

## Quotidien politique. Féminisme, écologie, subsistance

by Geneviève Pruvost (2021) Paris, La Découverte, 392 pp.

Silvia Bruzzone 

Mälardalen University

The book is the result of 10 years of research conducted by Geneviève Pruvost, sociologist of work and CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) research director. *Quotidien politique. Féminisme, écologie, subsistance* focuses on the subsistence perspective and, in particular, on ecofeminism as a way to think about political engagement and societal change. As mentioned in the introduction, the term subsistence refers to ordinary practices connected to the conduct, development and maintenance of our existence, such as producing food, fabricating clothes, ways of living, taking care of one's own health, loving, working, giving birth and raising kids, learning, and so on. This concept brings the focus of attention on the relations of interdependence between the human and material worlds which shape our everyday life (*le quotidien*) and become the object of political mattering. The study is an exploration of "rural alternatives" in the search of autonomy, drawing on ethnographic material collected in various (anonymized) regions of France.

The book unfolds in nine chapters, each divided into short subchapters. In the first two chapters – "Critical daily life" (*Quotidienneté critique*) and "Facilitated daily life and counter-system of professions" (*Quotidienneté facilitée et contre-système des professions*) – the focus is on different perspectives on subsistence intersecting marxism, feminism and ecology. The author draws on scholars – such as Henry Lefebvre, Henri Mendras and Ivan Illich – who have shown that the gradual passage from peasant societies to the capitalist ones brought about a radical change in the way basic needs are met. These transformations led to the loss of vernacular knowledges related to subsistence, the scientification and specialization of work and of knowledge, the segmentation and outsourcing of tasks within the capitalist system. As a result, the relationships of interdependence typical of rural communities were disrupted in favor of deterritorialized forms of production aimed at boosting consumption.

The following three chapters – "Feminism of subsistence: the matricial base of primitive societies" (*Féminisme de la subsistance: la base matricielle des sociétés premières*), "From subsistence work to domestic work" (*Du travail de subsistances au travail domestique*) and "'Housewifization' and capitalism" (*«Housewifization» et capitalisme*) – explore the core of the feminist subsistence perspective. The author focuses in particular on ecofeminism developed, between the 1970s and 1990s, by Francoise d'Eaubonne (1974/2020) – who introduced the

term – as well as by the scholars from the Bielefeld School – Maria Mies, Claudia von Werlhof, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen – and by Vandava Shiva, Maria Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici. Even though not all of the above-mentioned scholars would recognize themselves under the label of “feminism of subsistence”, they share the claim that the rise of capitalist industrial societies had a specific gendered dimension, grounding in exploitative relations of women, as well as of other beings and natural resources. Ecofeminism scholars’ accurate historical reconstruction of those transformations – starting from pre-historical matriarchal societies and accelerating from the peasant to the industrial societies – highlight the devaluation of women’s work within the capitalist system, their progressive confinement and domestication, the loss of knowledge and skills connected to women’s tasks (for example in agriculture, water management, healing practices, birth control, food conservation). As the author claims:

subsistence feminists have shown that the reduction of the household to the heterosexual couple has disrupted the logic of mutual aid that prevailed in extended local communities, which has allowed the rise of equipped domestic work – the keystone of capitalist development. (p. 281, *my translation*)

For ecofeminists, understanding the role of subsistence relations and transformations from peasant to capitalist societies is a focal point of political mattering and for building possible alternatives. In this regard, the difference between subsistence and domestic work is highlighted by ecofeminists. The domestic work is primarily linked to reproduction and to supporting consumption. In contrast, subsistence tasks, which have not disappeared in capitalist societies, are now outsourced to others (machines, experts and other humans working on our behalf) and purchased as services – typically for producing food, cloths, taking care of our beloved ones – on a global scale. The outsourcing of subsistence tasks leads to new forms of exploitation – of environmental resources, women and other marginals (animals, workers) – as well as to the creation of invisible and overexploited jobs worldwide.

Pruvost highlights how feminism of subsistence distinguishes itself from the broader feminist movement of the 1970s, which brought an anti-essentialist perspective on women. Compared to gender theories, ecofeminist researchers are less focused on the fluidity of gender and more concerned with the specific conditions and exploitative relations faced by women in the global South. These factors, together with the dominance of feminist scholars primarily raised in cities – in contrast to ecofeminist scholars who often have a rural background or have a specific focus on the rural experiences – help to explain the diminished academic focus on subsistence issues. A distinction can also be made between ecofeminism and queer and STS feminist theories (such as Donna Haraway’s): while these latter share a critique of the nature-culture divide, ecofeminism is particularly critical of the lack of attention given to the conditions of comfort associated to the development and role of technology in modern societies.

Local and regional experiences are then explored – in the chapter “Local communities and inter-subsistence” (*Communautés vicinales et entre-subsistance*) – as a potential alternative to break the production-consumption divide typical of capitalist industrial relations. The subsistence question has been in fact addressed by movements such as bioregionalism, municipal libertarian and ecopolis, which – while focusing on different forms of decision-making, level

of autonomy and of technicity – view local initiatives and democracy as a means of social change. However, as Pruvost claims, none of these political theories and perspectives focus on gender relations and forms of exclusion. In this sense, ecofeminist theories offer a real alternative centered on the role of women, as an oppressed category and susceptible to be awakened. In d'Eaubonne's radical view, it is not possible to reform the capitalist wage-earning society, while the priority is on the overcoming of the separation of production-consumption relations, the re-appropriation of the knowledge needed for self-production and the creation of autonomous living communities. The critique of heterosexuality as societal norm as well as the power of motherhood is also constitutive of her thought. In this regard, as Pruvost claims, the feminists of the Bielefeld School have a less-utopian program and draw inspiration from the observed experiences brought in particular by peasants and indigenous women from the global South. Common traits among ecofeminist scholars are the restauration of vernacular knowledge and subsistence practices, the cessation of exploitative and pollutant industrial activities, the reconnection to a *milieu de vie* and to active engagement, the urgency of the ecological cause, the complementarity of tasks between men and women and the role of women as driving force of collective action and social transformations.

But how can subsistence relations and knowledge be reconstituted? In the chapter "Transitioning towards subsistence" (*Basculer vers l'entre-subsistance*), Pruvost explores transitional places (*lieux de bascule*) from which it is possible to experiment a new relationship to the living world and to initiate new ways of inhabiting. Through a multisite ethnographic study, the author documents a range of experiences – primarily chosen through snow bowl sampling – from collective actions aimed at reclaiming land in opposition to large projects, such as the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport project, to the renaissance of rural communities through the municipalization of activities – such as a bakery and a grocery shop – and the practices of autogestion by local inhabitants. Concerning feminist experiences, as Pruvost notes, in France there is no large ecofeminist project or movement comparable to the women's lands in the US. Despite that, the author shares Gibson-Graham's (1996/2004) view of the ubiquity of the feminist experiences as:

a vast set of disjointed places – households, neighborhoods, localities, workplaces, civic organizations, public arenas [...] – related analogically rather than organizationally. (p. 266, *my translation*)

Feminist experiences are rooted in specific places to be created, defended or transformed. The empirical work carried out by Pruvost gives visibility to a plurality of stories, practices and experiences – combining ecology and feminism – and which address the subsistence option as transitional places (*lieux de bascule*): eco-construction, self-healing and auto-gynecology, bakery, self-education, knowledge transmission within informal communities. In the same chapter, she identifies different patterns of inhabiting, characterized by different degree of militancy, collective or individual action, with a focus on either feminism or ecological sensitivity, within rural or peri-urban contexts, and involving either only women or a broader group. The first pattern (*modalité*) gathers single women with a strong political commitment, without kids engaging in collective experiences, often within ecoqueer, vegan feminist

groups, bio-farming activities. They are committed to LGBTQIA+ or non-mixed groups and living mostly in the countryside to re-establish a subsistence economy. The second pattern is more fragmented and gathers mothers and other women who are not necessarily opposed to capitalism or heterosexuality and do not have feminist or radical claims. They focus on reconnecting and practicing of feminine know-hows within practical workshops (well-being and reparation), which are mainly attended by women. They practice ecology by minor gestures and everyday actions alongside work and family responsibilities. The third one involves highly engaged environmental, feminist, anticapitalism activists – often women students living in cities who are in a transitional phase of their life and yet to settle in a specific region and profession. They opt for short term practices and internships in permaculture, auto-gynecology, participation in ecofeminist events and festivals. The fourth pattern describes women who do not attend any activist groups, do not participate to national manifestations, preferring to focus on local action. These women – often living with few means, living in rural and peri-urban areas – are more engaged with ecological concerns than with feminist ones. They reject salary work in favor of manual skills and subsistence practices. Inspired by peasant women and women hunter-gatherers, they advocate for autonomy and emancipation from the system. A fifth pattern is the nomad version of the previous one. Their practice of subsistence includes gleanings, plants picking, the mastery of manual skills, while they choose to live within alternative networks. They engage in activities like woofing and use alternative modes of transports such as caravans or hitchhiking. As Pruvost notes, the evoked experiences do not necessarily refer to ecofeminism as the term is rather recent and unstructured. Moreover, the recent mediatization of the concept often prevents an open affiliation.

In the last chapters – “Vertigo of the materiality” (*Vertige de la matière*) and in the conclusion – ecofeminism and the subsistence perspective are thought as a way to develop new relations and modes of attention to the living world (*le vivant*) as well as a renewed distribution of tasks and solidarities connected to a *milieu de vie*. It is an invitation to experiment with new forms of attachment, starting from the place where one lives in and from awaking (*éveil*) to the local knowledge, the revaluation of craftsmanship and alternative forms of transmission, for example through manual work and self-learning. Re-localizing means expanding the range of interlocutors, their diversity, which as Latour (2018) suggests, requires to put in place a parliament of things. The attention to materiality – the history of its fabrication and how it circulates – is central to these experiences in search of autonomy and of more responsible modes of subsistence. Finally, the subsistence option, understood as a right to occupy the world, implies as a form of militantism of everyday life and daily gestures, ultimately a form of love.

The book offers the theoretical grounding of the feminist subsistence perspective and makes the hard work of detecting and acknowledging the heterogeneous, shattered and often invisible experiences which today address and share, in various ways, that sensibility. What strikes the STS reader is the resonance with – and yet the silence on (despite a few exceptions such as Tsing, Despret, Stengers and Latour) – feminist STS scholars and new feminist materialism regarding the urgency of the ecological question and of building new interspecies relations. This includes the overcoming of human-nonhuman divide, the critique of capitalist relations and new forms of neocolonialism and of exclusion, the ethics of reparation, the experimentation of alternative – bodily, sensorial – modes of education and of transmission

beyond the rational-scientific paradigm, the search for emancipatory gestures. The central role of “women”, of the “feminine” within ecofeminism, the delicate relations with technology – as well as the focal attention to the South of world, and the exploitative relations with the industrial societies, remain however important elements of distinction with STS scholars. The book gives visibility to the heterogeneity of stories and minor gestures in search for autonomy and emancipation, very often at the margin of capitalist relations and of the urban gaze. It is about the practice of ordinary feminism.

Even without using the term, the “subsistence question” becomes increasingly relevant in STS studies where the metabolic engagements to the world become the core of social theorizing (Mol 2021) or where following the complex and global entanglements around a fungal delicacy is a way of examining capitalist destruction and new multispecies survival arrangements in the ruin of capitalism (Tsing 2015). More generally, after being marginalized in feminist theory, the renewed attention to ecofeminism (Hache 2016) – and its inherent heterogeneity – within feminist thought is linked to a new interest in materiality, beyond language and discourse. This shift also reflects the need for renewed relationships to “nature” and matter in feminist thought, particularly emphasized by feminist new materialisms (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2003).

## References

- Alaimo, Stacy and Hekman, Susan (eds.) (2008) *Material Feminisms*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.
- Barad, Karen (2003) *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, in “Signs”, 28(3), pp. 801-831.
- D'Eaubonne, Françoise (2020) (orig. pub. 1974) *Le féminisme ou la mort*, Lorient, Le Passage Clandestin.
- Gibson-Graham, Julie Katherine (2004) (orig. pub. 1996) *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
- Hache, Emilie (2016) *Reclaim: Recueil de textes écoféministes*, Paris, Cambourakis.
- Latour, Bruno (2018) *Esquisse d'un Parlement des choses*, in “Écologie & Politique”, 56, pp. 47-64.
- Mol, Annemarie (2021) *Eating in Theory*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- Tsing, Anna (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.