

DISCUSSION PAPERS

Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection

Ariel Kay Salleh*

I offer a feminist critique of deep ecology as presented in the seminal papers of Naess and Devall. I outline the fundamental premises involved and analyze their internal coherence. Not only are there problems on logical grounds, but the tacit methodological approach of the two papers are inconsistent with the deep ecologists' own substantive comments. I discuss these shortcomings in terms of a broader feminist critique of patriarchal culture and point out some practical and theoretical contributions which eco-feminism can make to a genuinely deep ecology problematic.

. . . beyond that perception of otherness lies the perception of psyche, polity and cosmos, as metaphors of one another. . . .

John Rodman¹

In what sense is eco-feminism “deeper than deep ecology”? Or is this a facile and arrogant claim? To try to answer this question is to engage in a critique of a critique, for deep ecology itself is already an attempt to transcend the shortsighted instrumental pragmatism of the resource-management approach to the environmental crisis. It argues for a new metaphysics and an ethic based on the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the nonhuman world. It abandons the hardheaded scientific approach to reality in favor of a more spiritual consciousness. It asks for voluntary simplicity in living and a nonexploitive steady-state economy. The appropriateness of these attitudes as expressed in Naess' and Devall's seminal papers on the deep ecology movement is indisputable.² But what is the organic basis of this paradigm shift? Where are Naess and Devall “coming from,” as they say? Is deep ecology a sociologically coherent position?

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¹ John Rodman, “The Liberation of Nature?” *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 83–145; quoted by Bill Devall in “The Deep Ecology Movement,” *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (1980): 317.

² Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movement,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100; Bill Devall, “The Deep Ecology Movement,” pp. 299–322.

The first feature of the deep ecology paradigm introduced by Naess is replacement of the Man/Nature dualism with a *relational total-field image*, where man is not simply "in" his environment, but essentially "of" it. The deep ecologists do not appear to recognize the primal source of this destructive dualism, however, or the deeply ingrained motivational complexes which grow out of it.³ Their formulation uses the generic term *Man* in a case where use of a general term is not applicable. Women's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with Nature. However tacit or unconscious this identity may be for many women, bruised by derogatory patriarchal attitudes to motherhood, including modern male-identified feminist ones, it is nevertheless "a fact of life." The deep ecology movement, by using the generic term *Man*, simultaneously presupposes the difference between the sexes in an uncritical way, and yet overlooks the significance of this difference. It overlooks the point that if women's lived experience were recognized as meaningful and were given legitimation in our culture, it could provide an immediate "living" social basis for the alternative consciousness which the deep ecologist is trying to formulate and introduce as an abstract ethical construct. Women already, to borrow Devall's turn of phrase, "flow with the system of nature."

The second deep ecology premise, according to Naess is a move away from anthropocentrism, a move toward *biological egalitarianism* among all living species. This assumption, however, is already cancelled in part by the implicit contradiction contained in Naess' first premise. The master-slave role which marks man's relation with nature is replicated in man's relation with woman. A self-consistent biological egalitarianism cannot be arrived at unless men become open to both facets of this same urge to dominate and use. As Naess rightly, though still somewhat anthropocentrically, points out, the denial of dependence on Mother/Nature and the compensatory drive to mastery which stems from it, have only served to alienate man from his true self. Yet the means by which Naess would realize this goal of species equality is through artificial limitation of the human population. Now putting the merits of Naess' "ends" aside for the moment, as a "means" this kind of intervention in life processes is supremely rationalist and technicist, and quite at odds with the restoration of life-affirming values that is so fundamental to the ethic of deep ecology. It is also a solution that interestingly enough cuts right back into the nub of male dependence on women as mothers and creators of life—another grab at women's special potency, inadvertant though it may be.

³ See Ariel Kay Salleh, "Of Portnoy's Complaint and Feminist Problematics," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 17 (1981): 4-13; "Ecology and Ideology," *Chain Reaction* 31 (1983): 20-21; "From Feminism to Ecology," *Social Alternatives* (1984): forthcoming.

The third domain assumption of deep ecology is the *principle of diversity and symbiosis*: an attitude of live and let live, a beneficial mutual coexistence among living forms. For humans the principle favors cultural pluralism, an appreciation of the rich traditions emerging from Africa, China, the Australian Aboriginal way, and so on. These departures from anthropocentrism, and from ethnocentrism, are only partial, however, if the ecologist continues to ignore the cultural inventiveness of that other half of the human race, women; or if the ecologist unwittingly concurs in those practices which impede women's full participation in his own culture. The annihilation of seals and whales, the military and commercial genocide of tribal peoples, are unforgivable human acts, but the annihilation of women's identity and creativity by patriarchal culture continues as a fact of daily existence. The embrace of progressive attitudes toward nature does little in itself to change this.

Deep ecology is an *anti-class posture*; it rejects the exploitation of some by others, of nature by man, and of man by man, this being destructive to the realization of human potentials. However, sexual oppression and the social differentiation that this produces is not mentioned by Naess. Women again appear to be subsumed by the general category. Obviously the feminist ecological analysis is not "in principle" incompatible with the anti-class posture of deep ecology. Its reservation is that in bypassing the parallel between the original exploitation of nature as object-and-commodity resource and of nurturant woman as object-and-commodity resource, the ecologist's anti-class stance remains only superficially descriptive, politically and historically static. It loses its genuinely deep structural critical edge. On the question of political praxis though, there is certainly no quarrel between the two positions. Devall's advocacy of loose activist networks, his tactics of nonviolent contestation, are cases in point.⁴ Deep ecology and feminism see change as gradual and piecemeal; the violence of revolution imposed by those who claim "to know" upon those who "do not know" is an anathema to both.

The fight against *pollution and resource depletion* is, of course, a fundamental environmental concern. And it behooves the careful activist to see that measures taken to protect resources do not have hidden or long-term environmental costs which outweigh their usefulness. As Naess observes, such costs may increase class inequalities. In this context he also comments on the "after hours" environmentalist syndrome frequently exhibited by middle-class professionals. Devall, too, criticizes what he calls "the bourgeois liberal reformist elements" in the movement—Odum, Brower, and Lovins, who are the butt of this remark. A further comment that might be made in this context, however, is that women, as keepers of *oikos*, are in a good position to put a round-the-clock ecological consciousness

⁴ And on this connection, see Ariel Kay Salleh, "The Growth of Eco-feminism," *Chain Reaction* 36 (1984): 26–28; also comments in "Whither the Green Machine?" *Australian Society* 3 (1984): 15–17.

into practice. Excluded as many still are from full participation in the social-occupational structure, they are less often compromised by the material and status rewards which may silence the activist professional. True, the forces of capitalism have targeted women at home as consumer par excellence, but this potential can just as well be turned against the systematic waste of industrialism. The historical significance of the domestic labor force in moves to recycle, boycott, and so on, has been grossly underestimated by ecologists.

At another level of analysis entirely, but again on the issue of pollution, the objectivist attitude of most ecological writing and the tacit mind-body dualism which shapes this, means that its comprehension of "pollution" is framed exclusively in external material terms. The feminist consciousness, however, is equally concerned to eradicate ideological pollution, which centuries of patriarchal conditioning have subjected us all to, women and men. Men, who may derive rather more ego gratification from the patriarchal status quo than women, are on the whole less motivated to change this system than women are. But radical women's consciousness-raising groups are continually engaging in an intensely reflexive political process; one that works on the psychological contamination produced by the culture of domination and helps women to build new and confident selves. As a foundation for social and political change, this work of women is a very thorough preparation indeed.

The sixth premise of Naess' deep ecology is the *complexity, not complication principle*. It favors the preservation of complex interrelations which exist between parts of the environment, and inevitably, it involves a systems theoretical orientation. Naess' ideal is a complex economy supported by division, but not fragmentation of labor; worker alienation to be overcome by opportunities for involvement in mental and manual, specialized and nonspecialized tasks. There are serious problems of implementation attached to this vaguely sketched scenario, but beyond this, the supporting arguments are also weak, not to say very uncritical in terms of the stated aims of the deep ecology movement. The references to "soft future research," "implementation of policies," "exponential growth of technical skill and intervention," are highly instrumental statements which collapse back into the shallow ecology paradigm and its human chauvinist ontology. What appears to be happening here is this: the masculine sense of self-worth in our culture has become so entrenched in scientific habits of thought, that it is very hard for men to argue persuasively without recourse to terms like these for validation. Women, on the other hand, socialized as they are for a multiplicity of contingent tasks and practical labor functions in the home and out, do not experience the inhibiting constraints of status validation to the same extent. The traditional feminine role runs counter to the exploitive technical rationality which is currently the requisite masculine norm. In place of the disdain that the feminine role receives from all quarters, "the separate reality" of this role could well be taken seriously by ecologists and reexamined as a legitimate source of alternative

values. As Snyder suggests, men should try out roles which are not highly valued in society; and one might add, particularly this one, for herein lies the basis of a genuinely grounded and nurturant environmentalism. As one eco-feminist has put it:

If someone has laid the foundations of a house, it would seem sensible to build on those foundations, rather than import a prefabricated structure with no foundations to put beside it.⁵

A final assumption of deep ecology described by Naess is the importance of *local autonomy and decentralization*. He points out that the more dependent a region is on resources from outside its locality, the more vulnerable it is ecologically and socially: for self-sufficiency to work, there must be political decentralization. The drive to ever larger power blocs and hierarchical political structures is an invariant historical feature of patriarchal societies, the expression of an impulse to compete and dominate the Other. But unless men can come to grips honestly with this impulse within themselves, its dynamic will impose itself over and over again on the anatomy of revolution. Women, if left to their own devices, do not like to organize themselves in this way. Rather they choose to work in small, intimate collectivities, where the spontaneous flow of communication "structures" the situation. There are important political lessons for men to learn from observing and participating in this kind of process. And until this learning takes place, notions like autonomy and decentralization are likely to remain hollow, fetishistic concepts.

Somewhat apologetically, Naess talks about his ecological principles as "intuitive formulations" needing to be made more "precise." They are a "condensed codification" whose tenets are clearly "normative"; they are "ecophilosophical," containing not only norms but "rules," "postulates," "hypotheses," and "policy" formulations. The deep ecology paradigm takes the form of "subsets" of "derivable premises," including at their most general level "logical and mathematical deductions." In other words, Naess' overview of ecosophy is a highly academic and positivized one, dressed up in the jargon of current science-dominated standards of acceptability. Given the role of this same cultural scientism in industry and policy formulation, its agency in the very production of the eco-crisis itself, Naess' stance here is not a rationally consistent one. It is a solution trapped in the given paradigm. The very term *norm* implies the positivist split between fact and value, the very term *policy* implies a class separation of rulers and ruled. Devall, likewise, seems to present purely linear solutions—"an objective approach," "a new psychology"; the language of cost-benefit analysis, "optimal human carrying

⁵ Ann Pettitt, "Women Only at Greenham," *Undercurrents* 57 (1982): 20–21.

capacity," and the language of science, "data on hunter gatherers," both creep back in. Again, birth "control programs" are recommended, "zoning," and "programming," the language of technocratic managerialism. "Principles" are introduced and the imperative *should* rides roughshod through the text. The call for a new epistemology is somehow dissociated in this writing from the old metaphysical presuppositions which prop up the argument itself.

In arguing for an eco-phenomenology, Devall certainly attempts to bypass this ideological noose—"Let us think like a mountain," he says—but again, the analysis here rests on what is called "a gestalt of person-in-nature": a conceptual effort, a grim intellectual determination "to care"; "to show reverence" for Earth's household and "to let" nature follow "its separate" evolutionary path. The residue of specular instrumentalism is overpowering; yet the conviction remains that a radical transformation of social organization and values is imminent: a challenge to the fundamental premises of the dominant social paradigm. There is a concerted effort to rethink Western metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics here, but this "rethink" remains an idealism closed in on itself because it fails to face up to the uncomfortable psychosexual origins of our culture and its crisis. Devall points by turn to White's thesis that the environmental crisis derives from the Judeo-Christian tradition, to Weisberg's argument that capitalism is the root cause, to Mumford's case against scientism and technics. But for the eco-feminist, these apparently disparate strands are merely facets of the same motive to control which runs a continuous thread through the history of patriarchy. So, it has been left to the women of our generation to do the theoretical housework here—to lift the mat and sweep under it exposing the deeply entrenched epistemological complexes which shape not only current attitudes to the natural world, but attitudes to social and sexual relations as well.⁶ The accidental convergence of feminism and ecology at this point in time is no accident.

Sadly, from the eco-feminist point of view, deep ecology is simply another self-congratulatory reformist move; the transvaluation of values it claims for itself is quite peripheral. Even the Eastern spiritual traditions, whose authority deep ecology so often has recourse to—since these dissolve the repressive hierarchy of Man/Nature/God—even these philosophies pay no attention to the inherent Man/Woman hierarchy contained within this metaphysics of the Whole. The suppression of the *feminine* is truly an all pervasive human universal. It is not just a suppression of real, live, empirical women, but equally the suppression of the feminine aspects of men's own constitution which is the issue here. Watts, Snyder, Devall, all want education for the spiritual development of "personhood." This is the self-estranged male reaching for the original androgynous natural unity within himself.

⁶ Some of this feminist writing is discussed in Ariel Kay Salleh, "Contributions to the Critique of Political Epistemology," *Thesis Eleven* 8 (1984): 23–43.

The deep ecology movement is very much a spiritual search for people in a barren secular age; but how much of this quest for self-realization is driven by ego and will? If, on the one hand, the search seems to be stuck at an abstract cognitive level, on the other, it may be led full circle and sabotaged by the ancient compulsion to fabricate perfectability. Men's ungrounded restless search for the alienated Other part of themselves has led to a society where not life itself, but "change," bigger and better, whiter than white, has become the consumptive end. The dynamic to overcome this alienation takes many forms in the post-capitalist culture of narcissism—material and psychological consumption like karma-cola, clown workshops, sensitivity training, bio-energetics, gay lib, and surfside six. But the deep ecology movement will not truly happen until men are brave enough to rediscover and to love the woman inside themselves. And we women, too, have to be allowed to love what we are, if we are to make a better world.

INQUIRY

Editor: Alastair Hannay

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Subscription price:

Institutions: N.kr. 270,— \$45.00 — Individuals N.kr. 140,— \$23.00.

Published quarterly by Universitetsforlaget, P.O. Box 2959 Tøyen, Oslo 6, Norway
— P.O. Box 258, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York 10533, USA.