Ecofeminism and System Change

Women on the Frontlines of the Struggle Against Fossil Capitalism and for the Solar Commons

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Plusieurs universitaires et activistes reconnaissent que les femmes sont plus nombreuses à travailler dans les "communes." Ce texte nous présente une analyse écoféministe des communes, ces mouvements ou réseaux d'actions et de perspectives qui travaillent en commun avec deux mouvements où les femmes sont très présentes: le Réseau des femmes d'action pour la Terre et le climat (WECAN) et La Via Campesina. L'analyse démontre les luttes des femmes qui comprennent la coopération comme un contrôle des moyens de survie, elles défient les relations capitalistes et font la promotion des alternatives. Donc, les alliances entre ces communes et celles qui sont intégrées au capitalisme sont essentielles pour transformer le capitalisme anti écologique en capitalisme écologique.

A large number of high profile activists for the commons, including Vandana Shiva (2016), Silvia Federici, Peter Linebaugh, Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill (2004), Angela Miles, Pat Mooney, Clayton Thomas-Muller and, members of Friends of the Earth have pointed out that women are at the forefront of the defense of the commons. These commons include territories, against enclosures, especially by extractive industries (extractivism) Commoning is defined here as class struggle for collective control over and "direct access to social wealth, access that is not mediated by competitive market relations" (De Angelis 7). Subsistence production—caring for nature including families by, centrally, securing household food, water, fuel, medical and other needs—requires direct access to the material commons and a context of peaceful community relations. Subsistence production is overwhelmingly women's social responsibility. According to Federici, (143) "historically and in our time, women more than men depend on access to communal resources, and have been most committed to their defense."

I examine selected statements made by women activists and their networks within two social movement organizations: the Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN), that campaigns to keep fossil fuels in the ground, and La Vía Campesina's global movement for agroecology and food and seed sovereignty. I do so in order to understand the gendered, ethnicized class dimensions of activism for system change.[1] These networks are chosen because women are prominent in them, and because both groups address food and energy—relations which are core to capitalism and its negation by commoners in resistance.

The statements made by WECAN and Vía Campesina women and their organizations recognize that extractivism exploits and threatens women by destroying or undermining the social relations and ecosystems they rely upon for subsistence. The statements also indicate that women commoners are taking action to undermine extractivism and elaborate alternatives to capitalism. These alternatives, including community-controlled energy and small-farmer or peasant-centred agroecology, can be generalized to address the global life-threatening food-fuel-climate crisis faced by everyone on Earth**.** As the analysis below shows, WECAN and La Vía Campesina activists' insight that women are exploited by capitalism while also being agents of commoning transformation, is crucial to informing system change praxis and averting ecological crises.

As I show below, capitalists' profitability depends on women's unwaged and devalued work, as well as on the exploitation of nature. This work is primarily labour power production that includes child care, housework, food production and preparation, emotional work, health care, elder care, and the regeneration

of nature. Time use surveys across a wide range of countries estimate that women work more than men, spending 85-90 percent of their time on household food preparation (Ilahi 2000 cited in FAO 2011: 14). Many women, especially racialized and colonized women, are also exploited in precarious and low-paid service work and commodity production. When women take action to deny capitalists their labour, by transferring their time and energy from exploitative relations and to commoning, capitalism is fundamentally undermined (Turner 2012). I identify these actions as "commoning ecofeminism" because they are made on the basis of (i) a recognition that the exploitation of women and nature is central to capitalism, (ii) a stand against that exploitation and (iii) an affirmation of life-centred alternatives.

Women's system change activism has been strengthened by members of other social groups who join with women to challenge capitalism and affirm the commons (Turner and Brownhill). When all dispossessed men and dispossessed white women fight together with racialized women at the bottom of the capitalist hierarchy, capitalist divisions are challenged and potentially undermined, leaving room for these groups to establish horizontal relations (Sitrin and Azzellini).

WECAN Challenges Extractivism and Affirms Solar Commoning

The Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN), founded in 2013, is a global grassroots network of multi-ethnic women activists and their allies who work together across more than 54 countries "to stop the escalation of climate change and environmental and community degradation" and support "women's empowerment, partnerships, hands-on trainings, advocacy campaigns, and political, economic, social and environmental action" (WECAN 2015b). To this end, WECAN members have committed themselves to bringing forward a post-fossil epoch (Amazon Watch).

In September 2014 at a WECAN organized event in connection with the 400,000 strong Peoples' Climate March in New York City, Kichwa WECAN member from the Ecuadorian Amazon, Patricia Gualinga, stated that her community's fight to stop oil extractivism in Ecuador's Yasuní territory is a struggle to support life:

> Their [the Ecuadorian government of Rafael Correa] rationale is basically that we are poor, that by developing 'we are going to change your life and we are going to help you so that you are not poor anymore.' My response is: who is poor? You are the ones who bring poverty; we are the ones who have clean air, we are the ones who are breathing freely, we are the ones that have clean water, we are the ones who have a market. You are the ones who bring us poverty.… What we need to do is to challenge this greed, look at new models. We want the Amazon to live. We have models, we have ideas, we have ways of living sustainably. t

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Since the 1940s Indigenous women and allied men in Ecuador have been mobilizing against fossil fuel extractivism to defend the Amazon and territories and the way of life they support. In one famous instance from the 1940s, the uncontacted Huaorani people killed a Shell Oil Company employee who they presumed to be a threat to life (Rival). This mobilization has involved direct actions as well as women-led marches, for instance, from the Amazon to Puyo and to Quito (Pachamama Alliance). Gualinga offers a 'subsistence perspective'; a politics that prioritizes life-support and rejects neoliberal 'structural adjustment programs' that impose corporate markets on the world's poor. These programs expand corporate markets via enclosures that dispossess Indigenous communities of the means of life, and in particular most women, thereby reducing women to waged and unwaged units of labour power (Isla). Said another way, extractivism encloses the commons. From the perspective of Gualinga and her allies, her community's wealth comes from the Amazon and commoning relations.

Patricia Gualinga and her community are at the source and primary site—the wellhead—of petroleum extraction. Hence they are crucially important actors in the fight to keep carbon in the ground by virtue of the strategic location of their residence near the beginning of Big Oil's value chain. The struggle against fossil fuels in the Amazon is part of a broad and expanding network of anti-extractivist struggles around the world (Break Free).

Also at the source of extraction are members of Idle No More, a remarkable mobilization that emerged in 2013 in Turtle Island (North America). Idle No More is a grassroots movement initiated by Indigenous women, and joined by Indigenous men and allies from amongst settler communities, to defend treaties and Indigenous territories. On 29 September 2015 at a WECAN event in New York City, Cherri Foytlin, a Dine, African American and Latina

woman from Idle No More Gulf Coast, (southern Louisiana) and The Mother's Project, underlined the fact that, from the perspective of the oil companies, her community is a "sacrifice zone" which, for Cherri Foytlin, "means that you are not worth anything. That means your children are not worth anything." She explained that, "we need to understand extractivism as a form of violence toward women and children. It is part of rape culture and it is a continuation of colonization. It is the commodification of the natural world, and it is destroying us" (Foytlin).

Foytlin's analysis is that extractivism is inherently brutal toward women, children and nature. This view is supported by a wide network of Indigenous women and their allies who are fighting against extractivism (Honor the Earth). According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples (from 2008-2014), James Anaya; Indigenous women suffer an increase in violence, including rape, when extractive industries operate in or near their territories.[2] In the Bakken oil fields of North Dakota, for example, some non-Indigenous men employed by the oil industry who live in temporary 'man camps' near three native communities are known to commit acts of violence against Indigenous women and children. These men are transient; they do not have connections with or a sense of social responsibility to the surrounding community (Honor the Earth). Foytlin's statement indicates that putting an end to rape culture, colonization and the commodification of nature is necessary to fundamental system change.

Foytlin characterizes her community's struggle as a fight for a fundamental change in power relations so that people, not corporations, control the means of life:

> It is time to bring the power back to the people and to recognize that our greatest natural resource is not oil or coal or LNG [liquefied natural gas] but it is our children and our future generations. We are in a place where we have to make decisions. And we have to talk about a few things because it goes a little farther than just finding some solar panels. Who is in charge of that? Who benefits from it? It is not any good if BP [British Petroleum] moves off of oil and starts selling solar panels, if they are still the ones in power.

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> We have to shift the power back to the people. (Foytlin)

Foytlin recognizes that global warming cannot be addressed without also challenging the social relations that underpin ecocide. Foytlin does not seek 'decarbonization' or a simple shift to renewable energy under the current capitalist system. Rather, she and her allies seek grassroots democracy constituted by horizontal power relations.

Since 2014 WECAN has strengthened its cross-border connections and direct action strategy to challenge fossil capitalism. In the concluding hours of WECAN's 2015 New York City event, a group of Indigenous women from territories across the Americas signed the Indigenous Women of the Americas Protecting Mother Earth Treaty. The Treaty is being signed by women around the world who are committing themselves to political action in defense of Mother Earth (Grassroots Global Justice Alliance). This ceremony in New York City—at the symbolic and actual centre of fossil capitalist "male dealing" (Turner 1991: 70)—coincided with a direct action by a group of Ecuadorian Indigenous women at the Quito office of the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation, or CNPC. The women occupied the Quito headquarters of the Chinese state oil company engaged in exploiting oil in the Amazon.

On March 4, 2016, on International Women's Day in Puyo, Ecuador, Indigenous women members of WECAN from the U.S. and Ecuador gathered for a series protests and workshops to "reject new oil concessions and stand for the rights of Mother Earth and communities" (WECAN 2016).[3] Speaking at a rally attended by upwards of 500 Indigenous Amazonian women and their allies, WECAN's Osprey Orielle Lake affirmed the centrality of women's actions to defend life in the context of ecological crisis: "We all depend on the flourishing of these precious rainforests, the lungs of the planet. Now is the time to keep the oil in the ground and stand with the women who have been putting their bodies on the line for years to protect the forest, their cultures, and the health and well-being of all future generations" (cited in WECAN 2016).

According to the above analysis, extreme extractivism threatens women's lives, the communities and the future generations for which women are most socially responsible. The WECAN network is pursuing global, joint actions to challenge the global, integrated fossil fuel companies. WECAN's activism also promotes alternatives: commoning relations and community control over the means of life, especially energy.

WECAN's commitment is part of the long history of direct action by women to 'keep the oil in the soil' and to elaborate life-centred political econ-

omies (Turner and Brownhill). Such actions are crucial to averting climate catastrophe given that the exponential growth logic of the capitalist system prevents voluntary emissions reductions (Kovel). WECAN and their allies' activism against fossil capital pushes oil closer to the point of becoming a 'stranded asset'—unburnable or unproducable carbon that cannot be converted into profits due to the environmental risk (liability) and the consequent downward revaluation of fossil energy shares in the context of climate change (Giacomini and Turner 38).

I now turn to an investigation of the transformative ecofeminist content of statements made by La Vía Campesina.

La Vía Campesina's Fight Against Agribusiness and Expansion of the Commons

La Vía Campesina is a global movement of peasants, small-scale farmers, Indigenous peoples, landless workers, youth and women that has helped to coordinate global actions against agribusiness and for food sovereignty alternatives.[4] Food sovereignty involves expanded commoning by way of securing popular democratic control over the food system. La Vía Campesina defines agroecology, a path toward food sovereignty, as both a method of ecological food production and a political movement against agribusiness enclosures and for peasant and community control over food. According to La Vía Campesina's (2015a) Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, "[c]ollective rights and access to the commons are a fundamental pillar of agroecology. We share access to territories that are the home to many different peer groups, and we have sophisticated customary systems for regulating access and avoiding conflicts that we want to preserve and to strengthen." Many groups and individuals within La Vía Campesina recognize that women are central to the agri-food commons. "As savers of seed and living libraries of knowledge about local biodiversity and food systems, women are often more closely connected to the commons than men" (La Vía Campesina 2015b).

Since 2006 La Vía Campesina and their international allies, including the feminist World March of Women, have been organizing together in the Global Campaign to End Violence against Women. In *Stop the Violence against Women!,* La Vía Campesina explains that agribusiness' control over land and territories undermines women's lives and work: "agribusiness has become the manifestation of capitalism in the countryside, bringing with it exclusion, exploitation and violence against peasants, and particularly women family farmers. Agribusiness can therefore be considered patriarchal capitalism's rural strategy" (La Vía Campesina Internationale 2012: 23). According to the farmers, commodification and agribusiness concentration create the conditions for violence against women by "expell[ing] thousands of women from their land, destroying their cultures and generating isolated spaces in the countryside" (23). Under capitalist agriculture, women are "left with no place to work and are forced to remain in the domestic sphere, to carry out invisible and unrecognized labor" (23).

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Agribusiness separates women from their means of life and devalues women's work in agriculture, a process Maria Mies (110) calls "housewifeization," that entails hierarchical relations between women and men. Under capitalism men, with few exceptions, are socialized to control women in order to ensure that the products of women's wageless, invisible labour (especially labour power itself, the most strategically central of capitalists' commodities) are channeled upward to enhance corporations' bottom lines. "[P]atriarchal capitalism's rural strategy" to which La Vía Campesina refers is the enclosure of women's time and bodies in the service of agribusiness profits.

Below I draw on statements made by Korean women seed savers within La Vía Campesina to indicate that for these women and for La Vía Campesina, horizontal and non-exploitative gender relations are central to system change.

In many parts of the world, women peasants are the main custodians of seeds (Shiva 1989; Pionetti 5). The commodification and genetic modification of seeds harms small-scale farmer, peasant and Indigenous women in at least three ways. First, privatized seeds are costly, whereas common seeds are virtually free. The commodification of seeds makes it more expensive for women—who are, by and large, unwaged or low-waged—to access the seeds they need to feed their families. Second, the loss of control over seeds associated with commodification "either destroys the basis of women's work or devalues it. With the decline in the perceived or real productivity of women is associated a decline in their status in society and within the household" (Shiva 1989: 117). Third, technologies in seeds are paired at the genetic level with chemicals that are fossil fuel-based and implicated in the acceleration of climate crisis.

In 2015, the World Health Organization classified Monsanto's glyphosate—one of the main chemicals used in industrial agriculture worldwide—"probably carcinogenic." When human health is compromised by agri-chemicals, women spend more time and energy caring for the sick and compensating for the departed. Seed enclosures lead to an enclosure of the body, along with women's time and creativity.

La Vía Campesina puts forward food and seed sovereignty as an alternative to the corporations' monopoly control over food and seeds, and the hierarchical gender relations commodification entails. In the 2013 publication "Our Seeds, Our Future," a La Vía Campesina member-organization, the Korean Women Peasants Association (KWPA) outlines at least six ways in which the seed commons is central to women's and their communities' lives and well-being: (i) seeds have deep significance for women's collective history and culture; (ii) working with seeds gives women social standing, including "respect and admiration"; (iii) seeds are an "essential right" as the first link of the food chain; (iv) peasant saved seeds are a line of defense against fossil chemical agriculture; (v) peasant seeds secure farmer autonomy and; (vi) shared control over seeds is necessary for maintaining or establishing broad transformation to "create a new society." By affirming and enhancing the seed commons, the Korean women peasants in KWPA contribute to the development of a commoners' value chain. The commoners' chain is an alternative to the fossil-fuel dependent corporate value chain and the housewifeization arising from its expansion. The commoners' chain makes possible the elaboration of horizontal, commoning social relations.

A core component of La Vía Campesina's global transformative project—establishing collective control over the means of life—is putting an end to gendered exploitation and violence against women by ending agribusiness' commodification and housewifeization. The men farmers also recognize that women are central to the elaboration of worldwide commoning grounded in food sovereignty. According to La Vía Campesina (2011), peasant agriculture is an alternative to agribusiness and violence against women—"[o]ur work creates and celebrates life and it is in [sic] its own a form of prevention of violence."

La Vía Campesina farmers are indispensable allies in the time-sensitive battle for system change and to avert climate crisis. This is because, first, they prioritize the perspectives and actions of those women who are most exploited by capitalism, and whose knowledge, skills, capacities and cosmovisions linked to the commons offer essential starting points for elaborating a replacement system. By aligning with Indigenous and peasant women at the forefront, other social groups within La Vía Campesina help to shift the world further away from capitalist hierarchy and closer to commoner horizontalism.

Second, La Vía Campesina women and men are already taking action to defend and extend ecological agriculture. They have the skills, knowledge and capacities to grow and distribute food without fossil fuels or petrochemical feedstocks. These skills are essential to generalizing food and energy relations based on solar energy and "soil not oil" (Shiva 2008) by helping farmers and consumers to "break free" (Break Free) from fossil fuel dependency (Gliessman), expand biodiversity (Shiva 2008) and "cool down the earth" (La Vía Campesina 2009: 1).

Conclusion

Women activists' and their networks' statements claim that ecofeminist action and system change are inextricable. That is, a transformation in gender power is essential for system change. System change requires a fundamental shift in power from the one percent class**,** who monopolize the means of life, to the 99 percent class, who face dispossession or who must sell their labour power in order to survive. Because capitalists organize nature and labour within a global racialized and gendered hierarchy of labour power, with racialized and Indigenous women at the bottom; bringing about system change requires transformative ecofeminist actions that prioritize the interests and initiatives of the most exploited or threatened women. The selected statements considered above confirm that extractivism separates women from the means of life—the land, seeds, water—by commodifying and degrading nature and undermining commoning social relations. Agribusiness and fossil fuel extractivism undermines or threatens the basis of women's lives and livelihoods.

However, the women within WECAN and La Vía Campesina, far from being de-historicized passive victims, fight back on the basis of the knowledge, skills and community relations to halt enclosure and the ecological devastation arising from it. The women profiled here do not pursue reformist "green" capitalism or technology-fixes. Rather, they seek broad transformation in social relations away from capitalist hierarchy toward commoning horizontalism; including, centrally, the expansion of collective control over energy and food.

The insight that system change and ecofeminism are inseparable calls for strategic action: the formation of alliances between women at the bottom of the capitalist hierarchy and other social groups to undermine capitalist relations (including sexism, racism and colonialism) and to promote commoning. This commoning can be viewed as the process through which the 99 percent becomes a global class not merely in itself but consciously 'for itself'. In other words, activists who acknowledge and stand against the exploitation of women, prioritizing racialized women who are most exploited under capitalism, challenge and undermine the capital relation as a whole. On the other hand, the actions by those who ignore the struggles of women at the bottom of the hierarchy constitute

reformism because such actions risk perpetuating capitalist relations, with women at the bottom paying the price. As Algonquin Anishinaabe-kwe scholar Lynn Gehl says, "we need to follow the most oppressed to get the momentum we need. Otherwise, the moment other groups get what they need, my needs are dropped."

Commoning women and their allies within WECAN and La Vía Campesina are already taking action to challenge extractivism at multiple links of capitalist, fossil fueled value chains. These resistances simultaneously affirm the commons, especially by establishing collective control over food and energy—core sectors within the capitalist system. The alternatives practiced by members of WECAN and La Vía Campesina can be readily expanded to address global warming and stop ecocide. Alliances with commoning women build on the recognition that such women have the knowledge, skills, land, seeds and community networks to "live better without oil" (Shiva 2008: 4). To the extent that WECAN and La Vía Campesina's commoning initiatives are strengthened, so too is the potential for deepening and expanding transformative actions that promise to move us closer to a climate-stable world.

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[1]I draw on elements of gendered, ethnicized class theory. A more in-depth discussion of this theory than is possible here is available in Turner, Brownhill, and Giacomini (2011). In brief, gendered, ethnicized class analysis centralizes the "revolutionary significance of the life-sustaining activities and resistance of unwaged exploited peoples" (Brownhill 16).

[2]"…Indigenous women have reported that the influx of workers into indigenous communities as a result of extractive projects also led to increased incidents of sexual harassment and violence, including rape and assault. In one case in which I intervened, Indigenous girls walking to school were sexually assaulted by workers operating under a concession granted by the government for the extraction of forest resources in the indigenous peoples' traditional territory" (Anaya).

[3]The events involved women from seven Indigenous nations: Andoa, Achuar, Kichwa, Shuar, Shiwiar, Sapara and Waorani.

[4]While La Vía Campesina national affiliates share a common political strategy, there is great diversity in member organizations' perspectives on the meaning of and ways to achieve food sovereignty.

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