

social movements and places co-operative humanity in its multifaceted richness at the centre of its perspective and practice will necessarily radically differ from the socialism of modernity. Certainly any emphasis on the state as the public institution which carries the co-operative relation will have to be significantly displaced. This is not because the state is discredited; rather it is because the central task in postmodern circumstances is to dominate the information and image revolution.

How to do this must remain an open question for the immediate future but it is not easy to see how it could be achieved without a cultural politics able to critique the varied expressions of that revolution; a politics able to support the renewal of relations of presence as a ground for the generation of new forms of co-operation in everyday settings. A politics in this mode presupposes reflexive persons: public individuals with some sense of proportion as to the ways in which the diverse levels of social practice and interchange might be combined within the lived reality of social life.

Within this perspective the crisis of socialism is merely one expression of a more general crisis of state and market as the focii of political strategy. In turn, it can be seen to be a crisis of intellectual practice generally. As never before, the thinker must choose. Do we opt for the mental-manual division of labour and seek 'respectability' within a social form dominated by the new relation between the intellectually related strata and capital? Or do we act with more humility before broad humanity and, rather than make the everyday over in our image by means of the technological fix, seek a renewed relation between thinker and public and between the technical and the morally interpretive faces of rationality? Do we have the resources and reflective insight to reject a one-dimensional place of influence in a reconstituted class form or do we drift along waiting for public revulsion to emerge towards the project of an instrumentalized humanity?

'Essentialism' — and Eco-feminism

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Back in 1984, an influential harbinger of anti-essentialist rhetoric wrote: '... feminist theory has moved from an emphasis on the elimination of gender difference to a celebration of that difference as a source of moral values ...' Overlooking a fairly obvious *non sequitur*, Hester Eisenstein went on to claim 'this view conceals a new biologism'. She also pointed to 'false universalism' and 'metaphysical feminism' as pitfalls related to essentialism. On the other hand, the same author went on to affirm that a '... woman-centered perspective ... is essential to the foundation of a newly just society. The socially constructed virtues of women, the result of their long subordination, have redeeming qualities for all human beings. Women's capacities to nurture, to affiliate with others, to work collectively, are all crucial ...'¹ As feminism moved through the '80s, the term 'essentialism' became used popularly by liberal and Left-identified feminists to invalidate women writing about 'feminine difference'. As in the above example, this often happened regardless of whether their texts were talking about an 'experientially constructed' feminine or a 'biological' one.² While anti-essentialist voices might unwittingly conflate them, the two 'orders of reality' were supposed to be kept strictly separate. The latter was not to be discussed. The possibility of an interaction between 'experience' and 'biology' was certainly not entertained.

The invocation of 'essentialism' contrived to close debate by suggesting dogma with which no reasonable argument could be had. A feminist essentialist for example, was said to have not

read history; to believe in an innate and universal femininity; to ignore the impact of cultural context in shaping consciousness and action; and at very worst, to promote biological reductionism. It was feared that feminist essentialism would play into the hands of everyday commonsense patriarchal logic (or rather fantasy), which itself, constructs the notion of 'womanhood' by similar means. Essentialism was understood to be unreflexive, unreconstructed, literalist and fundamentalist. Yet it is hard to see how any contemporary feminist who has completed the obligatory work-out through psychoanalysis, marxism, discourse analysis and other aerobic forms, could put pen to paper in an essentialist fashion.

In fact, real instances of 'essentialism' are quite rare in the literature of feminism. It turns out that 'the floating signifier' was usually pinned on to a text because discussion had moved into an area either too complex conceptually for the reader, too murky emotionally, or both. Women's perplexity over how to theorize 'the feminine body' recurred as an area of such confusion; one marred by random imputations of essentialism, exacerbated by the 'history' versus 'nature' tension ingrained in Western ideologies, radical to conservative. In other words, the phantom of essentialism was, and still is, called-up at the point of desperation. Or as Gayatri Spivak has observed: '... used by non-philosophers simply to mean all kinds of things, when they don't know what other word to use ... anti-essentialism is a way of not doing one's homework'.³

As noted above, 'nature' or 'the body' need not be under scrutiny at all for the label 'essentialist' to be drawn in. Often it will be applied simply to an analysis of what is specific to, and commonly shared in, the experience of women. To examine 'specificity' however, is not necessarily to write ahistorically; nor to create false universals; nor to ignore cross-cultural variability; nor even lapse of biologism. One leftist philosopher, Kate Soper, has recently arrived at this conclusion herself. There are, she maintains,

1. Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1984, pp. xvii-xix. Also pp. 132-5.
2. For a recent example: Julie Stephens, 'Rejoinder', *Arena*, no. 91, 1990. The patriarchal backlash has also taken to using anti-essentialist rhetoric to defend basically masculine positions, viz. Michael Zimmerman, 'Feminism, Deep Ecology and Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 9, 1987.
3. Gayatri Spivak with Ellen Rooney, 'In a Word: interview', *differences*, vol. 1, Summer, 1989, pp. 132-3.

... experiences differently experienced by virtue of which sex you happen to be, and in that sense, they are universally differentiated between the sexes. It is this sex specific, but universal quality of certain conditions of general experience, which justifies and gives meaning to collective gender categories.⁴

What is puzzling is why marxists are not charged with essentialism for describing specifics and commonalities in the condition of working-class people in Britain, say, and the Philippines? In any event, the political consequence of discounting shared specificities in the lot of oppressed groups is a plurality of 'differences', and Weberian inertia, which pulverizes any chance of collective consciousness for change. Mid-West US liberalism holds up its suburban complacency with just such a technique. So does California's New Age yuppyism. Not to mention Paris' *Nouveau Philosophes*, who broke on to the scene with the help of *Time Magazine* a decade or more ago. All were patented in the same factory.

For critical thinkers and (some) post-structuralists, there is an even deeper epistemological issue deflected by the fear of 'essentialism'. This is the linguistic 'representation', or really, non-representation of women in cultures where patriarchalism prevails. Recognition of this phenomenon introduces an *exacting* demand for men and women who would think about gendered life. Teresa de Lauretis affirms that understanding when she points to how sexual difference must be thought through categories themselves discursively supported by the non-thinking of difference. Addressing that moment in history when women reach out to express something as yet unformed, a 'feminine-political' space, she writes: 'A freedom that, paradoxically, demands no vindication of the rights of women, no equal rights under the law, but only a full, political and personal accountability to women, is as startlingly radical a notion as any that has emerged in Western thought'.⁵

Of course, this sense of women's accountability *qua* women equally emerges outside of Western thought, as evidenced by Third World women's activism. And it emerges there, rather more smoothly than in the West where it tends to get saddled with the baggage of marxism and other master narratives. But going back to the 'feminine-political', de Lauretis says:

It is bound to appear reductive, idealist, essentialist, even reactionary,

4. Kate Soper, 'Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 55, Summer, 1990, p. 16.
5. Teresa de Lauretis, 'The Essence of the Triangle', *differences*, vol. 1, Summer, 1989, p. 26.

unless one keeps in mind, first, the [patriarchal] paradox on which it is founded and which has been the first task of feminist thought to disentangle—the paradox of woman, a being that is at once both captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as a spectacle and yet unrepresented; a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled.⁶

De Lauretis goes on to point out that this paradox is not just discursive, but grounded in a real contradiction for women in a social world designed and governed by men. She surmises that the Anglo-American obsession with 'the pitfall of essentialism' speaks an inability to grasp the symbolic devices of patriarchal power. And, one might add, the dead-weight of academic nominalism has done nothing to help it.⁷

Having now established a case for 'the feminine' (nominalism not withstanding), Soper believes feminism should proceed in two rather contrary directions at once—critiquing essentialism and retaining gender specific but universal categories of 'woman' and 'female experience'. Despite this apparent dialectic, however, her political focus is still linear, contained by a sort of interest group politics. Eisenstein's vision likewise, is thoroughly corseted by a narrowly 'feminist' emancipation. For her, '... the view of women as an eternal "essence", represents a retreat from the fundamentally liberating concept of woman as agent, actor and subject...'⁸ More *non sequiturs*. Eisenstein does not see that women might yet have their rice and eat it: that is, affirm 'a specific feminine identity' and turn patriarchy on its head at the same time. An ecologically oriented feminism does just this, drawing on the Woman/Nature theme so problematic to would-be anti-essentialists. What eco-feminism 'unpacks' is the complex and over-determined positioning of women along with nature in mythology and language; in the gendered division of labour, where women's work traditionally mediates nature and culture; and in the impact of women's reproductive experience, as this, in turn, is shaped by myth, language, and a social division of labour. There are cross-cultural variations in this picture, but there is also much overlap. But the crucial point is that the insights which stem from exposure of the Woman/Nature objectification teach

6. de Lauretis, p. 26.

7. Nominalism: 'the philosophical theory that a general word, such as dog, is merely a name and does not denote a real object...', *Collins Paperback English Dictionary*, London, Collins, 1986, p. 572. This tendency has predominated in twentieth-century Anglo academic philosophy with politically stultifying effects.

8. Eisenstein, p. 135.

us that feminist struggle and ecological struggle is one and the same politics.

It follows then, that apart from political and epistemological losses to women brought about by misguided attributions of essentialism, there are broader social and ecological costs as well. In the majority of extant cultures, women are not 'represented' precisely because they are treated 'like nature', as a condition of production. Like nature, woman has 'no subjectivity to speak of'. Now when ecological feminists take up the question of human embeddedness in nature, anti-essentialists start to see flashing lights. Marx himself explored the human metabolism with nature (albeit in a typically instrumental way to nature's disadvantage), yet this project did not lead him to abandon the constitutive role of history/ideology. On the other hand, women whose inquiry revives this aspect of the master narrative, are pulled up short by their socialist and other sisters for wielding 'the floating signifier', essentialism.

It is a political fact that over the last decade or more, a movement known as eco-feminism has spontaneously emerged to complement the formulations of a predominantly Anglo-Celtic feminism. Its 'centres' are as disparate as Finland, Venezuela, France, Australia, the United States of America, Kenya, Germany and the South Pacific Islands. The forms of activism chosen by such women, and their 'stories' (or analyses), developed quite independently of each other, yet they share astonishing commonalities based on their lived experiences as women. The underlying eco-feminist premise is that the exploitation of 'women' in patriarchal cultures runs parallel to the abuse of 'nature'.⁹ We see this at work in the harvesting of female bodies through *in vitro* fertilization and surrogacy experimentation; and equally, in the fact that women, an 'invisible' resource, put in seventy per cent of global 'labour' time. In various ways eco-feminists confront this social construction of women's lot and the confabulation of women's 'non-identity' in patriarchal languages—Western, and often 'other'. But anti-essentialists approach this project simplis-

9. Two representative eco-feminist books are—Rosemary Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, New York, Dove, 1975; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*, London, Zed, 1989. While eco-feminist activism is well developed in Australia, few feminists with an academic background have tried to write about feminism from an ecological perspective (or ecological revolution from a feminist one). The authors 'Of Portnoy's Complaint and Feminist Problematics', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 17, 1981, was an early attempt. Lorraine Mortimer, 'What If I talked like a Woman, right here in public?', *Arena*, no. 92, 1990, approaches an eco-feminist stance.

tically, seeing it as an endorsement of the traditional sentiment that women 'are closer to nature' and therefore 'inferior'. In their literalism however, the anti's bypass the epistemological paradox at the root of women's unspoken reality, so losing the potent political negativity contained in notions of 'the feminine'.

None of this should suggest that feminism is reaching a point of no return along a road to political and sexual apartheid; another regular, but false reason for anxiety over 'essentialism'. Here lurks a mistaken bracketing together of (a) talk about 'feminine difference', with (b) radical or cultural feminism, or lesbian separatism. It is true that such groups within the women's movement have avidly explored 'the politics of difference' and their practice has entailed an immediate, thorough (albeit often single-issue) defiance of men's oppression. But an association of the 'feminine-political' with separatism, is an historical rather than logically necessary position. Again, to insist on paying attention to the 'specificity' of women's condition is not simply a path to rampant feminist individualism. This is yet another *non sequitur*. Instead, such insistence proffers an invitation to colleagues, friends, lovers, who are gender masculine, to examine the integral tie of personal to political. Women in socialist and Green groups are actively grappling with the 'non-representation' problem in the context of broader political transformations. Such efforts deepen the general movement towards equality and sustainability, challenging an ever-ready instrumentalist technological fix as they go.¹⁰

Now work to deconstruct an unconscious patriarchal identification of women with nature—an attitude which has severed men's own sense of embeddedness, *viz.* the neurotic history versus nature split in modern Western culture, introduces a theoretical common-denominator to unify feminist, socialist and ecological activism. It seeks to re-define the relation of men to women, and of both to nature so-called. But that can only happen once 'nature' is no longer fixated as a mere object outside of and separate from humans. The word pulls this way in Western thought structures (both nominalist and essentializing), leading us to forget that we are also 'of nature', while yet transforming ourselves through 'it'. There is an interesting and logical parallel here with de Lauretis' comment on the difficulty of thinking about 'difference' (the relation of men to women) through categories themselves discursively supported by the non-thinking of difference. Likewise the human (usually men's) relation to nature

must be thought through categories themselves supported by the non-thinking of that relation. This conceptual device has kept both nature and women downgraded, serving a patriarchal need to repress/dis-member the originary source/s of material existence, and inhibiting men's reflexivity about their embeddedness in relations with women and nature. Global crisis is an outcome of practices, including economics, invested with this irrational belief. And the feminist phobia about essentialism is an extension of it.

Ecological crisis re-frames history. It has undercut the given direction of institutions originating in the cry *Liberte-Equalite-Fraternite* (*sic!*). The old politics such as liberalism with its freedom fetish, or socialist economism and statism, only gets to pursue its ends one at a time. It is invariably linear, single-issue and self-defeating. On the other hand, our new concerns, Community-Equality-Sustainability, are closely interlinked. It is one and the same struggle from an eco-feminist point of view. At both global (imperialist) and local (personal) levels, eco-feminists want to see relations of production and reproduction co-operatively re-arranged among men and women and 'nature'. And in such a way that freedom is joyfully grounded in necessity. In the meantime, a sound and loving politics will advance each concern together, without cost to the other. Accordingly, an internal critique of some feminist standpoints is urgent; same too for most socialisms; and the environment movement—including its soft face, deep ecology.

So to return to the floating signifier. Feminists and fellow travellers might take care that the charge 'guilty by essentialism' does not misconstrue the analysis of women's 'specificity'. Their abstinence leads to theory which is epistemologically unsustainable and socially barren. It fails to understand that to re-articulate and re-value what is called feminine as a source of institutional alternatives, temporarily positivizes a 'negative' in order to carry through a moment of political negation. A celebration of 'feminine difference' by and even in men as much as in women, and the reclamation of 'nature' that this implies—people caring and earth caring—is what the present conjuncture thirsts for. There is nothing essentialist, ahistorical, particularistic, about this communal intervention. It is a kind of transitional practice, restoring balance to a predominantly 'masculine' life-form that staggers on the brink.

10. Ariel Salleh, 'Deeper than Deep Ecology: the Eco-Feminist Connection', *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 6, 1984.