

DIFFERENT TAKES



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Sustaining Everyday Life: Bringing Together Environmental, Climate and Reproductive Justice

by **Giovanna Di Chiro**¹

Editors' Note: In this third installment of our Climate Change series, Giovanna Di Chiro evaluates how environmental degradation and climate change undermine a community's ability to survive and thrive. She calls for holistic politics of "living environmentalism."

— Co-editors Elizabeth Barajas-Roman & Betsy Hartmann

Political-ecological mobilizations, what I call "living environmentalisms," reframe environmental and reproductive rights issues in terms of the necessities for sustaining everyday life, what Marxists and feminists have termed "social reproduction." An analysis of social reproduction as an *environmental* issue allows us to understand the impacts of the current mode of production—corporate globalization—on the survivability into the future of individual bodies, particular communities, national cultures, and the biosphere as we know it.

I am arguing for a rethinking by both environmentalists and feminists of the dynamic relationship between production and social reproduction in the hopes of generating more effective political coalitions across these diverse social movements—coalitions that I argue represent *living* environmental and social justice movements in support of sustaining life on earth.

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The Significance of Social Reproduction

Social reproduction, as feminist theorists define it, is about the conditions necessary for reproducing everyday life and includes the ability to procure healthy food, clean water, decent shelter, clothing and health care. These daily tasks are part of the political-economic, socio-cultural, material-environmental processes required to maintain life and to sustain human cultures and communities. Social reproduction encompasses the conditions for “biological reproduction, the reproduction of labor power, and the social practices connected to caring, socialization, and the fulfillment of human needs,” as well as the social relations of power within which these conditions are embedded.²

Globalized capitalist production has put at risk the realization of social reproduction for a large portion of the world, making everyday survival for millions of people around the world more and more precarious. Feminist critics have been at the forefront in pointing out how neoliberalism’s mantra of privatization, flexibility, and mobile capital has eroded the capitalist state’s commitment and responsibility for social reproduction signified by 1) the withdrawal of government entitlements and protections, 2) public disinvestments in education, social welfare, housing, healthcare and environmental regulation, and 3) the backing away of corporate commitment and investments in particular places, workforces, and communities.³ Global economic restructuring policies such as SAPs (structural adjustment policies), welfare reform, environmental deregulation, and the privatization of public amenities such as water, sewage treatment, energy, and healthcare hit hardest in the arena of social reproduction, but they are rarely analyzed as such.

Linking Ecology and Social Reproduction

Ecofeminist scholars and activists have drawn critical connections between issues of concern to both feminist and environmental movements. Overlapping issues include environmental injustices based on race, gender, class, and sexuality, peace and anti-militarism, violence against women and the “rape” of nature, and toxic contamination and women’s reproductive health.⁴ The two movements, however, have not succeeded in sustaining fruitful political alliances and coalitions. Even worse, the most enduring connection to issues of “reproduction” identified by the mainstream environmental movement has been what feminists consider a *negative* one, that is, environmentalism’s focus on “overpopulation” and on reducing global population growth by curtailing the “unsustainably high fertility rates” of women from poor countries and poor women of color in the United States.⁵

The use of alarmist population arguments that identify poor women’s fertility as the major ecological threat to the planet (conveniently shifting the blame from the consumption and production patterns of the North) has led to the implementation of aggressive and coercive population control mechanisms that restrict women’s reproductive rights and endanger their health, and also to the support of regressive anti-immigrant policies that naturalize Third World women as “over-breeders” burdening the country’s resources and threatening national security.⁶

In a similar vein, the mainstream/Northern women’s movement has been slow to recognize intersections with broader environmental arguments or with the concerns raised by women of color and poor women about what it means to have access to reproductive “rights” and “choice.” For women whose communities struggle with escalating poverty, inaccessible or dangerous contraceptives, and poor health, the decision to have an abortion is largely not experienced as an act of reproductive freedom or choice. Emphasizing this point, long time women’s rights activist, Loretta Ross, argues that for poor women of color, “our ability to control what happens to our bodies is constantly challenged by poverty, racism, environmental degradation, sexism, homophobia, and injustice in the United States.”⁷

The intersectional politics of *reproductive justice* has linked the rights to bodily self-determination and the right to safe contraception choices and abortion (the right to *not* have children) with the right to *have* children and to be able to raise them in nurturing, healthy, and safe environments. Reproductive justice, therefore, asserts that a wide scope of social, economic, and environmental issues must be seen as significant *reproductive* issues and include, for example, good jobs and economic security, freedom from domestic violence and forced sterilization, affordable healthcare, educational opportunities, decent housing, and access to clean and healthy neighborhoods. This challenge by the reproductive justice movement to the dominant discourse of reproductive-rights-as-abortion-rights points to the significance of the struggle to achieve social reproduction for poor women and women of color.

Sustaining Everyday Life: Environmental Justice as Social Reproduction

In analyzing the meanings underlying the current fascination with the idea of “sustainability,” I am ever more persuaded by the argument that *all* environmental issues are reproductive issues; efforts to protect the health and integrity of natural systems—water, air, soil, biodiversity—are struggles to sustain the ecosystems

that make all life possible. In other words, environmental struggles are about fighting for and ensuring social reproduction. It is activists in the environmental justice movement (EJM) that have most convincingly foregrounded these everyday life (and death) stakes at the root of their environmental politics and have developed an “environmentalism of everyday life.”⁸ Rather than understanding nature as an exotic *elsewhere* that is separate from our daily lives, activists in the EJM locate “nature” and the “environment” in the places we “live, work, play, and learn.” Environmental justice scholars and activists examine how the deterioration of a community’s economic, social, and environmental conditions limits its sustainability (i.e., social reproduction). Limiting conditions may include living next to a polluting facility that dumps toxic chemicals into your air and water, suffering high rates of unemployment and poverty, living in substandard housing, or having your tribe’s ancestral land confiscated to bury high-level nuclear waste. By joining together all of these diverse issues, activists in the EJM, who are predominantly low-income women and women of color, redefine the popular concept of “sustainability” as the capacity for a community to maintain economic and bodily security, to breathe clean air and water, and to nurture the next generation.

Climate Justice and Everyday Environmentalism

The growing climate justice movement provides an example of a political coalition linking environmental and reproductive issues by making visible the disproportionate impact of global warming on poor and marginalized communities throughout the world. For many activists, the problem of *global* climate change has for too long been represented by the mainstream environmental movement as an overly abstract and highly technical issue unrelated to the everyday lives and struggles of local communities: global warming was more about starving polar bears and melting ice caps than about people’s daily survival.

By relocalizing the negative effects of global warming, environmental justice activists from around the world reframe this story of a planet in peril brought on by reckless industrial practices and unsustainable consumption as a *grassroots* concern putting at risk people’s health, homes, families, and livelihoods. Activists such as Beverly Wright, from the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in New Orleans, and Sara James, an Alaskan Gwich’in tribal leader from the Indigenous Environmental Network, explain how global warming will exacerbate the preexisting, long-term consequences of disinvestments in social reproduction

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—Van Jones

already suffered by poor and low-income people from around the world. These include increased health problems due to rising temperatures for people already suffering cancer, asthma, and respiratory disorders from living next to oil refineries and petrochemical plants; a rise in economic and food insecurity from the increasing energy costs and food prices connected to unpredictable agricultural output; and increased risks to life and livelihood associated with severe weather, storms, and flooding exacerbated by government negligence and deferred maintenance in infrastructure, housing, and public transportation systems.⁹

Activists in the growing international climate justice movement have brought their analyses and recommendations to the international stage at the non-governmental forums that run parallel to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change meetings, the most recent held in Poznań, Poland in December 2008. This global network of locally-based activists has called on the UN member states to embrace sustainable global economic policies that would take seriously both the planetary dangers to the earth’s ecosystems and the capacity for the vast majority of people around the world to achieve social reproduction. Climate justice activists in the U.S., for example, have launched the “Green for All” (greenforall.org) initiative dedicated to creating environmental justice solutions to global warming by configuring a new clean-energy economy. The initiative rejects the prevailing market-based policies for reducing carbon emissions agreed upon in the Kyoto Protocol¹⁰ and instead calls for the creation of innovative solutions that can ensure a healthy environment for all and can “lift people out of poverty.”

Green for All co-founder Van Jones proposes that a green economy rooted in a “just sustainability” generates sustainable solutions that fix multiple problems at the same time. Climate justice activists like Jones, Wright, and James argue that the seemingly unrelated problems of global warming, rising unemployment and poverty rates, and increasing incidences of reproductive cancers and childhood asthma and diabetes can be solved by 1) developing non-polluting renewable energy generation systems and green industries, 2) creating healthy, sustainable jobs that provide a living wage, and 3)

promoting policies for locally-based, organic food systems that support farm-to-school programs and provide nutritious food for school children. Eloquently expressing the power of an intersectional analysis that recognizes the linkages between escalating environmental problems such as global warming and dwindling access to social reproduction, Jones calls for a “social-uplift environmentalism”:

“We want to build a green economy that has the power to deliver work, wealth, and health for low-income people, while honoring the earth. We want to create green pathways out of poverty and into great careers for America’s children. We want this ‘green wave’ to lift all boats. This country can save the polar bears and poor kids too.”¹¹

Innovative environmental coalitions committed to climate justice, such as the Green for All movement, which articulate people’s concerns about their families’ and communities’ access to *social reproduction* are generating dynamic, *living* environmentalisms that may stand a chance at compelling people to take stronger action to fight even the big problems, like global warming.

About the Author

Giovanna Di Chiro is a Research Associate in the Environmental Studies Department at Mount Holyoke College. She has published widely on the intersections of gender, race, scientific expertise, and environmental justice. She is co-editor of the volume *Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social Power* (University of Minnesota Press) and is completing a book titled *Embodied Ecologies: Science, Politics, and Environmental Justice*. Di Chiro is co-founder of the Pioneer Valley Community Environmental Justice Coalition and collaborates with environmental justice organizations to conduct community-based research on environmental health disparities in the low-income communities of Western Massachusetts.

Notes

- 1 An earlier and longer version of this paper was published in *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 17, No.1 (2008), 276-298.
- 2 Isabel Bakker, and S. Gill, eds., *Power, Production and Social Reproduction* (London: Macmillan-Palgrave, 2003), 4.
- 3 *ibid*
- 4 Noel Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 5 Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (Boston: South End Press, 1995).
- 6 Betsy Hartmann and Ann Hendrixson, “Pernicious Peasants and Angry Young Men: The Strategic Demography of Threats,” in Betsy Hartmann et al., eds., *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
- 7 Jael Silliman et al., eds, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2004), 4.
- 8 Devon Peña, *Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 153
- 9 Manuel Pastor, et al., *In the Wake of the Storm: Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).
- 10 Larry Lohmann, “Carbon Trading,” *Development Dialogue*, No. 48 (September 2006). Available at: <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/summary.shtml?x=544225>
- 11 Van Jones, *The Green Collar Economy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 16.