

# Gender and the Global Struggle Civic Environmentalism, Anti-

BETSY TAYLOR

*Le combat pour réclamer les biens communaux est crucial pour la libération des genres et est profondément lié*

not show the commons as socially constructed in lived practices and contestation. It deflects attention from

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*à celui contre l'impérialisme, la mondialisation économique et l'exploitation de la nature. Cet article propose une définition dynamique et matérialiste des biens communaux comme un concept important pour la reconstruction sociale et écologique.*

This article explores a feminist ecological economics in which the notion of the “commons” is central to understanding gender domination and liberation—as well as causal connections with racism, imperialism, and the exploitation of nature. It proposes a dynamic and materialist definition of the commons as the *substantive grounds of social and ecological reproduction*. It emphasizes the social and agentic nature of the commons—as a weave of material and discursive practices that articulate the *mode of reproduction* and the *mode of production* with each other into collective agency—as contested and consolidated in public action. Many current usages of “commons” are too static. They reduce the commons to mere “resources”—the static object of a regime of management or ownership of that which is collectively owned or is fundamentally necessary to life itself. Such an approach does

systemic causal linkages between a commons and wider structures of political economy.

## **The Emerging Politics of the “Commons”**

I agree with those who would argue that struggles to reclaim the commons will be central to the politics of the twenty-first century (Bollier; McMurtry; Klein; Cromwell). Capitalist commodification deepens assaults on the commons at all levels. Market logics enclose more and more life forms that were previously taboo or invisible to exchange value (water, air, forests, the “gift economies” of care, genetic codes, professional research, etc.). It is hard to get semantic or conceptual clarity about this. First, the power and wealth of capitalism is predicated on the denial and erasure of the commons. Therefore, thought about the commons requires a kind of consciousness-raising—an undoing of ideological mystifications in mind and heart (Rowe; Theobald). Second, many examples of functioning commons have roots in precapitalist social formations. In our present political contexts, these are too often dismissed as archaic or utopian. For

instance, vibrant global indigenous rights movements have mobilized around the defense of particular commons (traditional knowledge about medicinal plants, various sorts of communalized ownership of land, traditional regimes for collective management of water forests, etc., etc.). In some sectors of the anti-globalization movement, there has been a call to protect or reclaim subsistence economies which rely on gift economies and the commons.<sup>1</sup> Some would dismiss such efforts as unrealistic or romanticized. I disagree. The traditional imagery that clings to the idea of the “commons” cloaks and protects potentially revolutionary emergent structures of political economic experimentation, which are crucial to planetary survival. Three, within the identity of women under patriarchy is a taboo against linking their reproductive labour in intimate life with reproductive labour in the public sphere. To think the commons under patriarchy and capitalism is to utter ideas that we have been conditioned to find dangerous. They crack open key structures of exploitation and violence that were hidden within the hegemonic illusions that founded patriarchy—raising desire, sorrow, rage and hope that we do not yet have the social relations or collective identities to contain (Taylor MS.).

This is a speculative and philosophical essay. Feminist political economy has been working to reconnect what patriarchal capitalist ideology has falsely disconnected: production/externalized social and ecological costs, public/private, work/family, market/informal economies, etc. This article attempts to put these factors together. It was inspired by my par-

# to Reclaim the Commons

## Globalization and Participatory Research

ticipation in, and observation of, grassroots civic environmentalism in the Appalachian coalfields and elsewhere (Taylor and Rice). Many grassroots struggles are best described as civic environmentalisms that are spontaneous, community-based defense of local commons. Theoretical clarification of the centrality of the commons to liberation from gender, race and ecological exploitation might help to build wider solidarities between localized civic environmentalisms around the world (Klein; Guha and Martinez-Alier).<sup>2</sup>

### A Feminist Materialist Understanding of the Commons

I simplify diverse and complex ecological and feminist theories in Figure 1. The top half of the circle (the “mode of production”) is what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the commodity chain”—moving from the extraction of “raw materials” from “nature” to the material production of specific things, which are exchanged within relations of distribution, leading to consumption. Ecological and feminist political economy, however, shows that this is only half the story (Mies; Daly). Equally important, is the necessary flow of matter through a phase of destruction into a complex process of material transformation that becomes the basis for renewal or “natality.”<sup>3</sup> Both Marxism and capitalism foreground production, making reproduction seem merely to be repetitive processes of repair or naturalized instinct. However, the reality of all material beings (whether manufactured products, ideas, or living beings) is that they cycle between creative manifes-

tation and circulation in material form (mode of production) and creative dissolution and renewal of material form (mode of reproduction). This model applies to all earthly life—from prehuman to preindustrial to industrial.

The unimaginable hypertrophy of the “commodity chain” phase under industrial capitalism does not cancel this green logic. Life is maintained at what I have elsewhere called the “thin green line” that balances reproduction against production (Reid and Taylor 2000). Capitalist ideology is based on a massive denial of the inevitability of this “thin green line,” disguising it under the very different “thin green line” of the profit margin which creates the illusion of endless linear progress in productive expansion unbound by the materiality of reproduction. But the ecological law

tion are sufficiently sidelined from decision-making about the mode of production that no thin green line can hold. The massive release of wastes, unbound energy and toxins proliferate risk and chaotic realignments of life patterns at all levels threatening a radical simplification and reduction of planetary life forms.

I propose an ecological feminism that understands political economy to be the systemic articulation of a mode of reproduction with a mode of production within a mode of social and ecological reproduction (SER)—for which the commons are the substantive grounds. The commons are the substantive goods which enable the “turning of the wheel” of the means of SER as graphically representative in Figure 1. This notion of the commons should be linked with an understanding of democratic

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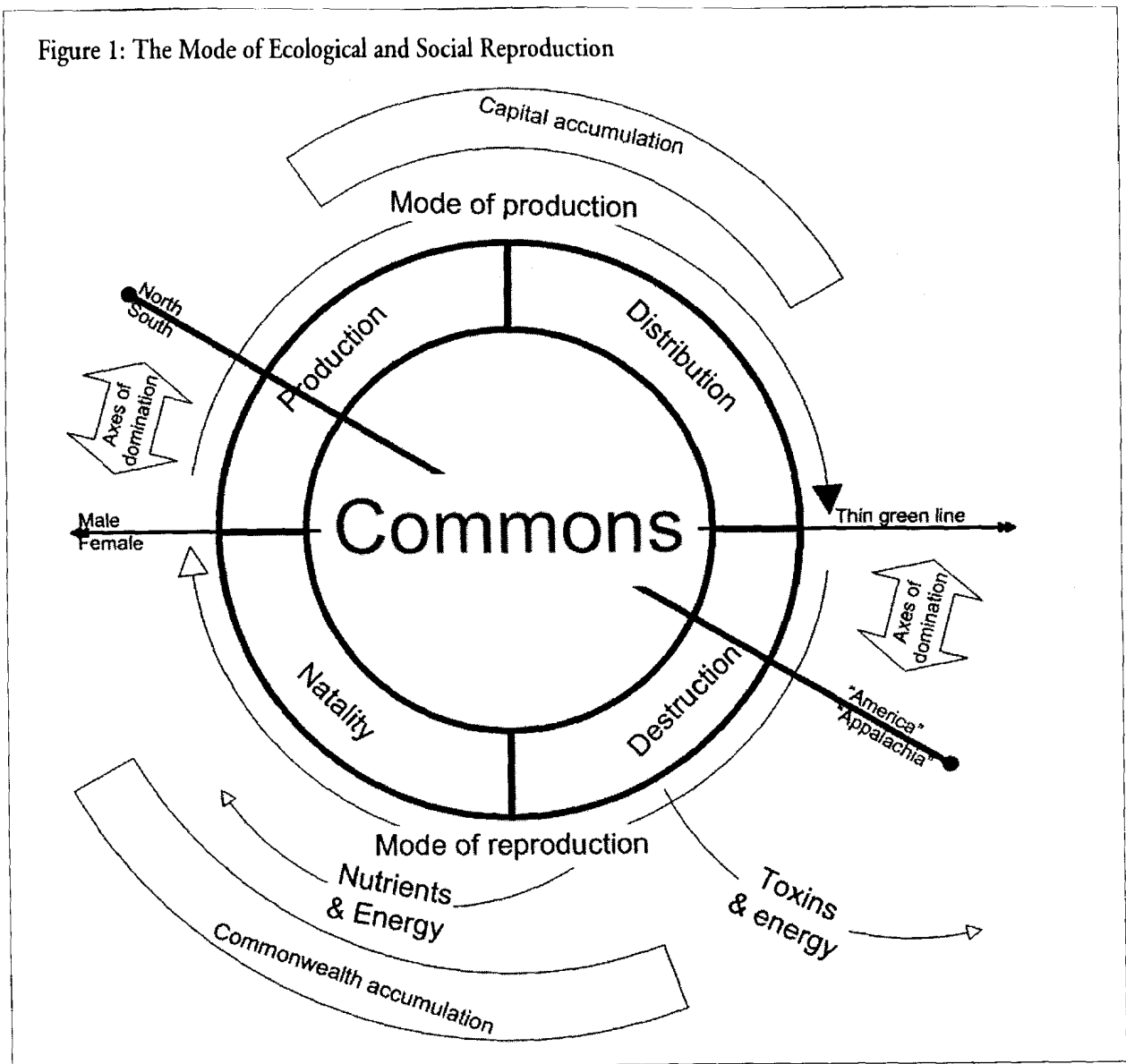
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of the “thin green line” still holds. Polar opposites in this chart require each other. Every object or being entails the destructive release of matter and energy in its production and its necessary destruction. These can be recycled into the composting, incubating, and nutritive functions of natality—to become the grounds for the new production of form. Or, they persist as waste or toxins. Under patriarchal capitalism social actors in all phases of the mode of reproduc-

public space. Hannah Arendt understands public space to be a “space of appearance” where persons can find their fullest being in a mutual witnessing of each others particularity and creativity (cited in Curtis). Elsewhere, I argue that ecological and social justice require a public space that can

countenance the voice and authority (and not erect social barriers against) the claims and ac-

Figure 1: The Mode of Ecological and Social Reproduction



tions of material beings (human and nonhuman) along all stages of the mortal cycles of production, circulation, reproduction. (Taylor MS.)

Public space, in this sense, can be understood as the *forces* of SER (that is to say a particular historical conjunction of the *social relations* and the *means* of SER).

### Domination

This chart provides an ecological geometry of the material basis of male domination under patriarchy. It suggests that domination is based on the material alienation of one sector of

the commons from the rest of the commons, while disguising it as a sublation of the whole into the part. However, while one can foreshorten the circular logic of the commons, one cannot collapse it entirely. It is too deeply written in the structures of life. Patriarchy was a form of sex/gender system that emerged with class society and the state. Kinship, and its reproductive functions, were domesticated within households under the authority of senior males (Gailey; Silverblatt). Only senior male patriarchs could represent these reproductive interests in public space in the authoring of the terms and conditions for SER. The very important contributions that these reproduc-

tive sectors made to real material life were elided and distorted within the public representations of collective life. In public symbolism, women and youth become like vestigial appendages of the public persona of males. Under patriarchy, gender difference is mapped along the "thin green line"—so that they help naturalize each other.

With capitalism, the official logics of public space are further abstracted from the circular materiality of the commons and encoded in a universal personhood which was charged with an unmarked white, masculinity (Pateman 2002; Nelson 1998). The logic of the market is extrapolated from distribution to become the ba-

sis schema for SER itself. As I have argued elsewhere these are symbolisms of social reproduction based on

logics of fungibility which are integrated in economic globalization in intertwined rationalisms of market logic, commodification, bureaucratic rationalization and technocratic managerialism. (Reid and Taylor forthcoming)

These logics of fungibility operate by disembedding beings from the circular logic of the commons—decontextualizing them from ecos, place, social and historical contexts—to make them infinitely interchangeable within markets, or bureaucratic regimes of regulation. Reproductive and ecological processes are both externalized and enclosed under this form of domination.

Under advanced capitalism, another axis of domination can be drawn across the circle of the commons. It begins halfway through the production process, after extractive industries have drawn “raw materials” from Nature and are selling them into production. From the very beginning, capitalism’s insatiable need for raw materials (timber, fossil fuels, agricultural raw materials, etc.) has led to a spatialization of inequality which continually regenerates racist ideology and imperialist hegemonies to maintain access to raw material, labour and consumer markets (Harvey). Above this axis are the geographic regions and economic activities which world systems theory would describe as “core.” These are the value-adding activities of the final stages of production and marketing, as well as the power creating economies of violence and war—which are most generative of capital accumulation. Below this axis of domination, are the material activities characteristic of “peripheral” geographic regions and feminized labour—that provide the “raw materials” for production and retain the least control over ecological destruc-

tion. The costs and the labour of ecological and reproductive destruction and renewal are externalized onto actors who were symbolically constructed as “other” in public life (the global South, nonwhites, women, “national sacrifice” regions like Appalachia) who are symbolically constructed as “left behind” in the linear, progressivist temporality of capitalism (backwards, primitive, nonrational, connected with the frightening primal forces of life-and-death) (Reid and Taylor 2000, 2003a). But just as patriarchy enclosed the reproductive and productive labour of women within households, capitalism increasingly encloses all commons into a standing reserve for production. Capital accumulates the most rapidly in the mid-point of the commodity chain where fungibility is highest, lending ever quickening power to the disembedding of power from the ecological and social commons. These two forces of enclosure and externalization converge with the most ferocity on women in the global South who are triply burdened—with their unpaid labour in “gift economies” (including civic, human, and ecological reproduction), with sexist discrimination in wage

graphical areas, nonmarketized biodiversity coevolved with traditions of ecological and artisanal local knowledges and informal economies that allowed oppressed people to survive as “ecosystem people”—gaining some degree of independence from undependable, low-wage job markets (Hufford; Guha 2000a, 2000b; Gadgil and Guha 1993). However, the contradictions of advanced capitalism are pushing deep into these remaining pockets of functioning commons—increasing oppression and spurring new forms of resistance in environmental justice and anti-globalization movements (Gadgil and Guha 1995; Schwab; Guha and Martinez-Alier). This way of conceptualizing the commons shows the continuing connections between sexism, imperialism, and the exploitation of nature.

### Freedom

Freedom is only possible within a commons-centered, democratic political economy. In the following, I argue that it would free us from false dualisms (subject/object, universal/concrete, self/other) that cripple our agency, by reifying our relationships

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labour and lack of access to unearned wealth, with heavier rates of ecological violence and devastation below the axis of domination (Mies; Hochschild; Ehrenreich and Hochschild).

Global regions (such as Appalachia in the U.S.) that were locked outside the core of the world system have often been able, paradoxically, to nurture rich civic and ecological commons which provide an alternative material means of subsistence. Often in mountainous or other fringe geo-

graphical areas, nonmarketized biodiversity coevolved with traditions of ecological and artisanal local knowledges and informal economies that allowed oppressed people to survive as “ecosystem people”—gaining some degree of independence from undependable, low-wage job markets (Hufford; Guha 2000a, 2000b; Gadgil and Guha 1993). However, the contradictions of advanced capitalism are pushing deep into these remaining pockets of functioning commons—increasing oppression and spurring new forms of resistance in environmental justice and anti-globalization movements (Gadgil and Guha 1995; Schwab; Guha and Martinez-Alier). This way of conceptualizing the commons shows the continuing connections between sexism, imperialism, and the exploitation of nature.

### Work and Power

Capitalism has an astounding capacity to make the direct production of products seem to be the only real work. Global immiseration of those who do that labour of “caring”

(Hochschild) is driven by the increasing colonization of the life world as described above, which drives increasing numbers of workers into the labour market as they are displaced from “gift economies” or are ecological refugees (Guha 1990). This floods the job market with increasingly desperate workers. The only long-term way to fight these structural tendencies is to develop a concerted political platform to fundamentally change power along both of these axes of domination. The primary need is to change the legal definition of who can function as a collective actor and collective representative of the interests of persons doing labour along each phase of the cycle of the commons. Efforts to re-regulate and deconstruct the legal “personhood” of corporations and global financial entities are crucial. Perhaps more important is the effort to create new legal and collective entities to protect and express the interests of those stuck below the axes of domination. Civil society organizations, who (claim to) represent the interests of the global South, youth, women, mothers, victims of violence, and nonhuman beings at least introduce these positionalities into global imaginary. It is much more important, however, to develop collective entities, for new forms of ownership and direct representation. There is much interesting experimentation in this area that is too complex to summarize here.<sup>4</sup> Most important is the recognition that the most important site of value creation is not in the zone of “capital accumulation” but in the zone of “commonwealth accumulation.” We need new ways of recognizing, conceptualizing and institutionalizing the generation of public/common goods and assets which nurture new “natality” and reclaim the products of material production.

#### *Temporality and Knowledge*

The timeframe within which we encounter a thing or being is a crucial factor in how we constitute it. Within the media of advanced capitalism, we

increasingly experience things and beings in a “spectacular” mode (Harvey 1990). They rise up before us in an “eternal now” which contains their visible meanings with ever denser webs of commodified codes of self-referential meanings carried by “floating signifiers” displaced from historical particularity and what Arendt terms human plurality (Curtis). Commodities not only fetishize and hide the class inequalities of their production (as Marx argued), they also hide the imperialist spatialities of their production (the global division of labour that externalizes ecological wastes, toxins and exhaustion onto peripheralized regions, workers and ecologies) (Harvey 1996; Schwab).

However, in a commons-centered, democratic political economy, beings and things would appear to us as an oscillation between a coming into being and a going out of being. They would tend to carry the aura (and the marks and scars) of particular pasts and possible futures. A political economy in which political and social actors are equal through all phases of the commons, would create the material conditions for an ontology and epistemology formed around the rich, concrete particularities of particular history of things in their oscillation between being and nonbeing. For instance, agribusiness deflects and ferociously attacks public knowledge about the real conditions of animals in factory farms and mechanized butchery, just as carefully as they disguise the real conditions of migrant farm workers. However, there is a burgeoning around the world of grassroots efforts to create direct exchange between food producers and food consumers. For instance, the Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky, U.S. (a grass-roots alliance of small family farmers)<sup>5</sup> is campaigning for L.I.F.E. (Locally Integrated Food Economy)—including community supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, dependence on local produce by government institutions and private businesses, community

gardens, safeguarding of heritage seeds and native plants, etc (Taylor 2004). As is true, globally, the language of this activism is suffused with an understanding that such material changes would bring about and require epistemological and moral changes—as people revalue the contingent, local and imperfect beauties of products, places and relationships which are not symbolically perfected by a mass culture industry and which are marked by the productive and reproductive cycles which form them.

Such an ontology and epistemology would not abstract itself from habitat. Such a reason is very different from the “logics of fungibility” that have been exalted and rewarded under patriarchal capitalism. Against the market influenced logics of fungibility that constructed beings as infinitely transactable, I argue elsewhere that an ecologically sane political economy would defend itself on “participatory reason” (Reid and Taylor 2000; Reid and Taylor forthcoming). Participatory reason sees beings as emerging at the nexus of multiple causal and shaping forces that must be understood in their *particularity*. This requires understanding living beings over long periods of time in those habitats in which they create their being through all phases of the commons. For instance, new forms of civic environmentalism globally are developing creative new forms of participatory action research as part of citizen efforts to monitor the healthy forests, watersheds, biodiversity, public health, etc. (Edwards and Gaventa; Fischer). This scaling up of so-called “local knowledge” is an important mobilization against the dominance of technocratic and professionalized knowledge regimes. It emphasizes field based, long-term, ground truthed knowledge of *particular* habitats or beings through seasonal change, unique and multicausal local histories. Herbert Reid and I have argued (Reid and Taylor 2003b) that academic scholars need to reclaim a Deweyan heritage of this sort of

democratic and participatory reason. This will require political struggles within higher education to bring poetics and field sciences together in place-based, action research and pedagogy. It also requires the deflection of prestige and resources from the now dominant technocratic research that is increasingly fueled by nonpublic, corporate entrepreneurialism.

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<sup>1</sup>In her preface to the second edition of *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Mies calls this SITA (Subsistence is the Answer) and summarizes her debate with her critics.

<sup>2</sup>See also the special issue of *Whole Earth* on “The Global Commons” assembled by the staff of *The Ecologist*. For a critical view of the imperialist misuse of the idea of the commons by “development professionals” from the global North see Goldman.

<sup>3</sup>I take Hannah Arendt’s term for creative human action in public space and expand it to include the preparatory and matrixial phase of all aspects of self, other and thing creation (see, for example, Curtis).

<sup>4</sup>See Bollier for an overview of emerging models for institutionalizing collective and equitable ownership of the commons and commonwealth—including public domain patents, various forms of land trust, joint management and ownership models, public asset development, etc.

<sup>5</sup>See the Community Farm Alliance website: [www.communityfarmalliance.com](http://www.communityfarmalliance.com)

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## DESI DI NARDO

### Ruby Garden

My uncle works outside in his backyard  
 In a small garden in urban Toronto.  
 It is only enough for a lawn chair or two,  
 But there is a field of fury growing there.  
 His tomatoes are rubies on felts of lush green,  
 Large lettuce heads unfold beguiled by their own size,  
 And plump purplish eggplants  
 Swing slowly with sense and mellowness.  
 He notices all this in the morning

Before young men turn up for work  
 In the subway with their angular jaws  
 Deep in the morning paper  
 How sexy is a man in a suit?  
 Especially when he's talking on his cell  
 That guy there's got a Walkman on  
 An all news radio station leaks out past his ears  
*Sunny today with a high of 34 degrees ... Residents are urged  
 to avoid watering their lawns again  
 For the next few days until the heat wave subsides...*  
 Somebody else has got his eyes closed but he is still  
 listening.  
 My uncle doesn't read the paper. He doesn't have time  
 for the news. But he has a cell. His children say,  
*Just for emergencies—the future looks grim.*

It is in the early quiet morning before his coffee  
 That he works the land  
 Overcome by its fullness  
 Spreading manure with a big open hand  
 He's wearing muddy work boots that he's left untied  
 In case there is a call for him and he must rush inside

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