

Occupy Our Kitchens: A New Feminism for Everyone

Peggy Rivage-Seul

When my daughter was a senior at an exclusive women's college, she entered the school competition for a Watson Fellowship. The award gives graduates a generous stipend to pursue projects of personal interest at the international level. Maggie wanted to study vegetarian cooking with women in their own kitchens in Italy, Morocco and India. She argued that home cooked foods are disappearing in the United States because the fast food industry has replaced home cooking. Her project was to gather knowledge and culinary skills to pass on to her own children and those she would one day teach in the public school classroom.

The first round of interviewing involved several faculty members. A dean remarked, "I have trouble with your proposal because McDonald's makes me a better feminist." Evidently, the dean meant that the fast food giant had liberated her from kitchen drudgery. Maggie though taken aback by the dean's comment, mustered the strength to argue the credibility of her project by gently reminding her elders that the school's alumni magazine was about to feature a former graduate who is reviving "slow foods." The graduate was following the lead of Carlo Petrini, who had begun the Slow Food movement in Italy—a movement celebrating the growing and eating of traditional foods that promise health and vitality while healing us from fast food. Maggie's arguments fell on deaf ears.

While the failure to win the Watson did not significantly impact my daughter's life, that moment of truth about food and feminism, captured in the dean's comment, changed the direction of my own feminist scholarship. From that moment on, my reflections and research have focused on the "McDonaldization" of feminism; that is, the relationship of the fast food economy to the women's movement. For the past ten years, I continue to be engaged in research and teaching to "take back the kitchen" from the agribusiness food industry. Too, I am calling for a new wave of feminism to reclaim the domestic sphere, and with it, our sense of community and joy that comes from serving others from the heart of our homes: the kitchen.

Collectively, we have strayed from healthy eating, partly because we live in an historic moment of capitalist enterprise that enslaves us to work harder, with less time to occupy hearth and home. Nevertheless, it is time for us to re-evaluate the way we live, and in particular, the way we eat. The combined health crises of obesity and diabetes implores us to pause. Too, these crises have spread across the world, thanks to the American diet of highly processed, fast foods. Moreover, we are living in a time which has no ethic for limiting our consumption, even when these patterns far exceed the earth's capacity to sustain the American way of life—now having gone global.

Exploring the kitchens of women throughout the Global South—including Mexico, Costa Rica, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and most recently, South India—while following in my daughter's footsteps, I wanted to learn how to produce traditional vegetarian cuisine. Though living in very poor communities, the foods the women I've

encountered create are remarkably rich, both in taste and nutrition.¹ Working with women in the social periphery of the world's economy, I have learned that the future of food and health just might be grounded in their traditional cuisine. Without knowing it, these women are the vanguard for what I am calling the "fourth wave" of visionary feminist resistance against the global food economy. And while this may sound audacious, I believe these food activists to be the leaders for a new feminism that will bring men, women and children to the table of social change.

Not For Women Only

This new wave of feminism is not for women only. In fact, fourth wave feminism is not gender specific. Across the planet though mostly in the Global South, we find that all genders are reclaiming their traditional ways of life that value the vital role that women play in preserving health and the earth's resources. People, working together, are dismantling a 5000 year patriarchy. This ancient system of subordinating women is bred into all of us. And it has produced a world of competition and fear, war and profit, and a debasement of the family and the kitchen. The trajectory of feminism's fourth wave is to go "back to the future" by reclaiming the family and community, as well as the values of love and service that come with it. Fourth wave feminism offers a vision of a new kind of thinking and living that re-prioritizes the way we eat and produce food to sustain the human community.

¹ For the most part, low income women in the Global South prepare vegetarian meals because the cost of meat exceeds their budgets. Most of these women are small farmers whose traditional methods for growing food require less of the earth's resources while providing healthier meals than we derive from the average diet in the United States.

The signs of a fourth wave of feminist resistance are visible in places like Chiapas, Mexico, where indigenous groups have remodeled their communities to reflect a new value system—one that rejects the dominant world view of competition and “win lest you lose.” There, for instance, we find a revolutionary regeneration of an earlier mode of living that respected women as equal partners to men, which lives the centrality of indigenous languages, and that acknowledges the vitality of traditional forms of agriculture and simple, vegetarian cuisine. So often we in the Western “developed” world think of ourselves as more evolved than our “undeveloped” world counterparts. Instead, in places like Chiapas, Mexico, signs of new, post-patriarchal social arrangements provide diverse blueprints—ways forward—for rebalancing the world and ourselves. From the perspective of fourth wave feminism, the kitchen is an important place to start.

Science has done its job of warning the world that our patterns of consumption, especially of processed foods produced by agribusinesses, are taxing the earth in unsustainable ways. Whatever taxes our earth inevitably takes its toll on generations of her inhabitants—the entire web of life of which our bodies are just one element. It is precisely for this reason that I am calling for a visionary global resistance—a new feminism for everyone: to celebrate the leadership of women (and men) at the economic periphery of the global community. We need to re-examine the high cost of eating prepared foods and non-organic meat. We need to take account of the price we are paying in terms of our collective health and the ability of the planet to continue supporting the human population.

In her recent book, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, British feminist Joanna Zylińska reflects on living in the new geological era of the Anthropocene. Scientists have named this epoch for the unique impact of humans on the planet's climate cycles. For Zylińska, negotiating life in the human "Anthropocene" era is a feminist ethical project. Given the heavy footprint of humans on earth, we now have a responsibility to work for the survival of life itself. As such, we need to rethink the way we live, both as individuals and as a species.²

And how do we respond to the feminist call to establish a new relationship to the earth? Our current global crises around climate, health, and food compel us to act collectively to transform the way we think about the earth. We need a critical praxis—an informed moral choice—about how we relate to the earth. This new movement of feminism calls us to revisit the heart of the domestic sphere—the kitchen—as a site for a new form of feminist visionary resistance. Given that the health and well-being of the planet is now controlled by a small number of large corporations, the first act is to change this configuration—to liberate the kitchen, the domestic world, from the hands of the profit driven fast food industry.

To move forward with the notion of feminism's fourth wave, we need to ask ourselves a critical question: how does a highly educated population allow a system of food production, spanning the farm to the table, to degenerate in less than two generations? Certainly, professional women in particular, have had their eyes on a

² Feminist author, Donna Haraway, prefers to conceptualize this new geological era as the Chthulucene, a term that calls on the language of science fiction. She argues in her newest work, *Staying with Trouble*, that humans are not the only species possessed of agency. In fact, human and nonhuman are inextricably linked. Learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth will prove more conducive to the kind of thinking that would provide the means to building more livable futures.

different prize, namely, their inclusion within the public sphere where decisions and policy about the well-being of the culture are made. Indeed, the gender gap has narrowed, and now the goal of 50x50, that is, 50% women's public leadership in business and government may be met by 2050. For such an achievement we have women's global movements of resistance to patriarchy to thank for paving the way.

However, the work of feminism is far from over. As long as we continue to live in patriarchal social arrangements, feminists will be called upon to continue the struggle for liberation from institutionalized forms of life-threatening oppressions that include racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance et al. One crucial, and often overlooked, form of human oppression, however, is the international food economy.

This essay on feminism's fourth wave lays both historical and conceptual groundwork for a new ethic in and about the kitchen. Accordingly, it explores the way that the post-World War II women's movement, in its valiant pursuit of gender justice in the workplace, helped to create and perpetuate the conditions for the corporate takeover of women's traditional domain—the kitchen. Tragically, an unintended consequence of second wave feminism was the usurpation of the kitchen by unbridled growth of the fast food economy. To fully understand this undermining of a genuine feminist movement which respected women's work in the home, we must consider the time around the Second World War and to then recall how women have always been charged with moral authority in the care of the family. The work of women has been to nurture—through providing food, medicines, and whatever it takes to ensure the survival of the family. In times of war in the United States, women have been the leaders in preserving and ensuring the food supply, tending to the wounded, and keeping the economy moving.

How Did We Get Here? Unpacking Feminism's Second Wave

Following World War II, the fast food industry entered the portal of the kitchen with Americans' growing affluence. This new wealth ushered in a period of unprecedented levels of consumption. With the success of the postwar economy came a large middle class that could afford to eat out and pay more for processed foods. Thus, the convergence of women's entrance into the professional sphere, the new affluence for the growing white middle class, and the postwar emergence of agribusiness wreaked havoc on women's traditional space: the kitchen.

Prior to 1950, most people's economic circumstances required that they dine on simple grains: corn, rice, wheat, and legumes, including lentils and beans of all varieties. Family gardens were common, especially in rural areas. Normally, when people are poor, they resort to the bottom of the food chain—to grains, beans, and leafy green vegetables to feed themselves. Dried fish, chicken, and eggs complement this basic diet when people can afford to move up the food chain. In the United States, cookbooks from WWII contain special wartime supplements with recipes for these simpler, strong vegetarian foods, while cutting back on expensive consumer items like meat was considered a civic duty during wartime.

Moving out of the Great Depression, the U.S. economy boomed as it produced massive amounts of armaments and raw materials for its battles. From the years 1942-45, women were vital to this effort. While most males who were capable of combat either enlisted or were drafted for military service, the workforce required for weapons production was dominated by women. Yet, at that time, it was not socially acceptable for women to work outside the home. Desperate for workers, the United States government

undertook the most successful advertisement campaign in U.S. history to change cultural norms so that women's work outside the home would become both socially acceptable and laudable.³ The ad campaign helped to recruit 17 million women to wartime industry, while permanently changing the relationship between women and the workplace.



Most feminists will recognize Norman Rockwell's iconic image (above) of Rosie the Riveter as the symbol of female strength for the workplace.

Whether constructing planes or helping to build ships and tanks for men to use in the war against Germany and Japan, women had been moved out of the private space of home into the public space of paid labor. For middle class women who went to work, this often meant a handsome independent income, meals prepared at the work site so that

³ See United States Office of War Information and War Manpower Commissioner, Walter Thompson. The nation's major magazines devoted their September 1943 covers to portrayals of women in war jobs, creating approximately 125 million advertisements. Womanpower ads, most of which were full pages, were among the interior pages of these magazines. Motion pictures, newspapers, radio, trade press, employee publications, and in-store displays all tied in importantly. Even museums participated, with the Museum of Modern Art in New York conducting a contest for the best magazine covers

mothers wouldn't have to worry about cooking when they got home, and community childcare. For working class women, especially women of color, there were no prepared meals or childcare. However, wartime factory work constituted a stiff increase in salary, from low paid domestic and service industry jobs to much higher paid war time work.⁴

Although poor women have been working for wages outside the home since the start of the Industrial Revolution, it wasn't until World War II that the United States experienced a major gender shift in the workplace. In providing leadership—preserving the food supply, tending to the wounded, and keeping the economy moving—women working in traditional male jobs began to feel their strength, while often having a good time in the process. However, the fun didn't last for long.

At the war's end, returning male soldiers expected to come home to their factory jobs operated by female laborers, sometimes more efficiently than their male counterparts. To facilitate the transition, the U.S. government created another advertising campaign, this time to lure women out of their factory jobs and back into the home and hearth. At the end of 1945, the national security narrative suggested that for the sake of the country, women workers needed to go home.⁵

So, Rosie being the good citizen, left her job. Working class women and women of color were forced to find low paying jobs, many of them returning to domestic

⁴ In terms of feminist social movements, it is important to note that the rise of work status for women of color in the United States, and their male counterparts in war combat, created a much higher expectation for justice in the workplace among African Americans in particular. Judith Cohen explained, "There was the feeling that the kinds of slurs, insults, and jokes that people make about minorities had helped lead to Hitler...I think there was a very strong feeling after the war that there wasn't going to be that kind of discrimination again." Segregation began to break down, and the Civil Rights movement started up. See Sharon H. Hartman Strom and Linda P. Wood's "What Did You Do in the War Grandma? An Oral History of Rhode Island Women in World War II," 1994. (This was a special project conducted by an honors English class at Rhode Island's South Kingstown High School, in conjunction with Brown University's Scholarly Technology Group. This project was featured as one of 701 Special Sites in *Third Age*, 1997.

⁵ See the film, "The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter" (1980) for graphic examples of the U.S. government's efforts to encourage women's return to the domestic sphere.

work. Middle class women went home to produce babies and gourmet meals. Knowing that this might be boring, media taught women that life could be more interesting if women focused on interior design, and on cooking elaborate, fancy culinary fare, assisted by a burgeoning number of consumer gadgets. Dining rooms replaced kitchen tables because more elaborate feasts would require more formality. Additionally, it took more time to prepare fancy meals. As a result, the cooks had less time to reflect on the way their lives had been changed since vacating their jobs.

Yet, the memory of Rosie the Riveter died hard. As Wood and Strom remind us, the genie was out of the bottle—women now felt compelled to work outside the home:

“... demand exploded in the post-war boom. Prices sky-rocketed with the removal of price controls, forcing many women to stay on the job to help buy things their families needed. The "American dream," so long dormant during the Depression and war, now became a reality as many families found it possible to buy a home in the suburbs, a car, a refrigerator, a washing machine, and to have children and to give them everything their parents had been deprived of for so long.”⁶

While some women found their moral authority in raising families, cooking, and house cleaning, it was not enough for others. In her classic text, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Freidan labeled women’s ennui as “the problem that has no name.” This undercurrent in the white middle class eventually gave rise to the Second Wave of Feminism in the United States, resulting in structural changes in the workplace. New doors opened for women— from corporate offices to university doctoral programs. Unlike the war campaign that called on women’s patriotism to join the labor force, the media campaign to bring women back to the home was less successful. Although many

⁶ See Hartman Strom and Woods.

young women temporarily left the work place, in general, married women's labor force participation continued to rise after the war, and has been rising ever since.

As formally educated women went to work, they left the kitchen behind. It did not remain unoccupied for long, however. As the U.S. rebooted itself for postwar domestic activity, the food industry took a giant leap in production by creating convenience foods and kitchen appliances that made cooking easier. Improved highways and transportation made available a great variety of food. Freezers became affordable so that women could store prepared dinners, frozen vegetables, and meats— in sum making it easier to move away from cooking with fresh foods. Soon, McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken would replace local diners.

In conjunction with advertising and media, the fast food industry worked hard to promote a new food culture. Using the science of psychology and the manipulative power of marketing—within newspapers, women's magazines, on the radio and television, and even in school children's "Weekly Readers"—people became convinced, talked into experimenting with highly starchy, salty, sugary, oily foods that had a "fun taste." Vegetables, grains, fruits, and meats began to taste the same as desserts instead of strong, plain food. As a result, a craving for sugar and starch replaced the body's desire for nutritious, healthy food— for whole grains, fruits and vegetables— thus undermining the health and wellness of everyone.

In addition, poor people, like their privileged counterparts, were watching TV, reading magazines, and listening to the radio. Cruising past drive-in restaurants, they, too, were being enculturated into the fast food reality. Too, fast food culture promoted the idea of a classless society since everyone, rich or poor, could eat the same diet. Having

once tasted a Big Mac and French fries, few were likely to “go back” to whole grains, legumes, greens and broccoli—the kinds of food that actually support well-being rather than disease (heart, diabetes, et al.)—what Francine Kaufman in *Hungry Planet* calls “diabesity.” Within the short span of fifty years, a new national habit of eating fast foods had been established, with the basic diet of healthy food lost. The aftermath of this transformation of American eating patterns is clear: nearly 10% of Americans now have diabetes.⁷ Childhood obesity, rising exponentially, results from the lethal confluence of consumer pressure, wide availability and desirability of fast foods, and the appeal of quick meals in a busy world.

Tragically, the current health crisis is not confined to the United States. We know that “diabesity” has spread from the United States across the globe as people embrace processed foods. And, with increasingly polluted sources of drinking water, soft drinks like Coca Cola have replaced the more dangerous alternative of contaminated water. Unlike in the United States, few social safety nets exist for coping with these major food-related health issues that increasingly plague the world’s majority, most of whom are women and children.

The Birth of the Global Food Economy

Emerging from World War II, the United States was the uncontested winner. The traditional global powers—England, France, Germany, Spain and Italy—having suffered heavy casualties from the global war, were unable to sustain their own economies. This

⁷ See the 2014 National Diabetes Statistics Report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/data/statistics/2014StatisticsReport.html>

was especially true for the European colonies within Africa and Asia. America's post-war challenge became one of converting its wartime economy of military production into a more productive industry to grow its national economy. Agribusiness helped to fill the production gap left by the war. Within a few years, the U.S. was overproducing grains, re-routing the chemical industry to industrial agriculture, and looking to establish markets in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America for selling its surplus production. In this historical moment, the United States was positioning itself to assume economic leadership in the world. Decision-makers debated their course of action, as the following quote by George Kennan, then Secretary of State in the United States, illustrates:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population ... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world benefaction.⁸

Several years later, in 1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law "PL 480 Agricultural Surplus Disposal Act" which gave the Global South the opportunity to buy grains (corn, wheat, etc.) at very low prices, using their own local currencies. PL 480 is also known as the "Food for Peace Program" which enabled former colonies to buy corn and wheat without borrowing foreign currency, thus saving the high cost of exchanging *pesos, cordobas, colones or lempiras* for dollars.⁹ To keep the U.S. economy moving,

⁸ Taken from a confidential, internal State Dept. document in 1948, this quote appears in F. William Engdahl's, *Gods of Money: Wall Street and the Death of the American Century*, 2009, p.225 (edition.engdahl).

⁹ The year 1954, however, is a landmark in the history of the idea of Food for Peace. The whole concept was given a new orientation as a result of the passing of the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, commonly known as Public Law 480. This act provided for sales using foreign currencies, donations, and barter of surplus U. S. farm commodities. Recently, the act was amended to permit sales of surplus commodities for dollars on a

agribusinesses in the United States could sell their grain, but instead of exchanging local currencies for dollars, local monies were re-invested in countries purchasing grains. For example, the *rupees* that India spent buying wheat went back into the Indian economy in the form of U.S. government investments and land purchases. The idea was to expand U.S. markets, and at the same, provide development and employment opportunities for poor countries. Multinational corporations with plants and offices in the Global South would hire locally and provide industrial products that would serve an ailing third world economy. At least this was the “officially” sanctioned story.

However, George Kennan’s sentiments regarding the importance of exploiting Third World economies for U.S. national interests are more indicative of the economic consequences of PL 480. When Haitian farmers brought their local rice to market, they could not compete with the artificially low prices of rice imported from the United States through the Food for Peace Program. The result was that Haitian farmers were forced out of business. Haiti, along with many economies in the Global South, became food dependent on the United States. Once these countries became dependent on the United States for their grains, they were then forced to pay international market prices when the surpluses ran out. Such circumstances required expensive bank loans. Finally, the debt needing repayment, countries were required to make payments in foreign, expensive currency. In the end, the “Food for Peace Program” helped to usher in the un-payable

long-term loan basis and at low rates of interest. See Douglas Hedley and David Peacock. “Food for Peace, PL: 480 and American Agriculture,” Report No. 156, Department of Agricultural Economics, Michigan State University, February 1970.

external debt that both crippled economies in the Global South and turned the United States into an unchallenged superpower in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁰

A High Price to Pay

More than just the Global South has paid a high price for the U.S. agricultural production boom. Excess production of grains like corn needed to go somewhere, so conveniently it was steered into the U.S. food industry. There corn syrup replaced the more expensive granulated sugar for over 75% of processed food items in major grocery stores. While corn surplus enriched the processed food companies, it simultaneously impoverished the population in terms of nutrition, while creating a totally unnecessary health crisis.¹¹ We can accurately talk about the “hungry American” as someone who eats a processed food diet, depleted of the nutrition found in whole foods. Further exacerbating the impoverishment, the poor and people of color largely live in areas with a dearth of fresh fruit and vegetable markets, leaving them much hungrier and much unhealthier than their wealthier counterparts. Taken in combination, the daily project of satiating the nutritional needs of one’s family becomes a nearly impossible task for too many. The poor become poorer in both the United States and the Global South. And we all become more compromised in health and well-being.

¹⁰ I was fortunate to have dinner with the late George McGovern who authored the “Food for Peace” program. When I shared the perspective above with him, his response was: “We didn’t get that one right.”

¹¹ To give an idea of the acreage used for corn production, in 2010, 82 million acres were cultivated in corn, representing 27% of agriculture in the U.S. According to 2008 figures (the year of the world food crisis), 43% of the corn crop was used to feed domestic animals, 15% exported (a huge decrease because of the U.S. decision to grow bio-fuels, thus triggering a corn crisis in Latin America), and 12% was processed, ending up in 45,000 food items found on grocery shelves. See Oran B. Hesterman. *Fair Food*, 2012. pp. 4-6.

The tragedy of the current global food economy is even starker relief when recognizing that the rich fields of grain in the United States have been used to generate enormous profits, instead of feeding the human community. When we begin to understand how the international food economy works against human need, then we will embrace a critical feminist praxis—feminism’s fourth wave—to undo the fast food revolution.

Going Back to the Future: “Occupy Our Kitchens”

The task of this new movement is to reclaim the domestic sphere by re-centering families and communities around food production and consumption. Ivan Illich’s work *Gender* (1980) is an important starting point for theorizing fourth wave feminism. There Illich sketches an historical picture of gender relationships in the domestic sphere, arguing that male/female relationships have long been dominated by egalitarian and complementary, mutually respectful relations. It is only in the recent historical epoch of capitalist industrialism that gender relations have focused on inequalities in the work place and neglecting egalitarian housework practices.

However, since the publication of Illich’s work on gender, we have witnessed significant advances—the beginning of a revolution of sorts—typified by actions now occurring within Zapatista communities throughout Mexico. Here we see evidence of gender practices that may take us into a post-patriarchal epoch. Going back to the future signifies the important study of the human domestic past as a guidepost for reconstructing a future that, in the words of Latin American economist/theologian Franz Hinkelammert,

“includes us all.” As the work of feminism’s fourth wave unfolds, we are likely to look to Zapatista women to lead the way to new gender practices.

“Occupy our Kitchens” is a call for the co-construction of a manifesto that moves the slow food revolution forward with every morsel we savor, healing the damage of the fast food revolution to our bodies, ourselves, our places and others’ places. Fourth wave feminism is dawning even as I write these hopes and dreams here and now.

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