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Ecology and Feminism

A summary of an “ecofeminist worldview”

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Ecofeminism developed in the 1980’s in the context of a growing green movement and of large anti-war and anti-nuclear missiles mobilisations. The ‘worldview’ of ecofeminists resonates today with the fights of indigenous people and of farmers organisations such as *La Via Campesina*.

Here are some key elements of their analysis and views.

Western society values male and scientific knowledge above everything else , it devalues the natural reproductive capacities of women and of nature.

Experts and owners of capital have developed new biotechnologies (GMOs, genetically modified organisms, and IVF, in vitro fertilisation) to keep their grip and control over women and over nature.

Fertile earth and the fertility of women are transformed through male domination and the technological creativity of the male takes a central position in society.

Earth and women are the passive terrain for the intervention by male experts, medical doctors, agronomists, agribusiness men. [1]

Geneticists consider traditional selection as backward and chaotic – GMO varieties represent progress, order and money. Farmers are forced to use the seeds, the fertilizers and the pesticides sold as a package by multinational agribusiness companies. The farmers lose their traditional ownership of seeds and varieties and must pay patent rights for selected hybrid and GMO plants and seeds.

Women have a duty to produce healthy children and are the objects of an expanding *health industry* with genetic screening of (pre- implantation) embryos, scans and echo-graphies, and a growing number of caesareans. Women lose the possibility and the capacity to decide for themselves.

Colonialism despised the *primitive* and the *backward* cultures of indigenous, non-white and local traditional communities who were considered more to be part of the local fauna than of the human race. [2]

The genocides performed in colonial times were disguised as the introduction of progress for primitive societies and as the conquest of ‘empty’ land. The common property and the common use of the land were considered an obstacle to the progress of civilisation. The young Charles Darwin noted in his diary that the complete equality amongst the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego would remain an obstacle for any progress of their civilisation until a leader would emerge who would have the strength to become the owner of all property. [3]

Vandana Shiva wrote in 1992 :

‘...improved’ seeds and fetuses are in reality imprisoned seeds and fetuses. The right to self determination of farmers and of women is degraded to backwardness and ignorance. The violent expropriation of the autonomous producers is a process to steal what belongs to nature and to women, in the name of progress. Violence and theft were not only the basis for the creation of wealth in our colonial past, they continue with neo-colonialism today which threatens life itself.’ [4]

Second wave feminism in the U.S.A. and Western Europe

In North America and in Western Europe, feminists in the 1970's protested against the traditional dichotomy between men and women, against the different “gender” roles, whereby *men* embodied *culture* and *women* embodied *nature*. This dichotomy was used to justify male dominance. Modern humans (white males from the rich world) are the creators of culture whilst women are considered as a kind of second class variety of humans who have only a limited level of personal qualities such as reason, courage, self control, freedom, capacities of autonomous ownership. This modern male gender role became the norm in society. It was developed during the period of the enlightenment – women remained in the shadow of nature, “knowing their place”.

Other typical images such as man the hunter, the – competitive and sexually active being were part of a dominant ideology justified by “scientific” knowledge. Women were described as – passive, asexual beings who kept the wild instincts of the males under control. Proudhon (– a French 19th century socialist) spoke of women as an essential civilizing factor, thanks to their role in the family.

You can easily understand that later on, many second wave feminists were not convinced when eco-feminists spoke about the special link all women have with nature!

But what is the precise nature of the domination of men over women and of the increasing destruction of the earth as an ecosystem? Is there a possible link between women’s oppression and the way nature is being destroyed? What is our vision of “human nature” and what are the consequences of this vision for women’s liberation?

The industrial revolution and the capitalist mode of production.

By the end of the 18th Century, we see the development of a new mode of production, capitalism. The changes involved in this transformation had important consequences for the position of women in society. Large productive family units, involving several generations, of farmers and of artisans, were ultimately replaced by what is now called the (non-productive) “nuclear family”. At the centre of this family there was – the house wife, she is not productive because she is not employed as a worker in a factory, a company, a public service. The man is supposed to be the bread winner for his wife and children, he is the “head of the household” and his wage is supposed to pay for the survival of all the members of his family. The household tasks done by the women are invisible, because they are not remunerated in the form of a wage. The woman is economically completely dependent upon her husband.

Of course, women (and children) have been working in the new factories from the very beginning of the factory system, – the struggles against child labour and for protective measures concerning health and safety, the fight for shorter working hours, etc., were combined with a new ideology on the natural role of men and women. The ideal household is that of the nuclear family in which the man can afford to have a wife who stays at home. At the ideological level, the well known dichotomy between man (– reason, culture, public life, etc.) and women (– intuition, nature, private life, etc.) is reaffirmed. [5]

After the Second World War, the situation for women changed considerably with contraception, and the victorious fight of women for the right to choose abortion being an important part of this. New opportunities in education for women, the generalisation of paid work (outside the nuclear family) by women, also changed their position in relation to men. Look simply at rising divorce rates, they illustrate the increased autonomy of women who are not anymore completely dependant on their husband’s wages.

But real economic equality was not achieved, women’s traditional skills such as caring are valued less and women are paid less not only in those roles but even when they work alongside men, they are less paid and valued, they are pushed into part-time work – often because of the unavailability of child care, unemployment is more readily accepted in the case of women.

The fundamental reason for this state of affairs lays in the fact that women are the central caring figure in the family. In fact, women pay a high price for their increased economic freedom. They have to ‘combine’ their job with the domestic tasks (80% is done by women). Even when women can afford to buy more and more commodities like clothes, ready made food, etc, the central responsibility for the well being of all family members rests on their shoulders.

The feminists of the second wave criticized this state of affairs. Their demands for public services and for the collectivisation of the domestic tasks combined a critical view on the possibilities of women’s liberation inside capitalism and a perspective of real liberation through the struggle for a democratic socialist society.

Women and the peace movement, women and ecology

The end of the seventies saw massive mobilisations in the US and in Western Europe against the installation of US nuclear weapons carrying cruise missiles in Europe. Normal ‘housewives’, not feminist at all, were very much involved. Women in the peace movement took the lead at the Greenham Common peace camp surrounding an important British military base. Many of these women had not taken part in the abortion and contraception campaigns; neither did they question their traditional role as housewives .

But in the peace movement, women developed a specific criticism of the so called traditional “male” values of aggression, of rational thinking (the logic of nuclear weapons and war games!), of blind faith in technology and hard science and of all kinds of “macho” attitudes.

This new, softer feminism found its place in the growing green movements and parties. Women rediscovered their history: witch burning, the medicalisation of the female body. Women felt at ease in the new green thinking, small was beautiful, an alternative life style was developed (from baking your own bread to herbal medicine).

An ecofeminist worldview was growing which accused patriarchy (the expression of ‘male’ values and attitudes) and the industrial system for destroying nature and ultimately life itself.

The analysis of the parallelism between the medical treatment of women as objects of science and the way agribusiness transform peasants into industrial plant and meat producers is indeed very powerful. But I don’t agree with those ecofeminists who point at patriarchy as the primary cause of these developments.

Can the simplistic and a-historical concept of patriarchy (in other words, the fundamental and eternal nature of all males) explain all that has happened in human society over the last 200 years?

Looking at this recent history, we can see that the growth and development of the capitalist mode of production covering the whole world is at the centre of the changes described by both socialist feminists and eco-feminists.

The many activities performed by women in pre-capitalist societies (– in traditional medicine, in local food and clothes production, etc.) have been destroyed by the incorporation of these activities in the capitalist economy. The

production of commodities for profit in the capitalist economy has taken over – the previously important production of use values for human needs.

Anticapitalist ecofeminist thinking

Second wave feminists stressed the potential of equality between genders through concrete demands like equal pay and opportunities, the right to choose, the fight against any discrimination on the basis of gender. They were convinced of the fundamental similarities between men and women. Their struggles linked the analysis of specific women’s oppression with demands going against the capitalist logic such as more public services and the collectivisation of house hold tasks.

Many *ecofeminists* value “feminine” attitudes, ways of life that stand in contrast with masculine attitudes and behaviour. They sometimes became differentialists whereby the two genders are the expression of two deeply rooted (determined by biology) realities. Some ecofeminists developed identity politics against “man the cause of all evil”.

On the other hand socialist feminists also pointed out that sexual stereotyping was restrictive to both genders – man are not allowed to be carers without their sexuality being questioned for example. And of course these issues were and are taken up strongly by the LGBTQ movement who argued in favour of the dissolution of stereotypes and the valuing of qualities traditionally applied to each gender.

Other lines of thought in anticapitalist ecofeminist thinking are more interesting because they start from the basic contradiction of capitalism between the production of exchange value for profit and the production of use value in order to satisfy human needs.

If we look at society as an iceberg, with only one third of its volume floating above the surface and an invisible two thirds of the volume supporting the top, then we can describe society as follows.

The visible capitalist economy is characterised by wage labour, commodity production, exchange value, competition, growth, exploitation of the work force and of nature. This society can only continue to function if it is first of all supported by the invisible domestic work that women perform for the well being of adults and children, for the fulfilment of basic human needs and secondly, if the regeneration of all natural systems is guaranteed.

To build societies based on the well being of the many rather than the few, we need to put the work of social reproduction, the satisfaction of individual and social needs, the production of use value and the conservation of the biophysical base of life at the centre of our concerns and practices.

Ecological economics, which analyses and criticises the destruction of nature and the depletion of resources under capitalist conditions, must be combined with *feminist economics* which puts the underestimated and largely invisible activities of women (necessary for sustaining day to day life and the well being of every individual), at the centre of its analysis, thus creating a new synergy between feminism and ecology.

The current crisis of civilisation is caused by multiple contradictions and tensions: between *capital* and *labour*, – between the *capitalist mode of production* as a whole and the preservation of *nature* (upon which every human depends), and finally the tension between the reproductive tasks, the fulfilment of human needs through use values on the one hand and the profit driven production of commodities on the other hand.

A summary of an “ecofeminist worldview”

In this field full of tensions, there is a clear need for a strong link between the anticapitalist, the feminist as well as the ecological dimension of the struggles for an ecosocialist society.

The fight for women’s liberation; the understanding of the strong affinities and similarities between the oppression of women and the oppression/exploitation of nature, can only strengthen the movement for human liberation in an ecosocialist society.

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[1]) SHIVA (V), The Seed and the Earth: women, ecology and biotechnology, in: The Ecologist 1/1992.

[2] The Belgian chocolate company CÃ´te d’Or published in the 1950’s, at the height of the Belgian rule in the Congo, photo albums with pictures of wildlife. One such album I will never forget. Its title was Faunaflor Congo and the last pages were pictures taken of black man and women on the market selling food. They were part of the last chapter on the great apes...

[3]) DESMOND (A.) & MOORE (J.), Darwin, Harmondsworth 1991

[4] SHIVA (V), The Seed and the Earth: women, ecology and biotechnology, op. cit.

[5] SHORTER (E.), The making of the modern family, London 1976