

Ariel Salleh

**Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern**

Zed Books Ltd, London, 1997. pp.208.

ISBN 1-85649-400-4 (pbk) £14.95

Mary Mellor

**Feminism and Ecology**

Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997. pp.221.

ISBN 0-7456-1418-3 (pbk) £12.95

Nancy C.M. Hartsock

**The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays**

Westview Press, Oxford &amp; Boulder, Colorado, 1998. pp.262.

ISBN 0-8133-1558-1 (pbk) £12.50

**F**EMINISM HAS PROVIDED one of the most interesting areas of critique of Marxist theory in recent times. Yet feminist development of Marxism has been largely neglected within mainstream (malestream?) Marxism. The three books reviewed here all provide different critiques of Marx from a feminist perspective. Salleh and Mellor consider themselves ecofeminists.

Hartsock and Mellor employ a feminist standpoint. All write from an explicitly materialist perspective which is described as 'embodied' and 'socially embedded' (Salleh: ix; Mellor: vii; Hartsock: 77). This review focuses on some of the lessons which these authors have for Marxist theory.

All three support a dialectical approach but challenge Marxian ambivalence on the relationship of people to nature. Salleh goes straight to the heart of this problem. Do we follow the Marx and Engels who see a dialectical interplay of Humanity and Nature? Or do we follow the Marx and Engels who embrace 'the old dualism of Humanity versus Nature'? (Salleh: 70-3).

Marx in the *Grundrisse* comments on how humans evolve with nature and so are an intrinsic part of it. But this ecological understanding was undermined by an Enlightenment conviction that reason with technology might shape the 'forward march' of history. Salleh rejects Marx's transcendent ego which seeks the instrumental mastery of nature. She insists that the attempt to control nature

as Other gives rise to class society as men harness the labour power of Others to help subdue the wild. Alienation of workers is rooted in alienation from nature.

This leads to a more fundamental critique of Enlightenment notions of 'freedom' than are provided by either Marxism or postmodernism. The transcendent ego of the Enlightenment seeks freedom from necessity. Ecofeminists like Salleh and Mellor reject such freedom. Transcendence can't be achieved without an Other to do the work of embodiment (Mellor: 101). Salleh supports Engels' observation that 'freedom is the appreciation of necessity' (Salleh: 76). But that should have led to a greater respect for the

**A Triple Review**

by Nigel Lee

sort of knowledge which has been gendered female than Marx and Engels were prepared to accept.

It is not just Enlightenment liberalism of the eighteenth century which is questioned here, but more fundamentally the Cartesian dualism of the seventeenth century which separated mind from matter. This dualism, which is fundamental for Western science, claims that only the human mind has agency (Mellor: 113). Ecofeminism counters that mind as well as body is embedded in the material world, and that mastery is not the only model of agency (Salleh: 190). Mellor extend this argument to develop a critique of Roy Bhaskar's transcendental critical realism. She argues instead for an immanent critical realism (Mellor: 186). Ecofeminism is both realist and critical in the sense that

Humanity's immanence will always mean that any knowledge about the natural world is bound to be partial . . . This requires recognition of the *essentially* dialectical and non-dualist nature of the relation between humanity and the dynamic ecological whole. It would also recognize the independent agency of the interconnected whole. This does not deny human agency, but human agency would always need to show ecological reflexivity and humility. (Mellor: 186-7)

The ecofeminist distinction between immanent and transcendental forms of knowledge echoes Hartsock's distinction between two different conceptions of power—power as energy, and power as domination—which she has been developing for the last 25 years (Hartsock: 21). She argues that women tend to conceptualize power in the immanent sense of power within, while men (including Marxists) tend to conceptualize power in the tran-

scendental sense as power over. (This is developed in more detail in her previous book on feminist historical materialism—Hartsock, 1985). Building on this understanding of power, Hartsock develops the idea of a feminist standpoint explicitly as a variation of the idea of a standpoint of the proletariat, recognizing that it can only be produced by a collective subject (Hartsock: 81-2), but expanding the Marxian account to include all human activity rather than focusing on activity more characteristic of males in capitalism' (Hartsock: 105). As Hartsock says,

The Marxian category of labor, including as it does both interaction with other humans and with the natural world, can help to cut through the dichotomy of nature and culture, and, for feminists, can help to avoid the false choice of characterizing the situation of women as either 'purely natural' or 'purely social.' (Hartsock: 106)

Ecofeminism can be seen as expanding Hartsock's account further to include recognition of non-human agency and not just human activity.

An immanent definition of power becomes important in questions of political organization. A topical question is whether unity is possible without dominance. If we start from a transcendental definition of power, it is easy to conclude that all forms of unity are coercive. Both standpoint feminism and ecofeminism lead us to conclude the opposite. If we proceed from an immanent definition of power and agency then unity need not threaten diversity. The challenge is to develop our own forms of cooperation which are not coercive while understanding the coercive nature of the forms of organization we are opposing (Hartsock: 50).

All three of these books are critical of postmodernism. As Salleh notes,

First, its anti-realism becomes defeatism by assuming the relation between words and actions to be unknowable. Second, its micro-political focus on texts distracts attention from the New World Order and its materiality. Third, as a discursive pluralism it has no way of grounding an alternative vision. (Salleh: xi)

Mellor supports Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in maintaining that there is a basis for a common global politics which is neither 'totalizing' nor denying of difference. 'It is not universalism *per se* that is at fault, but the false universalism of western hegemony' (Mellor: 67). As Hartsock reasserts, 'The understanding

available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement that requires both systematic analysis and the education that grows from political struggle to change social relations' (Hartsock: 236-7).

If Marxism is to reinvent itself, we should take seriously the work of feminists like Hartsock, Mellor and Salleh. They can be said to have taken some aspects of Marx more seriously than many Marxists.

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### Reference

Hartsock, Nancy C.M., (1985) *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. Northeastern University Press, Boston.

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Richard Huggett

## Catastrophism: Asteroids, Comets, and Other Dynamic Events in Earth History

Verso, London & New York, 2nd edition 1997 (1st ed. 1990), pp. xix + 262.  
ISBN 0-85984-129-5 (pbk) £14.00

Reviewed by David Harvie

'Catastrophism', as a paradigm, is exciting. How could a theory (or collection of theories) which suggests that major events in the world—changes in the landscape or climate, the emergence of a new species or extinction of an existing one, say—are violent and sudden, be anything but exciting, even if 'sudden' means taking place over tens of thousands of years? It is this paradigm which Richard Huggett's book aims to survey, placing it in context against its 'uniformitarian' rivals.

*Catastrophism*, the book, is divided into three parts. Part I sets out definitions of what a catastrophe is and explains the

various classifications of understanding the history of the world. Competing theories of Earth change can be distinguished on three criteria. First, the *rate of change*, with the polar extremes being *gradualism* (constant rate) and *catastrophism* (changing rate). Second, the characterisation of the underlying *state*, with non-directionalism or *steady state* being opposed to *directionalism* (changing state). Third, the *mode* of change. For *organic* history, mode of change refers to whether change is believed to be driven *externally* ('environmentalism') or *internally*? For *inorganic* history, it refers

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