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DISCUSSION

Eco-Socialism/Eco-Feminism

I.

Going back to its earliest issue, *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* has contained references to "eco-feminism." However, each use of the term has been clouded in misconceptions which beg to be dissolved. While *working on what might be called another level of abstraction, the eco-feminist project parallels that of eco-socialism.* The two political strands are complementary, and it is fairly clear that a self-consistent eco-socialist formulation will need to accommodate an eco-feminist analysis. Of course, the converse is equally true. To begin then: eco-feminism is an emergent politics already 15 years old. Its history lists international initiatives by women on nuclear weapons, pesticides, genetic engineering, water and forest conservation, carcinogenic additives in processed food, to name a few such interventions. It has a literature of two dozen or so scholarly texts and two hundred or more articles, of sufficient merit to be interesting at academic post-graduate level.¹ Substantive areas taken up by eco-feminist theorists range from history of science to epistemology critique, to environmental ethics, challenges to bourgeois economics, to Marxist theory and Green politics.²

¹ The first seminar on eco-feminism was taught by Ynestra King at the Institute for Social Ecology; but several campuses have now developed an interest. At the University of Chicago, 27 graduates from Divinity to Public Policy took a course with the author in 1989. It has been offered at the University of New South Wales, Australia, since 1984.

² Representative eco-feminist books include — Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth* (NY: Dove, 1975); Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, eds., *Reclaim the Earth* (London: Women's Press, 1983); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive* (London: Zed, 1989).

As Lori Ann Thrupp points out, the diverse paradigms of contemporary feminist thought find a new synthesis in eco-feminism — its organizing theme our global crisis. Even so, eco-feminist writers draw differently on the feminist tradition, some emphasize the radical feminist sense of "difference;" others develop from socialist feminism; and there are others.³ Not only are there paradigmatic variations within eco-feminism — as there are in the nascent eco-socialist analysis that appear in *CNS* — but since eco-feminism is an international phenomenon, there are typical regional variations as well. The spiritually oriented eco-feminism of the USA West Coast, for example, contrasts with socialist approaches in Europe and Australia.

So to address some popular misconceptions about eco-feminism: Sometimes the standpoint is taken to imply a reascription of absolute "feminine" and "masculine" "biological destinies." Yet, it is hard to imagine how any feminist who has completed the obligatory intellectual work-out through Marxism, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism could lapse into biologism. In fact, the social construction of gender is step number-one in feminist thought, just as determination by mode of production is an *a priori* for socialists. Eco-feminists do talk about "masculine" and "feminine" as universal, or at least commonly recurring, cultural categories though. And they note that these are socially imposed as personal attributes on sexed human beings, sometimes with a very bad fit.

But eco-feminists are mainly interested in structural outcomes of the asymmetrical valuation of gender dualisms: "masculine-reason-light-order-culture" versus "feminine-emotion-dark-chaos-nature." These patriarchal gender images becomes enmeshed in social institutions in a hegemonic way. Brinda Rao's analysis of the Indian identification of women with water demonstrates this process at work, and the brutal impact it can have on women's daily lives.⁴ Interestingly, Jim O'Connor writes in the same issue of *CNS*, but about capitalism rather than patriarchy, that "the essence of ideology is a reified naturalism."⁵ He

³ Lori Ann Thrupp, "The Struggle for Nature: Replies," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 3, November, 1989.

⁴ Brinda Rao, "Struggling for Production Conditions and Producing Conditions of Emancipation," *CNS* 2, Summer, 1989.

⁵ James O'Connor, "Socialism and Ecology," *CNS* 2, Summer 1989, p.5.

recognizes a *paradoxical dilemma for eco-socialists in how to handle this ideology, while yet theorizing the re-inclusion of "nature" within political economy.* Eco-feminists likewise are engaged in a subtle deconstruction of the patriarchal "Mother Nature" ideology while yet trying to re-theorize our human embeddedness in what is called "nature." As O'Connor has also pointed out, movements must battle *against* yet *within* hegemonic conditions. This can be like walking a tight-rope, but it is not an impossible task for those who have learned to think reflexively.

No feminist believes that "biology is destiny." At the same time though, people who are sexed female, and denigrated because of that, may decide to affirm their "difference" as a source of empowerment: viz. the body-based rituals of some eco-feminist groups. Such practices, while in themselves creative, help deconstruct patriarchal ideologies of "the feminine." Equally important is the work of other eco-feminists who examine the social, political and economic consequences of biological sex. This is not as many fear, to "essentialize" femininity, but to come to terms with the material conditions of women's lived experience. Women who bear children in the ghettos of Brazil know well that this is an economic event. Politicians cannot thrust "the biological" aside. That is precisely what has brought Western capitalist patriarchy to its present ecological impasse — calling up the need for an eco-socialist theory.

It is a fundamental premise of eco-feminism that in patriarchal cultures, men's assumed right to exploit nature parallels the use/s they make of women. Yet some activist men have great difficulty accepting this. They may endorse the substantial contribution of women environmental activists and agree that a future sustainable society should eliminate women's oppression; but will not go as far as to concede that there is a distinct and separate body of theory called eco-feminism. The argument may be simply that eco-feminism is part of Social Ecology with its assumption that *social domination and the domination of nature are interrelated.* While most eco-feminists will agree with that proposition, women theorists have found many ways of arriving at it: anarcho-communism is one; socialist feminism is another; and radical culturalist concepts of "difference" offer yet another route to the same conclusion. Further, many women activists, mothers and grandmothers, sass out the connection with no help from theory at all.

The word "eco-feminism" originated in Paris around 1974 as far as we can tell; but during the 1970s the idea erupted spontaneously in other "centers" too — Sicily, Japan, Venezuela, Australia, Finland, the U.S. Women don't need a pre-packaged social philosophy in order to see that their labor and sexuality are "resourced" by men in ways that match the instrumental exploitation of "nature." The appropriation of Rachel Carson's path-breaking work by today's ecologists is a case in point. The setting up of the EPA was a direct response to her research. Yet while Pinchot, Muir, Berry, and Commoner are acknowledged as "fathers" of the movement, her contribution invariably slips into invisibility. Dan Faber's and Jim O'Connor's overview history of environmentalism in the U.S. does little to remedy this.⁶ It also discounts the motive force of women in environmental campaigns. As political "workers," they constitute well over half the active membership of most organizations; many are housewives, even lone supporting mothers, all unpaid, as Kathy Hall chronicles for us in *CNS*.⁷ Moreover, this observation is equally true for the Soviet Union, if a delegation of Russian journalists visiting Chicago in 1989 is to be believed. But the authors of *CNS*'s environmental history judge the "the salariat" to be the back-bone of the movement in the U.S. and "scientists" in the USSR. True, professionals, usually men, do assume spokesperson and key lobbyist positions; but this is to judge a political phenomenon by mere appearance, ignoring the movement substrate. The interesting question though, is: why have women come forward in this way just at this point in history?

When they discuss eco-feminism, Faber and O'Connor's article takes the opposite tack to those who would have it disappear by absorption into Social Ecology. Their tendency is to bracket eco-feminism in with Social Ecology's arch rival Deep Ecology! Hence, "Neo-Romantic ideologies are also influenced by, and fused into, new eco-feminist ideas and values."⁸ The emergence of eco-feminism as an autonomous political force is lost. Worse: only one eco-feminist source is referenced; and even then, it is not an American contribution. Somewhat ironically, it also turns out to have been a "critique" of Deep

⁶ Daniel Faber and James O'Connor, "The Struggle for Nature," *CNS* 2, Summer, 1989.

⁷ Kathy Hall, "Coming to see the Forest as well as the Trees," *CNS* 2, Summer, 1989.

⁸ Faber and O'Connor, *op cit.*, p.32.

Ecologists. An essay that, along with a handful of other Left based commentaries, has provoked over 60 pages of outrage from the Deep Ecology camp.⁹ No, eco-feminism is not subsumable by Deep Ecology, even though it does share the Deep Ecological project of *dismantling the ideological artifice which divides "humanity" from "nature"*. This is a task that eco-socialism itself is about to embark on, for ecological crisis has brought home the urgency of understanding just what the connections between "humanity" and "nature" are. Yet there is a further curiosity about Faber's and O'Connor's eco-feminist citation. The referenced article — written while its author was an editor of a socialist journal — is classified as neo-romanticism and therefore, politically regressive. This, despite the fact that the piece extends the critical Marxist debate with positivism and instrumental rationality to the tacit scientism and managerialism of some Deep Ecological writing; or, that the article talks about the centrality of women's labour in some half dozen places. Is everyday silence over women's economic activities equally prevalent in textual exegesis?

Duly admonished by Lori Ann Thrupp in the journal's next issue, Faber and O'Connor go on to compound this "brevity of treatment" with an assertion that radical eco-feminism is romanticism in three senses.¹⁰ First, they say it is anti-science and technology. This does scant justice to the sophisticated epistemological critiques articulated by women scholars. Nor does it acknowledge the pioneering work of Third World women activists in the field of appropriate technology. Second, radical eco-feminism is seen by them to privilege "body" over mind — the old question of biologism again. Hopefully, readers are persuaded by now that what is actually going on in eco-feminism is a deconstruction of patriarchal notions of the body, while yet exploring alternative conceptualizations. It is a dialectical process. An analogy with eco-socialism might be the latter's need to undermine bourgeois-liberal notions of "scarcity," while yet designing new economic practices for sustainable living in a resource-finite world.

But there is a deeper aspect to Faber's and O'Connor's objection to eco-feminist preoccupation with the body, and that is their adoption of

⁹ Ariel Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology: the Eco-feminist Connection," *Environmental Ethics*, 6, 1984.

¹⁰ Daniel Faber and James O'Connor, "Rejoinders," *CNS* 3, November 1989, p. 177.

the patriarchal dualism which splits "body" and "mind" as if they were two entities. Differently valued entities, with mind the "masculine" sphere, privileged over body, inert, impure, "feminine." Here the authors speak their continuity with the Judaeo-Christian, Baconian-Cartesian, Marxian-Sartrean tradition. Each discourse has been driven by a common *"masculine" will to disconnect from and transcend our earthly condition: what Marx called necessity. Yet it is this same episteme that has dissociated economics from ecology* — a hegemony that eco-socialists must now learn to argue their way out of. Lastly, the authors ascribe romanticism to radical eco-feminism because of its association with "organic theories emphasising emotional ties to the community (caring)." Now the rationalist thrust to transcend bodily embeddedness in place and in relationships, again shows through. It promotes a model society that would abstract, quantify and commodify not only human experience but also nature. Critical Marxists see this impulse guided by domination and control. In any event, its epistemological basis rests in a reified naturalism — ideology *par excellence* — and one that Faber and O'Connor surely would not want to support.

Turning back to the issue of "caring" — however despised, this is nevertheless the kind of unpaid service/labor that women under capitalist patriarchy are required to put in. While society denigrates the worth of such work, social reproduction would not occur without it. We are looking at another kind of activity that could be identified as economic, and as such, interest eco-socialist theorists. Alternatively, in a future post-patriarchal scenario, men may engage in caring labor themselves. Unless, of course, new forces of production/technologies can be found to take it over. In the meantime, while eco-socialists look forward to a coherent formulation of "the concrete totality," they might attend the work of eco-feminists with scholarly care. Many women spent the best part of the 1970s and 1980s trying to get brother socialists to re-think the gender blind categories of Marxism, to zero effect. It would be a shame if dialogue between eco-feminists and eco-socialists in the 1990s was simply a repeat of that old history. — Ariel Salleh