

Book Reviews

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Review: *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*

Maria Mies and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen

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Reading about global economics can be intimidating. Attempting to understand it and possible alternative perspectives can be even more so. But in this book authors Maria Mies and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen offer a structural overview of the neoliberal capitalist creed that has shaped the global economy and propose a new economic viewpoint. It is the subsistence perspective: a way of looking at the economy and development from the bottom-up.

Drawing from their work in the women's movement, the authors began to look at the subject of housework as it relates to the women's movement. This inquiry broadened and they began to investigate the role of housework in global capitalism, asking: Why is it not seen as work? Why is it non-paid labor? Recognizing that housework and other types of subsistence work cannot be paid work in the global economy, they set out to look beyond global capitalism and define the subsistence perspective. As a result of their analysis, the authors propose the development of a new concept of labor and a new valuation of wageless labor.

What is the "subsistence perspective?" To begin with, commodity production is the goal of capitalist production. Everything is to be transformed into a commodity that is then marketable. But subsistence production has an entirely different goal: the direct satisfaction of human needs. Its goal is the support of life directly. And this type of production is necessary as a prerequisite for all types of paid labor. Thus, subsistence is the opposite of commodity production. It's not an economic model, but a new economic perspective.

Meis and Beholdt-Thomosen take a critical look at the neoliberal capitalist tenets that have shaped the contemporary global economy. One of the most prominent of these is the perceived necessity of unlimited growth. Without growth, there is no development, and the entire economy stagnates and collapses—according to the credo. But in practical terms, in a world of finite resources this aim can only be realized at the expense of others. Furthermore, the primary indicators of growth are the GNP and the GDP. This narrow measure of growth does not account for the bulk of the work of women, subsistence peasants, or those in the informal sector because it is not wage labor. Wage labor is sharply contrasted with unpaid work, creating a misguided perception that only work that produces wages is gainful. Since subsistence work is not wage labor, much work is invisible under this system, and can thus be exploited.

As the authors analyze these economic structures, they point out that patriarchy is a structural necessity for capitalism in their analysis of the “housewifeisation” of labor. Gender roles were used to create an asymmetric sexual division of labor: The males are the “breadwinners” of the household and the women are the “housewives.” This would place males primarily in the world of wage labor, and women with the wageless reproduction of labor power, which is the cheapest and most exploitable type of production work. Therefore, they make the case that the women’s movement ought to create an alternative to the capitalist system and the modern notion of progress, and not merely fight for equal rights within it.

Additionally, the authors discuss the role of development and colonialism in the pervasive growth of this system. Prior to World War II, many subsistence economies existed in both rural and urban areas worldwide. The near demise of these societies and life-ways was intentional. To illustrate how subsistence production had to be eliminated for the expansion of capitalist ventures, the authors call on the peasant resistance communities of the Mayan people in response to Guatemala’s seizure of their village common lands. A large part of their resistance efforts was the refusal of any paid or migrant labor as well as the rebuilding of their peasant subsistence economy, threatened by the government due to pressure to acquire land for foreign agricultural transnational corporations.

In sum, the subsistence perspective is not an economic model, but a new way of perceiving the economy. It is concerned with the production and reproduction of life directly, not just commodity production. It’s a vision of development from the bottom-up, where the aim is happiness, quality of life, and human dignity as opposed to the accumulation of wealth. In the end, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen describe a perspective of labor and economics that serves societies—not the other way around. The reader and the world will benefit greatly from this book especially in light of the dramatic economic tidal waves begun in 2007 tearing the market system from its moorings. This book offers a radical yet grounded view of the contemporary economic creed that has formed current economic practices, and what wisdom of life-supporting subsistence work can bring to such a system.