Environmentalism

Philosophy and Tactics

Peter C. List
Preface vi

Introduction 1

PART I RADICAL ECOPHILosophy

Chapter 1 Deep Ecology
Arne Naess/The Shallow a
Ecology Movement: A
Arne Naess/Identification
Attitudes 24
Bill Devall and George Ses

Chapter 2 Ecofeminism
Carolyne Merchant/Ecofem
Elizabeth Dolson Gray/W.
ynestra King/Toward an F
Feminist Ecology 70
Karen J. Warren/The Powe
Feminism 81

Chapter 3 Social Ecology
Murray Bookchin/What Is
Jim Dodge/Living by Life: P
Practice 108
Kirkpatrick Sale/Dwellers
Judith Plant/Revaluing Ho
Bioregionalism 124

PART II RADICAL ECOACTIVISM AND

Chapter 4 Greenpeace, V
Greenpeace/Declaration of
Bob Hunter/Taking on the
PART I RADICAL ECOPHILOSOPHY 15

Chapter 1 Deep Ecology 17
Arne Naess/The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary 19
Arne Naess/Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes 24
Bill Devall and George Sessions/Deep Ecology 38

Chapter 2 Ecofeminism 47
Carolyn Merchant/Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory 49
Elizabeth Dodson Gray/We Must Re-Myth Genesis 55
Ynestra King/Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology 70
Karen J. Warren/The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism 81

Chapter 3 Social Ecology and Bioregionalism 91
Murray Bookchin/What Is Social Ecology? 93
Jim Dodge/Living by Life: Some Bioregional Theory and Practice 108
Kirkpatrick Sale/Dwellers in the Land 117
Judith Plant/Revaluing Home: Feminism and Bioregionalism 124

PART II RADICAL ECOACTIVISM AND ECOTACTICS 133

Chapter 4 Greenpeace, Warriors of the Rainbow 133
Greenpeace/Declaration of Interdependence, 1976 134
Bob Hunter/Taking on the Goliaths of Doom 136
Paul Watson/Shepherds of the Labrador Front, Taking on the Goliaths of Doom 142

Chapter 5 Edward Abbey and the Monkey Wrench Gang 149
Edward Abbey/Shadows from the Big Woods 150
Edward Abbey/The Raid at Comb Wash 152

Chapter 6 The Sea Shepherd Society, Direct Action on the High Seas 167
Paul Watson/Goodbye to Greenpeace 169
Paul Watson/Raid on Reykjafjark 172
Paul Watson/Tora! Tora! Tora! 177

Chapter 7 Earth First! 185
Dave Foreman/Earth First! 187
Dave Foreman/Strategic Monkeywrenching 192

The Middle Santiam Protest
Mike Roselle/Middle Santiam Heats Up; 15 Arrested—More to Come 195
George Draffan/Cathedral Forest Action Group Fights for Oregon Old Growth 198
Cathedral Forest Wilderness Declaration 200
“Redwood Summer” Action
Two Thousand Rally at Fort Bragg 201
44 Arrested at L-P Mill 202
Zack Stentz/Osprey Grove Falls 203
Karen Pickett/Redwood Summer Retrospective 207

Chapter 8 Ecofeminist Activism 213
Pamela Philipose/Women Act: Women and Environmental Protection in India 215
Unity Statement of the Women’s Pentagon Action, 1980 217
Cynthia Hamilton/Women, Home and Community: The Struggle in an Urban Environment 221
Chaia Heller/Take Back the Earth 227

Chapter 9 Bioregionalist Activism 230
Peter Berg/Growing a Life-Place Politics 231

PART III CRITICAL RESPONSE TO ECOTAGE

Chapter 10 Responses 247
Eugene Hargrove/Ecological Sabotage: Pranks or Terrorism? 250

Edward Abbey/Earth First. Gang 252
Dave Foreman/More on E. Wrench Gang 253
Eugene Hargrove/Editor’s Michael Martin/Ecosabota Disobedience 255

Selected Bibliography 26
Acknowledgments 273
Contents

Edward Abbey/Earth First! and the Monkey Wrench Gang 252
Dave Foreman/More on Earth First! and the Monkey Wrench Gang 253
Eugene Hargrove/Editor's Response 254
Michael Martin/Ecosabotage and Civil Disobedience 255

Selected Bibliography 266
Acknowledgments 273
ECOFEMINISM AND FEMINIST THEORY
Carolyn Merchant

THE TERM ecofeminisme 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. 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. 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.

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. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century further degraded nature by replacing Renaissance organismic 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 antinuclear 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 we-like human/nature relationships.

For radical feminists, human nature is grounded in human biology. Humans are biologically sexed and socially gendered. 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. They expose hazardous waste sites near schools and homes as permeating soil and drinking water and contributing to miscarriage, birth defects, and leukemic. They object to pesticides and herbicidal sprays on forests as potentially affecting children living near them. Women frequently protest spraying and power plant siting and o c leanups. When coupled with an environment that degrades nature, such actions have women’s consciousness of their own opticality from the polluting effects of industries that lower-middle-class women who became toxic chemical wastes at Love Canal into feminism when their activism spilled.

Yet in emphasizing the female, body dualities male/female, mind/body, and victim runs the risk of perpetuating the victim throw. Critics point to the problem of their identification with a nature that “female is to male as nature is to culture.” Ortner argues, then women’s hopes association with nature. Any analysis of qualities special ties them to a biological reality of liberation. A politics grounded in values can be seen as reactionary.

To date, socialist feminists have had little to do with the domination of nature. To them, the women is the complex of social pattern which men bear the responsibility for women for labor in the home. Yet the ecofeminism that would push for an end to the domination of nature 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.

For socialist ecofeminism, environmentalism, and the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the idea that the rise of capitalism eroded the subsistence shop in which production was oriented toward women’s needs for economic partners. The society that is dominated by men and a domestic sphere became unimportant to life and the home was unpaid and subordinate to work. Both women and nature are exploited by the constraints of a business economy. The alienation of women and from nature.

Socialist feminism incorporates many aspects of feminism, but views both nature and human nature as socially constructed. Human nature is seen
and nature have been mutually associated since that both can be elevated and al action. In prehistory an emerging pater-nother Goddesses and replaced them with deities became subservient. The scientific entry further degraded nature by replaced a nurturing earth with the metaphor of a repaired from the outside. The Earth is to and -controlled technology, science, celerates the relationship between women al of ancient rituals centered on Goddess and the female reproductive system. A d in esteem as mother and Goddess is a powerment for many ecofeminists. Spiritual-ith personal and social change. Goddess around the lunar and female menstrual exhibitions, street and theater productions, ab weaving in antinuclear protests) are all of nature and women as powerful forces. by embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, arens nature is grounded in human biology, and socially gendered. Sex/gender rel-fferent power bases. Hence the personal is ject to the dominant society’s perception in close to nature because of their ability ant view is that menstruation, pregnancy, ants and young children should tie women it mobility and inhibiting their ability to cial feminists argue that the perception that toward biological reproduction degrades nature that is itself devalued in Western nd nature should instead be celebrated as nnection between women and biological becomes the source of women’s empowerm. Women argue that male-designed and the effects of nuclear radiation, pesti-household chemicals on women’s reproduc- system. They argue that radioactivity from s, and bombs is a potential cause of birth nimation of life on Earth. They expose schools and homes as permeating soil and ting to miscarriage, birth defects, and leuk- mia. 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.

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. If “female is to male as nature is to culture,” as anthropologist Sherry Ortner argues, 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 capitalistic patriarchy, in which men bear the responsibility for labor in the marketplace and women for labor in the home. 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 capitalistic 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 capitalistic 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 femi-nism, but views both nature and human nature as historically and socially constructed. Human nature is seen as the product of historically
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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.9

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, nondominating 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 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 Chipko (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.10

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.
feminism

humans and nature, men and women, and the societal environment must be grounded in an analysis of the role of women in history. Feminism in the political sphere is critical of the mechanistic view of nature and of its male-dominated power. The lack of a gender analysis in history of women's reproductive and nurturing roles in biological reproduction is social reproduction. Biological reproduction of species and the reproduction of ing, and shelter; social reproduction into political reproduction of the social

alist feminists see nonhuman nature as the upholding the necessities of food, clothing, and, not spiritualism, is the driving force of formed by human science and technology. Socialist feminism views change as ecological, rather than as mechanistic, linear, nature is dynamic and alive. As a historical human beings through human environmental theory gives both reproduct- places. A socialist feminist environmental several, nondomesticating relations with na- nes with a high quality of life. ts participate in many of the same environ- nists. The goals, however, are to direct an egalitarian socialist state, in addition to into nonsexist, nonracist, nonviolent, antip- alist ecofeminism deals explicitly with en- working-class women, Third World Examples include support for the women's movement in India that protects fuel resources for women's Green Belt movement in Kenya 2 million trees in 10 years, and for Native women exposed to radioactivity from uranium

is of liberal, radical, and socialist feminists capitalisms, women's culture, or socialism of economic action, shorter-term objective is perhaps more unity than diversity in storing the natural environment and quality living and nonliving inhabitants of the

Notes


WE MUST RE-MYTH GENESIS
Elizabeth Dodson Gray

This hour of the day is so incredibly beautiful that I am filled with wonder. The late afternoon sun, still vigorous with warmth but mellow with diminishing, is flooding our deck and beach and small cove with lustrous sidelighting. Like a Vermeer painting, it catches the white sides of the moored boats, making them gleam like translucent ivory. The sun goes in for a moment. I look up and see sheaths of lighted vapor shooting up out of the cloud like streaks of ethereal power. The sun comes back, and the sea is lit to an incredible aqua blue which shines back at me with a liquid sheen.

I have always wanted to paint this hour and the evening time which follows it—to attempt to capture, as the French impressionists did, the wondrous glories of light in nature. When my children were small and