

## [Earth Day 2018](#)

Professor Carolyn Merchant reflects on legacy of ecofeminism



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Climate change is considered one of the most pressing yet divisive issues of this century, and though political in nature, it is indisputably scientific at its foundation. But there is a rising field of study that analyzes these environmental issues from an entirely different perspective: the sociological.

Environmental sociology seeks to understand the implications of the different meanings we assign to nature, investigating how these connections shape humans' interaction with their immediate, nonhuman environments.

Carolyn Merchant, a professor of environmental history, philosophy and ethics, has researched and taught environmental sociology at UC Berkeley for the past three decades. She is well-established as one of the most influential contributors in the studies of ecofeminism and environmental history. Although Merchant will retire at the end of this semester, she leaves an impressive legacy at UC Berkeley and in the field of environmental sociology as a whole.

Merchant was inspired by two notable women whose works eventually shaped her career — Rachel Carson, author of “Silent Spring,” and Betty Friedan, author of “The Feminine Mystique.” These two pieces of literature — published in 1962 and 1963, respectively, while Merchant was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison — formed the foundation of ecofeminism in the 1970s.

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Carson’s “Silent Spring” is often seen as the spark that ignited the modern environmental movement. It was one of the first literary works that identified humans’ undeniable and irreversible impact on the environment by linking the indiscriminate use of pesticides to detrimental health effects. In a work equally as historically pivotal, “The Feminine Mystique,” Friedan encouraged women to look outside of their traditional societal roles for fulfillment — a concept that would initiate the second-wave feminist movement.

Merchant, along with various other female academics, is responsible for integrating these two concepts — environmentalism and feminism — into a study known as ecofeminism. Ecofeminism identifies the exploitation of nature in connection with the oppression of women. In this field of study, Merchant’s contributions are as important as those of her idols.

“Ecofeminism challenged the idea that men were identified with culture and hence were superior to women who were identified with nature,” she explained in an email. “Women challenged this hierarchy and demonstrated that women were saving the earth from destruction.”

Merchant explained that the ecofeminism movement continues to be prevalent in the present day. “Women bear the heaviest burden of the effects of climate change, especially in developing countries,” she wrote. “They live and raise families in low lying areas affected by the flooding of rivers because, as a family of caregivers, they are less mobile than their male counterparts.”

In addition to teaching and conducting research, Merchant is also an accomplished author who has contributed to more than 10 books in this field. In 1980, she published her first and perhaps most notable literary work, “The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution,” a book that describes nature’s perilous transition from a space regarded as sacred and motherly to a place that is violently exploited — a transition that she argues is often justified by science and infused with deep tones of sexism.

Merchant’s academic career began in New York, where she received a Bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Vassar College. She continued her education at the University of Wisconsin,

Madison, where she received her master's degree and doctorate in the history of science. Since then, Merchant has been awarded fellowships from numerous prestigious institutions, including the University of Wisconsin, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

She also held the position of president of the American Society for Environmental History from 2001-2003 and has won several academic accolades — most notably, the Chancellor's Professor Award from UC Berkeley in 1998, the Educational Initiatives Award from UC Berkeley in 2000 and the Distinguished Scholar Award from the American Society for Environmental History in 2010.

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Since her professorship at UC Berkeley began in 1986, Merchant has made formative strides in environmental research. Her current research centers around environmental history, a topic that, according to Merchant, “examines the ways in which humans and nature interact and respond to each other over time. It asks how humans have used, abused, and conserved nature and how nature has changed ecologically.”

Merchant's most recent research efforts have culminated in her latest book manuscript, entitled “The Anthropocene and the Humanities.” She described the Anthropocene as a period of drastic change in environmental quality as a consequence of human action.

“Humans have changed the geology and ecology of the planet by burning fossil fuels that put greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, causing climate change,” Merchant wrote.

Although Merchant's journey at UC Berkeley is coming to its end, she acknowledged that the battle against climate change is just beginning.

“I am most concerned about the effects of global climate change on the future of the earth,” Merchant wrote. “I would like to see the Age of the Anthropocene become the Age of Sustainability through the use of renewable energy, the recycling of resources, and the economic and political equality of all humans,” she wrote.

Beyond UC Berkeley, Merchant has considered developing new themes and ideas that will motivate individuals to think critically about the environment — about the ways we perceive and interact with it — in an effort to combat climate change and alter our relationship with the natural world.

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