

Ecofeminism in Theory and Praxis

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Phoebe Godfrey's recent article in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* tells the story of Diane Wilson, a fisherwoman and mother whose transformation into an anti-capitalist resister demonstrates connections between theory and praxis, ecosocialism and ecofeminism. But Wilson's particular ecofeminist politics and that of the women she draws along with her is not focused on how and why our current world is exploitative, nor is it about imagining the utopian contours of any possible world to be. It is about achieving everyday life outcomes. As such, there are broad lessons to take from her remarkable work for all of us committed to the idea that "another world is possible."

Feeling Connected

How do we envision an approach to working-class organization that goes beyond sympathies towards ecological issues or willingness to partner ecological causes to a politics that is ecologically grounded and gendered in its very composition? Such a practice is indeed possible; Diane Wilson makes this clear. Wilson is the daughter of a fisherman and has spent her life shrimping in the San Antonio Bay. Over the years, her catch began to decline, while abnormal occurrences such as brown tides became more frequent. Eventually, Wilson read an article about wanton pollution of the bay and recognized the connection with local industrial activities. Soon after this, one of the worst polluters, Formosa Plastics, proposed an expansion of their plant. This spurred Wilson to act. She bitterly opposed the Formosa expansion through a series of direct action protests. She was supported by a network of sympathetic ecofeminists, in particular Unreasonable Women and Code Pink, but not by her husband or community from whom she soon became alienated. Eventually, Wilson's actions took the form of hunger strikes, resulting in a modest success as Formosa signed a concessionary agreement with her that committed the plant to take steps to reduce its discharges into the bay. Wilson has since broadened the scope of her political action, linking her work in South Texas to the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal. She continues to risk her life in defense of the world which she feels all of us to be connected through.

In sharing this story, Godfrey's article focuses our attention on the close tie that Wilson has with the San Antonio Bay. Wilson claims that this "special connection," likened by her to the bond between a mother and child, is what provides her with a source of strength and purpose. It is this deep-felt sense of care that grounds her anti-capitalist actions. However, critics of ecofeminism interpret precisely this sort of relationship as a "biologically determined" and/or an "ahistorical essentialism." It is a standpoint that is seen to privilege "women" as being somehow closer to nature and therefore enjoying a special knowledge.

In defense, Godfrey's essay confronts critics—primarily within feminist theory—who argue that through the positive valorization of activities socially constructed as feminine, ecofeminists simply reinforce the dominant system of gender oppression based on difference instead of challenging its validity. Godfrey argues that such attacks are only justified by elitist theoretical perspectives, which are reluctant to discuss the body as anything

more than a terrain of discursive struggle. The preoccupation with discourse, to the exclusion of relations of production, is a central tenet of “postmodernism.” But Godfrey follows radical feminists in pointing out that postmodernism is less a cohesive philosophical project than an academic fashion inflecting many diverse theoretical practices.

The specifics of postmodern “immateriality” can be left for others to debate—for now it’s sufficient to ascribe it the status of theoretical foil for historical materialists, including and certainly not limited to those who consider themselves ecosocialists and ecofeminists. However, it is important to note that not all ecofeminists write from a historical materialist perspective. In fact, while the latter category may identify a core constellation of shared assumptions among ecofeminists associated with *CNS*, it may also obscure the variety of positions calling themselves ecofeminist. Godfrey acknowledges the diversity of ecofeminist “workers” ranging from Western academics to North Indian tree huggers, yet she seems somewhat reluctant to delve too deeply into diversity within ecofeminist theory.

Materialist Ecofeminism

Godfrey’s centering of ecofeminist theory around a particular group of writers involves, to some extent, a discursive sleight-of-hand. In an effort to preserve the theoretical integrity of ecofeminism writ large, she centers her understanding of ecofeminism on historical materialist ecofeminists, using their theoretical frameworks to then substantiate broader claims about ecofeminist work. This leaves us with an ecofeminism theoretically defined by its historical materialist sympathizers—certainly not a bad thing at all—but not entirely representative of the entire constellation of work that falls under the ecofeminist banner. For instance, works that appear most vulnerable to critiques of essentialism are defended by Godfrey as poetic, metaphorical and descriptive, as distinct from directly contributing to ecofeminism’s theoretical articulation.

An alternative approach for Godfrey might have been to accept that there is significant theoretical heterogeneity within the ecofeminist literature and that some ecofeminist work may indeed be rightfully critiqued as essentialist. Such a perspective is held by ecofeminist sympathizers such as Joel Kovel or Mary Mellor. Moreover, Kovel in particular, argues that metaphorical or poetic work may make an important contribution to political struggle. *Nonetheless, I do agree with Godfrey that a materialist ecofeminism is demonstrated by the actions of Diane Wilson and that it is fundamentally not essentialist in a positivist way.* In fact, both Wilson and a materialist ecofeminism offer an important contribution to the ecosocialist project.

While both ecosocialism and materialist ecofeminism (which I will henceforth refer to simply as ecofeminism) share a historical materialist critique of capitalist society, there is a major difference in the role that gender plays in each. When gender is addressed by ecosocialists, it is simply “added on” to what they see as the more central—and dire—analysis of class relations pending eco-destruction. This is not to say that ecosocialists are anathema to discussing gender, but that in general, gender relations are more often than not relegated to a secondary concern. There is no need to delve too deeply into this criticism here—I find reconciliation to be far more interesting than refutation—so a single example will suffice. In a recent *CNS* contribution, Michael Löwy gives an overview of ecosocialism

where the only reference to gender comes in via a statement by Jorge Riechman, proposing a rainbow coalition:

This project cannot reject any of the colors of the rainbow—neither the red of the anti-capitalist and egalitarian labor movement, nor the violet of the struggles for women’s liberation, nor the white of non-violent movements for peace, nor the anti-authoritarian black of the libertarians and anarchists, and even less the green of the struggle for a just and free humanity on a habitable planet.

Such rainbow metaphors have never sat well with me, as they seem to entrench the very divisions between various political projects that we should be working to dissolve. Each “new social movement” gets its own color—anarchists are black, environmentalists are green, women are violet—and if we all stand next to one another, we’ll make quite some photo opportunity.

This objection is not, by any means, intended as denying the need for coalitions but rather to suggest that the unification of discrete social movements can and must move beyond formal alliances towards a more substantive unity. If we consider the rainbow as a material phenomenon, where light is refracted into separate wavelengths, then the rainbow actually represents a process of fragmentation, not unification. And in this regard, the rainbow stands directly opposed to the ecofeminist way of seeing that Diane Wilson has come to appreciate—a vision of the world and of social struggles as indivisible. Ecosocialism in fact, makes just such connections—in particular, between economic exploitation and ecological destruction. An ecosocialist analysis is not “adding on” class exploitation to an analysis of ecological change, or vice versa; it is understanding how these are two inseparable dimensions of capitalist relations of production and must be confronted accordingly. The challenge that ecofeminism brings to ecosocialism is to take one step further by incorporating an analysis of gender relations in just such a seamless manner; this is what Kovel has begun to suggest with his recent work and what ecofeminists have been doing now for quite some time.

Woman as Natural Resource?

As I read it, there are three main steps to this ecofeminist synthesis: Throughout the history of class societies, reproductive labors have been near universally assigned—discursively and materially—to women, colonized and enslaved peoples, for the benefit of men. Similarly, in all class societies, the extraction of a social surplus has been ecologically exhaustive, to the short-term benefit of those in control. Finally, insofar as the gendered and ecological dimensions of class exploitation have been culturally and materially interwoven, ecofeminists perceive a historical process whereby these two forms of exploitation are linked as a singular process. Hence women are exploited “as a natural resource,” and nature is exploited as feminized chattel, or what Ariel Salleh refers to as exploitation of the Woman equals Nature, or $W=N$, nexus. Whereas ecosocialism understands relations of production—“always already” relations of destruction to be central to its analysis of capitalist society, ecofeminism asks us to broaden our analysis and consider an expanded notion of what counts as production beyond the more narrowly defined range of productive activities valorized by capital accumulation.

Maria Mies critiques Marx's narrow definition of "productivity" for considering only that which is productive of surplus value as opposed to a broader conception that includes forms of productivity not directly exploited through wage relations. This ties in to a general feminist claim that many Marxists often perpetuate a subtle Malthusianism within their work. To explain: the criticism holds that the socialist and ecosocialist understanding of laboring individuals goes no farther than an understanding of labor in the abstract. Hence their theoretical framework reinforces the myth of the individual (male) worker, without family or care responsibilities beyond winning the bread, able to operate freely as abstract labor. The subject of modern economic analysis, *homo economicus*, or the utility-maximizing, wage-earning individual, is substituted as the agent of class struggle as opposed to envisioning the working class on its own terms as a network or community of human beings whose social relations with one another cannot be reduced to the alienated form such relations take through the mediation of capital. Michael Lebowitz describes such a position as "one-sided Marxism."

Marx, in his critique of political economy, linked subsistence to its physiological minimum in the same way that Malthus grounds his population theory. However, Lebowitz insists, this linkage must be seen as theoretical shorthand, a convenience that allowed Marx to focus more directly on capital, the other dimension of the capitalist system of production. To the extent that Marxists interpret *Capital* as a sufficient analysis of capitalism without addressing this fuller understanding of subsistence as a social process, they are engaging in a "one-sided Marxism" that essentially excludes the process of social reproduction. Such Marxism reduces the need and desire for subsistence to an asocial (natural ideal) physiological minimum, disguising the fact that the laboring population operates according to a logic that is far more complex than any singular dependence on capital.

A counterpoint emphasis on the "logic" of social reproduction figures centrally in ecofeminism, but here it is reconceived as both social and ecological. In this regard, ecofeminism can be a merging of the core tenets of ecosocialism with a feminist critique of Marxism that broadens our conception of productivity. This includes the productive contributions of both "nature" and human reproductive labors, which are historically and disproportionately performed by women. By saying this, I do not imply that "the identity" of existing capitalist relations of production should be amended and revised to incorporate these additional forms of work. My aim is to acknowledge the inherent positivism within this capitalist "identification" of productivity as such—evidenced by political economy as well as its un-gendered Marxian critique—and to acknowledge the existence of an equally material, equally historical sphere of productive activity specifically "not-identified" as productive by a capitalist way of seeing.

Negative Dialectics: Identity/Non-Identity

These other forms of productive work are the "non-identical" form of the capitalist mode of production, necessarily occluded by capitalist relations of production. And it is this non-identical set of productive practices that Salleh describes using the W=N metaphor—positively as a historic form of exploitation and negatively/non-identically as a space for non-capitalist productivities. In proposing this W=N nexus, Salleh provides rigorous defense against any possible allegations that ecofeminism be construed as a positivist essentialism. Such criticism, she argues, fails to appreciate that the W=N nexus is

not simply an object of exploitation, but that it is also, simultaneously, an active, subjective (therefore historical and material) process. In explaining how social change comes about, she contrasts the essentializing identity of W=N with its non-identical form, that is, its representation as a historical position from which anti-capitalist agency and power are made possible.

The concepts of identity and non-identity used here are drawn from Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics. For Adorno, the identity relation is the form of subjective experience specific to capitalist social relations, or we could say, the fetish character of the commodity relation, as expressed through a separative individuality based on general equivalence. Identity grounds our rationality, and therefore our subjective, rational experiences; it is in every respect a cultural and material logic of capitalism. The non-identical is the always present, yet unacknowledged other-side of the identity relation. It stands as an attempt to do something with—and against—the concept (or whatever is being “identified”) in its presumed rationality. As Adorno writes, “Thought need not rest content in its logical regularity; it is capable of thinking against itself, without abolishing itself altogether.”

It is very much in this spirit that Godfrey and an embodied materialist ecofeminism in general approaches its “iron cage” of concepts. Negative dialectical reasoning allows concepts to be used and problematized at the same time, without—as some postmodern critics seem to prefer—assuming that they are essentially positivist. After all, historical actors are inevitably embedded in the language of everyday life and must negotiate their political agency accordingly. The story of Diane Wilson, as Godfrey tells it, illustrates this mode of negative dialectics as an embodied materialism, demonstrating how many “positivist” essentialisms, once reconstituted in a non-identical form, lay the groundwork for anti-capitalist actions.

Wilson's hunger strikes demonstrate to Alcoa (and to the world) that she is willing to put her life on the line for San Antonio Bay. Where does this commitment come from? It is not simply that she sees the bay as a pristine and beautiful object to protect, nor is it simply because the bay was one of her primary means of production. Wilson is willing to protect and defend the San Antonio Bay because it is family to her. At one point the bay is like a grandmother to Wilson, at another point like a child—but always family. The mother-child relationship, or care-giving labor, does indeed identify a sphere of family life that has historically been excluded from capitalist production. However, as Wilson demonstrates, it can also double as the radically non-identical form of those very same production relations from which it has been excluded, a relation between living entities based on holding and the dissolution of separations. As both the words and actions of this extraordinary yet ordinary woman demonstrate, this familial bond—an unwavering commitment—represents a life-centered and ecocentric form of working-class solidarity that could serve as a model of resistance for men and women alike.

Löwy writes: “ecosocialists know that the workers and their organizations are an indispensable force for any radical transformation of the system as well as the establishment of a new socialist and ecological society.” The question for *CNS* is: Who are these workers—and are they always organized as Löwy imagines? In my view, Diane Wilson specifically, and materialist ecofeminism more generally, offer a way to conceive of “workers

and their organizations” in a much broader context, as well as a way of seeing how the non-capitalist productivities that humanity relies on to survive in everyday life can translate, seamlessly, into anti-capitalist struggle.