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

Ewa Charkiewicz

Global ecology and global markets interact in a number of ways, to the point that nowadays the two are mutually indistinguishable. On the one hand, the global expansion of markets increases demand for resources and puts more pressure on the integrity of ecosystems, one result being global climate change. On the other hand, measures to address climate change rely on market instruments for environmental policy. Cap-and-trade measures contribute to the creation of new virtual financial markets. Today, the neoclassical model of the market is also offered as a compelling conceptual model for thinking about solutions to the problems of environmental degradation.

Close to half a century ago, French philosopher Michel Foucault coined the concept of 'biopolitics' to point to the problem of how *human life* is managed or administered. Foucault understood biopolitics as a historically contingent mode of the mutual implication of power and knowledge that enabled the differential adjustment of human bodies to new forms of capital accumulation (Foucault 1990). Later, neo-liberal biopolitics would expand the notion of the economic to include the social (Foucault 2004). Domains of government such as so-

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cial security systems and other public forms of social provisioning, for instance, education or healthcare, as well as public administration (the state itself) are reorganised in terms of economic rationality. The firm becomes a regulatory ideal, a beauty queen, for state, school or hospital. Environmental policy, too, has been subsumed under this economic rationality.

The way interactions between markets and the environment are governed has far-reaching consequences for human and non-human life. The combination of environmental and human resources has been neatly captured by Teresa Brennan (2000) as 'living nature'. Her work exemplifies a new feminist social critique, which has developed some interesting arguments about the relationships between people, nature and capital. These relationships, as in all social institutions, are funda-

mentally gendered. In other words the production of knowledge, access to resources, division of labour, responsibilities and entitlements are founded, signified and legitimised by way of the concepts of gender and gender relations. While for decades concerns have been raised about the ecological and social limits to growth, with the latter focused on poverty, feminist political thinkers have pointed to the effects that neo-liberal marketisation has had on social reproduction or the economy of care, where people's lives are sustained, maintained and reproduced at the level of everyday life (Bakker 2004, Elson 1994). Neoclassical economic models are blind to the maintenance of life in the households, or see households as firms, as single units that maximise their utility. The concept of the 'care economy' shows how markets and states depend on the reproduction of the lives of subjects (configured as taxpayers, workers, soldiers, consumers) that takes place in the household economy. According to global studies, the vast majority of care and reproductive work is done by women. The expansion of the concept of the care economy to include relationships with nature opens up new possibilities for linking feminist and environmental agendas. In this short piece, I will show how the relationships between nature and human reproduction have been captured by a neo-liberal *biopolitics* and discuss the possibilities for strategic interventions in the current global conjuncture.

From managerialism to marketisation

In the period since the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the Rio Summit in 1992, 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 neo-liberal revolution has affected more and more areas of human life. The changes in environmental policy were effected in two steps: first, techno-managerial and fiscal instruments gained ground, and second, a shift from material to virtual took place.

Thirty years ago, after the failure of attempts at measures to 'control and prevent', proposed solutions for the global environmental crisis were framed using the concept of 'sustainable development'. The high point of these debates was the formulation at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 of the global programme of action known as Agenda 21 (Agenda for the 21st century). Agenda 21 was a multilayered document that accommodated different vocabularies, including changing consumption patterns, linking poverty eradication with environmental improvements, as well as clean technologies and economic instruments. While the strategy of suggesting that women were better environmental managers was debatable, nevertheless the governmental Agenda 21 gave unprecedented visibility to women. At the time, the political space created by the UN's global conferences enabled the articulation of dissent in the form of alternative treaties from Rio, such as the 'Women's Agenda 21', which represented an alternative vision of social and ecological justice and participatory democracy.

Over the next 10 years, former critics of Rio who in 1992 had rejected the summit's compromise between 'the environment' and 'development', by 2002 had become defenders of Agenda 21. The turning point was the Rio+10 conference on sustainable develop-

ment in Johannesburg (WSSD), where the battle for a North-South deal on environment and development, and for keeping Agenda 21 intact, was lost. In Johannesburg, the question of the ecological and social limits of economic growth was displaced from the summit agenda. In the final documents of Rio+10, poverty was no longer an issue pertaining to access (or the lack thereof) to sustainable livelihoods. Women simply disappeared from final document (with two minor exceptions). Sustainable development morphed into global environmental management, the threads of which were already to be found in Agenda 21. To quote former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (2001) during the preparations for the Rio+10 conference in 2002, 'we have to make globalisation work for sustainable development'.¹ In fact, it was the other way round: sustainable development was retooled to work for neo-liberal 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. According to the script of free market ideology, the liberalisation of investment flows was meant to generate funds for environmental improvements and to reduce poverty. With the help of fiscal policy incentives, environmental management and new technologies, the environmental mess would somehow be cleaned up. Of course, these policies designed to speed up capital flows and turnover further inten-

sified pressures on the environment. Ironically, in light of *man-made* climate change, the persuasive neo-liberal metaphor of lifting all boats literally comes true.

Crucial in the move towards a neo-liberal biopolitics was the relocation of environmental policy to 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 banished 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 the expansion of 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, that is, 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 effect on the real economy in terms of reducing global emissions. As pointed out in a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

1 Annan, K. (2001), Implementing Agenda 21. Report from the Secretary General to the ECOSOC, www.johannesburgsummit.org

policy note of 2009, the policy focus on fiscal incentives for green technologies and cap-and-trade measures will offload the costs of dealing with climate change on to 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 transfer the risks and costs of ecological crises on to households. Given historical gender divisions of labour and responsibility as well as the exigencies of biological reproduction, women who provide caring work in formal or informal markets or in their households bear the greatest burden in making up for the environmental and social costs of neo-liberal governance. The loss of existential security, and specifically the loss of means of livelihood, 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, exert enormous pressures on people's capacities to live, and on the care economy or reproductive economy, in particular in households in the global South. Not surprisingly Teresa Brennan (2003) analysed globalisation in terms of the 'terrors of everyday life'.

Environmentalism, feminism and neo-liberal revolution

In her critique of global environmental management, Ynestra King (1997) wrote that the end of 20th 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.

Current mainstream wisdom on climate change is that new technologies and financial instruments will mitigate the consequences, or fix the problem. To be sure, global feminist discourse has also been affected by the neo-liberal revolution and become an avenue for the marketisation of social imaginaries and human interactions. Recently, free-market feminism, alpha-girls feminism or the feminist managerialism so visible in the reorientation of gender mainstreaming from women's rights agendas towards formal equity – and technical anti-discrimination – politics have gained prominence. Analogous with 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, nor has it slowed the intensification of new forms of exploitation of bodies, which are bombarded with toxins, forced to work long hours in flexible and insecure labour markets, while all the costs of reproducing people are reprivatised 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 both inside and outside were preempted when the discourse, for instance on poverty, shifted from meeting basic needs towards the technical Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the late 1990s. One possibility

for strategic intervention is, therefore, to recover old language and the 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 neo-liberal policies and increasingly operate according to the economic logic of the enterprise, where budgetary/macroeconomic politics is 'the last argument of the king', the *ultima ratio regum*.²

The financialisation of politics, including the politics of everyday life, entails the reproduction of patriarchal, gender, class and race relations in new guise. All human interactions and institutions are gendered – including markets. As Joan Scott (1987) puts it, gender is a primary signifier of power, and gender relations are constitutive of all power relations. The first economics textbook in history, Xenophon's (427–355 BC) *Oeconomicus* ('The Economist'), describes the good manager of the *oikos* (household and estate) as one who knows nature in order to make the best use of it in order to enhance the value of all his possessions. The good manager arranges workers like soldiers in a battle to plough the fields, and takes care of commerce while the nameless wife attends to duties under the household roof, including the management of slaves. What today is seen 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 privi-

leged men and subsequently determined by anonymous capital pursuing its own reproduction. When the industrial revolutions relocated part of traditional women's housework to the market (making clothes, cooking, healthcare, childcare, etc.), it was always valued less monetarily than work signified as 'male'. With the modernisation of patriarchy (Pateman 1987), women now have access to markets on terms of being equally exploited with men, while their responsibilities for care are intensified unless they can afford to 'outsource' it to other women in global care work-chains.

This massive renegotiation of power and knowledge, while maintaining modernised patriarchal structures intact in the domain of global economic, environmental and social policy, 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 remade and re-categorised, no longer being subjects or citizens. From the perspective of markets and states, we become revenue-generating resources, disposable sources of discretionary income to be cultivated and optimised for the market, or transformed 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 the households. The assumption is that women's time is infinitely elastic in providing paid and unpaid work, turning 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 the reproduction of capital.

2 This was the inscription on the guns of King Louis XIV.

Neo-liberal biopolitics optimises human subjects as economic units sufficient unto themselves, idealising those who can afford the bill for all their needs, including healthcare, children's education and pensions; who have sufficient disposable income to afford savings; and who do not need systems of mutual social insurance. Neo-liberal 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 exploited to the verge of bare existence in this new slave economy. As the expansion of credit markets to the 'sub-prime' 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 extraterrestrial 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 a healthy environment' has now become the right to live. To prevent the slip into necropolitics, the future of the present – with its differential life chances for useful neo-liberal subjects and for human waste, and new scenarios of the future where the spaceship earth is abandoned to rot – needs to be inserted into the social imaginary. Environmentalists and feminists have to take up the role of Cassandras who challenge neo-liberal politics of truth, free market Muzak and nihilism, with clear accounts of where this course is threatening to take us as human communities. For too long, while pursuing the strategies of change 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 neo-liberalism is the so-called pragmatic shift from discussing causes of social and environmental misery and predicaments to focusing instead on dealing with their effects (preempting the option of dealing 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 the causes of the global environmental crisis back in the days of Rio (chapter 4 of Agenda 21). All the talk of emission volumes, emission reduction scenarios, estimates of mitigation costs, focuses the climate change discourse on effects, while the in-depth causes of climate change are removed from the agenda. Analogous to earlier end-of-pipe policies, new techno-fiscal strategies do not decouple economic growth from environmental pressures and continue to transfer the risks and costs of ecological crises to households, while the benefits of economic growth and income from markets increasingly accrue to a 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 the 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 reorganise 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 crisis shows. To challenge these powerful trends, we need to socialise and 'green' markets. Markets have always existed as a form of exchange. The problem is how markets are constructed and regulated, in particular in the current lethal regulatory form of neo-liberal governance where all social and ecological costs are externalised to households, with disastrous effects for the weakest social groups. Socialising 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 environmental agendas of environmental sustainability coalesce.

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