

## Review essay

**John Barry, ' The Emergence of Ecofeminist Political Economy ', *Environmental Politics*, 7 (1998), 150-55.**

*Ecofeminism as Politics: nature, Marx and the postmodern* by Ariel Salleh. London: Zed Books, 1997.

*Women, Population and Global Crisis: A Political-Economic Analysis* by Asoka Bandarage. London: Zed Books, 1997.

*Feminism and Ecology* by Mary Mellor. Cambridge: Polity, 1997.

For those who associate ecofeminism with 'affinity', 'cultural', 'difference' or 'spiritual' ecofeminist theory and practice (approaches which adopt an 'essentialist' view of women as 'naturally' closer to nature), these three books represent a more radical, realistic and materialist ecofeminism. In different ways, all three authors outline a common 'embodied and embedded materialist' ecofeminism which suggests nothing less than a fundamental rethink of green politics (in which green, socialist and feminist components are integrated as core aspects of green politics). As Mellor sums up, 'despite the influence of cultural and spiritual feminism, ecofeminism is necessarily a materialist theory because of its stress on the immanence (embodiedness and embeddedness) of human existence' (p.162).

At first it may seem odd to attempt to link ecology and feminism, since as Mellor points out, 'While feminism has historically sought to explain and overcome women's association with the natural, ecology is attempting to re-embed humanity in its natural framework' (p.180). However, for Salleh this identification of women with nature (upon which the whole edifice of hierarchical dualisms within western culture and thought has been built from man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, production/reproduction, public/private), should be welcomed by feminists. As she puts it, 'Feminists should not fear the double-edged metaphor of Mother=Nature. This nexus both describes the source of women's power and integrity, and at the same time exposes the complex of pathological practices known as capitalist patriarchy' (p.175). All three authors, concur on the general thrust of the latter, while at pains to point out that theirs is a materialist (not an essentialist) analysis, and a materialism that is deeper, more basic, and potentially more politically powerful than the materialism of Marxist socialism.

This explicit materialist stance (based on the biological embodiedness and ecological embeddedness of humans), represents a nascent ecofeminist political economy, which like Marxist political economy identifies and explains the contradictions within the present, and proposes how to overcome them. However, unlike Marxist materialism, the primary contradiction within global capitalism is not that between capital and labour. Rather, women's position between men and nature, and their mediating, unvalued and unacknowledged reproductive work, is the basic contradiction within capitalism (Mellor, p.174). Thus, patriarchy is the basic social and ecological contradiction of global capitalism.

The ecofeminist materialist political economy developed by Salleh, Mellor and Bandarage, begins from attention to the relations and forces of reproduction, the private, unvalued but fundamental life-sustaining work women perform. This life-sustaining focus is particularly evident in Salleh's book when she makes clear that, 'the embodied materialism of ecofeminism is a "womanist" rather than a feminist politics. It theorises an intuitive historical choice of re/sisters around the world to put life before freedom... Ecofeminism is more than an identity politics, it reaches for an earth democracy, across cultures and species' (pp.ix-x; emphasis added). This adoption of a 'womanist' rather than a 'feminist' stance is motivated by a desire to make connections with women in the Southern, developing world, whose concerns, problems and issues are not articulated by the privileged, urban, affluence-based discourse of Northern feminism. While Bandarage and Mellor do not use the same term, all three offer powerful criticisms of Northern, liberal feminism and its concerns of individual self-realisation, its Eurocentrism and insensitivity to Southern women's concerns, its anti-reproductive bias, and ultimate blindness to its position within global capitalism. Salleh suggests that, 'For too many equality feminists, the link between their own emancipated urban affluence and unequal appropriation of global resources goes unexamined...Much of the energy that went into abortion campaigning was clearly a sublimation of this hostility toward the problematic mother. The unreality of mothering experiences to many feminists did not help theorisation...The hope is that feminism's ideological immaturity will be remedied as this generation of career women take up mothering themselves, and draw that learning into feminist thought' (p. 104). She sees Northern liberal/equality feminism as the product of what Marcuse called the 'repressive tolerance' of patriarchal capitalist states, in which feminist issues are 'co-opted' and thus neutralised, and feminist activists become 'femo-crats'. Thus, materialist ecofeminism is suggested as the theoretical maturity of feminism.

The ecofeminism developed in all three books proposes engendering and greening socialism, while at the same time socialising and greening feminism, within an embodied and embedded materialist political economy. This triad of feminism, socialism and ecology is made explicit by all three authors, from Bandarage's self-professed radical political economic analysis of population, poverty, violence and environmental degradation which begins with the premise that 'growing global economic inequality, not population growth, is the main issue of our time' (p.12) to her conclusion that, 'at a time when North-South, class, race and gender disparities are widening, we must not throw out left analysis and the promise of socialism altogether' (p.313). Both Mellor and Salleh have been developing a socialist ecofeminist position for some time (Mellor, 1992, 1995; Salleh, 1995).

Mellor and Salleh focus on the patriarchal relations of reproduction and reproductive labour, particularly 'mothering', 'child-rearing' and nurturing. However, while Mellor wants to focus on reproductive work as opposed to mothering and sex-based biological differences (pp.100-1), Salleh sees in mothering as a mode of thinking, acting and doing, a firm basis for an emancipatory 'life-affirming' ecofeminist political project (pp.104,135-6, 144). For both, however, women do have a unique epistemic standpoint, based on their different biological, and material, embodied relation to the world (and in Salleh's case partly based on an ecofeminist reading of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic) Though Mellor, discussing Salleh, notes that, 'Women may hold a privileged standpoint, but they may not necessarily "see" it' (p.104), echoing the Marxist idea of the difference between an oppressed class being 'in itself' and 'for itself'.

The work of Maria Mies in exploring the epistemic privilege of women is used by both Mellor and Salleh. For Mies, in their birth-giving and suckling activities, women can 'experience their whole body as productive, not just their hands or their heads' (in Mellor, p.170). Salleh makes much the same point, but stresses the life-affirming/sustaining character of reproductive work, claiming that 'As distinct from men's lot, women's labouring activities are designed to protect life' (p.13). This 'life-affirming' analysis is further outlined later where she perceptively suggests that, 'In the Eurocentric tradition, not 'giving life' but 'risking life' is the event that raises Man above the animal. In reality, reproductive labour is traumatic and highly dangerous...birthing...is an experience that carves the meaning and value of life into flesh itself' (p.39).

The practical importance of being sensitive to gender power relations (and the different 'environmental interests' of women) is highlighted by Mellor in discussing the gender divisions and tensions within environmental politics. She points out that, 'the high profile of men in organizations such as Earth First! both creates and reflects a bias in their campaigning towards such issues as wilderness and wildlife preservation rather than concerns with human health and habitat which are often the focus of women's local campaigning' (pp.127-8). This gendered character of environmental politics and struggles is also to be seen in the dominance of women at grassroots level, but less visible when these environmental movements become more formalised and bureaucratized. This potential and actual gender-blindness of 'malestream' green theory and practice is something both Mellor and Salleh articulate: from the gender-blindness of deep ecology to the limiting of women to population control issues and the ecological benefits of a 'feminine' principle and values. Criticising deep ecology for focusing on anthropocentrism as the ultimate cause of our ecological ills, to the detriment of a feminist critique of androcentrism, Mellor points out that, 'Although it is not always explicitly stated, human-nature relations are idealized as the lone figure in the open and wild landscape. The figure is not always male, but is unlikely to be ill, infirm, in a wheelchair or holding the hand of a small child' (p.139). However, Bandarage endorses the deep ecology platform (pp.318-9) and uses ecocentrism as an alternative to the patriarchal 'dominator paradigm'.

All three interweave ecofeminist theory with reference to ecofeminist resistance politics, struggles and networks globally. The tremendous variety and vitality of the global ecofeminist movement is outlined, highlighting the importance of such issues as population (the main focus of Bandarage), the relationship between 'development' and gender (from standard 'western' models of modernisation to the more sinister implications of biotechnology), and the gendered character of ecological degradation. All three are keenly aware of the dangers of universalising a particular notion of 'woman', and instead embrace and acknowledge diversity of women's experiences and political resistance to capitalist patriarchy, integrating their analysis with a focus on race, post-colonialism and class.

Population, 'neo-Malthusianism', and violence are the main themes of Bandarage's book. Replete with facts, figures and tables, her book provides an empirical complement to the other two more theoretical ones. Starting from a position which sees neo-Malthusianism as a dominant ideological analysis and approach to the global ecological crisis, she suggests that, 'Like Malthus, contemporary

Malthusian analysts who work within the population control paradigm advocate population stabilization as a substitute for social justice and political-economic transformation' (p.6). She offers an explicitly radical, socialist-ecofeminism analysis, 'This analysis begins with the premise that growing global economic inequality, not population growth, is the main issue of our time' (p.12). While like Salleh and Mellor, she focuses on the political economy of reproduction, she also stresses the 'feminisation of poverty' both North and South as one of the most devastating effects of the gendered character of ecological degradation and global economic restructuring and management. Ultimately, for her, the latter is rooted in the uneven development of global capitalism, the legacy of colonialism and current neo-colonial practices of 'Northern' institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and its Structural Adjustment Programmes, and the indebtedness of much of the Southern world to Northern financial institutions.

Bandarage is particularly good at uncovering the violence underpinning population control rhetoric and practice, noting how 'military metaphors that "declare war", "target" and "attack" "over population" with an "arsenal" of new drugs have become the standard language of global population control' (p.65) (a point also made by Salleh in reference to the organisation of transnational corporations, p.87), and documents the abuse of women's human rights in sterilisation programmes both North and South (pp.69-80). She develops a comprehensive and persuasive political economy of the 'contraceptive revolution', showing the links between drug, pharmaceutical and medical corporations, family planning departments and state agencies. As she puts it, 'Aggression and conquest rather than compassion and care drive the population control establishment and the larger model of technological- capitalist development that it represents' (p.103).

Interestingly and importantly she points out that, 'The concept of "carrying capacity", for instance, was first put into use by French and British colonial scientists and administrators seeking to estimate the minimum amount of land and labor needed by local people to meet their subsistence needs so that what was deemed in excess of that could be taxed by the colonial state and appropriated for export production' (pp.127-8). This reader for one was shocked to learn that this seemingly 'objective' and neutral ecological term 'carrying capacity' had such racist/colonial origins. The connection between colonial-racist and patriarchal ideas and practice is later seen as resulting in 'the collusion between population control interests and right-wing movements such as the anti-immigration movement encourage the spread of eugenicist and fascist ideologies of white racial and ethnic superiority' (p.295).

Both Mellor and Salleh use the concept of 'time' to analyse the material conditions of biological embodiedness and ecological embeddedness. If there is one concern I have it is about the need to preface this analysis with the real and important differences between 'human immanence' and the gendered work associated with it North and South. It seems as if both biological and ecological time are gendered in the South, but only biological time in the North. Hence I am not sure about Mellor's statement that, 'it is not essentialist to say that women can "speak" for nature in their role as mediators of biological time, as exploited workers or excluded peoples' (p.194). The connection between biological and ecological time requires much stronger emphasis in linking ecofeminism North and South. The re-embedding of Northern societies within 'ecological time' does not seem to be

necessarily feminist or 'womanist' (to use Salleh's term) in the same way that biological time is (though here the notion of a politics of reproduction is required, since reproductive work can and ought to be shared by men and women). Whereas the immanence of biological embodiedness does rightly privilege women, the ecological embeddedness of human beings is an immanence that can be altered by human collective effort and intentional transformation, though the limits (including limits marked out by biological time) cannot be 'transcended' in some ultimate sense. Here I think the work of Benton (1993), writing from a 'naturalistic eco-socialist' position can be used in developing a materialist approach to ecologically re-embedding Northern societies, and in this respect some of Mellor's earlier work is better on this point (Mellor, 1995). Ecologically re-embedding society requires first and foremost re-embedding the economy within society. That is, ecological sustainability requires socialising and democratically regulating the economy (Barry, 1998), not economising ecology with no, or little, democratic component as in 'environmental management' strategies such as 'environmental economics' and technocratic conceptions of ecological modernisation. While all three authors would probably agree with this eco-socialist position, there is little discussion of how this democratic regulation of the economy can be achieved.

However, some broad suggestions as to the ecological restructuring of socio-economic relations and practices can be discerned. Salleh, for example, proposes that, 'The question is how to reconnect men with ecological time - materially and discursively - as opposed to taking women away from it, which liberal, socialist, and postmodern feminisms have done' (p.82). She conceptualises sustainability as a form of 'holding', a mode of caring thinking and practice which minimises risk, reconciles differences and is orientated towards life-preservation (p.144-6). She explicitly links holding to a 'precautionary ethic'. By precautionary principle/ethic she seems to mean a principle grounded in action and experience which explicitly recognises that consequences flow from actions, thus incorporating responsibility into action. Thus she sees sustainability as requiring 'mindful' practice, not 'mindless' as in techno-centric views which stress compensatory, ex post justifications for dangerous, life-diminishing (human and nonhuman) and damaging environmental interventions. Developing the increasingly popular and powerful concept of precaution in this way provides plenty of food for thought for future developments in green politics.

For Salleh, 'As ecofeminists see it, the main obstacle to a sustainable future is the androcentrism of both political Left and Right. The labour theory of value especially demands reformulation in a way that takes account of the materially embodied reciprocity of men, women and nature. Men, especially, need to open up and hear what ordinary women have to say. And, more, to share holding labours. In the long-run, this direction of structural change will be more emancipatory all round than wholesale entry of the oppressed into public institutions that are both gender-dysfunctional and unsustainable' (p.166). As Mellor (1995) has written elsewhere, the political strategic point is not to get from 'here' (the unsustainable present) to 'there' (the future sustainable society), but rather to see that the logic of women's lives, labour and experience are already 'there', that is women already live within biological and ecological time (though as indicated above this is perhaps truer in the South than in the North). Salleh makes the same point: 'Women's labour experiences house both "grounds" for ecopolitical critique and actual "models" for sustainable practice...Thanks to capital and its contradictions, ordinary women, a global majority, already cultivate sustainability in their cycle of reproductive labours' (p.179). A simplistic way of reading this would be to say that women are the appropriate 'historical agent' for green politics. However, a more accurate view would be to note that the latter

needs to be understood as the need to foreground human embodiedness (socially-mediated biological 'reproductive' work and practices, delineated by 'biological time') and human social embeddedness (socially-mediated ecological 'reproductive' practices between human societies and their ecosystems, delineated by 'ecological time'). Thus while materialist ecofeminism is women-based, it is not exclusively women-centred.

In conclusion, all three books represent a 'realistic', materialist ecofeminism, in one way or another socialist-derived and based. They deserve to be widely read, since they both fill a gap within green politics (gender, and reproduction both as a mode of being, doing and acting), and develop a unique and powerful explanatory position. They offer a deeper materialist analysis than Marxism and socialism, by focusing on the political economy (including 'libidinal economy' in Salleh's case) of reproduction, a sphere markedly absent from Marxist (and liberal) analysis in its exclusive preoccupation with 'production'. Like charity beginning at home, preserving and respecting the nonhuman world and life begins with a positive affirmation of human life and awareness of the 'givens' of human nature. All three books reviewed here, acknowledge this without lapsing into either biological or ecological determinism. It may well be that a less 'arrogant', dominating, and patriarchal interaction with the nonhuman world starts from an explicit recognition of the ineliminable vulnerability, neediness and dependence of human beings in relation to each other and the nonhuman world.

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## References

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