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BILL DEVALL

DEEP
ECOLOGY

GEORGE SESSIONS

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APPENDIX B

FEMINISM AND ECOLOGY

Carolyn Merchant

The simultaneous emergence of the women's and environmental movements over the past two decades raises additional questions about the relationships between feminism and ecology. Is there a set of assumptions basic to the science of ecology that also holds implications for the status of women? Is there an ecological ethic that is also a feminist ethic?

The structures and functions of the natural world and of human society interact through a language common to both. Ethics in the form of description, symbol, religion, and myth help to mediate between humans and their world. Choices are implied in the words used to describe nature: choices of ways in which to view the world and ethical choices that influence human behavior toward it. Ecology and feminism have interacting languages that imply certain common policy goals. These linkages might be described as follows:

1. All parts of a system have equal value.

Ecology assigns equal importance to all organic and inorganic components in the structure of an ecosystem. Healthy air, water, and soil—the abiotic components of the system—are as essential as the entire diverse range of biotic parts—plants, animals, and bacteria and fungi. Without each element in the structure, the system as a whole cannot function properly. Remove an element, reduce the number of individuals or species, and erratic oscillations may appear in the larger system.

Similarly, feminism asserts the equality of men and women. Intellectual differences are human differences rather than gender- or race-specific. The lower position of women stems from culture rather than nature. Thus policy goals should be directed toward achieving educational, economic, and political equity for all.

Ecologists and feminists alike will therefore assign value to all parts of the human-nature system and take care to examine the long- and short-range consequences of decisions affecting an individual, group, or species. In cases of ethical conflict, each case must be discussed from the perspective of the interconnectedness of all parts and the good of the whole.

2. The Earth is a home.

The Earth is a habitat for living organisms; houses are habitats for groups of humans. Each ecological niche is a position in a community, a hole in the energy continuum through which materials and energy enter and leave. Ecology is the study of the Earth's household. Human houses, whether sodhouses, igloos, or bungalows, are structures in an environment. Most are places wherein life is sustained—shelters where food is prepared, clothes are repaired, and human beings cared for.

For ecologists and feminists the Earth's house and the human house are habitats to be cherished. Energy flows in and out; molecules and atoms enter and leave. Some chemicals and forms of energy are life-sustaining; others are life-defeating. Those that lead to sickness on the planet or in the home cannot be tolerated. Radioactive wastes or potential radioactive hazards are present

in some people's environments. Hazardous chemicals permeate some backyards and basements. Microwaves, nitrite preservatives, and cleaning chemicals have invaded the kitchen.

The home, where in fact women and children spend much of their time, is no longer a haven. The soil over which the house is built or the rocks used in its construction may emit radon (a radioactive decay product of radium), potentially a source of lung cancer. The walls, furniture, floor coverings, and insulation may contain urea formaldehyde, a nasal, throat, and eye irritant. Leaky gas stoves and furnaces can produce nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide, resulting in nausea, headaches, and respiratory illnesses. An underground garage in an apartment building can be an additional source of indoor carbon monoxide. The home's faucets may be piping in carcinogenic drinking water, formed by the action of chlorine on organic compounds in reservoir supplies.

Disinfectants sprayed where people eat or children play may contain phenols, creosols, or ammonium chlorides that can produce toxic effects on the lungs, liver, and kidneys, or act as nervous system depressants. Oven cleaners may contain caustic alkalis.

The bathroom and bedroom may feature cosmetics and shampoos that can produce headaches, eye-makeup contaminated by bacteria and fungi, deodorants laced with hexachlorophene, and hairdyes containing aromatic amines that have been linked to cancer.

The kitchen may have a microwave oven and the living room a color television emitting low-level radiation when in use. The refrigerator may be stocked with food containing nitrite preservatives, food dyes, and saccharin-filled "low-cal" drinks suspected as potential carcinogens. In the cupboards pewter pitchers or dishes containing lead glazes can slowly contribute to lead poisoning, especially when in contact with acidic foods. The indoor atmosphere may be filled with smoke, containing particles that remain in the air and accumulate even in the lungs of non-smokers. For ecologists and feminists alike, the goal must be the reversal of these life-defeating intrusions and the restoration of healthy indoor and outdoor environments.

3. *Process is primary.*

The first law of thermodynamics, which is also the first law of ecology, asserts the conservation of energy in an ecosystem as energy is changed and exchanged in its continual flow through the interconnected parts. The total amount of energy entering and leaving the Earth is the same. The science of ecology studies the energy flow through the system of living and non-living parts on the Earth. All components are parts of a steady-state process of growth and development, death and decay. The world is active and dynamic; its natural processes are cyclical, balanced by cybernetic, stabilizing, feedback mechanisms.

The stress on dynamic processes in nature has implications for change and process in human societies. The exchange and flow of information through the human community is the basis for decision making. Open discussion of all alternatives in which ecologists and technologists, lawyers and workers, women and men participate as equals is an appropriate goal for both environmentalists and feminists. Each individual has experience and knowledge that is of value to the human-nature community.

4. *There is no free lunch.*

"No free lunch" is the organized matter, energy ladder of organized life manufactured increases a reservoir of energy unavailable.

Although underpaid energy cannot continue to provide because the ultimate cost is taken from the sharing of goods and the sharing of resources.

For feminists, reciprocal household services are a part of their waking time struggle for social dynamics. Continually sumptuous and spiritually demanding private spheres should be separated from the workplace merge specific context—childrearing work, sexual relations, etc. tional rewards. Men and women use-values and would work commodities that are costly technologies having a low impact possible.

APPENDIX B

4. *There is no free lunch.*

"No free lunch" is the essence of the laws of thermodynamics. To produce organized matter, energy in the form of work is needed. But each step up the ladder of organized life, each material object produced, each commodity manufactured increases entropy in its surroundings, and hence increases the reservoir of energy unavailable for work.

Although underpaid environmentalists are said to accept free lunches, nature cannot continue to provide free goods and services for profit-hungry humans, because the ultimate costs are too great. Thus, whenever and wherever possible, that which is taken from nature must be given back through the recycling of goods and the sharing of services.

For feminists, reciprocity and cooperation rather than free lunches and household services are a desirable goal. Housewives frequently spend much of their waking time struggling to undo the effects of the second law of thermodynamics. Continually trying to create order out of disorder is energy consuming and spiritually costly. Thus the dualism of separate public and private spheres should be severed and male and female roles in both the household and the workplace merged. Cooperation between men and women in each specific context—childrearing, day-care centers, household work, productive work, sexual relations, etc.—rather than separate gender roles could create emotional rewards. Men and women would engage together in the production of use-values and would work together to scale down the production of commodities that are costly to nature. Technologies appropriate to the task, technologies having a low impact on the environment, would be chosen whenever possible.