

Ecofeminism

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Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is both a grassroots counter-globalisation movement and form of ideology critique drawing on women's historical positioning as socially reproductive labour. Women's experience of ongoing sex-gender domination in activist movements also gives impetus to the ecofeminist search for new and comprehensive political understandings. Ecofeminist ideas have emerged spontaneously over the past four decades from several continents, and regardless of class, ethnicity, or age differences that mark women's lives. The earliest usage of the term 'ecofeminism' is believed to be by D'Eaubonne (1974) in Paris; the phrase Women-and-Life-on-Earth (qv) was common at that time among ecofeminist activists in the Anglo world.

The first premise of ecofeminism is that society-nature relations in the dominant global polity are fundamentally sex-gendered in both a material and ideological sense. Specifically, the claim is that the objectification, exploitation, and destruction of nature will not be remedied without addressing the parallel structural resourcing of women. The present conjuncture of military terror, systemic debt, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, species extinction, peak water, and global warming, elicits responses from workers, women's, indigenous, and ecological movements. However, by positing the centrality of social reproduction, ecofeminists seek to build a common theory and praxis for socialist, postcolonial, feminist, and ecological politics.

Pioneering ecofeminist standpoints were developed by activist-writers such as Griffin (1978) in the United States; Salleh (1984) in Australia; Mies (1986) in Germany; Shiva (1989) in India; Mellor (1992) in the UK. In the eurocentric tradition, it has been tacitly assumed that men represent the sphere of 'humanity and culture', while indigenes, women, children, animals, plants, are 'part of nature'. Ecofeminists from both global North and South see class, race, gender, and species domination and exploitation facilitated by a set of ideological dualisms wherein the first term is valued and privileged over the second.

self	/	other
man	/	woman
white	/	black
capital	/	labour
humans	/	nature
mind	/	body
clean	/	dirty
North	/	South
1	/	0

These grid-like metaphors structure everyday life assumptions and are sustained by the hegemonic practices of religion, philosophy, law, economics, and science, so enabling the instrumental manipulation of non-valued 'others'.

The value hierarchy is carried subconsciously, but serves to rationalise capitalist exploitation, unpaid domestic labour, colonial slavery, and planetary resource extractivism. Some ecofeminists are developing transdisciplinary analyses to deconstruct this masculinist logic in both the natural and social sciences. Merchant (1980) has exposed the sex-gendered character of Enlightenment science

and mechanistic medicine. Shiva (1989) has highlighted the loss of sustainable indigenous economies to agricultural devastation from imported technologies in the name of 'green revolution'. Mellor (1992) has described women's domestic labour contribution to the economy as putting in 'biological time'. Charkiewicz (2009) has traced the genealogy of women's juridico-political subjection from classical Greece to the Chicago School. Isla (2015) has demonstrated how well intended UN climate change policy is impacting on community livelihoods in South America.

Eurocentric masculine power is deeply embedded in and sustained by the 1/0 value hierarchy, and it is arguable that the institution of sex-gender dualism is what constituted this existential and historical contradiction in the first instance. Moreover, men's control of women's materially embodied fertility has always been an economic imperative. Patriarchal domination has a history of many thousand years, whereas capitalism is only a few hundred years old - merely the latest version of patriarchal oppression. The sex-gender dualism cuts beneath other political fault lines because it is not merely sociological but somatic and continually infused with libidinal energies. For this reason, ecofeminists prefer the term 'capitalist patriarchal' system, seeing commodification and exchange value (1=1) as a sublimation of man-to-man recognition.

This claim does not undermine the marxist exposition of capitalist dynamics, but highlights the fact that relations of production propagate masculinist values. Nor is the recognition of a libidinal component in politics an essentialist claim, since biological bodies are always already influenced by historical forces. Alongside the marxist critique of relations of production, ecofeminists acknowledge that the global majority of women work as reproductive labour. The generation of a surplus, capitalist exchange value, implicitly relies on the creation of use values in a conventionally sex-gendered domestic reproductive sector. Here ecofeminist reasoning affirms the major contribution of socialist feminists whose domestic labour debate demanded a theoretical account of unpaid care giving as absolutely fundamental to capitalist accumulation.

The ecofeminist emphasis on protecting living relations implies a move beyond structuralist critique to an 'embodied materialism'. Additionally, ecofeminism is dialectical (qv) in character, giving attention to:

- historical context and process
- a logic of overdetermination
- unity of matter and method
- contradiction as non-identity
- suffering as epistemological (qv)
- cycles of praxis and theory
- a relational ontology and ethic.

Embodiment joins theory and praxis, making politics historically sensitive and accountable. If women are constructed as part of 'nature not humanity', their subjectivity is 'non-identical', painfully suspended between historically contradictory signifiers. The moment of ecofeminist insight is thus a libidinal release, a dialectical negation that renders ideology transparent. While not all ecofeminists interpret their experiences through a materialist and dialectical lens, they agree that contemporary global crises are a structural outcome of conventional eurocentric masculinist constructs and methodologies, values and attitudes, decisions and behaviours. As distinct from the principle of equality, ecofeminist respect for the principle of 'difference' as cultural autonomy joins womanist and postcolonial concerns.

The US eco-socialist O'Connor (1998) was early to point out that productivism is not simply unjust, rather capitalism manifests a 'second contradiction' by eliminating its own material basis. Foster (2010) following Marx, argued that capitalist industrialisation created a 'metabolic rift' between parasitic cities and an integral rural countryside. However, while each of these theorists has been

supportive of sex-gender equality, neither grasps what this implies for a 21st century eco-socialist theory. When daily labour involves the careful maintenance of living cycles, whether in the metabolism of nature-at-large or in human bodies-as-nature - women and men - readily learn how sustainability, justice, and precaution fit together.

As in the case of women's domestic emancipation, the preservation of ecosystemic cycles calls for a shift of theoretic focus from relations of production to relations of re-production. In the global North, family care givers are attuned to natural metabolic cycles, embodied ones. Likewise, in the global South, Via Campesina (2007) explains how the labour of peasants or gatherers demonstrates a good interactive fit between human needs and ecological health. The non-monetised regenerative activities of care givers, peasants, fishers and gatherers is entirely necessary for everyday life and for the global economy to function adequately. Therefore, an embodied materialist ecofeminism argues that in addition to use values, a 'metabolic value' form (Salleh 2010; Odih 2014) should be acknowledged by marxist and other economists. Whether in traditional subsistence farming or permaculture communes, life-reproducing labour operating outside of productivism may appear to be achieving little, even while realising the highest goal of balancing economic provisioning with ecological sustainability.

At this point, an acknowledgement of new agents of history becomes critical: meta-industrial labour - peasant farmers, indigenes, mothers - is stepping up as a new class unity - one that is already a global majority (Salleh 2012). Ecofeminist activism is seen today in neighbourhood campaigns against 'development', and in international organisations like the World Rainforest Movement or anti-extractivist network WoMin. While ecofeminist political insights have been offered by grassroots labour North and South, they have been criticised by advocates of old-style workerist politics (Faber and O'Connor 1989). More recently, the US journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* has proactively instituted a formal dialogue between ecofeminists and eco-socialists.

From the Right, ecofeminism has been rejected by mainstream equality feminists - and some ecologists who rely on them in envisaging women's liberation as entry into the privilege of middle class men (Biehl 1991). Ecofeminism has also been condemned by postmodern constructionists, who treat the word 'woman' as an essentialist category and see 'mothering activities' as intrinsically reactionary and demeaning (Cuomo 2001). On each count, these critics are culturally insular and insufficiently historical, being unaware of the dialectical negation and qualitative shift involved in coming to an ecofeminist political consciousness. Meanwhile, ecofeminist scholars continue to expose and debate unconscious masculinism in environmental ethics (Zimmerman 1987); social ecology; ecological economics; and the degrowth movement, with a view to broadening would-be progressive political frameworks.

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