Transformative Feminisms

Expanding Feminist Strategies for Living in Troubled Times

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L'auteure assure que subsister, se suffire, pour les paysans, c'est une transgression face aux arrangements économiques et politiques dominants qui sont banalisés et même déclarés morts. Mais ils serviront à nous garder vivants.

This paper began as a talk for a session on transformative feminisms at the Canadian Congress meetings in Ottawa in 2015. The session included themes of ecological economies whether subsistence, anti-commodity, peasant, sufficiency, or others. I argued that subsistence, sufficiency, peasant or repeasantized economies are so transgressive of dominant political and economic arrangements they are trivialized or declared dead. But they will help keep us alive.[1] I am using a narrative style here because it helps me to talk about ideas I find hard to pull together. Hard because the theme of the session forced me to try to assess the usefulness of my work both as a feminist sociologist focusing on farming, environment, and climate change and as a part-time, small-scale sheep farmer where I live in British Columbia. What am I really trying to do on both fronts? When I listen to the news on CBC about Climate Change or about the scale of the TPP trade agreement of which Canada is most likely to be part, I feel like crawling into some hole to hide and curling up with a book that uses words like subsistence, commons, peasant, sufficiency, and different kinds of earth-respectful economies. Maybe there in subterranean networks I can be with others who also feel these words hold some precious insights and passwords to better worlds. I remember those lines in W. B. Yeats' poem that invokes the flight underground by the ancient Tuatha na Daanan peoples when invaders (some attribute the flight to the arrival of Christianity) came to Ireland in early times. They continue to seductively sing unheard to us moderns above ground, "Come away, oh human child! To the waters and the wild…for the world's more full of weeping than you can understand" (W. B. Yeats, "The Stolen Child"). In Irish folklore, the "pagan," once god-like, Tuatha na Daanan continued to live their subaltern lives emerging to play with, disrupt, and thwart those living above ground with disturbing frequency. Mythologically, they embodied beliefs about the sacredness of the Earth. We moderns misunderstood the importance of living respectfully with the Earth, reducing such pagan ideas to mere irrational disruptions of our projects of controlling nature. Today the notion of peasantry is trivialized for "messing up" the fantasies of modernity. It is symbolically buried as a relic of history rather than a potentially life-saving intervention into our fantasies.

But this is no time to go underground. Even if we did, the troubles won't go away. And we have debts to pay. One of these debts is to pass on to others lessons about what Vandana Shiva framed as "Staying Alive." Depending on our experiences this might include the wisdom and logic of peasant-like economies, subsistence economies, ideas of enough, refusing to participate in the destruction of the environment or respecting our storied ways of living that deeply value place. I grew up around the remnants of a so-called post-colonial but still colonized semi-peasant economy. I use the term logic above because I am talking about the kinds of understandings that inform the organization of economies. I am not talking about the empirical historical experiences of peasant economies that were often framed within larger contexts of colonialism or other kinds of exploitative value extraction, but about

the understandings that informed them. These peasant logics (they are plural) I am talking about varied and vary historically and from place to place. They are built on logics of living interdependently with place under difficult circumstances—in good time and bad times. In these logics nature embodied in and as place keeps us alive. Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg has described the contemporary challenge of the peasantry (and maybe or most of us) as that of "living with Empire."

It has taken my own academic work on re-peasantization to allow me to see the intergenerational and multispecies logic of the small-scale farming of the world in which I grew up in Ireland. On the surface it looked like a lot of hard work and no money. The land was so important—in good and bad ways.[2] Despite its darker sides I am coming to grasp how invaluable much of the logic organizing that economy is to helping us today to live in a time of climate change—if we could extract it from Empire—or Empire from it. Learning more about climate change, food, and farming I see new connections. Elisa Da Via's, Anthony Pahnke's, and Van der Ploeg's research on the contemporary, globally diverse processes of re-peasantization, the world's largest social movement network of Via Campesina, feminist analysis of subsistence perspectives (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies), Vandana Shiva's misunderstood early work in *Staying Alive* and those small farms in Ireland are all analytically connected in important ways.

In modern societies, even when we felt nostalgically romantic about the past, there was a tendency to feel we had moved on, that we have progressed toward the promises of better futures. Climate change has shattered that confidence. Just as some of us were being taught by Indigenous societies to think in terms of seven generations to come, scientific information raised questions about the possibility of a seventh generation at all or about what their worlds might be like. But if we are ethically obliged to care for those who will live in the future are we also not ethically obliged to care for the dead? It seems to me that right now we are unable to do either and that these inabilities are connected. Put another way, caring for and respecting the dead is a way of caring for the future. In recognizing the logics and value of subsistence and peasant economies are we calling on the dead to help us stay alive? Such an idea will only shock if you think of those older logics as dead. But they are not dead. They are not relics but lively guiding spirits—maybe like those mythological helpers who, at least in ancient myths or in some kinds of psychoanalytic theories, constantly turn up in time of need.

But what has talk of the dead and relics got to do with subsistence economies, peasants or re-peasantization? Quite a bit. I am not being flakey. In the modernist consignment of the peasantry and subsistence economies to the trash cans of history (McMichael) along with other no longer useful apparent relics of the past one can see an element of mythical if not magical thinking. First, it is 'magical' in its attempts to make the peasantry disappear when, as we will read below, the peasantries are far from gone away. It is magical also in that it is an attempt to externalize what it fears. Peasantry and subsistence are humbling conditions to modern subjects' self-understanding and to modern States' political claims about territory. Onto "the peasant" and the idea of subsistence are projected the very things from which modernity is supposed to have freed us. Modernity's self-shadows. Backwardness, drudgery, dependence on nature, constrained in time and space, and the recognitions that we are creatures of the earth, water and the land. We belong first to place and only secondary—if at all—to the imagined geo-political space of State territory. Place, of course, may not be fixed but may include nomadic pathways, fluid and liminal relationships.

It is no accident then that notions about subsistence, the commons, the peasantry are so often pronounced "dead" by many in the Global North, even when speaking of the Global South. This declaration of death is premature, or more correctly, unwarranted. It is everyday disrupted by the growing vitality of new forms of peasant, peasant-like and related movements. It is even being found to be alive and well in the Global North (often travelling under assumed identities) as the work of Van der Ploeg and others shows. "It Takes Roots" declare an Indigenous people delegation at COP 21 in Paris—to "build an economy for people and planet" (It Takes Roots). But the fake obituary notices still run in many places. Declarations of premature death, Mary Hawksworth reminds us in her analysis of the semiotics of the premature burial of feminism, really tell us about the living. The public writing of death-certificates, whether for feminism, or in our focus here on the idea of subsistence, involves particular kinds of mis-representations. Such textual accounts of premature death, Hawksworth writes, "…serve as allegorical signs for something else, a means of identifying a perceived danger in need of elimination, a way for a community to define itself through those it symbolically chooses to kill" (963). What are the dangers in the concepts of subsistence? What is it about the idea or reality of the peasantry that need to be symbolically killed or erased by illusions of modernity? Could it be that what is being killed-off in the declaration that subsistence economies and the peasantry are dead (or dying) are a) ideological threats to the fantasies of modernity and b) practical threats to the political economies of global agri-business? If so, this would help explain why it

is important to declare the peasant way, subsistence, and sufficiency dead, dying, or irrelevant.

All that said the term subsistence still feels like a bit of a downer…

The term subsistence stills feels like a bit of a downer to me. It sounds dreary, as being about drudgery and endless struggle. But at least one etymological dictionary surprised me with the positive meanings of that word and offers me deeper insights into the impulses towards the concept's erasure and degradation.

Subsistence
"early 15c., "existence, independence," from Late Latin subsistentia "substance, reality," in Medieval Latin also "stability," from Latin subsistens, present participle of subsistence "stand still or firm" (see subsist). Latin subsistentia is a loan-translation of Greek hypostasis "foundation, substance, real nature, subject matter; that which settles at the bottom, sediment," literally "anything set under." In the English word, meaning "act or process of support for physical life" is from 1640s." (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=subsistence)

If Mary Hawksworth is right then ideas of independence, reality, foundation, real nature, processes of support for physical life embedded in the concept of subsistence contain symbolic dangers for the contemporary social order. In an age of extinction and climate change—the meaning of subsistence doesn't sound so bad to me. In an age of globalized private governance the notion of independence has appeal. Subsistence is beginning to sound more and more attractive.

When one looks more closely one finds that concepts like subsistence, peasantry, or sufficiency have been misrepresented in ways that ideologically validate the contemporary forms of socio-economic order and hide the transgressive nature of the logic of peasant-like economic ideas. If so, could it be that many of our dominant ideas about "the economy" and economic arrangements are keeping us trapped and that actually concepts like subsistence, sufficiency and peasantry offer keys to escape? Feminist theorists Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon explain that every day understandings of economic realities are often inversions of what is really going on. They argued that popular ideas about economic dependence and independence need to be turned upside down. It used to be, they point out, that wage labour was seen as an undesirable form of economic dependence, not as independence. From that perspective being a waged employee is to be economically dependent. One does not need to be a political libertarian to ask how it is that relying on debt and someone else's decision to hire us to put bread on the table and a roof over our heads is not seen as political and economic dependence? Could it not be argued that it is a very real kind of drudgery and misery to live in a world framed by elite organized trade agreements in which we are told that we can't stop climate change tomorrow because we need to produce and purchase (largely unnecessary) stuff today? Subsistence and peasant economies are at least partially outside those catch 22 prisons. Despite the unjust conditions under which those economic logics were often found in historical times, today subsistence and peasantry as logics of being-in-the world may have a lot going for them.

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Michael Deflorian is getting at something similar when he advocates for sufficiency as a new form of governmentality in an era of climate change. Sufficiency, he explains implies a critique of the imperative of economic growth. It calls for a return to a "sufficient" degree of consumption and partial subsistence in order to reach qualitative well-being. As such it would involve the reconfiguration of current governmentalities and the construction of new kinds of subjects to counter the consuming subject of neoliberalism. This, he continues, would involve what he describes as the development of two new "technologies of the self: the rebalancing of needs (through the reflection on personal aspirations) and the self-furnishing of demands". This latter transformation of the subject from consumer to ecological citizen in a more just forms of self-and public governance and would include practices like gardening, repairing and shared consumption. In that way, he explains, "the governmentality of sufficiency remediates elements of liberalism and modern progress to guarantee a 'good life' for all in a warming world."

Trying to Put into Words

You can see how I was so pleased to be part of that session in Ottawa and very grateful to people like Leigh Brownhill and Angela Miles and others for enabling this kind of work that in a time of climate change is more important than ever. It felt like an invitation to join others in taking ecofeminism or ecological feminisms into new political and conceptual hybrids—new species adaptions between feminisms and peasant agro-economics, subsistence, anti-commodity production, different kinds of provisioning system, ecological respectful and socially just way of living with each other. And equally important, ways of living with other-than humans, whether winged, finned, four-legged or otherwise embodied: a world of Donna Haraway's multi-species muddles or Chris Cuomo's ethic of co-flourishing.

Mostly I find myself talking in places where I am not among like-minded colleagues and feminist thinkers. Trying to talk of subsistence, peasant economic logics, the commons or reproduction in such situations reminds me of the impossibility of speaking with female sounding voices in places of power. If I may heuristically and temporarily employ essentialisms here I am reminded of how feminist theorists explained years ago that in places of power one can't be really heard or taken seriously if one speaks like or sounds like a woman. However, speaking like a man with a woman's voice sounds shrill and also un-listenable to. It is challenging to speak in conventional sites of power. So too is it challenging to use words like subsistence, peasant, and the commons in an age of bi- and multilateral trade agreements, and of a war on climate change (rather than care for the earth), because it makes one sound irrelevant or silly. To use these words is to speak from beyond the pale of intelligible global conversations.[3]

There must be some way of talking about these concepts, ideas and alternative economic logics that can be heard. But heard by whom? Am I trying to get privileged elites to take these other logics of being in the world seriously? How can they? These words are the counter narratives to their own stories: stories that justify their lives and their privilege. This at least is partly why these alternative economic logics and those who embody them are being declared dead.

If I had to sum it up what would I say? I would say that the concepts of subsistence, sufficiency provisioning, the commons and others that were central to our discussions in Ottawa are in fact radical, potentially mind-body and consumer-society transformative conceptual and political tools. As conceptual tools they are relatively easily accessible to those of us who are not Indigenous to the places where we live, work or study in Canada. These may allow those of us who are relatively new to the places where we live to revisit our own dead and tell different and more livable stories for different futures, and to not try to appropriate others' stories. Indigenous peoples have immense knowledge traditions that speak to being in and of place and although these are profoundly instructive and must be respected; they cannot be appropriated.

Re-peasantization is a logic of ecological, economic, and socio-cultural survival in the shadow of Empire. We all now live in new kinds of Empires' shadows. Peasant movements and re-peasantization are fields to which we feminist scholars and activists need to better attend. Doing so would help evade new kinds of colonization by seductive neoliberal subjectivities.

Stock market indices, GDP, debt, interest rates, and markets for new kinds of financial derivatives, all sound like more realistic kinds of economic-talk than talk of subsistence or peasant economics. How does one argue that there needs to be new kinds of hybrid politics, economics and research to help us to survive in troubled times? How do we have these important conversations when economic logics and words such as subsistence or peasantry that embody living interdependently with nature have to be symbolically killed for the good of the "the (globalized-market) economy?" But let me try.

If I Could Put It Into Words…

If I could be articulate and coherent I would say that work on subsistence, re-peasantization, food sovereignty, and the articles in this issue of *CWS/cf* can help steer feminism away from being co-opted by capitalism and the seductions of neo-liberal subjectifications that Nancy Fraser, Hester Eisenstein, Ann Ferguson, and others identify so clearly in the case of feminism, and Julie Guthman and others identify with respect to the growing local food movement.

And if I could speak in any half coherent way I would put into words why those of us who work in the local

food movement and around agri-food systems and (what is called) sustainability need far better feminist analysis. I would try to explain that reference to family, household, and community in much of the politics, practices, and theorization around re-peasantization, alternative food networks, and anti-commodity sociations can unintentionally reproduce classed, racialized, and gendered assumptions. These fields of research and inquiry need more feminist analysis. And much contemporary feminism needs to attend seriously to work on subsistence and peasant economics. This is not least because of the problematic seductions of neoliberal consumer identity that colonize much contemporary gendered performances and in so doing inevitably symbolically (and materially) erases the significances of subsistence and the logics of peasantries. The editors of this issue, of course, will quickly remind us that what is (probably) the largest social movement network in the world, Via Campesina, translated as *the peasant way*, makes the rights to subsistence and gender justice central to its politics and its resistance to the neo-liberalization of the dominant agri-food system. These interconnections are no accident but conceptually as well as politically grounded. These lessons from the Global South need to be learned by those in the Global North.

In other words—the marginalized technologies of being-in-the world of subsistence, sufficiency, and peasantries can teach much about how to *Stay Alive* (Shiva). Re-peasantization, Van der Ploeg explains, is a logic of ecological, economic, and socio-cultural survival in the shadow of Empire. We all now live in new kinds of Empires' shadows. Peasant movements and re-peasantization are fields to which we feminist scholars and activists need to better attend. Doing so would help evade new kinds of colonization by seductive neoliberal subjectivities.

My point is that instead of seeing the word "peasant" as referencing either a despised or romanticized pre-modern past, we can learn lessons about living in an age of Empire and Extinctions. These latter terms, Empire and Extinction (or made to disappear) to me are better terms than the Anthropocene. Research on small scale-farming and alternative provisioning of anti-commodity production or the diversity and resilience of peasantries globally is telling us that we have much to learn from these ways of being. This is not a retreat to the past (which of course is not past—the same struggles about respect and justice continue in new embodiments). It is about being very smart and brave, staying alive, and keeping those we love and care for (including non-human nature) alive and well. Sounds like "women's work."

Ecofeminism has long told us that the dominant political and economic systems of high modernity and corporate dominated capitalism actively constructs Nature(s) as Other from which we need protection and which must be managed as resources, by experts. What do we do when new experts offer green capitalism or some variation on sustainable corporatism as the only realistic way of responding to climate change? The peasantry, on the other hand, have long relied on the diversity, complexity, and autonomy of the self-organizing capacities of nature to protect and buffer them from the vagaries of the market place and elite exploitation. This is a very different way of being in the world—materially and symbolically. It opens an intergenerational logic of co-survival—of intertwined nature and people. It speaks to complex entanglements of co-production between animate and inanimate, of webs of actants (Latour), of multispecies muddles (Haraway). This world cannot be contained by the modernist simplifications of life and space so central to the organization of State building industrial societies (Scott), and the territorialisation of place. How did terra become State territory? I suspect the dead can tell me.

I have argued that it is because particular ways of being-in-the world such as subsistence, sufficiency, peasant or repeasantization, anti-commodity production or the commons are so transgressive of dominant political and economic arrangements that they have to be declared dead. But they are not. They do and shall keep us alive.

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[1]Networks of scholars working outside mainstream academia are showing how peasant agro-ecologies and Indigenous people's methodologies avoid the destructiveness of modernist food provisioning. More than that, research is showing, these kinds of agro-ecological world can both feed communities and help cool the planet.

[2]The ownership of land was used to reproduce patriarchal relationships and inequalities.

[3]No wonder I find it challenging to speak of such profoundly different economies and ways of being-in-the world without sounding flaky. Yes words like subsistence economies are used when talking (in the Global North) about the Global South. The unspoken assumption is that 'they' will escape subsistence and join 'us' in the global marketplace—with the help of Philanthropic Foundations and International Aid from the North and all sorts of neo-liberal economic governance regimes.