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## ***SYMPOSIUM: ECOFEMINIST DIALOGUES***

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### **Towards an Inclusive Solidarity on the Left: Editor's Introduction**

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Several of us around the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* have been aware of the need for more en/gendered political theory and the need to integrate ecosocialist and ecofeminist insights where possible. As Joel Kovel observes, a partnership between the two approaches is essential to bring lasting social change.

Over the years, *CNS* has published a number of ecofeminist pieces, although it should be noted that articles on women as “objects” of injustice and environmental degradation using a mainstream liberal, feminist, or Marxist frame are not necessarily ecofeminist in conception.<sup>1</sup> Ecofeminists speak as “subjects” creating a “political discourse” meaningful to the experience of being “resourced as nature” under capitalist patriarchal economic practices. Ecofeminism is womanist rather than feminist; it is a global movement centered on locality and life needs. Such a politics

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<sup>1</sup>Ecofeminist material published by *CNS* includes: 1990, review of Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation*; 1991 discussion by Salleh, O'Connor, and Faber on “caring labor”; a review of Hynes's *Recurring Silent Spring*; 1992 Holland-Cunz interview; 1993 reviews: Mellor's *Beyond the Boundaries*, Rodda's *Women and Environments*, Biehl's *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*; Women Population & Environment, “Call for a New Approach”; 1994, Carlssare, “Destabilizing the Criticism of Essentialism”; 1995, Salleh, “Nature, Woman, Labor, Capital: Living the Deepest Contradiction”; 1996, Dalla Costa, “Capitalism and Reproduction”; 1997, Bari, “Revolutionary Ecology”; review: Rao's *Dry Wells and Deserted Women*; 1998, review: Warren's *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*; 1999 reviews: Shiva's *Biopiracy*, Mellor's *Feminism and Ecology*, Gaard's *Ecofeminism and the Greens*; 2001, Plumwood, “Nature as Agency”; 2003, Salleh, “Ecofeminism as Sociology”; reviews: Bennholdt-Thomsen's *There is An Alternative*; Naples and Desai's *Women's Activism and Globalization*; Clark, “Ecofeminist Lessons for Social Ecology”; 2004, Federici, “The Great Caliban: Struggle For the Rebel Body”; review: Eaton's *Ecofeminism and Globalization*; Turner and Brownhill, “We Want Our Land Back: Gendered Class Analysis, the Second Contradiction of Capitalism and Social Movement Theory”; Mies interview at Mumbai; review: Schaff's *Seeing Through Gender*; Grossholtz, “The Cotton Campaign”; 2005 reviews: Shiva's *Water Wars*, Engelhardt's *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*; Salleh, “Editorial: Moving to an Embodied Materialism”; Isla, “Conservation as Enclosure: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Sustainable Development in Costa Rica”; Godfrey, “Diane Wilson vs. Union Carbide: The Elitist Charge of Essentialism”; 2006, Mies, “‘War is the Father of All Things’ (Heraclitus) ‘But Nature is the Mother of All Life’ (Claudia von Werlhof)”; Mallory, “Ecofeminism and Forest Defense in Cascadia: Gender, Theory and Radical Activism”; Shultz, “Dissolved Boundaries and Affective Labor”; Pietila interview, “We in the North are the Biggest Problem for the South”; Hawthorne, “Ecofeminism in Two Worlds.”

of everyday struggle is by definition dynamic and materialist—certainly not essentialist, as some critics like to claim. The logic of ecofeminism is also intrinsically integrative—a gift to the alter-globalization movement, dependent as it is on allying between worker, postcolonial, women's, and ecological concerns.

In searching for a common theoretical basis for ecosocialism and ecofeminism, it is important to recognize at the outset that grassroots ecofeminist insights have, over the years, been expressed drawing on various intellectual vocabularies—cultural, postmodern, materialist. Here, clearly, the latter formulation is the subject of discussion. In the first *CNS* ecofeminist editorial “Moving to an Embodied Materialism” (June 2005), I suggested that the encounter between ecosocialists and ecofeminists would be a dialectical process, a praxis spanning three moments: acknowledgement, engagement, and re-conceptualization. Already, the formation of an ecofeminist editorial group in 2003 was an acknowledgement by the *CNS* community that women's perspectives have an important place in ecosocialist thought. This symposium opens up the second moment, a considered dialogue around ecofeminist themes. Now the hard work begins, as we hold our constructs to the light and begin a theoretical re-conceptualization of radical political ecology.

The idea for these “Ecosocialist-Ecofeminist Dialogues” came out of a meeting of ecofeminist editors and interested others at the *CNS* Anniversary Conference at York University in Toronto in July 2005, an event honoring the journal's founding editors—the James O'Connor-Barbara Laurence team. The symposium takes the form of six thoughtful ecosocialist commentaries on six ecofeminist articles published in *CNS* since 2004. In turn, each ecofeminist author develops a rejoinder, emphasizing points of disagreement or areas of misinterpretation that call for more attention in our collective theoretical endeavor.

The exercise was quite unplanned, but a coherent set of shared thematic concerns emerges from it: subsistence, accumulation, the body, labor and class, dialectics, and materialism. A combined ecosocialist-ecofeminist analysis must be, at once, class, race, sex-gender, and “nature” inclusive. And as so many of the essays argue, the mutual goal of ecofeminism and ecosocialism is to draw the social movements together—workers', women's, indigenous, and ecological struggles—in a way that is politically integrative while yet holding on to cultural and bio-diversity.

### **Subsistence**

The symposium opens with an exchange between two highly respected practitioners of our trade: Victor Wallis, editor of the U.S. journal *Socialism and Democracy*, and German ecofeminist Maria Mies. In “Questioning the Subsistence Perspective,” Wallis agrees that Mies' vision of simplicity and communal provisioning is inviting, but he urges that our politics be realistic and achievable. For example, he recommends that the use of advanced technologies, which ecofeminists judge to

be un-just and anti-ecological, be negotiated case by case for particular social contexts. Wallis would proceed cautiously and strategically towards the future.

Mies' rejoinder, "Questioning Needs," spells out a little more about the subsistence perspective—a counter-globalization position not widely understood in the U.S. She stresses that "subsistence" is not about going backwards but about examining alternative ways of human provisioning. Mies' revisits the question of "basic needs," listing these as food and drink, shelter, clothing, affection, love, respect, learning, fantasy, adventure, company, friendship, enjoyment, pleasure, and work. All are subsistence needs, because they are the same for people everywhere, North and South. The subsistence perspective raises major considerations for ecosocialists and others fighting for equality and sustainability on a global scale.

### **Accumulation**

"The Eco-Pre-Fix" by environmental philosophy teacher Robert Chapman, situates the symposium in the context of an established environmental ethics literature. And he queries whether an ecocentric ecosocialism can ever be possible. Chapman gives an appreciative account of Ana Isla's article, "Conservation as Enclosure," a study of corporate biopiracy in Costa Rica and its impacts on nature, women, and indigenous people. His difficulty with ecofeminism arises over "the feminine principle," which he reads as a reactionary notion. This interrogation raises an important issue—the value or otherwise of secondary sources. Philosophers—even the ecofeminist ones that Chapman relies on—often misconstrue the work of materialist ecofeminists, because their analytic approach leads them to discuss hegemonic constructs out of historical context.

Isla's rejoinder to Chapman, "Women, Enclosure, and Accumulation," is a strong essay on colonization, NGO-assisted enclosures, commodification of nature, and the accumulation process. Isla reaffirms the need to recognize a patriarchal contradiction underlying capitalism; and she joins the call for non-anthropocentric class analysis.

### **The Body**

Using an ecofeminist lens, it is a small move from accumulation to "the body" as the ultimate site of material extraction. Under this theme, geographer Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro reflects on Silvia Federici's "Struggle for the Rebel Body," a detailed study of the role of European witch hunts in the formation of capitalism. Engel-Di Mauro has a ready grasp of how "gender" is not simply an add-on to class analysis but is actually constitutive of labor and class relations. He asks: Does ecofeminism, in fact, turn ecosocialism on its head? However,

he also entertains several possible lines of criticism in relation to Federici's thesis, including a postmodern one: Is she sufficiently sensitive to regional specificities?

Longtime scholar and activist Federici takes issue with this in "Capital and the Body," and the rejoinder reasserts her powerful ecofeminist argument that ecosocialist theory must attend to "the primacy of social reproduction."

### **Labor & Class**

Further to the theme of "reproduction," Australian political economist Stuart Rosewarne comments on Terisa Turner's and Leigh Brownhill's article, "We Want Our Land Back," an essay on African women's leadership in opposing corporate colonizers, especially oil raiders. Rosewarne's piece, entitled "Socialist Ecology's Necessary Engagement with Ecofeminism," begins with an explication of James O'Connor's "second contradiction" thesis, in order to situate ecofeminism as a new social movement. He moves on to describe how socialists around the journal *Rethinking Marxism* and ecofeminists have each been carving out a place for subjectivity and "difference" in social theory. Rosewarne contrasts O'Connor's traditional emphasis on the "universality of labor" with ecofeminist constructs like the "hierarchy of labor."

In their reply, "Gendered, Ethnicized, Class Struggle," Canadian ecofeminists Turner and Brownhill challenge what they see as a white masculinist bias in O'Connor's analysis of the "second contradiction" and "conditions of production." Their focus is the current contestation of globalization; a fight to protect the commons, which is led by "reproductive labor"—peasants, housewives, and indigenous peoples.

### **Dialectics**

Staying with the theme of resistance to corporate globalization, scholar and activist, Jesse Goldstein offers a sympathetic reading of sociologist Phoebe Godfrey's article on the toxics campaigner, Diane Wilson. Goldstein's essay, "Ecofeminism in Theory and Praxis," raises important conceptual matters and draws widely from the Marxist literature to amplify these. He explores the contrast between hands-on grassroots activism by ordinary laboring women and the familiar elitist criticism of their gendered-political understanding as "essentialist." Not surprisingly, these critics of ecofeminism are usually armchair socialists or postmodern academics. Goldstein also revisits my own argument on why the charge of essentialism is misplaced when praxis is understood in terms of a "dialectics of identity/non-identity."

Godfrey's brief rejoinder, "Essentialism and the Semantics of Resistance," reaffirms her case that many critics of ecofeminism fail to recognize historicity and materiality in ecofeminist reasoning.

### **Materialism**

Alan Rudy takes issue with my 2005 editorial, "Moving to an Embodied Materialism," and his spirited commentary claims that the ecofeminist literature is unable to provide a coherent political standpoint. On the other hand, as an advocate for a new postmodern ecosocialism, he argues against homogeneity, emphasizing the importance of site specificity in theory. Rudy, a *CNS* editor-at-large, rejects my ecofeminist claim that "an originary or primal contradiction separating humanity from nature" is prior to and informs both the "first and second contradictions." In his view, ecofeminist emphasis on the body and reproductive or "meta-industrial" labor is biologizing, transhistorical, and therefore not materialist.

By way of rejoinder, I, Ariel Salleh, interrogate the value of postmodern epistemologies for Left politics and explore further what "Embodying the Deepest Contradiction" means for us in a lived material sense. I argue that the difficulty some ecosocialists have with "nature" and "reproduction" signifies that their thinking is still touched by the capitalist patriarchal hegemony and its "originary" contradiction.

So, these energetic dialogues bring a new theoretical agenda to the table:

- Is ecofeminism a particular social movement or a universal "class analysis"?
- How are productive and "reproductive labor" dialectically interrelated?
- Is ecofeminism about "feminine difference" or resourcing accumulation?
- What is the economic function of "woman = nature" metaphors?
- What is the ideological purpose of the "essentialism" charge?
- How is gender constitutive of class, and how is "materialism embodied"?
- Is the ecosocialist analysis of "conditions of production" a gendered theory?
- What does it mean to speak of an "originary contradiction"?
- What does "transhistorical" mean in an ecosocialist context?
- Can ecosocialism be reconciled with cultural diversity and "ecocentric" values?

- What “technologies” are compatible with basic needs and global sustainability?
- Is global democracy possible without an ecofeminist “subsistence” perspective?
- Who are revolutionary “agents” in the struggle to hold the global commons?

The intention in setting these political dialogues in motion has been to identify convergencies between ecosocialism and ecofeminism, to articulate divergencies, and to find ways of bridging the two frameworks so that Left theory and practice are deepened. This ongoing project is critical to growing a solidarity that is truly inclusive.