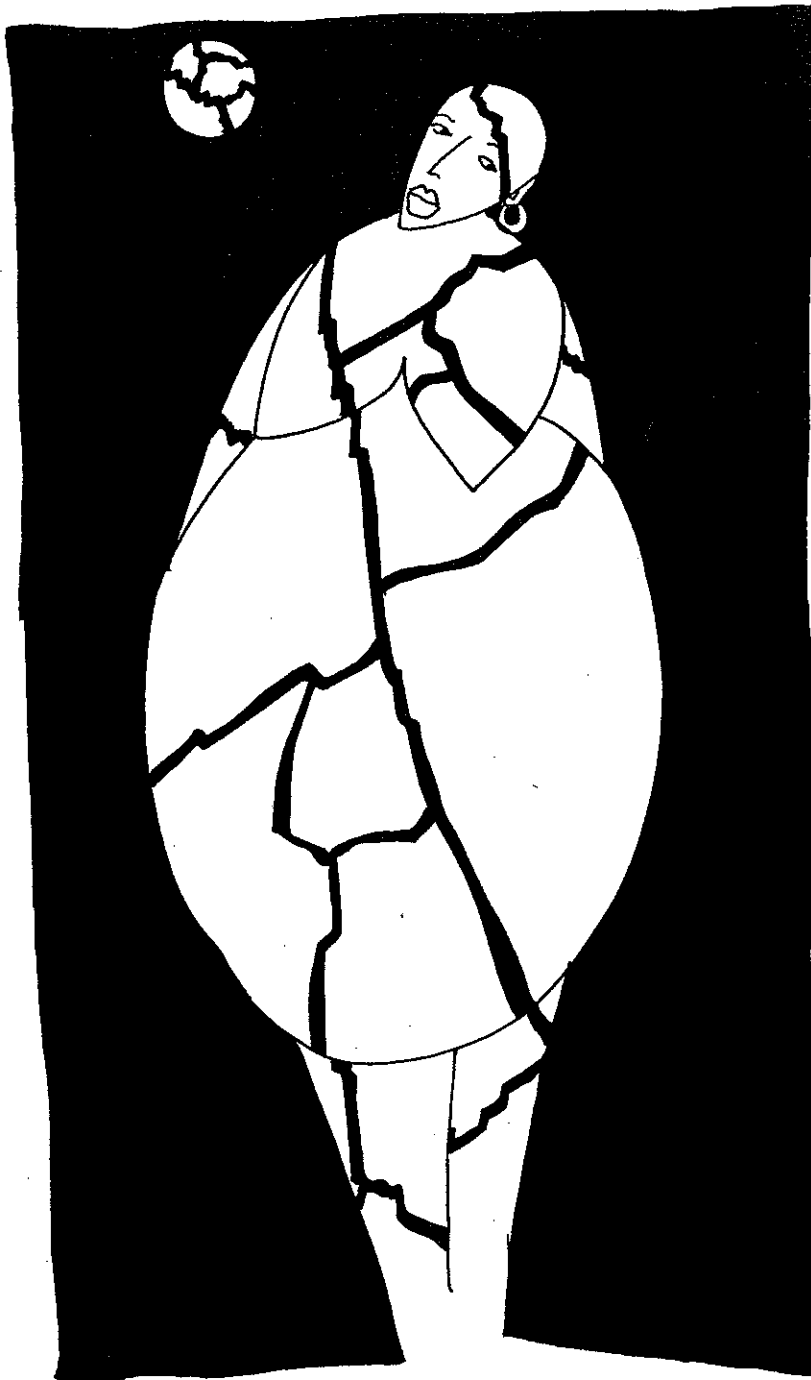


Merchants, pp 18-19
#37

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Can We Learn To Nurture Nature?

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Perspectives on Ecofeminism

"A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists."

—Carolyn Merchant

Ecofeminism describes a diverse range of views on both the relationship of women to the Earth and to a patriarchal society. Central to ecofeminist theory is the tenet that man's domination of nature parallels that of man's domination over women. Ecofeminism encompasses a wide gamut of ideas and actions, from resurrecting ancient forms of goddess worship to connecting concerns about environmental contamination with reproductive hazards.

Here ecofeminist author Carolyn Merchant, who is chair of the department of natural resources and conservation at the University of California, Berkeley, examines a framework for looking at the spectrum of ecofeminist thought, including her own ethic that treats all men and women as equals. Social ecologist Janet Biehl takes a hard look at ecofeminism and finds its basic underpinnings too constraining to effect environmental and social change.

Viewpoint: Carolyn Merchant

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s with an increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. The term "ecofeminism" was coined by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, when she called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet. During the

1980s, feminists in the United States injected new life into ecofeminism by arguing that both women and nature could be liberated together.

I basically look at ecofeminism as falling into four main categories: liberal, cultural, social and socialist. All four are concerned with improving the human/nature relationship, and each has contributed to ecofeminism in different ways.

Liberal ecofeminism is consistent with the objective 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. Often stemming from an anti-science, anti-technology standpoint, cultural ecofeminism 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.

Social and socialist ecofeminism 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. The domination of women and nature inherent in the market economy's use of both as resources would be totally restructured. 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 for a liberating social justice.

My own approach is closest to socialist ecofeminism. I believe in a partnership ethic that treats humans (including male 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, so humans must give nonhuman nature space, time and care, allow it to reproduce, evolve and respond to human actions.

In practice, this means not cutting forests and damming rivers that would 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 non-humans as well as for people who are sexually, racially or culturally different. It avoids gendering nature as a nurturing mother

NADINE EPSTEIN



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.

Weaving together the many strands of the ecofeminist movement is the concept of reproduction construed in its broadest sense to include the continued biological and social reproduction of human life and the continuation of life on earth. 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 non-living inhabitants of the planet. ❖

Carolyn Merchant's book Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World, from which this is drawn, will be published in August by Routledge, New York.

Viewpoint: Janet Biehl

It might surprise many female ecological activists to learn that they have a mystical connection with nature that men do not possess. It may further surprise them to learn that when they fight development in their communities, a mysterious "goddess" is inspiring them. Still further, having researched ecological destruction and presented testimony before planning commissions and other government bodies, it may surprise them to learn that rationality is not after all their strong suit.

Having relied upon scientific studies of the effects of toxic wastes on a river or lake, they may be surprised to learn that science is their enemy, rather than corporations and that magic ("the art of liberation," as feminist Starhawk calls it) and myths are the means of choice for altering the present state of affairs. Having worked with diverse members of their community in the name of building an ecological society, radical female ecological activists around the world, in short, may be surprised to learn that, thanks to a reworking of traditional male stereotypes of women into a more "positive" form, they are now part of a movement called ecofeminism.

Many ecofeminist writers, in fact, seem to want people to believe that female ecological activists worldwide are part of a cosmic process, irrespective of what they think they are doing. In this cosmic scheme, women, who long "cleaned up after the men" in the domestic realm, are now destined to clean up our earthly home as well. Ecofeminist writers like Riane Eisler inscribe female identity politics into the very cosmos by posting a goddess "immanent" in nature as such, while Charlene Spretnak wants women to associate their menstrual cycles with the cycles of nature.

Somehow, women ecologists are expected to accept a hoary sexist identification with nature as part of a program not only to save the biosphere but to

liberate women. In particular, women of color are accorded the dubious honor of being the "closest" to nature, over the strong objections of many women of color.

To be sure, some ecofeminists, especially in academia, retreat from asserting the most blatant of this nonsense. They claim to be committed not to perpetuating but to destroying sexist stereotypes—which are, after all, social constructions. But this alternative mires them in a contradiction that can be maintained only by a willful suspension of disbelief. After all, what logic is there to advocating the elimination of woman-nature stereotypes in a discourse whose very name—ecofeminism—as popularly understood embodies those stereotypes, and whose most influential writers argue precisely for spreading them?

Ecofeminist Vandana Shiva calls upon us to revive the worship of Prakriti, an Indian goddess—despite the fact that Shiva herself is a trained physicist, and it must be assumed, knows better. Such ecofeminists seem to rely rather condescendingly on the gullibility of women generally to believe in a set of images or a religion that they themselves are apparently not prepared to accept. This patronizing (better, matronizing) approach is the height of instrumental manipulation.

Fortunately, it is possible to be a feminist and an ecological activist without accepting ecofeminist baggage.

For my part, social ecology's philosophical and political approach—what I've come to think of as confederal libertarian municipalism—seems a vast improvement for recreating a vibrant public political culture in which both men and women debate intelligently and have a say in issues of concern to them.

It calls upon people to democratize and ecologize their municipalities by running for local office on direct-democratic, ecological platforms, then confederating those municipalities into a counterpower to the nation state. I do not believe that we can build an ecological society unless we eliminate hierarchy (including priestesses) in social and political relations, not to speak of mystical ideologies whose roots lie in a superstition-laden past. Women who seek to build a non-hierarchical ecological society can reclaim their genuinely human heritage—as rational (as well as emotional) beings, as people capable of public, grassroots democratic practice (as well as private, intimate concerns) of a broad human solidarity—a struggle that includes fighting the specific oppressions of women. ❖

Janet Biehl, author of Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1991), is a member of the Left Green Network and the Social Ecology Project. She is co-editor of "Green Perspectives: A Social Ecology Publication."

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—Janet Biehl