

ACCUMULATION

The Eco-Pre-Fix: Reading “Conservation as Enclosure”

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For some time now environmentalists working from diverse interests have declared that the planet is rapidly becoming uninhabitable for many species and increasingly inhospitable to humans. Their warnings are mostly ignored by those directly responsible for this ecological crisis—growth-oriented corporations and governments that subsidize them. Environmental activists undaunted by the callous response from the present-day vandals of industry have through varying strategies increased awareness of the potential dangers confronting us from degrading natural systems that support life. Paul and Anne Ehrlich point to exponential population growth coupled with wasteful patterns of consumption; E. O. Wilson believes the one thing our children’s children will never forgive us for is the loss of biodiversity—senseless eradication of species; Barry Commoner’s litany of chemical poisons, like Rachel Carson’s crusade against pesticides, has troubled the sleep of many a citizen-chemist.

Others amplify these concerns calling for paradigmatic change or transvaluation of values. Thomas Berry contends that life is entering a new stage of development, “the ecozoic age,” where evolution selects for mutuality. Central to Berry’s new era is the role of women:

An important aspect of the Ecozoic era is that it will be guided extensively by the archetype of women. The terminal Cenozoic shows patriarchal oppression against both the human and the natural. In the new age the basic symbol will be one of nurturing and being nurtured in a communion of subjects, not one of exploiting and being exploited in a collection of objects. We are speaking here of the feminine in its ontological reference rather than to gender.

Others again, less cosmologically oriented, answer the crisis with the creation of *new* areas of study driven by ecological categories.

Philosophy, in the area of values inquiry, has gone beyond the longstanding humanistic ethic to include nontraditional entities in the moral club asking whether there are “nonhuman objects of duty.” Still other philosophers take a metaphysical turn constructing an eco-centric system of value with a supporting ontology. Dissenting ecological economists realize the importance of including the natural world in their economic models—a move that requires the addition of normative categories and recourse to the physicist’s principle of entropy in their explanatory models. In the west, eco-theologians puzzle anew over the status of the created world and try to come up with a new cosmogony. Many more examples showing the prevalence of the prefix “eco” are readily available; a cursory look at most college 65 catalogs demonstrates the proliferation of study concentrations focusing on environmental concerns. Two other important examples for consideration here are ecofeminism and ecosocialism.

Ecofeminism : Ecosocialism

What is gained by adding the prefix “eco” to an established domain of discourse, and are those who adopt it guilty of ecologism? Undeniably, “eco” has had a tremendous

influence on Western thought. The richness of its Greek root is well known and needs no further elaboration here, except to remind us that *oikos* (home) extends to the entire globe (*n' oikoumevn*) while at the same time designates a very specific place where there is rootedness, a settlement (*oikizw*). E. O. Wilson, echoing Rene Dubos' theme—"think globally act locally"—put it this way, "...evolutionary biology is a discipline of special cases woven into global patterns." I mention this, first to illustrate the potential of "eco" in addressing the cultural and biological homogenization brought on by globalization, and second to suggest that place-centeredness might mitigate against some of the problems with "site-specificity" that worry some post-Marxists.

A conspicuous but nonetheless significant outcome of an "eco" designation is to declare that, hereafter, the natural world will figure centrally in the theory and practice of respective disciplines; but it must be a natural world unlike the present world designed for productivist needs. Currently nature appears as a Newtonian encryption divested of complexity, unpredictability and, yes, a source of wonder; it is a book easily opened and just as easily read, or so we are led to believe. Retrieving Nature by emphasizing connections and interdependencies requires a value system beyond that of humanism. It requires rethinking disciplinary and social structures as a dynamic and creative interplay between nature and culture. By extending the traditional material base of socialism and by adding a "subsistence perspective" to feminism, we are told that both ecosocialism and ecofeminism can enrich the concept of nature needed to secure a sustainable relationship to the natural world.

My plan is to explore ecofeminism within the context of a case study by Ana Isla, "Conservation as Enclosure: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Sustainable Development and Biopiracy in Costa Rica." In this single article, Isla relies on basic principles of feminism and ecofeminism and addresses concerns that are important to both ecofeminism and ecosocialism. Isla's concerns are exploitation, environmental degradation, globalization and universal commodification—and they provide a vehicle for comparing ecofeminism and ecosocialism.

Basic to any form of feminism—Marxist, liberal, existential, black, etc.—is the assumption that sexist oppression is morally indefensible. Patriarchy is a form of sexist oppression; hence it is wrong and should be overthrown. Ecofeminists add to this a further assumption that patriarchy is the principle cause of our ecological crisis, especially in its current articulation—global capitalism. For example, Ariel Salleh's "nature-women-labor-capital nexus" is seen as a fundamental contradiction of patriarchal capitalism. Ecofeminists argue that an examination of women's relation to nature should inform all political-economic analyses and any adequate environmental ethic. These general propositions outline the significant characteristics of ecofeminism and mark it off as a distinct form of feminism. A close look at Isla's case study should clarify these propositions and open the way for a dialog between ecofeminists and ecosocialists.

Sustainable Development?

Among contemporary capitalist practices, biopiracy is potentially the most offensive and dangerous form of expropriation, since it touches the very core processes of life; it is one of the more grotesque acts of organized hubris. Regardless of its current disguise as "sustainable development," biopiracy is the ontological transformation of biological integrity

(life) into artifact, and the implications of this transformation cross the entire moral and social spectrum. Isla is correct to specify biopiracy as a sinister form of commodification and a source of surplus value that demeans labor. In the case of Costa Rica, this commodification of biodiversity falls disproportionately on women.

It is unfortunate that Isla sometimes uses the corrupted language of “sustainable development,” when clearly the instances she criticizes are not sustainable development, but “sustainable growth,” an impossible formulation. As she says herself, sustainable development is not merely “an innocuous and positive-sounding goal” but also one of the few bumper-sticker buzzwords that contain a morally deep imperative—a commitment to future generations that cannot be achieved through continuous economic growth. That is, sustainable development as practiced outside the narrow confines of capitalist double-speak is a resounding rejection of the exploitation she rightly objects to. It would have been helpful and less distracting had she made the distinction between growth and development sharper.

Isla reports that today the Costa Rican economy and traditional way of life is in a state of flux as multinational corporations, NGOs and other global interest groups establish market mechanisms to exploit the rare and exotic biodiversity of this tiny but bountiful country. As she writes: Indigenous species identified as having valuable traits are collected and shipped to laboratories for modification by pharmaceutical, medical, and agricultural companies, [while] ...local populations are viewed as an inconvenience... and are encouraged to leave the country to make room for eco-tourism and conservation zones—“enclosures.” The outcome is sadly typical as two “visions of nature” collide and conflicting epistemologies clash:

Western science transforms nature’s bounty into commodities of global economic value” against longstanding cultural practices that resist scientism by asserting a special relationship to nature, one that views ...biodiversity [as] a relational category, ecologically and culturally embedded. For centuries, local and indigenous communities, *particularly women*, have worked as caretakers of nature and keepers of the encyclopedia of its uses.

Thus, biodiversity is related to culture in such a way that its value lies outside the typical anthropocentric value scheme.

After a penetrating examination of the global mechanics of biopiracy in Costa Rica, Isla concludes, “Women lose their autonomy in gender and development programs that claim to promote equality by including them in the international market.” This claim rests on the following interrelated propositions: women are the principal providers through a complex (biological and cultural) ordering of subsistence activities; (thus) making women the harbingers of local knowledge; (thus) placing them nearer to nature. For Isla, reliance on a “subsistence perspective” entails further overlapping propositions mostly of an epistemological nature. Her position that women possess by nature a more intuitive relationship to nature is clearly stated by Maria Mies; “... We have a deep and particular understanding of this [nature] both through our natures and our experience as women...” “...In place of the disdain that the *feminine role* receives,” Salleh recommends “...*the separate reality*’ of this role...be taken seriously by ecologists and reexamined as a legitimate source of *alternative values*.” Further support is provided by Vandana Shiva: “The violence to nature as symptomized by the current ecological crisis and the violence to women symptomized by

women's subjugation and exploitation arise from the subjugation of the *feminine principle*." These claims need close scrutiny but will have to wait until the ecosocialist elements in her paper are acknowledged.

Conditions of Production

Fundamental to ecosocialism (and ecofeminism) is the recognition that the economy is rooted in nature and that the current economic system of neoliberalism is a failure, because it has not understood this essential feature. Once the material base, or "conditions of production," is destroyed, there is no longer an economy. This is, simply put, the "second contradiction of capitalism." Isla identifies women's labor and their intimate knowledge of local biodiversity as the conditions of production under siege in Costa Rica. Devaluation and expropriation occur through an "enclosure system" that prohibits the indigenous population's access to these newly resourced areas, tentatively referred to as "Conservation Areas." The method of enclosure has an immediate and debilitating impact on local communities, criminalizing traditional sustainable subsistence activities—hunting and botanical gathering—while exploiting regional labor, especially women's. As Isla pointedly remarks, "With the development of nature as a resource for biotechnology, rural women have been encouraged to get loans to develop biodiversity-related micro-enterprises." So what once was a subsistence practice having no exchange value is now a for-profit commodity. She further points out that "In the process of commodification, medicinal plants lose their social, ethical, cultural, and even biological power." This shift creates the ingredients for the collapse of community.

This is a convincing critique, made more so by the addition of "subsistence." Subsistence is central to "uncorrupted" sustainable development and entails the rejection of linear economic processes and instead offers a cyclic/ecological approach through changes in the conditions of production. Thus the model of subsistence might press capital into extended modes of cooperation that, in turn, should lead to more socially transparent economic arrangements. Isla provides an excellent example of this promising transition: "The Medicinal Plant Common Knowledge Network Project" is an "interdisciplinary network of universities and communities to deepen and share the knowledge of the voiceless in envisioning the future of the Medicinal Plants Commons." This kind of association can constitute a "social barrier" to capital and, in the case of Costa Rica, demonstrates an important contribution by ecofeminists.

Although ecosocialism and ecofeminism have shared goals—overall elimination of oppression brought on by capital—the architecture of their material base differs. The material base of ecofeminism is the subsistence perspective—a set of life-affirming activities performed (mainly) by women engaged in a daily struggle to survive for themselves, family and local community. For ecosocialism, the material base is everything not produced capitalistically but treated as if it were including, "personal conditions of production... labor power" and the natural world as a "non-subjective" condition of production along with social infrastructure. This difference in weight given to their respective material bases influences the value(s) attributed to nature, with ecosocialism adopting an instrumentalist perspective while ecofeminism prescribes a version of non-anthropocentrism.

There is little doubt, from a particular perspective, that ecofeminism has and will continue to contribute greatly to the overall liberation of life, but it remains problematic as to whether or not it enhances ecosocialism. Among the challenges confronting ecofeminism is the relationship between subsistence (as material base) and the “feminine principle.” If they are identical or stand in strong implication where one is deducible from the other, then we are in danger of encountering an essentialist dualism. But, if they are extrinsic to one another, then we need to know in what manner they are connected—because they are connected. There is evidence to support either position: “...what is undeniably given is the fact that women and men do have existentially different relationships to ‘nature’ because they have different kinds of body organs.” I read this as evidence of an intrinsic relationship through fixed biological and anatomical categories; although Salleh rejects any ontological difference between men and women, “...this is not to say that women are ‘closer’ in some ontological sense.” Instead she claims a temporary difference due to historical circumstances “...privileging women temporarily as historic agents par excellence.”

A Feminine Principle?

Mies and Shiva, speaking of the subsistence perspective, claim, “Our opinion is that women are nearer to this perspective than men...” But further on they state, “Yet all women and all men have a body...Therefore, all women *and finally all men* have a ‘material base’ from which to analyze and change these processes...” I would consider this a statement against an intrinsic connection between the feminine principle and the subsistence perspective, because the subsistence perspective is potentially realized in men. But, if “body” has the same biological status that Salleh seems to attribute to it, then the statement is equivocal. By contrast, Berry, who is outside the ecofeminist camp, claims the male/female distinction does have ontological import.

Elsewhere Shiva remarks, “Nature as a creative expression of the feminine principle is both in ontological continuity with humans as well as above them. Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and women, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle.” But further on in the article, Shiva claims that male and female are culturally created categories: “Gender ideology has created the dualism and distinction between male and female.” This sounds a lot like the earlier quote from Shiva and Mies, but with a difference. If the feminine principle is ontologically grounded in the creative, dynamic aspects of nature, then male and female cannot be social constructs since they are derived from the feminine principle, which suggests an intrinsic relationship. As for Isla, there is no explicit mention of the “feminine principle” in her article. Neither is a sharp distinction drawn between male and female which might lend support for such a principle: “Rural women *and* indigenous people have survived by means of their expertise in biodiversity,” and “...sacrificing the survival of forest peoples to capital accumulation” demonstrates an inclusiveness not unlike that expressed by Shiva and Mies.

Yet this is not the main issue I wish to consider, but we have come this far, and a brief outline might provide material on the values attributions accorded to nature by ecofeminism. The criticism is well known: To say that the feminine principle is a solution to problems of ecological degradation builds on a dichotomy between male and female—regardless of whether it is a socially constructed difference or biologically ordained. Further, if the interconnected oppressions of woman and nature arise from devaluation of

the feminine principle, then to value the feminine role is to acknowledge women's epistemological advantage in knowing nature. I believe this is what Berry has in mind when he claims the Ecozoic age "will be guided extensively by the archetype of women...the feminine in its ontological reference rather than to gender." The problem is that the ecofeminist goal of eliminating dualism is itself built on a substantial dualism, the feminine principle. I don't want to press the inconsistency here or unleash the specter of essentialism. I mention this only to pass over it, and to arrive at what I consider important to the dialogue between ecofeminism and ecosocialism, which is the question of whether their value systems are compatible.

The closeness-to-nature (ontological or otherwise) envisioned by ecofeminists calls for a non-anthropocentric value scheme; for caring, compassion, cooperation, love and respect for ecological complexity and diversity cannot be homocentric. "Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness," claims Ynestra King, "It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing." Likewise Salleh states, "Concerned with equality for all life forms, ecofeminism is a *socialism* in the very deepest sense of the word." Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen concur: "This power [empowerment] also lies in our recognition that all creatures on earth are our relatives." Anthropocentrism, no matter how pliant, cannot support such claims; can ecosocialism?

Beyond Anthropocentric Values

Orthodox eco-Marxists with their passion for progress through science and technology do not make allowances for a non-anthropocentric value system. It would seem that even the more benign humanist eco-Marxists are unable to accept a system containing nonhuman values. Because, as Robyn Eckersley points out, "...what *is* apparent in the writings of the young Marx and in other versions of humanist eco-Marxism is a notion of human freedom that is irredeemably anthropocentric." And it won't do to go to the writings of the older Marx, since his emphasis on freedom from necessity—that is, from nature—is stronger there.

In his "Eco-Marxist critique of political economy," Jean-Paul Deléage makes it clear that human good is the primary motivation for protecting and rehabilitating nature. The importance of ecology is instrumental for human survival:

Lack of knowledge of the laws governing great biogeochemical cycles and the evolution of ecosystems can lead to irreversible breakdown and jeopardize *human life in the future.*" [And, after dissecting the exploitation of labor] "...we must now turn to those of the destruction of nature, of this nature that remains the *material guarantee* of the future of our species.

There is no indication in either of these passages, in letter or spirit, that nature has a value beyond human use. Neither does Michael Löwy provide any evidence that nature has value other than utilitarian. In a recent article for *CNS* outlining the arguments upon which ecosocialism rests, he states that capitalist expansion "...directly threatens... the very survival of the human species. The protection of the natural environment is thus a *humanist imperative.*"

Without moving beyond a humanistic value system, it is difficult (if not contradictory) to find a complementary non-anthropocentric system needed to connect ecosocialism with ecofeminism. The closest eco-Marxists can come is a benign stewardship, which still privileges humans over non-humans. It seems that for eco-Marxists to overcome the “second contradiction,” all that is required is Pinchotian conservationism or, at best, biblical stewardship—both respectable approaches but inadequate for our purposes. The second contradiction runs much deeper than they acknowledge and, in all likelihood, could be considered as an adjunct to Salleh’s “primary contradiction.”

Where ecofeminists relate to their material base through interconnectedness, closeness, embeddedness, and identifying with it as a shared oppression, ecosocialists have no similar ties to the conditions of production other than to transform them into objects that express use-value. Where Isla can claim a link to biodiversity that is “...relational, ecologically and culturally embedded,” Deléage characterizes the nature/culture relationship this way: “At bottom, to produce is to metabolize natural physical energy into energy useful to man.” How can two such disparate value systems support one another in a transition to socialism? The value(s) attributed to the natural world direct actions toward it, and, in the case of ecofeminism and ecosocialism, those actions are incommensurable. † Salleh asks: “How can ecosocialists [and ecofeminists]...evolve a shared theoretical language?” So long as their basis for evaluation is largely different, they cannot!

Much needs to be done to regain the world from the totalizing discourse of globalization and the linguistic antics of postmodern dilettantes, and a dialogue such as this is a very fine beginning. Important questions will be asked and answered and, undoubtedly, asked anew. In closing let me raise an issue for consideration, one that affects the material base of both ecofeminism and ecosocialism. There is a need for both ecofeminism and ecosocialism to address a seminal question: What system of ecology are they using? Static “balance-of-nature” or a dynamic system characterized by unpredictability, captured by the metaphor “discordant harmony.” Löwy appears to adopt the former “ecological balance.” Shiva in recognizing a natural unity between the sexes—“It ruptures the cooperative unity of the masculine and feminine...”—seems to move toward a stable wholeness, equilibrium, and balance. Meanwhile, Salleh courts a dynamic biocentric view: “The alternative ecofeminist conception of subjectivity as signification-in-process, permanently forming and reforming itself in collision with the social order is based in a living embodied materialism...” As for the others, I can’t tell; this needs more attention.