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Women peasants, food security and biodiversity in the crisis of neoliberalism

From the perspective of feminist economics, the neoliberal system with its functional principles of efficiency, competition and orientation to profits goes against the operative rationality of provision and co-operation in the care and subsistence economies with which social reproduction and food security is guaranteed, above all by women and their unpaid labour. Certainly, capitalist markets have overarched, penetrated and functionalised such traditional moral survival economies for a long time. However, neoliberalisation is not a comprehensive and definitively closed process, but rather, consists in incomplete and non-contemporaneous phases of integration, interlinking and subjugation. After every crisis, political and economic forces set about organising new neoliberal projects and conquer new fields and terrains that were previously only partially or marginally integrated.

In a complex contradictory relationship, neoliberal politics and economics define care and subsistence economies – private households, unpaid labour and nature – as extra-economic and unproductive. At the same time, however, they presuppose care work as infinitely flexible, extendable and indispensable base and social security net for the monetarised economy. Without them, the market sphere cannot work (Elson 1991). Furthermore, neoliberal politics and economics functionalise and economise selective elements of these sectors. Capitalist intervention places natural, human and intellectual resources in the sphere of economic value, integrating them according to requirements into its valorisation processes and, in cases of diminished profitability, throwing them back into the care and subsistence economies.

At the same time, these markets seek to increase their efficiency by externalising ecological and social costs and pushing them into the spheres defined as extra-economic. Crisis are softened and administered by a downloading of costs, burdens and risks into the kitchens, onto the peasants' fields, onto the women performing unpaid care work and into the environment (Elson 2002). Market integration and cost externalisation are thus entwined processes and modes of functioning of the neoliberal system.

It is not only that markets – and this is shown once again by the current food supply crisis – fail in relation to securing social reproduction and food. Even more: they represent, in their tendency to crisis, a threat both to social and food security and to the functional logic of social reproduction, of production and use of local experiential knowledge, as well as of agriculture based on natural processes rather than on industrialised methods and inputs.

In the wake of intensified growth and competition, women have been increasingly integrated in recent years into the markets as self-responsible and independent actors, while gender has been integrated into political programmes. Precisely because this construction of women as fully fledged, self-responsible market subjects latches on to emancipatory key images of feminism such as self-determination, individual freedom, independent securing of existence, liberation from patriarchal control and public participation, it is historically an advance in gender equity. On the other hand, we are dealing here with an integration that has been instrumentally established in line with neoliberal goals, and with steps towards equal opportunity that obey the rules of the game of the system instead of changing them – as initially aimed at by feminism.

Women peasants, biodiversity and local knowledge

With their kitchen gardens in local communities, women are responsible for the food crops that secure the food supply. Cash crops and monetary income are, on the other hand, defined as masculine. The construction of women's roles as food providers, as guarantors of the biodiversity of food plants and of seeds, continues, even though many women peasants also perform a great part of the ongoing work on men's cash crop fields or produce fruit, vegetable or flowers for export as contract farmers and daily labourers: that is, they are integrated into transnational agricultural valorisation processes and contexts (Wichterich 2004).

Masculine and feminine roles in agriculture are constructed within the gender-specific division of labour and in the context of the dual agricultural production system – commercial, chemical-intensive monocultures, on the one hand, and mixed cultures geared towards local markets and self-sufficiency, on the other. Under the influence of local regional and global market forces and in the socio-cultural allocation of gender-specific tasks and capacities, traditional responsibilities and social ascription of masculinity and femininity are entangled in ever-new ways and transform power relations (Krishna 2004; Rupp 2007).

The Guatemalan peasant women who design their kitchen garden like many spirals turning into each other of corn, sweet potatoes and other vegetables are tied by a mixture of survival pragmatism, ancestor worship and natural philosophy to their land and biodiversity. They treat both as an inheritance from their ancestors, from which they are not allowed nor want to separate themselves through sale. The plots should remain in the clan or in the ethnic community, in order to ensure their survival and well-being.

The peasant women have had their own understanding of biodiversity and of the seed as their own means of production ‘for centuries’. They see their work self-consciously as value-creating activity and their knowledge as productive capacity, with the help of which they have not only maintained the genetic stock, but have productively further developed it. Furthermore, they have accumulated detailed knowledge of the nutritional value and healing powers of local species. Traditional knowledge in these reproduction contexts is a constitutive element of survival spaces and a central livelihood resource (Kuppe 2002). The women peasants therefore understand themselves as investors: they give value to the plants and develop their productivity, which in its turn ensures that the women enjoy esteem in the community.

Their practical and strategic interest in biodiversity and in food security often brings the women peasants into conflict with their men. Official government agricultural advisors offer the men commercial seed and praise the advantages and earning possibilities of monocultural farming, recently above all those of organic fuel. In Burkina Faso, many peasants followed the desire of the government and planted cotton, reducing the fields of the women, in order to have more land available for the allegedly lucrative cotton. The women nevertheless continued to foster and care for biodiversity in the kitchen gardens. It was precisely that which ensured their food supply when the cotton prices on the world market fell into the basement. Peasant women in Tanzania had a similar experience. In a subversive action, they planted banana trees and cabbage between the coffee trees, even though the government had forbidden mixed farming on the export fields.

Protection of species diversity and market mainstreaming

When COP9¹, the ninth conference of the signatory countries of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the fourth conference of the members of the Cartagena Protocol on Biological Security (MOP4)² met in Bonn in May 2008, there was a notable confrontation in the parallel civil society forum Planet Diversity in a women's workshop. An official of the secretariat of the CBD proudly presented the CBD Gender Plan of Action to the workshop participants, predominantly activists with a peasant or environmental NGO background.³

The CBD Gender Plan of Action was accepted, after a year of lobbying and of overcoming of some resistance, as a reference document for the COP9. Reference documents should inform the signatory partners, but they nevertheless are not objects of negotiation and have no binding character. Gender experts celebrate the action plan as successful acknowledgement of their concern to direct political attention in the field of biodiversity to the goal of general equal opportunity. It repeats the dictum of many UN documents, namely, that gender equality and the empowerment of women are important preconditions for the protection of the environment and sustainable development, and recognises women's knowledge of biodiversity and their role in the management and protection of resources.

The main goal of the action plan is to integrate a gender-responsive perspective into the framework of the CBD with the help of gender mainstreaming, and to allow women to participate in the governance mechanisms, the negotiations and implementation. In opposition to the technical procedure, however, questions of content regarding the relation of gender and biodiversity nevertheless remain ignored. What, then, does a gender perspective mean in relation to biodiversity? Does it mean the goal of gender equality? Is it an instrument for the recognition of gender-specific needs and interests? Or against the discrimination of women in the CBD process? And is a gender perspective on biodiversity related to the perspective of peasant agriculture or to the perspective of the large landowners, the perspective of indigenous ethnic groups or of agribusinesses? These questions already suggest that the action plan as an instrument that aims only at the integration of gender and the participation of women disregards both the production relations as well as the micro-economic level of resource usage of dif-

¹ COP stands for Conference of the Parties, the meeting of the delegates of 190 signatory countries of the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity).

² Meeting of the Parties, meeting of the member states of the member states of the Cartagena Protocol, which is a supplement to the CBD regulating dealings with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in international trade.

³ UNEP/CBD/COP/9/INF/12, Convention on Biological Diversity: The Gender Plan of Action under the Convention on Biological Diversity, 11 March 2008, <http://www.cbd.int/cop9/doc/>.

ferent actors in their dealings with biodiversity (see also Wichterich 2007).

The representatives of women peasants and activists at Planet Diversity correspondingly reacted indignantly to this Gender Plan of Action that claimed to represent their interests.⁴ It is neither in their strategic nor their existential interest that their agricultural biodiversity is put into terms of economic value on the world market or taken away from their usage and preserved in nature reserves. The women don't want to be mainstreamed or to engage in negotiations that presuppose their expropriation. They don't want to share in profits that businesses make with their resources. Rather, they want to prevent the transformation of their agricultural biodiversity and their knowledge into trade commodities. Instead of the freedom of businesses and trade, they demand the freedom of self-determined production independent of the world market and the exchange of seed among themselves. As women peasants they are afraid of a double depreciation: the lack of the food sovereignty based upon biodiversity and the lack of the appreciation that they enjoy as the food suppliers of the local communities.

Industrialisation of agriculture and the commodification of biodiversity

In the phase of agroindustrial modernisation in the name of the 'green revolution', the locally generated, resource-specific experiential knowledge of peasants was initially overlooked and devalued as useless in the new contexts of production and valorisation. Under the sign of neoliberal globalisation, however, even this in situ knowledge and the local biodiversity become an object of strategies of selective marketisation and exploitation. Free trade is supposed to create access for the market and entrepreneurs even to the last 'unexploited' resources and to squeeze them along with the local usage knowledge connected with it into the commodity form in transnational markets.

The biodiversity convention that was set in motion by the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 links the market logic with the necessity of protection. On the one hand, biological diversity should be included in global commodity competition and the profit cycle; on the other hand, it should be protected by being zoned as nature protection parks –excluding the indigenous owners. With the offer of benefit-sharing, the CBD tries to mediate between the long-established proprietors of biodiversity and the private economy, which wants to appropriate genetic resources with patents and com-

⁴ <http://www.planet-diversity.org>, <http://www.wloe.org/Women-of-Planet-Diversity.539.0.html>.

mercialise them. Sharing in profits here serves as stimulus for the communities, which collectively own biodiversity, to agree to the commercialisation. Flanking the UN convention, free trade agreements codify the protection of biodiversity as environmental services and as a liberalised sector with rules for intellectual property rights (TRIPS)⁵.

The appropriation and patenting of genetic material and traditional know-how about food resources by agribusinesses and pharmaceutical companies disembeds these out of their spatio-temporal and social practice of usage and tries to treat them in a decontextualised form as a commodity. This privatisation of the collective survival capital of biodiversity and knowledge is in opposition to the concept of property and survival of the women peasants. For them, the biodiversity built into and further developed in the logic of their provision economy is a model opposed to the dominant concept of development, which, with the dogmas of the market and of growth, advocates monocultures in the fields and in the mind, and which wants to integrate local species, seed and indigenous knowledge into the business logic of the global markets. Whether or not preceded by a scientific inventory of profitable genetic resources (bioprospection), biopiracy or a contract of sale - for the women the transformation of genetic material into patents and commodities, is appropriation of resources and a threat to their mode of existence and production.

The current supply crisis in the world agromarkets shows that food security cannot be guaranteed by industrial mass production and free trade, but rather, on the contrary, is massively threatened by it. For peasant women, this is confirmation that food supply can be best secured through cultivation on the basis of local biodiversity and for local markets. Capitalism, as noted by Marina Meneses Velazquez, corn farmer and city councillor for ecology in Juchitan in Mexico, proposes false solutions for peasant agriculture: commercialisation of resources and integration into the world market, on the one hand; nature protection zones for the conservation of biodiversity, on the other hand. Both expropriate the women.

Alternative banks and stock exchanges

As the diversity of local species and knowledge was lost with the introduction of monocultures, peasant women from Zimbabwe to Bangladesh began to set up, or to reanimate, their own banks and exchange systems for seeds (Akhter 2001). Their orientation to the needs

⁵ Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights. The agreement on trade related rights of intellectual property was added to the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), under pressure from US industry. It obliges all members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to implement the strong regulations of the patent rights of industrial countries in national law.

of producers went against the valorisation interests of the agribusinesses and the world market. In seed movements in India and in Southern Africa, peasant women collect seed, themselves conduct biological classification, research and qualitatively high-value seed propagation, set up collective seed banks and organise seed festivals with exchanges for knowledge and seed. Thus they cross, cultivate and develop the crop, always adapting it to local necessities. These practices form and prove their knowledge and abilities of maintaining biological diversity and of proliferating in forms independent of the market (Seed/Hoering 2002).

Against the annihilation and theft of traditional knowledge, peasant women and grassroots movements therefore organise capacity building in local communities as memory building, in order to maintain traditional knowledge and passed down skills that risk being forgotten: for example, knowledge about indigenous plant and tree species and methods of seed proliferation. The reactivation and passing on of indigenous knowledge systems implies an upgrading of this knowledge in comparison with modern know-how and an empowerment in order to secure one's own survival and food supply.

Networks like that around the NGO Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT) in Southern Africa, the Coalition in Defence of Diversity in India or the South Asia Network on Food, Ecology and Culture (SANFEC) demand from governments and multilateral institutions the conservation of seed and knowledge diversity, so that the right to food, health and self-regulated survival economies are not sacrificed to commercial interests. At the same time, these grassroots movements are also articulate opponents of the adoption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and campaign forcefully against the politics of agrimultinationals like Monsanto. The struggles for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity as a fundamental resource for the diversity of survival practices and local economic cycles are not only defensive struggles against the formation of monopolies of hybrid or genetically modified seeds, of patented and universalised expert knowledge, but also struggles against the free trade model as the universalised mode of the economy and of survival. The peasant women want to 'live' biodiversity and refuse expropriation by the market system as well as by gender mainstreaming. Neither the CBD nor the Gender Plan of Action offer them answers to their questions regarding food sovereignty, regarding indigenous intellectual property and survival.

These social confrontations over biodiversity give evidence that the neoliberalisation of social nature relations was never a process without

resistance. Certainly, the defensive struggles of local resource owners could not prevent the neoliberal appropriation of nature, but they cause breaks in the global consistency and contradictions in the coherence of the system. Even if the resistance is locally limited and not to be generalised, it conserves, first, niches and peripheries that are not yet fully integrated, while, second, it opens up possibilities of developing post-neoliberal alternatives out of these enclaves.

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