+10"-conference in 2002: "We have to make globalisation work for sustainable development."<sup>2</sup> In fact, it was the other way round, sustainable development was retooled to work for neoliberal global governance.

Now, the solution to interlinked global crises no longer lay in fundamentally changing consumption and production patterns, but in liberalising global trade and investment flows. Trade as the new saint and the new saviour of development was supposed to raise all boats, thus rendering any discussion of poverty redundant. According to the script of free market-ideology, liberalising investment flows was to reduce poverty and generate funds for environmental improvements. With the help of fiscal policy incentives, environmental management and new technologies, the environmental mess will be cleaned up. In reality, designed and implemented to speed up capital flows and turnover, the policies of liberalising trade and investment flows further intensified pressures on the environment. Ironically, in light of *man*-made climate change, the persuasive neoliberal metaphor of raising all boats literally comes true...

---

<sup>2</sup> Annan, Kofi: Implementing Agenda 21. Report from the Secretary General to the ECOSOC 2001, [www.johannesburgsummit.org](http://www.johannesburgsummit.org)

Crucial to the move towards neoliberal biopolitics was the relocation of environmental policy into the domain of virtual financial markets. This move was consolidated on a global scale with the Kyoto Protocol. Pollution was no longer something that policy-making sought to avert, and its materiality was removed to the subtext. Instead, environmental policy itself became a means of creating virtual markets, such as local markets for pollution permits or global cap-and-trade measures. What Rio+10 did to sustainable development, the Kyoto Protocol did to climate change discourse, in effect harnessing global ecology in the service of market expansion, including virtual financial markets.

From the perspective of the materialities of everyday life, reducing 'environmental policy' to mere techno-managerial fixes makes it far more difficult to avert global ecological and climate crises, as the politically and technologically mediated growth in the volume, scale and speed up of production and consumption has far outpaced environmental efficiency gains (Sonntag, 2001). The shift to market-based instruments either transfers some of the environmental costs of production and consumption to the end user, i.e. the consumer (with poorer households paying the largest share of cost relative to their income); or creates new virtual money markets for pollution permits through global cap and trade systems, with no effects on the real economy in terms of reducing global emissions volumes. As pointed out in UN DESA policy note of 2009, *Achieving Sustainable Development in An Age of Climate Change* the policy-focus on fiscal incentives for green technologies and cap-and-trade measures will offload the costs of dealing with climate change onto developing countries. Just like earlier end-of-pipe policies, these new techno-financial strategies do not decouple economic growth from environmental pressures, and continue to socialize the risks and costs of ecological crises onto households. Given historical gender-divisions of labour and responsibilities as well as the exigencies of biological reproduction, women who provide caring work at formal or informal markets as well as in their households bear a substantial load of making up for the environmental and social costs of neoliberal governance. The loss of existential security, and specifically the loss of means of livelihoods, food security and health as acutely experienced by poorer households and populations, as well as the intensification of work and claims on time and physical energy, all exert enormous pressures on people's capacities to live, on the care economy or reproductive economy. Not surprisingly Teresa Brennan (2003) analysed globalisation in terms of "terrors of everyday life".

### **Environmentalism, feminism and neoliberal revolution**

In her critique of global environmental management Ynestra King (1997) wrote the end of twentieth century involved *'a massive renegotiation of power, knowledge, and the ownership of life from the*

*molecular to the planetary. Fertility, labor, "natural resources" can all be rationalized and controlled ...all part of the managed and manageable brave new world.... nature, and the unruly masses, particularly women of color in the north and south, are monitored and managed as never before.'*

The current mainstream policy wisdom on climate change which assumes that new technologies and financial instruments will mitigate the consequences, or fix the problem represents and intensifies environmental managerialism.

To be sure, global feminist discourse has also been affected by the neoliberal revolution, and became an avenue of the marketisation of social imaginaries and human interactions. Recently, free market-feminism (Dawson, 2001), alpha girls-feminism (Haaf, Klinger & Streidl, 2008), or the feminist managerialism so visible in the reorientation of gender mainstreaming from women's rights agendas towards formal equity- and technical antidiscrimination-politics (Schunter Kleeman & Plehwe, 2008) have gained prominence. Analogous to the dubious effects free market-environmentalism has had in reducing the impacts of economic growth on the environment, feminist managerialism has not improved the quality of women's lives, and neither did it slow down the intensification of new forms of exploitation of bodies, which are bombarded with toxins, forced to work long hours in flexible, insecure labour markets, while all the costs of reproducing people are reprivated to households.

In both cases, neither environmentalists nor feminists have abandoned the ideas of sustainability, justice and rights, but for both groups it has been increasingly difficult to bring this language into global policy arenas. The old strategies of working from inside and from outside were pre-empted when the discourse, for instance on poverty, shifted from meeting basic needs (UN and World Bank frame of development decade in the 1970s. the Basic Needs Decade) towards the technical *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) in the late 1990s. So one possibility for strategic intervention is to recover old language and memory of shifts in conceptual frameworks to challenge the contemporary enclosure of feminist and environmental discourse within the rationality of the market. There are various feminist and environmental stakes in challenging this rationality not only in relation to economic activities, but also to the extent that markets have captured the politics of states, which enforce neoliberal polices as well as increasingly operate according to the economic logic of the enterprise, where budgetary/macroeconomic politics is 'the last argument of the king', (*ultima ratio rei* - inscription on the guns of king Louis XVI) or as Foucault (2005) says market has become an economic tribunal which demands permanent adjustment.

The financialisation of politics, including politics of everyday life entails the reproduction of patriarchal, gender, class and race relations in a new guise. Patriarchy is not gone, it has been

modernized, and marketized. All human interactions and institutions, including markets are gendered. As Joan Scott puts it, gender is a primary signifier of power, and gender relations are constitutive of all power relations (1987). The first economics text book in history Xenophon's (427 – 355 BC) *Oeconomicus* (The Economist) describes good manager of the *oikos* (household and estate) who knows nature in order to make the best use of it to enhance the value of all his possessions. The good manager arranges workers like soldiers in a battle to plough the fields, takes care of commerce, while the nameless wife attends to duties under the household roof, including the management of slaves. What is counted now as *economic* activity is based on the same historically established gender division of labour, time and money, with access to wealth and money controlled by privileged men and subsequently determined by anonymous capital pursuing its own reproduction. When industrial revolution relocated part of traditional women's housework to the market (making clothes, cooking, health care, child care, etc.), it has been always monetarily valued less than work signified as 'male'. With the modernisation of patriarchy (Pateman, 1987), women have now access to markets but on terms of being equally exploited with men (Young, 2001) while their responsibilities for care are intensified, unless they can afford to 'outsource' it to other women in global care work chains (Kurian, 2008).

This massive renegotiation of power and knowledge, while maintaining modernised patriarchal structures intact in the domain of global economic, environmental and social politics, coincided with political changes in the status of human subjects. When markets become the key source of political rationality (as Foucault argued in his 1979 lectures on the birth of biopolitics), not only nature, but also human beings are discursively reconstructed and recategorised, no longer being subjects or citizens. From the perspective of markets and states, we become revenue-generating resources, sources of discretionary income to be tapped by markets, disposable, flexible workers to be cultivated and optimised for the market, or transformed, in the eye of powers that be – into human waste. The state no longer legitimises itself by taking care of its citizens. Responsibilities for social reproduction are not shared, as they were in socialist or liberal welfare states, but are relocated to households. The assumption that women's time is infinitely elastic in providing paid and unpaid work, is making women into a buffer zone for rises in productivity, declining quality of jobs, and for everything else that is required in the speeded-up time of reproduction of capital.

Neoliberal biopolitics optimises human subjects as economic units sufficient unto themselves, capable of living on private subscription as coined by Jamie Skye Bianco (2005), meaning those who can afford footing the bill for all their needs, including health care, children's education and pensions, have sufficient disposable income to afford savings, and do not need systems of mutual

social insurance, unless to extract profits from other people's needs to insure themselves. The political subject of neoliberal biopolitics, and its product, is entrepreneurial Self which is cultivated by state and market. Neoliberal biopolitics has its dark underside, the politics of death or necropolitics, as Achille Mbembe (2003) put it, where the poor are left to die or are being exploited to the verge of bare existence in this new slave economy. As the expansion of credit markets to the 'subprime' sector (with all its eugenic connotations) shows, the poor are continuously accessed and processed for profit. As, indeed, is nature, a quest that includes new appetites for extra-terrestrial resources, dangerously coupled with new techno-political capacities for planetary enclosure. It is not unlikely that these trends will be amplified in the future. From the standpoint of critical social movements this calls for strategic interventions in the name of human agency and universal indivisible human rights. The right to environment has now become the right to live. To prevent and countervail the slip to necropolitics the future of the present - with its differential life pathways for useful neoliberal subjects, and for human waste, and new scenarios of the future where the spaceship earth is abandoned to rot - need to be inserted in social imaginary. Environmentalists and feminists have to take up the role of Cassandras who challenge neoliberal politics of truth, free market muzak and nihilism, with clear accounts where this course is threatening to take us as human communities. For too long while pursuing the strategies of changes from inside NGOs have patiently argued that destroying the environment or excluding women from the market is not good for business. Now we need to argue that this kind of business is not good for people.

Last but not least, one of the salient features of neoliberalism is the presumed 'end of history' and the age of post-politics. Conveniently, these concepts make power obscure, and enable a shift from discussing causes of social and environmental misery and predicaments, to instead focusing on dealing with their effects (thus pre-empting possibilities to deal with the causes). An example of this is the abandonment of any debate on changes in consumption and production patterns that was perceived as central to addressing causes of global environmental crisis back in the days of Rio (chapter 4 of Agenda 21) which are now purged from political agendas or relocated to the market in the form of consumer responsibility. Talk of emission volumes, emission reduction scenarios, estimations of mitigation costs, all this focuses the climate change discourse on effects, while the in-depth causes of climate change are removed from the agenda. Analogically, to earlier end of pipe policies, new techno-fiscal strategies do not decouple economic growth from environmental pressures, and continue to socialize the risks and costs of ecological crises to households, while benefits of economic growth and income from markets increasingly accrue to small privileged group with economic and political resources.

When looking at the climate crisis from the perspective of environmental integrity and social reproduction, the major source of misery is revealed to be the unrelenting growth of pressures on both nature and human bodies. People need nature and nurture to live, and to live they have to produce and to consume. In a capitalist society, the interactions between nature and people are mediated by money. The currently ruling form of money (financial capital) is driven by the compulsion to reproduce itself.

As Teresa Brennan (2000) points out in her theory of energetics, the time of reproduction of living nature (human and non human) is on a collision course with the time of reproduction of capital. Following and reworking the arguments of Karl Marx, she argues that the accumulation of capital requires the input of living nature (human and non-human) into products and services. As 'raw materials', nature and human labour are sources of energy and sources of surplus value. *Both labour and nature give more than they cost*. Capital does not pay the costs of reproduction of people, but transfers these costs to households (to the care economy, as some feminists would say). Nor does capital pay for the reproduction of nature (under substitution laws), unless forced to do so.

*The real costs of nature are always deferred ... Speed of acquisition and spatial expansion increase pressures on living nature ... In the event that natural processes of reproduction cannot be speeded up, the cost of natural reproduction has to be reduced to make up for the drag on exchange-value.* (Brennan, 2003: 128)

From this perspective, and taking climate change seriously, what is at stake is to shift the language of the debate from effects (emissions) to causes (the way virtual and productive economies are functioning now), and to reorganize markets, in particular to slow down the flow of money through the economy. With the transaction-time of global money markets now reduced to milliseconds, market growth dependent on its further speed up and expansion has disastrous consequences, as the recent financial and climate change crises shows. To challenge these powerful trends, we need to socialise and 'green' markets. Markets have always been there as a form of exchange since people began to trade. The problem is how markets are constructed and regulated, in particular in the current lethal regulatory form of neoliberal governance where all social and ecological costs of profits are externalized to households, with disastrous effects on the weakest social groups. Socializing markets implies recapturing the notion of the market as a form of exchange, where costs of human and environmental reproduction are shared. This is where feminist agendas of securing the integrity of social reproduction, and ecological agendas of environmental sustainability coalesce.

## References

- Bakker, Isabelle. Neoliberal Governance and Reprivatization of Social Reproduction: Social Provisioning and Shifting Gender Orders. Chapter 4 in: Isabelle Bakker & Stephen Gill eds.. Power, Production and Social Reproduction. Human Insecurity in the Global Political Economy. New York: Palgrave. 2004
- Zygmunt Bauman. *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Polity Press/Blackwell Publishers. 2004
- Bergmann, Barbara R. Becker's Theory of the Family. Preposterous Conclusions. Challenge, Vol. 39, Issue 1, January/February 1996
- Joao Biehl. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. University of California Press. 2005
- Dawson, Graham. Markets and Feminisms. A Critique of Free Market Feminism. Open Discussion Papers in Economics No 34. Walton Hall, UK: Open University. 2001
- Elson, Diane. Gender and Macro, Mezzo, Micro Levels of Economics Analysis. In: Isabella Bakker, ed. *The Strategic Silence. Gender and Economic Policy*. London: Zed Books. 1994.
- Brennan, Teresa. *Exhausting Modernity. Ground for a New Economy*. London: Routledge. 2000
- *Globalization and Terrors of Everyday Life in the West*. London: Routledge. 2003
- Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I*. Penguin Books. [1976] 1990.
- *Naissance de la biopolitique : Cours au collège de France (1978-1979) de Michel Foucault*, edited by François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Michel Senellart. Gallimard. 2005.
- Haaf, M., B. Klingler, B. Streidl. *Wir Alphamädchen*. Hamburg, 2008.
- King, Ynestra. Managerial Environmentalism, Population Control and the New National Insecurity: Towards a Feminist Critique *Political Environments Vol. 5*, Fall 1997
- Kurian, Rachel. Globalization of care work. Chapter 7 in Thanh Dam Truong, Saskia Wieringa, Amrita Chhachhi, eds. *Engendering Human Security. Feminist Perspectives*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. 2006. pp. 147-168
- Maurizio Lazzarato. *Biopolitics/bioeconomics: a Politics of Multiplicity*.  
URL <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fplazzarato2.htm>. Downloaded 2006-04-22
- Luxton, Meg. Feminist Political Economy in Canada and Politics of Social Reproduction. In: Kate Bezanson & Meg Luxton, eds., *Social Reproduction. Feminist Political Economy and Challenges of Neoliberalism*. Monreal:McGill-Queens University Press. 2006. Str 11-44
- Mbembe, Achille. Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15 (1). 2003. 11-40
- Miller, Peter & Nikolas Rose. Governing Economic Life. *Economy & Society* vol. 19 no 1. 1990
- Nelson, Robert, H. *Economics as Religion. From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*. The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2001
- Pateman, Carol. Fraternal Social Contract. Chapter 2 in Carol Patemen. *Disorder of Women*.

Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory. Poity Press. 1989

Perkins, Ellie, ed. Women, Ecology and Economics. Special issue of Ecological Economics, vo. 20. 1997

Georgescu Roegen, Nicholas. The Entropy Law and Economic Process. Harvard: University Press, 1971

Sachs, Wolfgang, ed. Global Ecology, A New Arena of Political Conflict. London: ZEDBooks. 1993

Schor, Julie. The Overworked American. The Unexpected Decline of Leisure. New York: Basic Books. 1991

Schunter-Kleeman, Susanne & Dieter Plehwe. Gender Mainstreaming. Integrating Women in the Neoliberal Europe? Chapter 10 in Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen i Gisela Neunhöffer. Neoliberal Hegemony. A Global Critique. Routledge. 2006

Scott, Wallach Joan. Gender as Useful Category of Historical Analysis. American Historical Review. Vol. 91, No. 5. 1986 pp. 1053-1075

Sen, Gita. Reproduction: Feminist Challenge to Social Policy. In Gita Sen and Rachel Grown. Power and Decision. Social Control of Reproduction. Cambridge: Harvard School of Public Health. 1994

Jamie Skye Bianco. *Zones of Morbidity and Necropolitics*. *rhizomes*.08.spring 2004  
[URL:http://www.rhizomes.net/issue8/bianco.htm](http://www.rhizomes.net/issue8/bianco.htm)

Sonntag, Viki. Sustainability in t Light of Competitiveness. Ecological Economics. Vol. 34, pp. 101.-113. 2000

UN DESA, Achieving Sustainable Development in an Age of Climate Change. Policy Note. United Nations 2009.

Xenophon, *The Economist*. Translation H. G. Dakyns. Project Gutenberg Association / Carnegie-Mellon University". 1998 . URL <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1173>

Young, Brigitte. Disciplinary Neoliberalism in the European Union and Gender Politics. *New Political Economy*. Vo. 5, No. 1. 2000. pp. 77-98