

Prof. **Mariarosa Dalla Costa**

Report to the assembly of students against war

Department of Political Science in Padua, Aula Magna,

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The war on subsistence

I thought it important to accept the invitation of students to come and discuss issues that affect us all so deeply, not only as students and teachers, but as human beings and citizens. It seems to me that the university, in fact, should be like the **round river**, to use the image of an Indian farming technique, which builds knowledge drawing on external stimuli, elaborating it and returning it to all of society. The round river carries water to the crops but they give back what is not consumed by the field so it can be carried elsewhere.

With regard to the war that is unfolding now and which is planning further scenarios, I will leave it to others to discuss oil and gas and the new configuration and partitioning of political control over various geographical areas, seeing as these topics are widely

discussed in magazines and mainstream press. I want to say a few things about an **aspect that may seem irrelevant** but in my opinion is **central** and which accompanies, more or less visibly, all the wars that have occurred in recent decades and that is the aspect of **massive destruction of land** and with it, **resources for subsistence** be they **grazing lands** or lands for **sustainable and diversified agriculture primarily intended for domestic consumption**. From Angola to Kosovo to Afghanistan, more and more tracts of land are excluded from the chance to be farmed because they are contaminated by war material such as land mines or long-term toxic substances such as depleted uranium. Unlike the plundering and burning of ancient wars we are dealing with weapons of war that cause **infinite damage**. When that land is once again farmable and, if farmed, will it not produce monsters? **More and more bodies are mutilated and can not cultivate anymore**. Sheep, vegetable gardens and jars of milk are devastated. Accident of war or war system?

System of what kind of war? To my mind it's a **war on economies, on the possibility and on the criteria of subsistence**, that passes precisely through the **continuous and systematic expropriation of lands and their pollution**, be it by weapons of war or pesticides. In this sense, war and the obligation to grow monocultures for export head in the same direction. They destroy the possibility of subsistence and reserve the right to live for fewer and fewer individuals.

Five centuries ago, it was precisely the large act of expropriation of lands in England that allowed the start of this production system since it produced that mass of dispossessed impoverished people, a population that appeared just “overabundant”, from which you could draw a labor power prepared to work on any terms, seeing as it was deprived of means of subsistence. It became clear early on that in order for **this system** to work it needed to create **hunger and misery**. These elements constituted a **necessary condition for the start** of the system of wage labor and the possibility of stratifying it to determine conditions of slavery, which happened not only through the incentivized slave trade but also within England itself. Suffice it to recall the legislation against poor vagrants which authorized the complainant to make work for himself as a slave the person whom he denounced as a vagrant. The stratification of labor to the point of conditions of slavery continues to this day so that there are an estimated 200 million slaves, of which 150 million are children. So a war was started against a possibility of life for all humanity and not just for a part of it, which generates many other wars, because injustice, the social drama that it continually produces, life versus non-life, concentration of wealth against the spread of poverty, increases by calling other wars. The expropriation of land continues to be necessary in this system of production and its stratification of labor. The **taking away of land** is the **great mystery kept quiet** in discussions managed by the media about world hunger or the population explosion. Humanity seems to be

overabundant because it is made to be overabundant with respect to means of reproduction which no longer exist because they have been taken away. And humanity is further weakened by the fact of being constantly uprooted from its territories, destined to languish in refugee camps or to provide migratory fluxes of cheap labor, or to swell the pockets of poverty of urban belts.

In this sense, the **wars complete** what in various countries was the **Green Revolution**. This took away the best lands to devote them to monocultures for export, often with government subsidies, while subsidies for smaller crops for domestic consumption were withdrawn. And, by privatizing the land previously meant for common use, it simply **expelled** the people who lived on it, sentencing them to destitution. It's a well known process that has spread from Latin America to Africa to Asia, and it is criticized by scholars of capitalist development.

When **Pizarro conquered Peru in 1532**, he found not only gold but huge reserves of food. Peru had successfully solved the problem not only of alimentary self-sufficiency but also the problem of guaranteeing food for periods of scarcity or disaster. Yet they knew neither the wheel nor the plow drawn by animals that had already been depicted in Egypt in 2700 BC and that had led to the creation of surpluses in the countryside to feed the city. **Alan Garcia**, former president of Peru, finding it paradoxical that the Incas were able to feed their people but the capitalist economy

couldn't, declared at one point that he wanted to restore the indigenous food system to establish a more democratic food system, that is to say, affordable for all; but he was strongly discouraged by the great financial powers. The West does not like people's alimentary self-sufficiency. It loves creating poverty and dependence. It cultivates "its own" 820 million hungry people, its one billion, 200 million individuals with severe nutritional deficiencies.

During the 1980s the insistence by the major international financial institutions on the need to set a price on land, privatize it, and then take it away from its community use by populations where it was still a collective good (such as in various African countries) was joined to the drastic application of structural adjustment policies, which dramatically exacerbated the impoverishment of populations, so much so that the '80s saw bread riots everywhere repressed very hard. Furthermore, these facts lowered demand and paved the way for neo-liberalism, which constituted the moment of programming, in that everywhere it called for lower expectations, lower wages and fewer protections so companies could more freely compete in the globalized economy.

The next stage in this tale of expropriation and commodification of the land concerns, as is known, not only the appropriation of its square kilometers but the appropriation, **distortion, and capitalization of its reproductive powers** through

modern biotechnology and the patent system. It is liberalism applied to all aspects of production of life. It is the destruction of the earth through the systematic destruction of its biodiversity, the real source of abundance and guarantee of sustenance. As Vandana Shiva says well: “When engineering enters the life sciences, the renewability of life as a system that reproduces itself comes to an end.” And with it, we reiterate, comes to an end the possibility of subsistence of populations.

So the war that is consumed around the availability of land is the same that is consumed around the maintenance of its biodiversity, and thus its ability to regenerate itself and to generate and sustain the people who live there. It is the same war that is consumed around an agricultural knowledge that seeks to meet the criteria of sustainability, which above all **takes, but in moderation, and gives back**, so that by protecting the reproductive powers of nature, it preserves the possibility of human subsistence, of life, against the logic of destruction for replacement with privatization, capitalization and impoverishment.

The alternative which in the end tightens **this systematic destruction of economies and criteria for subsistence** through the imposition of a solely industrial food that must be entirely purchased, food as a result of specialization by geographical areas and of the liberal internationalization of markets, meaning very often imported, preserved and highly processed food, is that of a **total**

domination of money on every possible aspect of life and subsistence. For the mass of people made overabundant not only is the relationship between lack of wages or low wages and food prices at stake, not only is an eternal status of being dependant on aid that too often arrives late and does not reach the real target at stake, not only is losing the relationship with one's own history and geography, culture and identity at stake. At stake for everyone involved is the **loss of freedom** and the entrance into a state of **absolute dependency and blackmail.**

So **this war** against the **possibility and the criteria of subsistence** against **Mother Earth** is the most lethal of all wars. But it is the one, in the most distant areas of the planet, against which humanity is gearing up, especially since the '90s, by building alternatives and resistance, retrieving knowledge, reactivating old farming methods, re-discovering endless varieties of seeds and round rivers. And I believe that how we deal primarily with these issues and organizational networks can lead to a re-opening of a different life for us all, and thus the construction of a different world.

Translated from Italian into English by **Rafaella Capanna**