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# ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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MICHAEL BOYLAN

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BASIC ETHICS IN ACTION

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# Environmental Ethics

MICHAEL BOYLAN



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association between nature and society and about the importance of defining such disciplines as economics, psychology, and sociology in natural as well as social terms. Recent uses of "social ecology" to advance a rather superficial account of social life in fairly conventional ecological terms are particularly deplorable. Books like *Habits of the Heart* which glibly pick up the term serve to coopt a powerful expression for rather banal ends and tend to compromise efforts to deepen our understanding of nature and society as interactive rather than opposed domains.

4. Claims of hierarchy as a ubiquitous natural fact cannot be ignored by still further widening the chasm between nature and society—or "natural necessity" and "cultural freedom" as it is more elegantly worded. Justifying social hierarchy in terms of natural hierarchy is one of the most persistent assaults on an egalitarian social future that religion and philosophy have made over the ages. It has surfaced recently in sociobiology and reinforced the antinaturalistic stance that permeates so many liberatory ideologies in the modern era. To say that culture is precisely the "emancipation of man from nature" is to revert to Sartre's "slime of history" notion of the natural world that not only separates society from nature but mind from body and subjectivity from objectivity.

5. Our disastrously one-sided and rationalized "civilization" has boxed this wealth of inner development and complexity away, relegating it to preindustrial lifeways that basically shaped our evolution up to a century or two ago. From a sensory viewpoint, we live atrophied, indeed, starved lives compared to hunters and food cultivators, whose capacity to experience reality, even in a largely cultural sense, by far overshadows our own. The twentieth century alone bears witness to an appalling dulling of our "sixth senses" as well as to our folk creativity and craft creativity. We have never experienced so little so loudly, so brashly, so trivially, so thinly, so neurotically. For a comparison of the "world of experience we have lost" (to reword Peter Laslett's title), read the excellent personal accounts of so-called Bushmen, or San people, the Ituri Forest pygmies, and the works of Paul Radin on food-gatherers and hunters—not simply as records of their lifeways but of their epistemologies.

## II. ECOFEMINISM.

*Overview.* *Ecofeminism* is a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne. The concept is that a connection exists between the aspects of domination that humans exert on the biosphere and that the male-dominated social system exerts on women. The various aspects of this logic of domination are central to ecofeminism.

✓ Carolyn Merchant's essay shows how mainstream feminist theory might profit from adopting the ecofeminist model. Behind this model are assumptions that are not too dissimilar to Bookchin's previous essay except that the focus is on the domination of women in the context of domination in general. Merchant is interested in putting these connections into a comparative context with: (a) liberal feminism, (b) Marxist feminism, (c) radical feminism, and (d) socialist feminism. The ultimate end of this analysis is to create a synergy of interests, tactics, and intended results.

Karen J. Warren seeks to portray ecofeminism as an essential element to any environmental ethical theory. She identifies eight points of feminism that center on the pluralism and contextualism that are missing in the current social climate. A key feature that should be noted is that Warren does not believe that any objective social/ethical theory can ever be proposed. The question then becomes which biased theory is better. After proposing the feminist position, she emends each of the eight points with ecofeminism objectives to



importance of defining such disciplines as well as social terms. Recent uses of "social ecology" in fairly conventional ecological terms *start* which glibly pick up the term serve to tend to compromise efforts to deepen our understanding of the other than opposed domains.

It cannot be ignored by still further widening "cultural necessity" and "cultural freedom" as it in terms of natural hierarchy is one of the effects that religion and philosophy have made and reinforced the antinaturalistic stance of the modern era. To say that culture is precisely Sartre's "slime of history" notion of the nature but mind from body and subjectivity from

and "civilization" has boxed this wealth of it to preindustrial lifeways that basically in a sensory viewpoint, we live atrophied, cultivators, whose capacity to experience grows our own. The twentieth century alone loses "as well as to our folk creativity and loudly, so brashly, so trivially, so thinly, so much we have lost" (to reword Peter Laslett's Bushmen, or San people, the Ituri Foresters and hunters—not simply as records of

Françoise d'Eaubonne. The concrete aspects of domination that the male-dominated social system exerts. The logic of domination are central to

mainstream feminist theory might be. Behind this model are assumptions from my previous essay except that the context of domination in general. The actions into a comparative context of sexism, (c) radical feminism, and (d) the analysis is to create a synergy of

ecofeminism as an essential element to identifies eight points of feminism that that are missing in the current so-called is that Warren does not believe to ever be proposed. The question After proposing the feminist position with ecofeminism objectives to

show how similar these two worldviews are and that they should therefore be accepted as a package.

Val Plumwood argues in her essay that the issues of discontinuity and of instrumentalism are among the most important ones to be addressed. *Discontinuity* refers to the seemingly arbitrary categories that serve to separate male/female, human/animal/plant, and so forth. In this way, the lessons of the deep ecologists are accepted. However, deep ecology goes too far in identifying the self with the biosphere and should instead critique social institutions and patriarchy, for they are the human institutions that promote instrumentalism. Men use women as the tools by which their purposes might be fulfilled. In the same way, humans use nature as a tool; but like the social ecologists, the ecofeminists emphasize the development of actual people (as opposed to the Hindu self of the deep ecologists) in a community (both social and natural).

## Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory

Carolyn Merchant

The term *ecofeminism* was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to represent women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution to ensure human survival on the planet.<sup>1</sup> Such an ecological revolution would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature. Liberal, radical, and socialist feminism have all been concerned with improving the human/nature relationship, and each has contributed to an ecofeminist perspective in different ways.<sup>2</sup> Liberal feminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature through the passage of new laws and regulations. Radical ecofeminism analyzes environmental problems from within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature. Socialist ecofeminism grounds its analysis in capitalist patriarchy and would totally restructure, through a socialist revolution, the domination of women and nature inherent in the market economy's use of both as resources. While radical feminism has delved more deeply into the woman/nature connection, I believe that socialist feminism has the potential for a more thorough critique of the domination issue.

Liberal feminism characterized the history of feminism from its beginnings in the seventeenth century until the 1960s. Its roots are liberalism, the political theory that incorporates the scientific analysis that nature is composed of atoms moved by external forces with a theory of human nature that views humans as individual rational agents who maximize their own self-interest and capitalism as the optimal economic structure for human progress. Historically, liberal feminists have argued that women do not differ from men as rational agents and that exclusion from educational and economic opportunities have prevented them from realizing their own potential for creativity in all spheres of human life.<sup>3</sup>

For liberal feminists (as for liberalism generally), environmental problems result from the overly rapid development of natural resources and the failure to regulate environmental pollutants. Better science, conservation, and laws are the proper approaches to resolving resource problems. Given equal educational opportunities to become scientists, natural resource managers, regulators, lawyers, and legislators, women like men can contribute to the improvement of the environment, the conservation of natural resources, and the higher quality of human life. Women, therefore, can transcend the social stigma of their biology and join men in the cultural project of environmental conservation.

Radical feminism developed in the late 1960s and 1970s with the second wave of feminism. The radical form of ecofeminism is a response to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in Western culture and that both can be elevated and liberated through direct political action. In prehistory an emerging patriarchal culture dethroned the mother Goddesses and replaced them with male gods to whom the female deities became subservient.<sup>4</sup> The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century further degraded nature by replacing Renaissance organicism and a nurturing earth with the metaphor of a machine to be controlled and repaired from the outside. The Earth is to be dominated by male-developed and -controlled technology, science, and industry.

Radical feminism instead celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on Goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system. A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and Goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists. Spirituality is seen as a source of both personal and social change. Goddess worship and rituals centered around the lunar and female menstrual cycles, lectures, concerts, art exhibitions, street and theater productions, and direct political action (web weaving in anti-nuclear protests) are all examples of the re-visioning of nature and women as powerful forces. Radical ecofeminist philosophy embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and weblike human/nature relationships.

For radical feminists, human nature is grounded in human biology. Humans are biologically sexed and socially gendered. Sex/gender relations give

y of feminism from its beginnings. Its roots are liberalism, the analysis that nature is common to all, and a theory of human nature that holds that men and women should maximize their own self-interest for human progress. Women do not differ from men in their intellectual, educational and economic opportunities, and their own potential for creativity.

Generally, environmental problems of natural resources and the environment are seen as separate from the Better science, conservation, and resource problems. Given the existence of natural resource management, men like men can contribute to the conservation of natural resources, and therefore, can transcend the social cultural project of environmentalism.

In the 1960s and 1970s with the second feminism is a response to the patriarchal system. A vision in which nature is mutually associated and devalued and liberated through the patriarchy. Patriarchal culture dethroned male gods to whom the female of the seventeenth century saw nature as organicism and a nurturing force. Nature was controlled and repaired from the developed and controlled technology.

The relationship between women and nature is centered on Goddess worship, a divine system. A vision in which nature is a source of inspiration and fertility is seen as a source of both life and rituals centered around the moon, art exhibitions, street action (web weaving in anti-war), and nature and women as they embrace intuition, an ethic of intuition.

Founded in human biology. Hurdled. Sex/gender relations give

men and women different power bases. Hence the personal is political. Radical feminists object to the dominant society's perception that women are limited by being closer to nature because of their ability to bear children. The dominant view is that menstruation, pregnancy, nursing, and nurturing of infants and young children should tie women to the home, decreasing their mobility and inhibiting their ability to remain in the work force. Radical feminists argue that the perception that women are totally oriented toward biological reproduction degrades them by association with a nature that is itself devalued in Western culture. Women's biology and nature should instead be celebrated as sources of female power.

Turning the perceived connection between women and biological reproduction upside down becomes the source of women's empowerment and ecological activism. Women argue that male-designed and -produced technologies neglect the effects of nuclear radiation, pesticides, hazardous wastes, and household chemicals on women's reproductive organs and on the ecosystem. They argue that radioactivity from nuclear wastes, power plants, and bombs is a potential cause of birth defects, cancers, and the elimination of life on Earth.<sup>5</sup> They expose hazardous waste sites near schools and homes as permeating soil and drinking water and contributing to miscarriage, birth defects, and leukemia. They object to pesticides and herbicides being sprayed on crops and forests as potentially affecting children and the childbearing women living near them. Women frequently spearhead local actions against spraying and power plant siting and organize others to demand toxic cleanups. When coupled with an environmental ethic that values rather than degrades nature, such actions have the potential both for raising women's consciousness of their own oppression and for the liberation of nature from the polluting effects of industrialization. For example, many lower-middle-class women who became politicized through protests over toxic chemical wastes at Love Canal in New York simultaneously became feminists when their activism spilled over into their home lives.<sup>6</sup>

Yet in emphasizing the female, body, and nature components of the dualities male/female, mind/body, and culture/nature, radical ecofeminism runs the risk of perpetuating the very hierarchies it seeks to overthrow. Critics point to the problem of women's own reinforcement of their identification with a nature that Western culture degrades.<sup>7</sup> If "female is to male as nature is to culture," as anthropologist Sherry Ortner argues,<sup>8</sup> then women's hopes for liberation are set back by association with nature. Any analysis that makes women's essence and qualities special ties them to a biological destiny that thwarts the possibility of liberation. A politics grounded in women's culture, experience, and values can be seen as reactionary.

To date, socialist feminists have had little to say about the problem of the domination of nature. To them, the source of male domination of women is the complex of social patterns called capitalist patriarchy, in which men bear the responsibility for labor in the marketplace and women for labor in the home.

### Feminism and the Environment

	NATURE		HUMAN NATURE	FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ENVIRONMENTALISM	IMAGE OF A FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISM
Liberal Feminism	Atoms		Rational agents	"Man and his environment" leaves out women	Women participate in natural resources and environmental sciences
	Mind/body dualism Domination of nature		Individualism Maximization of self-interest		
Marxist Feminism	Transformation of nature by science and technology for human use		Creation of human nature through mode of production, praxis	Critique of capitalist control of resources and accumulation of goods and profits	Socialist/communist society will use resources for good of all men and women Resources will be controlled by workers Environmental pollution will be minimal since no surpluses will be produced Environmental research by men and women
	Domination of nature as a means to human freedom Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy		Historically specific—not fixed Species nature of humans		

Nature is material basis of  
life: food, clothing,  
shelter, energy

specific—not fixed  
Species nature of  
humans

Environmental pollution will  
be minimal since no  
surpluses will be produced  
Environmental research by  
men and women

## Radical Feminism

Nature is spiritual and  
personal  
Conventional science and  
technology problematic  
because of their emphasis  
on domination

Unaware of  
interconnectedness of  
male domination of  
nature and women  
Male environmentalism  
retains hierarchies  
Insufficient attention to  
environmental threats to  
women's reproduction  
(chemicals, nuclear war)

Woman/nature both valued  
and celebrated  
Reproductive freedom  
Against pornographic  
depictions of both women  
and nature  
Radical ecofeminism

## Socialist Feminism

Nature is material basis of  
life: food, clothing,  
shelter, energy  
Nature is socially and  
historically constructed  
Transformation of nature  
by production

Leaves out nature as  
active and responsive  
Leaves out women's role  
in reproduction and  
reproduction as a  
category  
Systems approach is  
mechanistic not dialectical

Both nature and human  
production are active  
Centrality of biological and  
social reproduction  
Multileveled structural  
analysis  
Dialectical (not mechanical)  
systems  
Socialist ecofeminism

Yet the potential exists for a socialist ecofeminism that would push for an ecological, economic, and social revolution that would simultaneously liberate women, working-class people, and nature.

For socialist ecofeminism, environmental problems are rooted in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology. Historically, the rise of capitalism eroded the subsistence-based farm and city workshop in which production was oriented toward use values and men and women were economic partners. The result was a capitalist economy dominated by men and a domestic sphere in which women's labor in the home was unpaid and subordinate to men's labor in the marketplace. Both women and nature are exploited by men as part of the progressive liberation of humans from the constraints imposed by nature. The consequence is the alienation of women and men from each other and both from nature.

Socialist feminism incorporates many of the insights of radical feminism, but views both nature and human nature as historically and socially constructed. Human nature is seen as the product of historically changing interactions between humans and nature, men and women, classes, and races. Any meaningful analysis must be grounded in an understanding of power not only in the personal but also in the political sphere. Like radical feminism, socialist feminism is critical of mechanistic science's treatment of nature as passive and of its male-dominated power structures. Similarly, it deplores the lack of a gender analysis in history and the omission of any treatment of women's reproductive and nurturing roles. But rather than grounding its analysis in biological reproduction alone, it also incorporates social reproduction. Biological reproduction includes the reproduction of the species and the reproduction of daily life through food, clothing, and shelter; social reproduction includes socialization and the legal/political reproduction of the social order.<sup>9</sup>

Like Marxist feminists, socialist feminists see nonhuman nature as the material basis of human life, supplying the necessities of food, clothing, shelter, and energy. Materialism, not spiritualism, is the driving force of social change. Nature is transformed by human science and technology for use by all humans for survival. Socialist feminism views change as dynamic, interactive, and dialectical, rather than as mechanistic, linear, and incremental. Nonhuman nature is dynamic and alive. As a historical actor, nature interacts with human beings through mutual ecological relations. Socialist feminist environmental theory gives both reproduction and production central places. A socialist feminist environmental ethic involves developing sustainable, non-dominating relations with nature and supplying all peoples with a high quality of life.

In politics, socialist feminists participate in many of the same environmental actions as radical feminists. The goals, however, are to direct change toward some form of an egalitarian socialist state, in addition to resocializing

that would push for an eco-  
ould simultaneously liberate

blems are rooted in the rise  
Earth and nature can be ex-  
Historically, the rise of cap-  
d city workshop in which  
men and women were eco-  
omy dominated by men and  
home was unpaid and sub-  
women and nature are ex-  
ration of humans from the  
is the alienation of women

the insights of radical femi-  
as historically and socially  
t of historically changing in-  
d women, classes, and races.  
an understanding of power  
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all peoples with a high qual-

many of the same environ-  
however, are to direct change  
, in addition to resocializing

men and women into nonsexist, nonracist, nonviolent, anti-imperialist forms of life. Socialist ecofeminism deals explicitly with environmental issues that affect working-class women, Third World women, and women of color. Examples include support for the women's *Chipco* (tree-hugging) movement in India that protects fuel resources from lumber interests, for the women's Green Belt movement in Kenya that has planted more than 2 million trees in 10 years, and for Native American women and children exposed to radioactivity from uranium mining.<sup>10</sup>

Although the ultimate goals of liberal, radical, and socialist feminists may differ as to whether capitalism, women's culture, or socialism should be the ultimate objective of political action, shorter-term objectives overlap. In this sense there is perhaps more unity than diversity in women's common goal of restoring the natural environment and quality of life for people and other living and nonliving inhabitants of the planet.

## NOTES

1. Françoise d'Eaubonne, "Feminism or Death," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

2. See Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9 (no. 1: 1981): 3-20.

3. See Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).

4. Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.)

5. See Dorothy Nelkin, "Nuclear Power as a Feminist Issue," *Environment* 23 (no. 1: 1981): 14-20, 38-39.

6. Carolyn Merchant, "Earthcare: Women and the Environmental Movement," *Environment* 22 (June 1970): 7-13, 38-40.

7. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," *Socialist Review* 15 (no. 80: 1985): 65-107.

8. Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 67-87.

9. Carolyn Merchant, "The Theoretical Structure of Ecological Revolutions," *Environmental Review* 11 (no. 4: Winter 1987): 265-74.

10. See Jeanne Henn, "Female Farmers—The Doubly Ignored," *Development Forum* 14 (nos. 7 and 8: 1986); and Gillian Goslinga, "Kenya's Women of the Trees," *Development Forum* 14 (no. 8: 1986): 15.