

Published as Ariel Salleh, 'Oakley's *Gender and Planet Earth*', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 2004, Vol. 19, No. 1, 137-138.

## Review of Ann Oakley, *Gender on Planet Earth*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002.

Ann Oakley's *Gender on Planet Earth* defies academic convention and aims for democratic accessibility. A good read, it offers a mix of "expert and non-expert opinion, personal narrative, statistical recitation, and historical diversions". In an era of postmodern hyper-theory and disengagement from everyday life, Oakley revisits the radical roots of feminism to explain why and how the movement broke on to the political scene in the 70s, and why a gendered understanding becomes imperative in an era of global ecological crisis. This is an intensely personal book, grounded in the author's daily experiences as a woman, and it is an exercise in making connections. Oakley argues that postmodern feminism fails us both in its narrow focus and by muting the fact that not all "truths" are equal.

A book addressing the foundational moments of feminism is sorely needed in these times - given the sustained public backlash of the past two decades, the palpable disorientation of Left politics, and confusion among a young post-feminist generation fearful that the label may reduce their sexual attractiveness. Oakley's tome arrived on my desk like reinforcements, in a week when I was anguishing over Australian writer Kathy Lette's witty womanish self-loathings and a string of ignorant misogynist *Sydney Morning Herald* columns penned by the darling of paunch city, Miranda Devine. I was also dreading a Bluestocking Week invitation to speak on - "Is Feminism a Dirty Word?". As Oakley says - feminism itself has come to share women's victim status. If I could have afforded it, I would have bought 300 copies of the book to give out among the UWS student body, so unconsciously neo-liberal and ready to laugh off our untrendy enthusiasms.

The radical feminist in Oakley describes the patriarchal mindset as a "delusional system" and she proceeds to deconstruct three key facets of it - psychoanalysis, economics, and sociobiology. Little of this is new. Women scholars from Millet to Irigaray have chipped away at the vicissitudes of Freud and his confreres. Waring overturned the logic of the Keynesian System of National Accounts in the 80s, and shortly after, Haraway exposed the unconsciously masculinist assumptions of sociobiology. Oakley's contribution is to translate this literature in a way that shows non-specialist readers the systematic corruption of science in the service of class, race, and gender domination. And as the global public re-groups in a post 9/11 world, there is certainly a place for this kind of political communication.

The book teems with facts and figures demonstrating the irrationality of hegemonic masculinity in both domestic and corporate arenas. Thus, two-thirds of non-literate citizens globally are women but feminism is said to cause under-achievement of boys at school; men commit 90 per cent of violent crime and 80 per cent of all recorded offences; 20 children die world wide every minute as a result of poverty; in Britain, women still receive 53 per cent of men's average weekly wage; tax relief is available for buying cars but not for buying child care services; 3 tons of TNT is stored in military warehouses for each individual on earth; environmental exploitation multiplies; the internet carries harassment to new heights, not to mention the paedophilia industry; and Ford company management deems it more economic to compensate deaths than to recall and fix a dangerous fuel tank.

At first sight, the title of *Gender on Planet Earth* suggests an ecofeminist turn on Oakley's part, and a whole chapter is given over to themes like BSE, impacts of the nuclear industry, and so on. She writes:

Our food is laden with chemicals, with genetically modified materials and other hidden health risks; our rain is acid; our drinking water harbours pathogens; our bodies soak up radiation from all the electrical technologies - computers, mobile phones, televisions, microwave ovens, electricity transmission lines...the air we breathe carries lead and dangerous particulates; and the ground is contaminated with chemical spills and hazardous waste. Planet earth is warming up...(p.128).

Her conclusion is that nothing less than total overhaul of the Western consumer lifestyle will do. But the discussion remains a journalistic one, with no political strategy for this momentous change spelled out.

It is surprising to see a pioneer of the "politics of reproduction" only now arriving at the confluence of women and ecology.\* The international literature of ecofeminist theory and praxis spans some two dozen classic texts, reaching back to Francoise d'Eaubonne's *Le Feminism ou La Mort* in 1974. Yet while Oakley covers some of the same ground, she seems unaware of these analyses. And of the central figures in this genre - Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva - only the latter is cited. Ecofeminist writing develops reproductive labour as the integral theoretical link between women, body, habitat, justice and sustainability. So in the light of Oakley's earlier work, it would surely be a win-win if she opened up a conversation with ecofeminism. Or would such collaboration undercut her anti-theory stance?

\*Oakley is Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the Institute for Education, University of London. Her numerous publications include *The Sociology of Housework* (Bath: Martin Robinson, 1974), *The Captive Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), and *Experiments in Knowing: Gender and Method in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

