

## **Green Economy or Green Utopia? Rio+20 and the Reproductive Labor Class**

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Sociologists use the concept of class variously to explain and predict people's relation to the means of production, their earnings, living conditions, social standing, capacities, and political identification. With the rise of capitalist globalization, many sociologists focus on the transnational ruling class and new economic predicaments faced by industrial workers in the world-system (see, for example, Robinson and Harris 2000). Here I will argue that to understand and respond to the current global environmental crisis, another major class formation should be acknowledged - one defined by its materially regenerative activities under "relations of reproduction" (Salleh 2010).

The salience of this hypothetical third class is demonstrated by the 2012 United Nations Rio+20 summit and its official "green economy" negotiating text *The Future We Want* ([UNCSD 2012](#)). Clearly, the question that begs to be asked is - who is the "we" in this international document, and whose "utopia" does it serve? Part of the answer is found in a recent G20 media release, suggesting that "current high energy prices open policy space for economic incentives to renewables [...] investors are looking for alternatives given the low interest rates in developed countries, a factor that presents an opportunity for green economy projects" ([Calderon 2012](#)).

The UN, together with the transnational capitalist class, looks to technology and new institutional architectures to push against the limits of living ecologies, and these measures are given legitimation as "economic necessity." Yet empirically, it is peasants, mothers, fishers and gatherers working with natural thermodynamic processes who meet everyday needs for the majority of people on earth. Inhabiting the margins of capitalism – domestic and geographic peripheries – these workers are unspoken, as if "nowhere" in the world-system. As a meta-industrial labor class, they constitute the broadest base of the global 99 percent. Moreover, looking toward a green utopia, it is their reproductive modes of economic provisioning that already practice precaution and sustainability (consider the Mujeres Manifesto 2009; or Serrano 2011).

Sociologists may not recognize this class, but the [World Social Forum](#) (WSF) is one international process that is helping to unify women's, peasant, Indigenous, and ecological voices, alongside the traditional proletariat. The WSF began a decade ago as a grassroots response to the annual World Economic Forum at Davos. It is not without its problems, but people with meta-industrial skills and life-affirming values have been taking their concerns to the WSF (see Smith et al. 2012). In June, women anti-toxics campaigners, organic farmers, Indigenous climate networkers – many working within the WSF process – gathered at Rio+20 in a [People's Summit for Environmental and Social Justice in Defense of the Commons](#). The name

of this meeting speaks to the fact that great world cities grow by forcing food-sufficient peoples off their land to join the treadmill of factory workers and consumers.

As the business sector and UN promote a future "green economy" based on finance, technology, market mechanisms, and "voluntary commitments," ETC, a people's science advocacy group, explains that soon petroleum-based plastics, chemicals, fuels, and drugs will be derived from feed stocks and forest residues and "transformed through bio-engineering platforms," including untested and unregulated applications like nanotechnology. This corporate utopia will mean more land appropriation from the global South, biodiversity loss, and atmospheric pollution (ETC 2011). The international peasant organization Via Campesina describes it as capital accumulation for the rich, and structural adjustment for the rest (Via Campesina 2012). This ongoing assault on the material basis of life is exposed in the World Watch estimate that 60 percent of global "ecosystem services" has been destroyed since World War II (World Watch 2009).

Rather than concede the fundamental irrationality of industrialized provisioning, the transnational ruling class asks the World Bank, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and UNEP to insert green growth and sustainable development into structural reform policies on a country by country basis. The International Monetary Fund, regional development banks, UNCTAD, and World Trade Organization have agreed to consider ecosystem costs in their decision making. But at the same time, "innovative instruments" for high tech financing are to be consistent with the Doha Development Round of multilateral trade negotiations. *The Future We Want* builds on Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Declaration, Monterrey Consensus, Istanbul Programme for Least Developed Countries, and the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building. Needless to say, pursuit of competitive advantage through free trade and intercontinental product shipments will seriously aggravate nature's entropy.

The neoliberal hegemon is using the Rio+20 process to achieve several institutional restructures to facilitate accumulation. Internal to the UN, the Commission on Sustainable Development may be upgraded to Council status, with ECOSOC allocated a stronger outreach role. UNEP may be transformed into a more imposing World Environment Organization; alternatively, the Global Environment Facility may be given wider powers. Capital's technocratic sub-class is also exploring the feasibility of new agencies for Earth System Governance; even a revamp of Global Financial Architecture is on the table.

The corporate "green economy" idea came spinning into view with networks, promotional agencies, think tanks, websites, and conferences, but public understanding of the politics of Rio+20 remains paralysed in a maze of official acronyms. A discourse of international governance is in the making: a shared set of social and material expectations across nations, classes, bodies. Yet new forms of commodification and market logic like "carbon trading," "geo-engineering," or "climate smart agriculture" cannot restore the life-support-systems broken by industrial capitalism. Nor will the "green economy" advance democracy, since green jobs designed by free traders will only deepen the unequal exchange between global North and South. In principle, the UN endorses the 1992 Rio commitment to "common but differentiated responsibilities" in redefining relations between affluent and "developing" nations, but while "poverty alleviation" is highlighted, class power is not.

What unfolds here is the next phase in a history of eurocentric expansion – a world-system of accumulation for the few that functions on an economic surplus provided by the many. The material surplus is fourfold: a social debt to exploited workers; an embodied debt to unpaid

women for their reproductive labors; a neocolonial debt to peasants and indigenes for taking their land and livelihood away; and an ecological debt transferred to living nature at large. As always, the extraction of labor and resources from the margins of capitalism relies on the cooperation of compradors, groomed with incentives by the coloniser. This is the real meaning of "development" and such power relations are enacted today through the UN machinery, business connections, and universities. In New York, high-level consultations for Rio+20 acculturate technocratic managers for capital among scientists and bureaucrats. Special opportunities for travel are made available to "young professionals."

Women are especially vulnerable to the privileges of comprador status as they strive to climb out of oppressive patriarchalisms and obtain better conditions for their communities. UN-Women's Executive Director Michelle Bachelet has called for gender sensitivity in both national budgeting and corporate practice. UN Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro reminded the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women that unpaid rural women grow most of the world's food while unpaid rural and urban women do most of the world's care giving ([UN Women 2012](#)). If the industrial work force is declining, the meta-industrial class remains a steady global labor majority. Its work is trans-cultural, and in principle non-gendered, but for historical reasons, women still undertake more regenerative-ecological activities than men do. This phenomenon should interest sociologists, but it is the private sector that responds to women's plight – with "easy terms" on technology transfer for water infrastructure or renewables for climate mitigation. Such aid often benefits donors more than recipients, and like micro-credit, it locks women into the capitalist system.

In UN "mainstreaming" policy, the right to cultural difference is subsumed by the principle of equality. So too, the accepted criterion for gender equality is "the masculine universal," an ideal of the emancipated woman as one who is able to live like a white, middle-class man. In the corporate utopia of *The Future We Want*, the meta-industrial skills and integrative insights that women learn from undertaking reproductive labors are diminished as a valid source of alternative values and basis for a life-affirming future utopia.

In the Rio+20 process, women's and indigenous "rights" are fostered by conference Secretary-General Sha Zukang, a Chinese career diplomat also responsible for the initiative Sustainable Energy for All. Coordination of governmental, inter-governmental, and non-governmental participation falls to UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner. The UNEP Global Ministerial Environment Forum is deployed to tailor "green economy" free markets to local conditions, a program that is at once "pro-growth" and seeking an index of wellbeing "beyond GDP." Business leaders are invited by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to sign the Global Compact, a voluntary credo of 10 principles for corporate social responsibility. The International Trade Union Confederation supports both the "green economy" and new ideas for global governance.

Non-governmental participants in the Rio+20 process are organized into a Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum. Here space is made for Women (52 percent of the world's population), along with Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, Labor and Unions, Business and Industry, the Science and Technology community, and Local Authorities. Significantly, the only Major Groups demanding fundamental material changes in the global economy are people involved in the hands-on regeneration of natural processes: women want their reproductive labor contributions valued; peasant farmers want community food sovereignty prioritized; and Indigenous peoples want secure land and biodiversity rights.

It is this meta-industrial majority, inhabiting the domestic and geographic peripheries of

capitalism, whose local economic provisioning and care giving already exemplifies the green goals of grassroots democracy and sustainability. Their jobs are "real" green jobs. By contrast, the UNEP "green economy" stresses research into product design and entrepreneurial partnerships. Its ambiguous objectives combine equity with inclusive governance, competitiveness with market reform, green jobs with high tech, workplace standards with best practices. The UK-based New Economics Foundation is making considerable effort in this respect to help "join the dots" of social, economic, environmental concerns, but sooner or later a more thoughtful transdisciplinary analysis is likely to confront the complex contradictions existing between these "three pillars" (New Economics Foundation 2008).

The "green economy" ideology is an amalgam of actual and imaginary interactions between financial capital, human capital, and natural capital. The imputation of economic value to the life-giving capacities of "nature's services" translates metabolic flows into fictitious units (Salleh 2010). This epistemological reductionism does environmental and social violence. Consider the popular "dematerialization" rhetoric of ecological economists: sophisticated production systems do not avoid further energy and resource drawdowns. Instead, each new technology relies on a further cradle-to-grave cycle of extraction, *transport*, manufacture, *transport*, market, *transport*, consumption, *transport*, waste pit. In the human metabolism with nature, industrial innovation for "efficiency" does not solve problems; it simply displaces them. The displacement may be spatial, shifted on to the backs of less powerful social classes, or temporal, shifted on to the backs of future generations.

For two decades, the transnational capitalist class has used the UN sustainable development agenda to promote a technocratic form of environmentalism. In sociology, this professional trend is associated with a functionalist theory known as ecological modernization. However, the reproductive labor class of women, peasants, and indigenous peoples are advancing an alternative discourse on society and habitat ([World People's Conference 2010](#); Salleh 2011). This rejects economic provisioning based on the fracture, commodification, and financialization of "eco-system services." Instead, it accords legal rights to nature as a living-subject. It advocates *sumak kawsay*, *buen vivir*, or "living well" as a guide to building low-footprint models of the humanity-nature metabolism. The World Social Forum's deliberative document for the Rio+20 People's Summit, [Another Future is Possible](#), applies this perspective. In calling for a "bio-civilization," it articulates a rationality practiced worldwide by an (as yet) invisible meta-industrial class.

A meta-industrial lens on relations of reproduction can be a useful class analytic notion for sociologists who hope to democratize the world-system in a time of environmental crisis. It obliges the discipline to re-examine its classical foundations, resting as these do on anthropocentric, androcentric, and eurocentric premises. Politically, a grounded materialist strategy for the global ecological crisis is effectively the same as a grounded response to global economic crisis. For the South, it means de-linking from the capitalist juggernaut. For the North, it means de-growth and learning from sustainable sufficiency practices modeled in the domestic and geographic peripheries. This insight radically contests conventional understandings of "dispossession" and "underdevelopment." Reading sociology through a meta-industrial lens makes clear that it is the affluent who are dispossessed of their human embodiment in nature, and thus most in need of "capacity building."

As globalization and free trade regimes undermine the needs and rights of peoples everywhere, the search for alternative ways of provisioning is on. Indeed, the contributions to this symposium point to several ways in which the world-system is transforming from within. In

terms of restoring integrity to the humanity-nature metabolism, the transformation is energized by international initiatives like commoning, solidarity economics, permaculture, *sumak kawsay*, bioregionalism, urban transitions, and other elegant subsistence paradigms. At Rio+20, financial interests, the UN, and governments recommended dismantling more of nature and livelihoods in order to set up a global "green economy." But the point is surely to recognise and support the multiplicity of sustaining, life-reproducing "green utopias" already in existence.

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