
Remembering, Honoring Maria Mies.

February 6, 1931-May 15, 2023

by

Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen*

Il 15 maggio 2023 è mancata Maria Mies, ecopacifista femminista. Riceviamo e pubblichiamo il ricordo di Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, per molti anni sua amica e sodale.

Dear mourners! Today we carry to the grave a woman known and revered worldwide: MARIA MIES! She was an important feminist pioneer, mentor, and tireless activist of the women's movement: in our country and worldwide. Here in Cologne she co-founded Germany's first women's shelter for protection against domestic violence, and was closely associated with women in social movements in India and Bangladesh. Together with them she fought for the preservation of fields, their cultivation methods, forests and fishing grounds. Maria was anything but aloof. She, the famous professor, always remained the Eifel girl, – modest, meeting everyone at eye level. She was not connected with global institutions, but with the people whose concerns she shared. With them, Maria made friendships lasting a lifetime. A particularly close friend and long-lasting faithful companion is Saral Sarkar, who became her husband. To you, dear Saral, we extend our special sympathy for the loss you are suffering. The attention and tenderness with which you cared for Maria in her final years, when her alert spirit increasingly slipped away, is admirable. I, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, was Maria's close friend and comrade in the women's movement and the Third World Movement, as we used to say at the time. We opposed the social disregard for women, with all the devastating consequences of violence and poverty that patriarchal hierarchy brings. We have resisted the neoliberal expropriation of women's special knowledge and women's care work – Maria always out front, especially eloquent, and energetic. Almost 70 years old, she still traveled to Seattle to fearlessly protest the subjugating decisions of the World Trade Organization. That 1999 event has gone down in history as the Battle of Seattle. Before, but also afterwards, Maria tirelessly organized congresses to raise awareness about the dangers that the new world market-global order poses

* Eulogy delivered by South Cemetery, Cologne, Germany May 25, 2023. Translation from German by Anna Gyorgy.

to humanity and nature. Today, decades later, we are all aware worldwide of the consequences for the climate, know about the pollution of water, how environmental toxins damage health, and social cohesion suffers. Maria was particularly concerned about the new technologies being developed by global institutions and corporations for the world market, without respect for the organic processes of nature and the diversity of cultures. Thus, was born the congress “Women against Genetic and Reproductive Technologies” on modern reproductive technology, in Frankfurt in 1988. Maria had already co-founded FINRAGE, the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering, in 1984. In 1989 she supported her friend Farida Akhter in organizing the congress in Bangladesh and co-wrote the “Declaration of Comilla”. This was by no means solely about the problems women faced because of so-called 2 population policies, as if we were a separate interest group. – How could we be! – Rather, it was and is about the female knowledge of reproduction and the responsible care associated with it: against GMOs, genetic manipulation in plants and animals, and the industrial machine interventions in reproductive life processes. Another matter close to Maria’s heart was what was happening in agriculture, with the production of all our food. In 1996, she called for a “Women’s Day on Food”, parallel to the FAO World Food Summit. It brought together representatives from all continents in Rome. The message: women are the ones who provide food security for their people, not the FAO. From all over the world, women contributed experiences of how they managed to do this under the most difficult conditions and how they were hindered in doing exactly that by the projects of the world development organizations – a major reason why hunger has increased in the world. Women's Nutrition Day was only made possible because of Maria’s personal connections around the world. From 1979 to 1981, she was a Senior Lecturer at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, where she established the Women in Development program. Women from many different countries were able to complete a two-year postgraduate course here. Maria made sure that grassroots activists received scholarships for this. She brought them together with women from the women’s movement in the Netherlands. Together they developed a method of research through which they could carry their political activism into academia. Which they practiced successfully, as was shown in Rome. The role of moderator fell to me, as it had many times before at Maria’s events. Maria and I knew each other from our studies in Cologne in the early 1970s, where she was doing her doctorate in sociology and I in ethnology. Maria, who was 14 years older, had already returned from India, where she had taught German at the Goethe Institute in Pune. She had gone there in 1963 after graduating as a secondary school teacher and stayed until 1967. Maria and I really found each other in the early years of our academic work – Maria at the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne, I at the University of Bielefeld. The third in the group was Claudia von Werlhof, my colleague in Bielefeld, whom Maria knew from her sociology studies, as well as through her collaboration with Dorothee Sölle at the Political Night Prayer. “Women: The Last Colony” was the title of our first book together. Published in 1983, it sold a staggering 17,000 copies by 1997. Together we then developed what would eventually be called the Bielefeld Ecofeminist Subsistence Approach. Together, we were also involved in launching German women's studies as a

university discipline, in association with other powerful women. Many of them are here today. Crucial, however, was Maria's commitment. In 1978 she was the driving force behind the founding of "Contributions to Feminist Theory and Practice" (Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis) the first social science journal of the autonomous women's movement. Maria Mies wrote numerous books that became internationally known. And how she could write! No dry sentences, but always connected with stories, through which it became clear what it was all about. Famous are "Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor" (1986), or "Ecofeminism" together with Vandana Shiva 3 (1995), and "The Subsistence Perspective" (1997) together with me. In addition, Maria wrote countless articles, brochures and tirelessly lectured. Where did she get this energy? Maria's last book, her 2008 autobiography "The Village and the World" helps us understand. Simply put, the answer is – from the Eifel, the love of its people and landscape. Born in 1931, Maria was the seventh among 11 siblings. She grew up on her parents' farm in Auel, and like everyone else always pitched in, even during college vacations. She was the only one from the family who could study, thanks to a special village scholarship. The Eifel is not a particularly fertile region, and the farm was small. From her own experience, Maria knew how important it is to treat the soil, the animals, the plants with care. This determines how long and how well the people who work the land can live. This includes the special peasant knowledge of cooperation between people and nature. Maria had great respect for this knowledge, and pride in her origins. Maria's story of "My Mother and the Sow" (1997, 1999, 2022) is wonderful. Before the war's end approached, in February or March 1945, Maria's mother fulfilled her own vision of peasant woman and mother, ensuring that life continues. This is how she put it. Instead of despairing in the face of the impending end and slaughtering the sow, as so many others did, she drove her to the boar in the neighboring village. At the end of the war, the sow delivered 12 healthy piglets, which the mother then traded for shoes, pants, shirts, and jackets for her five sons, as they fortunately returned from the war, one by one. With this story, Maria shows that whatever the political climate, survival is always assured where there is food and security. Maria adored her mother. With her she experienced the caring motherliness and the strength of the peasant woman. She later worked with energy for the preservation of these qualities. Early on, Maria recognized the dangers the German economic miracle brought with it; the lure of consumerism, to which – to her chagrin – many people in the Eifel succumbed. The basalt rich Steffelberg mountain, a landmark Maria could see from her village, was despite much resistance removed and ground into building material, because the money gained would bring prosperity to the area. But in fact, farm after farm in the area had to give up for lack of funds, and supplies no longer came from the population's own fields, but increasingly from the supermarket connected to the international food chain. This never ceased to hurt Maria. Through her time in India, Maria had become aware that colonialism not only subjugates the colonized, but as a system causes damage on both sides, in the South as well as in the North – namely, as a worldview that corrodes humanity, where the focus is "But I want my banana", as Maria mockingly put it. 4 One who opposed this and was threatened with political persecution for it in India is Saral Sarkar. He became her husband, came to Germany,

wrote relevant books himself, such as “Ecosocialism”, and when Maria became ill, he took care of her until her last breath. Maria was quite unpretentious, which is not to say that she was not well aware of her increasing importance as an internationally known professor. She took advantage of this to speak ever more bluntly. Her clothes should be functional and not too elaborate. She preferred to wear pants and items that had a personal connection and wore a simple embroidered cotton shirt from India almost every day. Maria and Saral’s apartment was also simple, functional. I don’t remember them changing the furniture once. It was possible to sleep on the living room couch, reasonably well, I would say. And it provided a place to stay for hundreds of women of modest means. Their hospitality was generous and uncomplicated. For me - and probably for other companions as well – Maria’s death marks the definitive end of an era. Even 15 or even 20 years ago, Maria had a similar feeling: “What happened to our women’s movement? And “our time is over”. Because we in our time wanted something different in the women's movement than what it has become, and nowadays is publicly praised for as the achievement. We wanted “not the equality of women within the capitalist system, but a new society” – as the obituary in *Der Spiegel* quite rightly puts it. For the first decade or two, that seemed to be precisely the goal of women’s liberation. The famous domestic work debate aimed at making visible the vital importance of the housewife’s work. We wanted to take pride in the relevant skills, rather than continuing to suffer the social disdain of being a housewife. We wanted to liberate our work from its functionality for accumulation and build a new social order on its foundation. That was our dream. For this, of course women's work had to be removed from the control of the so-called “breadwinner” model and we women had to gradually free ourselves from the entanglements associated with wage dependency. We believed that men critical of capitalism would also join in this effort, and that the unions would work with us to find a new way. But this was not to be. “Globalization has won”, Maria said more and more often after the turn of the millennium. And “no one talks about subsistence anymore”. By this she meant subsistence as a perspective and as an orientation for our everyday actions, or as we also called it, as the everyday politics against neoliberal corporate globalization. In this context she also said “Maria Mies is forgotten”. When Maria realized that her memory was failing, she said “I’m just glad I wrote all this down”. We both knew that she meant so that other generations could refer to her analyses. This is precisely what is happening in our days. So, I call out to Maria: Maria Mies is not forgotten! We thank you for the spiritual foundations that you have laid for overcoming the problems of our present era.