

[Ariel Salleh](#) [1]

Thursday, April 19, 2012 - 03:00

As capitalism exhausts the planet's capacity to provide material throughout for industrial 'value-adding', it's not just high tech 'renewables' but 'global institutional architectures' that the private sector is devising to push against the limits of living nature. Typically, the new 'environmentalism' is rationalised as an economic necessity. Thus, Business Action for Sustainable Development writes of its role at the June 2012 Rio+20 summit: 'The private sector generates most of the goods and services that are utilised every day and therefore must be actively engaged to address ... sustainable development goals.'

CLASS INTERESTS

Now, it is not true that business delivers most people's needs. For one thing, the majority of world food growers are women in the global South. In fact, the BASD statement invisibilises several 'othered' economic groupings. It is peasants, mothers, fishers and gatherers outside of capital and labouring directly with natural cycles, who meet everyday needs for the majority of people on earth. Moreover, this 'meta-industrial' class uses modes of provisioning and 'indigenous technologies' that already integrate precaution and sustainability.

Meta-industrial workers constitute the very broadest base of the international 99% - and their jobs are actually real 'green jobs'. While the Left has not fully come to terms with this heterogeneous class, the World Social Forum has attempted to combine workers', women's, indigenous and ecological voices. People with meta-industrial skills and values are active in WSF as peasant food sovereignty and indigenous environment networks, as women anti-toxics campaigners and peace activists. And a meta-industrial consciousness is implicit in the critique of bio-colonialism developed by the ETC group. As the WSF looks to Rio+20, its Thematic Social Forum is circulating a strong synthesis of shared concerns in 'Another Future is Possible: Come to Re-invent the World at Rio+20'.

Meanwhile, the corporate message of BASD and others is a bid to promote the private sector as key sponsor and ideas man for reframing global governance institutions. This technique was pioneered by the Business Council for Sustainable Development in 1992 as it steered UNCED, the first Rio. Today, Elliott Harris from IMF announces a Green Economy Initiative building on 'the strengths of the market-based economy' supported by a more 'coherent institutional framework'. No surprise that the peasant organisation Via Campesina, a leading strand of WSF and of the worldwide class of meta-industrial producers, reads the Rio+20 Green Economy as a yet another 'structural adjustment program'.

Biotechnology will be central to capital accumulation through this Green Economy. But ramping that up means ever more resource extraction, biodiversity loss and energy pollution. In the words of ETC, advocates for people's science,

'The big idea is to replace the extraction of petroleum with the exploitation of biomass (food and fibre crops, grasses, forest residues, plant oils, algae, etc.). Proponents envision a post-petroleum future where industrial production (of plastics, chemicals, fuels, drugs, energy, etc.) depends - not on fossil fuels - but on biological feedstocks transformed through high technology bioengineering platforms. Many of the world's largest corporations and most powerful governments are touting the use of new [but untested]"> technologies including genomics, nanotechnology and synthetic biology

to transform biomass into high-value products.'

MANUFACTURING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

World Watch Institute calculates that 60% of "ecosystem services" have been destroyed by industrialisation since World War II. So, the key substantive issues for Rio+20 are energy access and efficiency; food security and sustainable agriculture; green jobs and social inclusion; urbanisation; water management; chemical wastes; oceans; risk and disaster amelioration. Greening the global capitalist system is deemed to be an 'integration' of economics and ecology. At the same time, business interests and the UN argue that 'innovative instruments' for financing this new direction must be consistent with 'the Doha Development Round of multilateral trade negotiations'.

The big-picture initiatives towards this emerging hegemony are:

- Moves to transform UNEP into a World Environment Organization;
- Moves to assess the feasibility of Earth System Governance;
- Moves to explore a new Global Financial Architecture.

The World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the regional development banks, UNCTAD and the World Trade Organization will be asked to consider the ecosystemic implications of their decisions. But in so doing, these neoliberal agents of social dislocation and hardship will gain fresh political legitimation.

With guidance from UNEP, the Rio+20 agenda entitled The Future We Want (also known as the Zero Draft) spells out terms of reference and potential outcomes. It rests on earlier agreements such as Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Declaration, the Monterrey Consensus, Doha Round, Istanbul Programme for Least Developed Countries, and the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building. The Zero Draft also endorses the 1992 Rio principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' in redefining relations between the affluent global North and so called 'developing' South. But if 'poverty alleviation' is prioritised, power relations are unspoken.

Rio+20 spins into view with networks, promo agencies, think tanks, websites, and conferences, paralysing public understanding in a maze of acronyms. A discourse of international governance is in the making; a shared set of social and material expectations across nations, classes, bodies. Yet market logic like 'carbon trading', 'geo-engineering', or 'climate smart agriculture' cannot restore broken life-support-systems in nature. Nor will the Green Economy do much to promote democracy. Rather, green jobs designed by free traders will deepen the unequal exchange between global North and South.

SOCIAL, EMBODIED, AND ECOLOGICAL DEBT

The Green Economy is the next stage in a history of eurocentric colonisation - a system of accumulation that can only function on a surplus provided by others. Thus, capitalism is built on a social debt to exploited workers; an embodied debt to unpaid women for their reproductive labours; and an ecological debt to peasants and indigenes for appropriating their land and livelihood.

So too, history has shown that this extraction from the living peripheries of capital relies on a cooperative colonial comprador class, groomed with incentives by the coloniser. This is the real meaning of 'development' and such power relations are enacted today through the UN machine, through the business world, and through universities. High-level consultations for Rio+20 are currently taming a technocratic management class from among scientists, academics and bureaucrats.

Usually, colonial intermediaries come from marginal populations or poorer regions, but not always. For example, women internationally are especially vulnerable to the privileges of comprador status as they strive to climb out of oppressive patriarchalisms, and to obtain better conditions for their communities. For this reason, feminist groups like the World March of Women can face a political double-bind in responding to a Zero Draft that announces:

'We call for removing barriers that have prevented women from being full participants in the economy and unlocking their potential as drivers of sustainable development, and agree to prioritize measures to promote gender equality in all spheres of our societies, including education, employment, ownership of resources, access to justice, political representation, institutional decision-making, care giving and household and community management.'

This gender mainstreaming seems benign enough, yet the neoliberal criterion for equality is 'the masculine universal' - an idealised image of the emancipated woman as one who lives like a white, middle class, man. Women's material embodiment is neutralised - often with technological help. In this way, the unique meta-industrial skills and integrative insights that women learn from undertaking reproductive labours are diminished and 'contained' as a valid source of alternative life-affirming values.

At the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, UN Deputy-Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro endorsed the fact that rural women constitute one quarter of the global population; grow the majority of the world's food; and perform most unpaid care work. Without doubt their situation merits attention. But financing for water infrastructure, renewable energy, biodiversity protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation, may well benefit donors more than recipients. UN-Women's Executive Director Michelle Bachelet calls for gender sensitivity in national budgets and in business. However, like micro-credit, such measures quietly recruit women to the capitalist system.

AN ARISTOTELIAN HIERARCHY

At the pinnacle of Rio+20 stands conference Secretary General Sha Zukang, a Chinese career diplomat. He may be less hands-on than Maurice Strong, the Canadian businessman who brokered UNCED in 1992, but he is pushing a Sustainable Energy for All Initiative, as well as women's and indigenous' rights. It is envisaged that after Rio+20, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development should be upgraded to Council status - CSD becoming SDC - and ECOSOC will have a stronger coordination and outreach role.

As UNEP under Executive Director Achim Steiner explains, getting the Rio event up means orchestrating three kinds of humans - intergovernmental, governmental, and nongovernmental. In the governmental sector, state ministers or their stand-ins meet under the rubric of GCSS-12/GMEF - that is to say, the UNEP Governing Council / Global Ministerial Environment Forum. These national representatives are deployed to spell out a mix of new Green Economy models 'tailored to different local and national conditions'; at once 'pro-growth' but based on a measurement of well-being that goes beyond GDP.

The corporate sector is being urged by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to sign on to a Global Compact, circulating as a kind of individualistic rights based credo of 10 principles. The International Trade Union Confederation agrees with the Green Economy approach and the idea of a new architecture of global governance. In addition, ITUC prioritises procedure - access, right principles, concrete targets and accountability. But it needs to be emphasised that if the concerns of Major Groups get tied up in operational matters at Rio+20, then capitulation to the status quo will happen by default.

Most nongovernmentals are marshalled under the UN acronym GMGSF, which stands for Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum. Here a designated space is made for Women's groups, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, Labour and Unions, Business and Industry, the Science and Technology community, and Local Authorities. There is also scope, possibly ad hoc, for regional opinion makers. But with no acknowledgement of 'power' and 'profit' as economic levers of capitalism, there is likely to be a good deal of sociological fudging in Rio+20 consultations - at this, and every other level.

The only Major Groups consistently expressing material alternatives are people whose labour involves the hands-on reproduction of natural processes.

- Women want their unpaid domestic contributions valued;
- Indigenous peoples want secure land rights;

- Peasant farmers want attention to food sovereignty.

-

To reiterate: it is these meta-industrial workers - inhabiting the domestic and geographic peripheries of capital - whose local economic provisioning and care giving already exemplifies the goals of commoning and sustainability.

META-INDUSTRIALS V TECHNOCRATS

In a time of environmental crisis, the notion of a meta-industrial class is powerfully integrative. It broadens the socialist preoccupation with productivist industrial workers, and it transcends the divisive idealism of approaches to 'identity politics' like feminism or indigeneity. Meta-industrial labour is materially grounded in the reproduction of embodied and ecological processes. Maintaining the humanity-nature metabolism is a 'transcultural' activity, and in principle, an un-gendered one. That said, for historical reasons, women around the world still undertake far more unvalued reproductive-metabolic-ecological labour than men do.

As regenerative, meta-industrial labour already models the 'green jobs' that the UN, private sector, and unions hope to operationalise out of thin air. Meta-industrial workers already meet human needs without destroying ecological cycles. But where are these meta-industrials in the Green Economy Coalition? GEC is a very eurocentric masculinist developmentalist program. It is all about research and product design, 'partnerships for local entrepreneurship', grant giving, educational forums, and reporting. GEC entertains a mixed bag of themes - Millennium Development Goals - equity yet inclusive governance - competitiveness yet market reform - green jobs yet finance for technology - workplace standards yet best practice - and transitioning. There is some interest in an international environment court, although again, the question of global power relations under neoliberalism is not interrogated.

At the G20 meeting in Mexico late February 2012, President Felipe Calderon, intimated that funding technology transfer is a way for the global North to compensate climate change and the ecological debt of colonisation. But again, the environmental imposts of industrial technology were passed over in favour of 'opportunities for growth'. The G20 rallied by asking the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, World Bank, and UN, to prepare a report 'inserting green growth and sustainable development policies into structural reform agendas, tailored to specific country conditions and level of development.'

A Green Economy embedded in industrialisation is an oxymoron. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of 'dematerialisation', ecologically modernising digital production cannot avoid energy and resource draw-downs. Each further advance in technology depends on a further cradle-to-grave cycle of extraction - transport - manufacture - transport - market - transport - consumption - transport - waste pit. In the human metabolism with nature, industrial technology never solves a problem, the best it can do is displace a problem. The displacement may be spatial - shifted on to the backs of less powerful sectors of society, or the displacement may be temporal - shifted on to the backs of future generations.

In June 2012, young people, small farmers, workers, squatters, grandmothers, and indigenous gatherers - among others, are planning to converge on Rio+20 to oppose the deadly commodification of life. But environmentalists like the Global Footprint Network give up the game when they say that 'billions of dollars of investment' will be necessary to make sustainability real. Again, Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for Environment, invites funds from 'non-traditional sources' to help 'green' the global South. Edna Molewa, South Africa's Minister for Water and Environmental Affairs, is hoping for 'public-private partnerships' to multiply.

REAL GREEN JOBS

In the 1970s, activists in the global North talked about 'living simply so others may simply live'. But this commitment was overtaken in the 1980s and 1990s by the rise of 'professional environmentalism' championed by business through the UN sustainable development agenda. Now, with the new millennium, Latin American peoples are revitalising Left politics with earth centered Constitutions in Ecuador and Bolivia recognising Rights of Mother Nature. And a history-making 2010

Cochabamba Climate Summit, hosted by women and indigenes, advanced the principle of sumak kawsay or buen vivir. The precise meaning of such words is unique to their Andean cultures of origin, but local versions of 'living well' have been adopted by commoning activists across the world.

The technocratic agenda is incoherent and can only exacerbate social and environmental crises. Rio+20 is a chance for meta-industrial labour to show what a green job really involves. Broadly speaking, wherever resources remain free of capitalist appropriation, people can enjoy autonomous ecologically sensitive provisioning. The classical hierarchy of Man over Nature, and the metabolic breakdown that results from it is unknown. At the margins of the capitalist patriarchal economy, the earth is valued for itself, not simply as a resource for human profiteering. And where economics is a materially embodied practice, people find identity and belonging in working together with nature.

NOTE: For a detailed annotated argument see [here](#) [2].

* BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS

* Please do not take Pambazuka for granted! Become a [Friend of Pambazuka](#) [3] and make a donation NOW to help keep Pambazuka FREE and INDEPENDENT!

* Ariel Salleh is an activist and Honorary Associate Professor in Political Economy at the University of Sydney. The term 'meta-industrial labour' is a sociological abstraction originating in Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: nature, Marx and the postmodern* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997) and further articulated in ecosocialist articles at [Ariel Salleh](#) [4].

* Please send comments to [editor\[at\]pambazuka\[dot\]org](mailto:editor[at]pambazuka[dot]org) [5] or comment online at [Pambazuka News](#) [6].

Categories: [Features](#) [7]

Issue Number: [581](#) [8]

Article Image Caption | Source: W S

```
(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =  
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";  
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
```

Article-Summary:

A discourse of international governance is in the making. Yet market logic like 'carbon trading', 'geo-engineering', or 'climate smart agriculture' cannot restore broken life-support-systems in nature.

Category: [Resources](#) [9]

Oldurl: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category.php/features/81459> [10]

Source URL: <https://www.pambazuka.org/node/79198>

Links:

[1] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/7938>

[2] <http://www.zcommunications.org/rio-20-and-the-green-economy-technocrats-meta-industrials-wsf-and-occupy-by-ariel-salleh>

[3] <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/friends.php>

[4] <http://www.arielsalleh.info>

[5] <mailto:editor@pambazuka.org>

[6] <http://www.pambazuka.org/>

[7] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3272>

[8] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/7934>

[9] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3277>

[10] <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category.php/features/81459>