
DIRECTION

Moving to an Embodied Materialism

Ariel Salleh

A new initiative by *Capitalism Nature Socialism* aims to help ecosocialists and ecofeminists find a common political language. Since *CNS* is dedicated to social equity in the context of sustainability, not just any feminism will do. So a first step has been to gather together a group of ecofeminist editors, people who are both activists and internationally published authors in the field. They in turn, are inviting activist women, and members of organizations like EcoPolitics, the National Women's Studies Association, the Global Studies Association, and the International Association for Feminist Economics, to participate in en/gendering the journal's eco-socialist pages. The goal is to ensure that each issue carries at least one ecofeminist article—usually by a woman, though not necessarily so. There are openings for an ecofeminist special issue, for opinion columns, and for accounts of women's grass-roots campaigns. The 2005 *CNS* Anniversary Conference at York University, Toronto, will feature German ecofeminist Maria Mies, author of *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, alongside the ecosocialist voice of James O'Connor, founding *CNS* editor.

In the past year, *CNS* has published ecofeminist pieces on capitalism and the body, land struggles in Kenya, and the global cotton campaign of Diverse Women for Diversity. Articles in the pipeline will look at food security, eco-tourism, toxic struggles, and genetic engineering. Some of these are theoretical essays, others cover substantive themes connected in some way to reproductive labor. And a careful reading reveals new and critical constructs in this writing, ideas to carry our ecopolitics forward. These *CNS* initiatives toward partnering ecofeminism and ecosocialism are necessary ones, but not sufficient of themselves. Making women's contributions to ecopolitics visible is less than half of what needs to be done. There's little point in running thoughtful essays by women if men among the readership don't engage with these fresh insights and the intellectual challenge of recognizing how gender often enters into the very formulation of a political concept.

Broadly, ecofeminists are asking ecosocialists to draw back from their transcendent vision and grow their politics in a way that holds on to the materiality of the everyday world. Part of this grounding in the here and now is about remembering how we are embodied and embedded in the earth. It's about a dialectical process of looking inward and understanding where the great gender divide—deepest of all

social oppressions—marks each of our lives. This *acknowledgement* is a very *first political moment* for ecofeminists and ecosocialists to share, as it is for masculine and feminine subjectivities at large. Our bodily energies are artificially configured and constrained by gender, and those dissociations, in turn, deform economic practices, social institutions, and cultural beliefs. A *second political moment* is in developing *practical skills* to protect face-to-face and virtual organizing from being undercut by gendered habits. A *third political moment* is dialogue and *re-conceptualization*. Here, we take our working constructs like prisms to the light, and where they are clouded by gender, try to angle them differently.

* * *

During the radical insurgence in the late Sixties through Seventies, many women were shocked to discover the sex/gender blind character of politics in the labor, peace and environmental movements. Women's analysis of capitalist patriarchal relations highlighted different aspects of phenomena like the military industrial complex, and carried different insights on strategy. But their voices were silenced, for the movements themselves were masculinist in both internal structure and functioning. No surprise then, that one of the first premises to come out of this Second Wave of feminism was that "the personal is political." If women walked away and set up "women only" actions, they were accused of separatism. On the other hand, sometimes green or socialist men just told us to do our feminism elsewhere, so as not to disrupt "the main game." The *first political moment of an en/gendered politics—acknowledgement*—was a long way off, let alone the *second*, or *third*.

Over the past quarter century, spaces for women have opened up in government, academia, journals, political parties and NGOs. But judging from the ever so slight shift in terms of reference, these breaks seem to have been little more than expressions of political correctness. Meanwhile, women's concern about the micro and macro aspects of sex/gender politics was creating a substantial international literature and a proud history of political interventions across the globe. The more academic of this feminist writing draws on sociology, economics, and international relations and is variously informed by psychoanalysis, Marxism, phenomenology, and post-structuralist thought. But women have also interrogated these received traditions. One grouping—ecological feminists—extending their concerns beyond the spectrum of radical, liberal, Marxist, cultural, and poststructuralist feminisms, have broadened the social scientific understanding of power by critically examining the Humanity-Nature link. Ecofeminists spell out the material implications of women's subordination as mediators of biological processes for men. For most women are *reproductive labor in the sexual, economic, cultural, and ecological senses of that word*. They are associated with—but are certainly much more than—"conditions of production."

From this vantage point, ecofeminists have made deconstructive readings of cutting edge ecopolitical thinkers like deep ecologist Arne Naess, social ecologist Murray Bookchin, and ecosocialist John Bellamy Foster. But as with earlier attempts to raise the consciousness of Seventies activism, their reflections have fallen on stone, more or less. Not that their analyses go unpublished, though censorship is not unknown.

There are plenty of women's books and articles out there, but masculine identified scholars—not necessarily men—ignore the writing, sidelining it as “women's stuff.” Part of the problem is the patriarchal pecking order that dictates who gets to cite who in academic work. But even when masculine identified scholars do respond, my observation in the case of ecofeminist texts is that too often they “just don't get it.” Or they dig in to defend old gendered positions, or they reply without bothering to acquaint themselves with the full literature. Very occasionally, there is appropriation of an ecofeminist name or theme—often unreferenced, and in a way that ignores the wider context of the idea. The sad truth is that in general, men continue to show a lack of collegial respect for women's intellectual production. Meanwhile, academic women learn that there are few points scored for building on each other's scholarship.

So how can we reach the *third moment in our dialectic—dialogue and re-conceptualization?* As an old feminist adage goes: “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” For socialists, the capitalist class, its government cronies, and lifestyle hangers on, are the master, and his house is the global public sphere. For ecofeminists, this is also true, but there is another master embodied in the private power relations that govern everyday life for women at home, at work, and in scholarship. This is why we use the double construct *capitalist patriarchal societies—where capitalism denotes the very latest historical form of economic and social domination by men over women.* This double term integrates the two dimensions of power by recognizing patriarchal energetics as a priori to capitalism. As reflexive ecosocialists know: *the psychology of masculinity is actively rewarded by the capitalist system, thereby keeping that economy intact.*

The “double whammy” of capitalist patriarchal impacts that women face, enjoins another doublet—sex/gender. It's politically correct these days to speak as if differences between men and women were simply socially constructed overlays upon two androgenous kinds of body. In North America, liberal and poststructural feminists each emphasize this discursive shaping of personal identities. Certainly, conventional masculine domination of the feminine is a learned style, and not necessarily a direct expression of the sexed body. But the current fashion for totalising social construction only makes sense in a high-tech economy, where people can design their lives in ways that bypass their sexed biology.

Taking a global perspective, it is ethnocentric nonsense to infer from our own opportunities for self-transformation that only acquired gender conditioning is relevant to our work for political equality. Thinking internationally about justice, women make up a majority of the global population according to the sex/gender category. Or using another sociological lens, they constitute half of any class or indigenous grouping. Whichever way you look at it, *women are the global majority. And the majority of women are oppressed, both as gendered feminine and as sexed female bodies. Moreover, the two conditions may be mutually reinforcing.* In any event, an ecofeminist deepening of ecosocialist thought will acknowledge biological sources of social domination as much as discursive ones. Both natural and cultural realities interact with each other and with class identity, translating into material effects like poverty and social disadvantage.

In 1994, Martin O'Connor published a fine *CNS* Guilford Series anthology called *Is Capitalism Sustainable?* Lucky enough to get an ecofeminist voice in that early collection, I tried to sketch the massive structural consequences of the sex/gender doublet. For example, women globally receive less than 10 percent of all wages paid, and only 1 percent of women in the world own property. After a decade of neoliberal globalization and wars, women's lives—North and South—are even harder. The reason for this is that: *Women's position as mediators of nature is a prior condition for the transaction that takes place between capitalist and laboring men.* Mary Mellor describes this work as putting in *biological time* for men. Silvia Federici recounts the *history of breaking and taming the female body* and how men have been complicit with capital in this. In a related vein, Terisa Turner points to what she calls *the male deal*, struck by Western colonizers and local men, as they build economic development on the backs of Third World women.

I have suggested that *the nature-woman-labor nexus is a foundational contradiction of the capitalist patriarchal system*, wherein women are neither full political subjects, nor full labor. Ecosocialists need to grasp this unstated but originary contradiction, because it penetrates the very heart of their political analysis. As reproductive labor, women bear the main cost of World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization policies and capitalist wars. However, as primary care givers and community food producers, women are also the quintessential experts in precautionary wisdom and practitioners of sustainability. These experiences educate them—whether they are housewives, peasants, or indigenes—for global leadership. Moreover, the ambiguous attribution and denial of humanity to resourced and sacrificed people charges their political sense.

In the old bones of capitalist patriarchal logic “men are culture, women are nature”—a perfect rationale for economic externalization of “the other half.” Consequently, in the androcentric discourse of Western economics, the material surplus generated by women's labor remains unspoken in much the same way that indigenous labor, and nature itself, has zero value. Moving to a deeper level of abstraction like *the nature-woman-labor nexus*, or putting it another way, *moving to an embodied materialism*, enables ecosocialists to acknowledge oppressions beyond that of the working class. It offers a framework for an integrating politics, helping ecosocialists theorize resistance to capital in a way that is not only socially fair, but ecologically sensitive. There has been too much emphasis by the Left on the emancipatory potential of the urban industrial proletariat and too little on other oppressed folk. Today as the corporate stranglehold intensifies, ecosocialists need to deepen their analysis in order to broaden their alliances. Especially important at this conjuncture is communication with a very diverse alternative globalization movement.

As I see the shared goal of ecofeminism and ecosocialism, it is *to draw the separate movements together—workers', women's, indigenous' and ecological struggles—in a way that integrates while holding on to diversity.* As the global political response to neoliberalism flourishing at Porto Alegre and Mumbai shows us, it is not urban industrial labor, so much as *meta-industrial labor—mothers, small farmers, hunter-gatherers on the fringes of capital—*

who know most intimately the meanings of economic justice, social equity, cultural autonomy, and ecological sustainability. This is not to dismiss Marx's economic analysis, but to adapt it to our time. It demands a closer study of the complex dimensions of reproductive labor by ecosocialists; and it begs a reading of that great 19th century transformative program, which can support inclusive futures. One proposal that simultaneously embraces economic justice, social equity, cultural autonomy, and ecological sustainability is the *subsistence perspective*, developed by ecofeminists Maria Mies, Ellie Perkins, and others. This pre-figures an ecopolitical commons that could be at once, post-gender, post-colonial, and ecologically sound.

Of course, creating a *CNS* forum for en/gendering ecopolitics may be easier said than done. In bringing the sex/gender divide to the surface, we try to un-do attitudes that have lasted thousands of years. And it goes without saying that there are almost always difficult dynamics for women working inside organizational structures set up by men—particularly so, where an established vision is taken as given. This harks back to the *second political moment—working up the skills for managing reflexive interactions.* How do we make sure that women get beyond the old role of “union auxiliary” or “housewives to the revolution?” How do we see that their journal contributions are not mere tokens or objects of the ecosocialist “gaze?” How do we prevent women's essays from being trivialized as “women's stuff?” How do we encourage women intellectuals to debate, without “mud wrestling” for the titillation of an ambivalent audience? And how do we avoid the spectacle of white women barracking for competing postcolonial “feminist teams?” Over a decade or so, I have seen all these things happen.

And there are other pitfalls. Sometimes when scholars are new to the sex/gender question, they are held back by default assumptions. For example, it may be wrongly assumed that because a woman is writing, she puts forward a feminist view; or because she writes about environmental matters, she must be an ecofeminist. Secondly, ecosocialists may overlook the plurality of paradigms within feminism, from radical, liberal, Marxist, cultural, and poststructural, to ecofeminist. Scholars can get into cross purposes over ecofeminism, because these fundamental epistemological differences are not recognized. Again, editors may unwittingly give an ecofeminist book to a poststructuralist feminist reviewer—a bit like sending Sartre's ramblings to Althusser for assessment. Arguably, ecofeminism has more in common with ecosocialism than with most other feminisms. But one could make the case either way, for ours is a politics pulled and stretched by hybrid commitments.

Occasionally theoretic tendencies take over ecofeminist thought, only to colonize and compromise its organic grassroots origins. The very confused debate about “essentialism” is a result of this kind of anomaly, and *CNS* readers will have a chance to sort through this in a forthcoming paper by a new writer, Phoebe Godfrey. Much effective ecofeminist political work is carried out by people not informed by any formal philosophy: activist women, peasant, middle or working class. *How can ecosocialists learn from their ecofeminist insights, and in exchange, evolve a shared theoretical language with them?* This may mean adjusting the pre-ordained vocabulary to more immanent

socialist perceptions. Are we ready to meet this challenge with psychological integrity as well as rigor? Can we explore strategies for it in the journal—pairing theorists and activists to work together perhaps, wherever ecosocialists have no hands-on praxis?

* * *

These are some of the issues facing *CNS* editors, authors, and readers as we move *towards an embodied materialism*. Joel Kovel's pessimistic but very apt metaphor for the current theoretic apartheid of ecofeminism and ecosocialism is "ships passing in the night." But we would like to think that increasingly, future submissions will evidence an integrative ecopolitics. Better still, ecosocialists in the *CNS* community might take up themes from past and future ecofeminist articles, argue the territory around them, and test analytic constructs for class, gender, ethnic, and ecological adequacy. After all, a one-eyed ecosocialism loses touch with Marx's own holistic and dialectical approach.

Ecofeminists are asking ecosocialists to join them in a more fully amplified account of how capital degrades the "conditions of production." Unravelling the *nature-woman-labor nexus* is central to this work—not least, the distinction between "women" and "conditions" as such. The exploitation of women's reproductive labor powers goes on—from mothers in late-capitalist superstates like the EU to food growers in poor African communities. And in the public mind, this economic extraction is still naturalized in the ideological fog of "man is culture, woman is nature." In evolving an ecofeminist-ecosocialist partnership, let's not lose sight of the originary contradiction and its volatile displacements. As Ynestra King says, it's important to focus on the pre-gendered reality that women and men are *both part of nature*. The secret is for ecosocialists to reclaim that embodiment—and its meanings—remembering how all our energies ebb and flow with the earth.