



The Meta-industrial Class and Why We Need It

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ABSTRACT The paper suggests that the appropriate ‘agents of history’ in an era of globalisation and ecological crisis are ‘meta-industrial’ workers. This hitherto nameless class carries out hands-on reproductive labours at the interface of ‘humanity’ and ‘nature’ using ‘holding skills’, a grounded epistemology and ethic consonant with genuine democracy and local sustainability. Pointing to the unexamined neo-liberal assumptions of many environmental philosophers, the author suggests that only an ‘embodied materialist’ epistemology and ethic can do justice to class, race, gender, and species diversity.

The futility of neo-liberalism

At the close of the 20th century, an aggressively global economic system is deepening tensions between class, race, gender, and species interests.¹ A mere one-fifth of the world’s population takes four-fifths of all resources for itself. And these are managed so crudely that renewable ‘natural capital’, as it is called—forests, air, water, and soils—is made non-renewable. For ‘to live sustainably, we must ensure that we use the essential products and processes of nature no more quickly than they can be renewed, and that we discharge wastes no more quickly than they can be absorbed.’² The impacts of industrialisation on this ecological ‘bottom line’ are now exacerbated by free trade policies and a frenzy of production for competitive export markets. Again borrowing the ubiquitous jargon of economics, the ‘ecological deficit’ grows and the future is ‘mortgaged’. The search for ever more high tech fixes only multiplies the losses and postpones the day of reckoning.

It is often noted that if the ‘developed world’s’ lifestyle were shared by everyone, it would take three planets to meet that consumption. Yet curiously, many environmental philosophers still work within the assumptions of this irrational global system, configuring technical arguments about this or that small amendment to it. More ‘efficient’ economic growth and development are

1. Revised text of a paper delivered as ‘Ecofeminist Reasoning: Towards Sustainability with Equity’ at the Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice Conference, Mansfield College, Oxford, 29 June 1999.
2. David Orton, ‘Commentary on the Ecological Footprint’, *Ecopolitics Digest*, 345 (ecopolitics@efn.org), 1 August 1999. Orton is citing Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1996), p. 7.

claimed to be preconditions of justice and sustainability. But this academicism, usually from the North, is framed by an inward looking context. When the word 'we' is spoken, for example, it does not include views from the other four-fifths of humanity, let alone species interests. The restricted vision of these neo-liberal philosophers, and indeed some socialists, leads them to believe that all peoples want to live as the North does, and that the affluent must help achieve this. Certainly, it is said, the privileged have no right to deny others a lifestyle that they themselves enjoy.

This surprisingly common position among environmental philosophers carries a class, race, gender and species bias, and is a very undemocratic stance. To take the needs of other species first, it is a fact that each day whole species lines become extinct under the pressure of consumerist resourcing. Given what is known now about the thermodynamic dissipation of 'natural capital' under industrial production, proposals for more economic growth in order to 'fund' good environmental management are simply self-contradictory. If a global free trade regime means that the ecological deficit is increasing and the future is being mortgaged, then the ecosystemic integrity needed for animals and plants to survive is simply incompatible with continued pursuit of neo-liberal policies.

In terms of class interests, the resource extraction and manufacture necessary to meet human needs through industrial production actually generate social inequalities by requiring armies of labour, commanded by management, itself responsible to a corporate hierarchy. But beyond this paid labour force exists another class, rarely mentioned. Salaried workers are themselves usually maintained by women's domestic labour in the North and women food farmers in the South. This is where gender interests come in. UNDP and ILO publications consistently report that women—half the global population—put in two-thirds of all work—for less than one-twentieth of all wages paid. It is therefore incoherent to suggest that equality can be achieved in a predatory system such as this. Squeezing more productivity out of the global economy, in order to allow a trickle down of benefits to those at the bottom, means that the recipients will have to work harder for less in order to receive! Besides, recent work-place rationalisations indicate that neo-liberal fine tuning actually distributes income upwards in the class relationships. This tacit incentive system, in turn, underwrites the loyalty of governments to the corporate movers of globalisation.

Class and gender relationships are interconnected with race and ethnicity in complex ways. Economic colonisation by the North, intensified now by free trade and technology transfer, has always depended on the creation of a 'new class' in the subject country. The foreign power cultivates this new ruling class through business and educational rewards, and this local elites are then relied upon to shift the resources of their community toward the imported lifestyle they share with their colonisers. The establishment of free-trade zones and assisted bio-piracy are cases in point. Meanwhile, the resultant displacement of workers from the South conveniently provides cheap migrant labour in the North, as people leave their homes desperately in search of new means of subsistence. When environmental philosophers from the North argue that people of the South want what they themselves have, they overlook the manifold sociology of colonisation, including benefits that they themselves derive from it.

They also essentialise the South as one voice, falsely assuming it to be ‘naturally poor’.

Colonisation sets up class conflicts, gender strife, and ethnic tensions, between those who succumb to external pressures and those who want to protect their traditions and see cultural diversity flourish. As Indian ecofeminist and former physicist Vandana Shiva notes, under neo-liberalism, governments re-direct subsidies from the poor to transnational corporations and diversity is replaced by the global junk food monoculture. The majority perspective in the South is quite distinct in fact from that of its manipulated ruling class. Moreover:

... perceived poverty may not be real material poverty: subsistence economies which satisfy basic needs through self provisioning are not poor in the sense of being deprived ... millets are nutritionally far superior to processed foods, houses built with local materials are ... better adapted to the local climate.³

In considering notions of poverty taken for granted by unreflective consumers in the North, it is also worth revisiting sociologist Serge Latouche’s comment on globalisation:

If we were to pursue a true and genuine internationalism, or universalism, the proper approach would be to invite ‘experts’ from the last remaining ‘primitive’ regions of the world to draw up a list of the ‘lacks’ from which we, the people of the developed countries, suffer: loneliness, depression, stress, neuroses, insecurity, violence, crime rates, and so on.⁴

What is badly named ‘development’ actually pulverises communities as much as it decimates ecosystems. Under the dominant neo-liberal ideology, the fracturing of life on Earth is expressed politically as many competing voices—ecological, feminist, socialist, indigenous. But the much-celebrated pluralism of the metropolitan democracies is, in practice, a series of disheartening trade-offs that pit one movement grouping against the other. So far, no unifying political theory has presented class, race, gender and species domination as inherently joined. But ecofeminism comes close to this, offering a conceptual frame that addresses these apparently single-issue concerns simultaneously. For over two decades, ecofeminist ideas have been emerging from women activists scattered in communities across several continents. Ecofeminism is now both a grassroots social change movement and a form of discourse analysis. It rests on the insight that the current global crisis is an outcome of unreflected Eurocentric capitalist patriarchal behaviours and values. Thus, by an ecofeminist standpoint—equality in diversity, cultural autonomy and ecological sustainability become interlocking objectives. In the South, ecofeminist leaders may be peasant or indigenous women; in the North, they may be housewives or academics.

3. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 10.

4. Serge Latouche, *In the Wake of the Affluent Society*, M. O’Connor and R. Arnoux, trans. (London: Zed Books, 1993), p. 201.

Ecofeminists draw on a variety of models in their analyses, but the present argument is articulated as an ‘embodied materialism’. In philosophical terms, this implies an ontology of internal relations, a dialectical epistemology, a precautionary ethic and a bioregional politics.⁵ *A priori* to this embodied materialism is an assumption that the industrialised form of provisioning is already empirically demonstrated to be incompatible with social equality, cultural diversity and ecological sustainability.⁶ In fact, the search for an alternative way of satisfying daily needs calls for nothing less than a fresh epistemological orientation—at least in the North whose civilisation is responsible for the global crisis. The argument to be made here suggests that in the South, at least in areas that are relatively uncolonised, other cognitive styles are already practised and that many environmental philosophers might usefully learn from these.⁷

The ecological crisis is at root a social one. Eurocentric philosophy, science and economics, evolved by elective affinity with urban industrialisation and each continues to serve it by objectifying nature as inert. This reductive anthropocentrism commemorates life as intention and domination above all else. Optics guided men in focusing on discrete objects, the art of aiming the canon in war, perspective drawing and causal argument; each would project mastery by linear technique. Thinking by means of sharply bounded identities arranged in an either/or grid became essential to defining humanity over and above the nature that it abusively exploits. Similarly, dualism was essential to social control by race and gender demarcations.

This instrumental positivism that typifies knowledge disciplines of the North, is hopelessly inadequate when it comes to sound environmental practice—interventions in complex webs of energy exchange, where each part resonates information from the whole. On the other hand, in everyday life, ordinary humans rarely pursue a single trajectory, but create order out of chaos by calling diverse sets of internal relations into focus. Women do this as they mediate conflicts in family life. Peasants catalyse biological transfers between hens, cows and orchard plots. People who work with all their senses together, come to a kinaesthetic awareness of the multiple timings embedded in what is handled. As agents of complexity, they synchronise their labour with the rhythms of organic growth. One might call this a ‘barefoot epistemology’.

5. What follows is argued more fully in Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books/New York: St Martins Press, 1997).
6. Ted Trainer, *Abandon Affluence* (London: Zed Books, 1985). See also Orton, ‘Commentary on the Ecological Footprint’; Wackernagel and Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint*; Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism* (London: Earthscan, 1997).
7. In *Ecofeminism as Politics* (1997) I introduce the term ‘meta-industrial’ to designate a hitherto unrecognised class whose labours and value orientation in relation to ‘nature’ leave them at the margins the tele-pharmo-nuclear complex. Strictly speaking, meta-industrial groupings such as women domestic workers, subsistence farmers, and indigenous peoples, are both inside and outside of the dominant hegemony. They are inside in as much as they are essential ‘resources’ but as political ‘subjects’ they are largely outside. At an existential level, this structural contradiction is a source of insight and political motivation (viz. my chapter 11—‘agents of complexity’). The term ‘meta-industrial’ thus has both positive (immanent) and normative (transcendent) senses.

An embodied materialism

A materialist approach to ecofeminism is guided by Marx's profound understanding of the dialectic between our practical actions in the world—labour—and the form that our thought processes take. However, Marx's model was biased toward industrial labour and the production of things, 'men's work' as distinct from women's socially given reproductive activities. So, an ecofeminist approach must fill out the gaps in the master's historical materialism: his philosophic silence on 'women' and on 'nature', marginalised subjects in an otherwise radical analysis. Ecofeminist politics can re-embodiment materialism and in doing this, the notion of reproductive labour becomes central. Reproduction means to be engaged in nurturing living processes by enhancing our human interchange with nature. Such labours give rise to kinds of knowing that defy the Eurocentric definition of humanity as distinct from nature. Socially reproductive domestic work for example, is a process by which women have traditionally mediated nature for men as they cook and clean, tend young, old, and sexual bodies. But sustaining reproductive labour is not necessarily gendered.

Subsistence farming and hunter gathering by men also mediates humanity and nature without turning it into dead matter as industrial workers have been forced to do. Obviously, women and men caught up in urban consumer societies have less direct give and take with so called external nature than cottage dwelling folk once did. But in the international division of labour, indigenous peoples and Third World farmers are still bound up in care for earthly cycles, albeit increasingly compromised by technology transfer. In environmental terms, subsistence agriculture is low in energy input and pollution output, and it preserves biodiversity as it goes. Moreover, since four-fifths of the world's food is provided by this meta-industrial class in the South, its labour should be of great significance in the global economy. Why is this not the case?

In conventional political economy, where production of objects for exchange is prioritised, the reproduction of daily needs and the reproduction of future generations remains invisible. It is reduced to a taken for granted background 'condition of production'.⁸ Even so, the socially reproductive labours of mothers, wives, housekeepers, or slaves, continue to be an essential backup to factory production. At further remove in the global economic gestalt, are those colonised others, whose labours and lands generate the resource surplus from which First World citizens draw leisured hours for speculation and such. Whether domestic care givers or peasant farmers, these meta-industrial workers have hands-on knowledge of sustaining labours in a remarkable metabolism with nature. Additionally, if democracy still means anything at all, this sociologically nameless reproductive class constitutes a statistical majority globally. So, in the search for an epistemology and an ethic that is both practical and just, it makes sense to hear its voice.

If the discipline of environmental ethics is succumbing to the futility of neo-liberalism, perhaps it might consider the good sense of an epistemology

8. In the ecofeminist literature, men are spoken of as colonising women's lives in political, economic, social and sexual ways.

based on 'working in/with nature'? According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the word 'indigenous' means: 'native, belonging to soil'. So women's various reproductive labours almost universally mediate nature for men—she tends the herb garden, shakes out the mat where he rests his feet. This nature–woman–labour nexus generates hands-on knowledge that is marginalised and devalued by urban industrial productivist economics—even in an era of biopiracy, when the results of such labour are appropriated and patented by corporations in the North.

Among housewives, and increasingly househusbands, the nexus of reproductive activities may include: growing food, historically assigned household chores, birthing and suckling labours, creating and implanting meanings in the next generation. Similarly, peasant and indigenous men and women are organically and discursively implicated in the energy exchanges of their habitat and like domestic workers, they develop practical expertise attuned to that materiality. In the labour transaction between humanity and nature so-called good farmers foster the earth to metabolise these connections; women give up their bodies as alchemists to make life. This is why I argue in *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* that in the North, it is usually grassroots housewives, as opposed to so-called emancipated feminists, who are the strongest fighters for ecology. Likewise, in the Third World, it is subsistence farmers and indigenous hunter-gatherers who come to environmental politics with clarity and a materially grounded conviction from their communities.⁹

Workers skilled in sustaining care, usually have a moral sensibility finely honed by experiences of exploitation and suffering in a world wide economy designed primarily to benefit metropolitan middle class men. Epistemologically speaking, the enduring time frame of meta-industrial workers is simply not compatible with the truncated horizon of a profit driven market. Nor do they find the reductive and controlling practices of Eurocentric science appropriate to the maintenance of living things. It is plain that the idealised methodological separations of subject and object, fact and value have a common history with the rise of liberal individualism and positivist law. But in contrast to the self interested maximisations known these days as 'best practice', sustaining labours involve following through long-term goals in complex socially and ecologically interrelated systems. In contrast to planning with crudely abstracted statistical indicators, the indigenous labour process in the South and gendered labour processes in the North, know their material intimately.

A finely reasoned account of vernacular labours immersed in details of the physical world, can be found in several ecofeminist texts. And here I will refer to writing by Vandana Shiva, German ecology activist Ulla Terlinden and US philosopher Sara Ruddick. As the latter reminds us, maintaining a household requires harmonising a complex of sub-systems, as well as considerable decision-making and diplomatic skills. Note too, that to re-appraise the labours of social reproduction is not to argue from victim-hood, that oppressed women have a monopoly on good behaviour, nor to fall back into unreconstructed masculinist readings of some innate essential naturalness, or pro-family assertions about

9. Guha and Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*.

moral superiority of the female sex. This ecofeminist analysis uses a materialist analysis based on forms of embodied labour.

In this sense, Shiva's account of Indian forest dwellers is a paradigmatic statement of material agency in complexity:

It is in managing the integrity of ecological cycles in forestry and agriculture that women's productivity has been most developed and evolved. Women transfer fertility from the forests to the field and to animals. They transfer animal waste as fertiliser for crops and crop by-products to animals as fodder. This partnership between women's work and nature's work ensures the sustainability of sustenance.¹⁰

In a parallel vein, Terlinden describes the implicit 'systems' epistemology of domestic workers in the North:

Housework requires of women [or men] a broad range of knowledge and ability. The nature of the work itself determines its organisation. The work at hand must be dealt with in its entirety. ... The worker must possess a high degree of personal synthesis, initiative, intuition and flexibility.¹¹

Contrast this total engagement with the fragmented industrial division of labour and the numb inconsequential political mindset that it gives rise to. In discussing parental skills, Ruddick introduces a concept of 'holding' labour, which embodies knowledge that is quintessential to good ecological reasoning:

To hold means to minimize risk and to reconcile differences rather than to sharply accentuate them. Holding is a way of seeing with an eye toward maintaining the minimal harmony, material resources, and skills necessary for sustaining a child in safety. It is the attitude elicited by world protection, world-preservation, world repair ...¹²

Paradoxically, while minimising risk, holding is the ultimate expression of adaptability. As opposed to the physicist's separation of space-time, interconnectedness is commonsense in the mater/reality. With ecofeminism, this precautionary principle comes to be applied beyond home and neighbourhood to moral action in society at large.

Holding as epistemology and ethic

Holding is equally apparent among indigenous peoples in their reproductive labours to ward off environmental entropy. Australian Aboriginal workers traditionally practice a kind of holding as they move through country, and this

10. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, p. 45.

11. Ulla Terlinden, 'Women in the Ecology Movement', in E. Altbach *et al.*, eds, *German Feminism* (Albany: SUNY, 1984), p. 320.

12. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), p. 79.

too, nurtures sustainability.¹³ Hunter gathering peoples do not package land into legal title for fear of losing it. They make their walk in the knowledge that each habitat will replenish and provide for them again when they return. Self-managed Aboriginal provisioning is not only ecologically benign, it creatively meets many social needs at once: subsistence, learning, participation, innovation, ritual, identity and belonging, freedom and partnership with nature. Indigenous peoples are known to achieve their high quality of life with only three hours work a day. On the other hand, the engineered satisfiers of modern industrial societies like bureaucracies or cars, cost great effort and frequently end up sabotaging the very convenience they were designed for.¹⁴

Humanity and nature constitute a single thermodynamic web. So reproductive labours embedded in a matrix of social relations, are sustained by subsistence activities embedded in cycles of biological time. In the care-giving labour which Ruddick names mothering practice, a woman, or man, has no choice but deal with material before her. Unlike the economist, she cannot invent categories to deny what is natural. What characterises her understanding is a dialectic of reciprocity with what the environment provides. Marxist-feminist Nancy Hartsock has noted how this gentle labour by mediation distinguishes enduring work from proletarian labour, which under the North's free market growth ethic must break nature's back at the master's command. Historian of science Evelyn Fox Keller's notion of non-gendered research echoes the theme of subject-object collaboration. Epistemologically, nature is known here as a subject with a heart of its own, and one that pulses through our own body cells.¹⁵

Some critics have charged that an ethic of care is undemocratic because it privileges qualities of a particular group. But the learned skills of holding labours are open to any group who chooses to work at the socially constructed margin where culture meets nature. In fact, a respect for the enduring time frames of reproductive labour is profoundly democratic. It challenges all existing political stratifications, including the split between men's and women's traditional labour roles, as much as the 'speciesist' split between humanity and 'other nature'. In making a case for an embodied materialist epistemology experientially grounded in meta-industrial nurture, I also emphasise that while we are all environmentally determined to a degree, we also daily re-make the conditions of our existence. This ecofeminist argument is neither essentialist, nor assumes any fixed end-state for human society. The dialectical notion of praxis implies a continuous culturally mediated physical conversation between our bodies and their milieu.

Living things are joined across time as well as space; an indwelling structure invisible to positivist science and economics which prioritises the eye over all other senses and counting over all other cognitive capacities. Seemingly obli-

13. Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), p. 68.
14. Manfred Max-Neef *et al.*, *Human Scale Development* (New York: Apex, 1991).
15. Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power* (Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1985); Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1983).

ous to the pulse of life, Eurocentric reason and its instruments cut across nature's intricate score. Consider, agroforestry, mining, nuclear weapons, road transport, genetic engineering, where the plan is management, but complex metabolic rhythms are disrupted and ecological disintegration results. Under capitalist patriarchal industrial production, abstract dis/located knowledge called expertise, generates merely an illusion of human choice and control, but the North's myth of management is protected by the professional elite's labelling of unanticipated consequences as accidents.

Conceptualising the ecosystem as a web of internal relations calls for a radical non-'identitarian' logic where process replaces fixed categories. Everything is both this/and that. How do we talk about this dialectic in every day life? Typically, in caring for sick infants and aging parents, women workers become highly skilled in coping with non-identity, permeability and contamination of boundaries. Bodies as nature, wither and ooze, but sustaining labours are about holding these moments of transformation—in the bedroom or in the field. But most metropolitan men are taught to be contemptuous of bodily flows, waste and soil. Eurocentric languages and institutions offer an armoury of externalising, idealising gestures to bolster masculine separateness from matter. But what our brothers can end up with is desensitisation, a false sense of individualism, crippling loneliness and destructive compensatory drives.

Different ways of living and working yield different psychologies. Thus holding labours open people to an embodied self-consciousness quite at odds with the *cogito* of the masculine unitary subject. Women, says ecofeminist methodologist Maria Mies, are inclined to work out their ethical responsibilities integrating thought and feeling in relational context.¹⁶ Such an approach calls us away from strategic calculation of optimisations and abstract formulae like rights, into an extrapolation of caring experience. Holding as both epistemology and ethic is based neither on instrumental control of others, nor suddenly 'waking up' deep ecological style to some ephemeral cosmic fusion. An embodied materialism rests on practical deferral to the matter at hand and as such it is intrinsically precautionary. Such labour practices exemplify a strong and flexible de-centred subjectivity, implicated in many layers of time at once; a relation self grounded, in place.

As suggested above, an embodied materialism implies an ontology of internal relations, a dialectical epistemology, a precautionary ethic and a bioregional politics. It celebrates the qualities of engagement that an unnamed class—housewives, subsistence farmers and forest dwellers, bring to their provisioning in partnership with nature. In contrast to the profoundly alienated labour of conventional political economy, these workers carry an alternative way of knowing and doing. In fact, it is this experience outside of the dominant productivist time frame, that provides the possibility of a grounded political vision and solidarity between meta-industrial labour North and South. Their insights and skills are sorely needed for building an Earth democracy beyond the divisive plurality of neo-liberal, socialist, post-colonial, feminist and ecological politics.

16. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

This transvaluation of reproductive labour coincides with the respect that development critic Wolfgang Sachs's accords to 'societies which live graciously within their means and for social changes which take their inspiration from indigenous ideas of the good and proper life.'¹⁷ But more, it supports the crucial insight of perceptive workers in the South that the protection of bio-diversity will depend on the protection of cultural diversity. Acknowledging the meta-industrial class does not mean walking backwards in history as liberals, mainstream feminists and high tech fundamentalists, sometimes claim. In fact, their very notion of linear progress is itself part of the problem. Rather, opening up to a barefoot epistemology means questioning old industrial habits of thought and being more fully sensitive to where we tread.

17. Wolfgang Sachs, *Global Ecology* (London: Zed Books, 1994), p. 4.

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