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Ecofeminism as Politics: nature, Marx and the postmodern.

By Ariel Salleh (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 208.

Reviewed by Louise Edwards, Australian Catholic University

Ecofeminism as Politics is a comprehensive and persuasive account of ecofeminism's role in critiquing the foundations of the global economic, intellectual and political orders. This far-reaching volume forges new ground in our understandings of ecofeminism and its potential contribution to the creation of a new epistemology for a truly global political order. It provides an historical survey of the transformation of the ecofeminist movement from its beginnings in the 1970s and charts new paths for the future of the movement and further possibilities for ecofeminism's engagement with other global social, political and economic forces.

Ariel Salleh has addressed long-standing mainstream criticisms of ecofeminism as essentialist or biological determinist. The link between women and nature asserted by ecofeminists was rejected by the bourgeois feminists who were concerned to displace this patriarchal binary on the grounds that it had justified centuries of oppression of women. Salleh demonstrates that the link between women and nature in the ecofeminist consciousness is based on political action. From her concern with the need for an inextricable link between theory and action, Salleh argues that "it does not matter whether sexed differences are ontological fact or historical accident" because "the case for women as historical actors in a time of environment crisis rests not on universal essences but on how the majority of women actually work and think now" (p. 6). Women, she points out, undertake 65 per cent of the world's work for 5 per cent of its pay.

She has also convincingly disclosed the partiality of the existing dominant alternative theories: feminism, Marxism and postmodernism. At the foundation of her critique rests the rejection of the "humanist" hierarchical binary culture-nature. Salleh has drawn together the major critiques of these philosophies within the one volume as part of her creation of an alternative agenda for globalisation strategists. Mainstream liberal feminism is challenged for its suppression of gender differences in the struggle for an androgynous equality as the concern of only a handful of women in the wealthy west. The connection between urban affluence and the inequitable distribution of global resources is ignored in most western feminist theories.

Marxism is challenged for its failure to incorporate feminine labour, the feminisation of poverty and ultimately the degrading effects its enthusiasm for human-species specific development has had on the environment. Premised as it is on the historical agency of working-class men, Marxism has devalued women's labour and thereby failed to see the potential for women to be the driving force for historical change. Postmodern theorists

are challenged for their sneering rejection of reality and the denial of the materiality of political, economic and environmental inequalities. Salleh argues that the espousal of discursive pluralism renders postmodernism incapable of providing an alternative vision. Described as a “castrated academic philosophy”, postmodernism has been effective in drawing a generation of students “off the streets and into the salons” (p. xi).

The middle class Green Movement is also examined in close detail. Salleh argues that its fundamentally patriarchal, western world bias limits its effectiveness on a global scale. Women farmers, who make the bulk of the world’s women and the bulk of the world’s farmers, are regarded by Salleh as being a potential driving force of history that would establish a more environmentally sustainable political and economic world order. Yet this group is overwhelmingly disregarded by western eco-activists.

Her critique of dominant conceptualisations of the global world order is followed by the assertion of ecofeminism’s significance to the “offensive against the entire capitalist patriarchal assault to life on earth” (p. 104). Ecofeminism, Salleh argues, is the third and only genuinely international wave of feminism. It builds upon and gains support from liberal, socialist and radical feminist politics but in its assertion of the fundamental need for an environmentally sustainable future, ecofeminism is the only global democratic option. Non-metropolitan and indigenous viewpoints combine with a “womanist” sensibility that affirms reproduction of life-giving potentialities of all species on earth. Ultimately ecofeminism challenges the necessary link between “rationality” and patriarchal capitalism. Rationality, Salleh asserts, is centred in the land-based cultures and domestic economies that sustain life, forge cohesive community and family bonds. These are currently the ignored and unpaid services within the existing conception of rational economic management.

This is an important and engaging book. It is suitable as an undergraduate text since the language is clear, the arguments succinct and the referencing comprehensive. Its interest to all academics and community leaders is considerable. Innovative, comprehensive and challenging, *Ecofeminism as Politics* is a thoroughly impressive volume.