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Sustainability

A BEDFORD SPOTLIGHT READER

Christian R. Weisser

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Earthcare: Women and the Environment

Carolyn Merchant

Carolyn Merchant is an environmental historian interested in the relationships between humanity and nature, and much of her research focuses on gender and the environment. She is a professor of environmental history, philosophy, and ethics at the University of California,

Berkeley. Merchant is a past president of

the American Society for Environmental History and has served on the executive and advisory boards for numerous environmental and scientific organizations.

This excerpt from Merchant's book *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1995) introduces the concept of ecofeminism and argues for a "partnership ethic," in which humans (men and women) are equal partners with nonhuman nature rather than dominant over it. As you read this excerpt, think about the ways in which our culture constructs nature as feminine. How does this influence our relationship to it?

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s with an increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. The term, "écoféminisme," was coined in 1974 by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet.¹ Such an ecological revolution would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature.

Developed by Ynestra King at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont about 1976, the concept became a movement in 1980 with a major conference on "Women and Life on Earth" held in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the ensuing Women's Pentagon Action to protest anti-life nuclear war and weapons development.² During the 1980s cultural feminists in the United States injected new life into ecofeminism by arguing that both women and nature could be liberated together.

Liberal, cultural, social, and socialist feminism have all been concerned with improving the human/nature relationship, and each has contributed to an ecofeminist perspective in different ways (Table 1).³ Liberal feminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature from within existing structures of governance through the passage of new laws and regulations. Cultural ecofeminism analyzes environmental problems from within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature.

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Social and socialist ecofeminism, on the other hand, ground their analyses in capitalist patriarchy. They ask how patriarchal relations of reproduction reveal the domination of women by men, and how capitalist relations of production reveal the domination of nature by men. They seek the total restructuring of the market economy's use of both women and nature as resources. Although cultural ecofeminism has delved more deeply into the woman-nature connection, social and socialist ecofeminism have the potential for a more thorough critique of domination and for a liberating social justice.

Ecofeminist actions address the contradiction between production 5 and reproduction. Women attempt to reverse the assaults of production on both biological and social reproduction by making problems visible and proposing solutions. When radioactivity from nuclear powerplant accidents, toxic chemicals, and hazardous wastes threaten the biological reproduction of the human species, women experience this contradiction as assaults on their own bodies and on those of their children and act to halt them. Household products, industrial pollutants, plastics, and packaging wastes invade the homes of First World women threatening the reproduction of daily life, while direct access to food, fuel, and clean water for many Third World women is imperiled by cash cropping on traditional homelands and by pesticides used in agribusiness. First World women combat these assaults by altering consumption habits, recycling wastes, and protesting production and disposal methods, while Third World women act to protect traditional ways of life and reverse ecological damage from multinational corporations and the extractive industries. Women challenge the ways in which mainstream society reproduces itself through socialization and politics by envisioning and enacting alternative gender roles, employment options, and political practices.

Many ecofeminists advocate some form of an environmental ethic that deals with the twin oppressions of the domination of women and nature through an ethic of care and nurture that arises out of women's culturally constructed experiences. As philosopher Karen Warren conceptualizes it:

"Humans must give nonhuman nature space, time, and care, allowing it to reproduce, evolve, and respond to human actions."

An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes the multiple voices of

Table 1
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 in natural resources and environmental sciences
	Mind/body dualism	Individualism		
	Domination of nature	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 society will use resources for good of all men and women
	Domination of nature as a means to human freedom	Historically specific -- not fixed		
	Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy	Species nature of human		
Cultural feminism	Nature is spiritual and personal	Biology is basic	Unaware of interconnectedness of male domination of nature and women	Woman/Nature both valorized and celebrated
	Conventional science and technology problematic because of their emphasis on domination	Humans are sexually reproducing bodies		
		Sexed by biology/gendered by society		
			Male environmentalism retains hierarchy	Reproductive freedom
				Environmental research by men and women
				Environmental pollution could be minimal since no surpluses would be produced
				Resources will be controlled by workers
				Environmental research by men and women
				Woman/Nature both valorized and celebrated
				Reproductive freedom
				Male environmentalism retains hierarchy
				Against pornographic depictions of both

	Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy	Species nature of human	Unaware of interconnectedness of male domination of nature and women Male environmentalism retains hierarchy	Environmental research by men and women	Environmental research by men and women
Cultural feminism	Nature is spiritual and personal Conventional science and technology... problematic because of their emphasis on domination	Biology is basic Humans are sexually reproducing bodies Sexed by biology/gendered by society		Woman/Nature both valorized and celebrated Reproductive freedom	

			Insufficient attention to environmental threats to woman's reproduction (chemicals, nuclear war)	Against pornographic depictions of both women and nature Cultural ecofeminism
Socialist feminism	Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy Nature is socially and historically constructed Transformations of nature by production and reproduction	Human nature created through biology and praxis (sex, race, class, age) Historically specific and socially constructed	Leaves out nature as active and responsive Leaves out women's role in reproduction and reproduction as a category Systems approach is mechanistic and not dialectical	Both nature and human production are active Centrality of biological and social reproduction Dialectic between production and reproduction Multileveled structural analysis Dialectical (not mechanical) systems Socialist ecofeminism

women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example Chipko women, in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is thereby . . . structurally pluralistic, inclusivist, and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice.⁴

An ecofeminist ethic, she argues, would constrain traditional ethics based on rights, rules, and utilities, with considerations based on care, love, and trust. Yet an ethic of care, as elaborated by some feminists, falls prey to an essentialist critique that women's nature is to nurture.

My own approach is a partnership ethic that treats humans (including male partners and female partners) as equals in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equal partners with (rather than controlled-by or dominant-over) nonhuman nature. Just as human partners, regardless of sex, race, or class, must give each other space, time, and care, allowing each other to grow and develop individually within supportive nondominating relationships, so humans must give nonhuman nature space, time, and care, allowing it to reproduce, evolve, and respond to human actions. In practice, this would mean not cutting forests and damming rivers that make people and wildlife in flood plains more vulnerable to "natural disasters"; curtailing development in areas subject to volcanos, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornados to allow room for unpredictable, chaotic, natural surprises; and exercising ethical restraint in introducing new technologies such as pesticides, genetically engineered organisms, and biological weapons into ecosystems. Constructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate (but not necessarily spiritual) relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different. It avoids gendering nature as a nurturing mother or a goddess and avoids the ecocentric dilemma that humans are only one of many equal parts of an ecological web and therefore morally equal to a bacterium or a mosquito.

Notes

1. Françoise d'Eaubonne, "Feminism or Death," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, ed., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 64-67, but see especially 25.

2. Ynestra King and Judith S. Rothchild, eds., *Women's Work: The Revolution of Gender Equity* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 10.
3. Alison Jaggar, *Women's Work: The Revolution of Gender Equity* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 10.
4. Karen Warren, *Sexism and Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 14.

Understand

1. What is ecofeminism?
2. What is the ecofeminist approach to sustainability?
3. In what ways is ecofeminism a radical attitude?

Reflection and Application

4. Do you think ecofeminism is a radical belief?
5. In what ways is ecofeminism a radical attitude?
6. Describe the ecofeminist approach to sustainability. Why or why not?

Making Connections

7. Do some research on the accuracy of the research on ecofeminism?
8. Compare the ecofeminist approach to sustainability with the sustainable development ethics, and explain the differences.
9. Do you think ecofeminism is a radical belief? Why or why not?

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2. Ynestra King, "Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology," in Joan Rothschild, ed., *Machina Ex Dea* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 118-29.
3. Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983); Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1987): 3-10.
4. Karen Warren, "Toward an Ecofeminist Ethic," *Studies in the Humanities* (December 1988): 140-56, quotation on 151.

Understanding the Text

1. What is ecofeminism? How does it differ from other approaches to environmental and ecological thinking?
2. What is the history of ecofeminism? Describe some of the different facets and approaches to feminism that have emerged over the past forty years.
3. In what ways is our culture "patriarchal" when it comes to nature? Why is this attitude a problem?

Reflection and Response

4. Do you think of nature as masculine or feminine? How does this influence your beliefs and actions regarding nature and the environment?
5. In what ways does ecofeminism align with the concept of sustainability?
6. Describe Merchant's "partnership ethic." Do you agree with her perspective? Why or why not?

Making Connections

7. Do some research on the concept of ecofeminism. Does Merchant describe it accurately here? What do you find most interesting and useful in your research?
8. Compare the previous selection, David Orr's "Framing Sustainability," and Merchant's "Earthcare." In what ways do they both equate human equality with sustainability? In your opinion, is sustainability a matter of equality, ethics, and morality?
9. Do you consider yourself to be an ecofeminist? What principles of ecofeminism do you identify with, and which do you oppose? Is it necessary to be a female to be an ecofeminist?

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