

MATERIALISM

On the Ecofeminist Editorial “Towards an Embodied Materialism”

Alan Rudy

As with the relation between feminism and socialism in some quarters, so too, is the relation between ecofeminism and ecosocialism. I agree with Salleh—

- that exclusively transcendent visions are problematic,
- that the materiality of the world is as central to ecofeminist socialism as it is to socialist ecofeminism,
- that no collective project with ecosocialists is likely without an understanding of gender divisions and our reproduction of them, and
- that reconceiving gender within ecosocialism is a central project.

Generating a synthetic position that does justice to ecofeminism and ecosocialism necessitates working out the diversity of each perspective, establishing the ground that is to be plowed, and then cultivating a new form of collective position and politics. But I question that these conditions are at issue because sex/gender is the deepest social oppression. In fact, this strikes me as a transhistorical vision that goes against the historical grain that grounds the materialism at the foundation of socialism, feminism, socialist feminism and feminist ecosocialism or ecofeminist socialism.

Our Theoretical Diversity

Moreover, our respective literatures are wide and diverse. For ecosocialism, there are the differences between Martínez-Alier, Benton, Harvey, Dickens, Foster, O’Connor, and Swyngedouw; and for ecofeminism, different stances are taken by Griffin, Haraway, King, Mellor, Merchant, Mies and Shiva, Plumwood, Salleh, and Sturgeon. The key silence in that last sentence, however, remains the question of differentiating analyses of the North from the global South. Here, the particular cultural, bodily, ecological, political, and economic situatedness of the processes of ecological crisis tendencies and gender oppressions—as well as the structure of relations between the two—comes most centrally to the fore.

In addition to the interactionist political question that Salleh stresses in “Moving to an Embodied Materialism”—whether or not individuals and collectivities recognize the depth and intensity of gender hierarchies and sexed matters in everyday and movement relations—it seems to me that ecosocialists and ecofeminists each have to make a similar—and equally pivotal—move in order to produce a new collective ground. On the one hand, ecosocialist concerns tend to focus on issues of social justice in a fashion that naturalizes the environment such that the foundation of ecosocialism is scientized. But whether tied to discussions of risk society, audit society, environmental justice, science studies or feminist epistemology, it is clear that the nature-science-policy relation, however necessary for ecosocialist politics, is one fraught with historical inequity, undemocratic institutional structures, and overly strong commitments to separating natural and social questions in just exactly the form so cogently critiqued by Marx’s materialist conception of history.

On the other hand, and somewhat differently from most critical and anti-essentializing feminist trajectories over the last quarter century, many ecofeminist texts—Salleh’s editorial among

them—continue to focus on women’s mediations of biological processes, whether ecological, agricultural, or reproductive labor within families. While it is imperative that we acknowledge and resist the historically inaccurate re-inscription of “traditional” naturalized gender roles by neoconservative and reactionary movements around the world, to argue that these relations are predominantly about women’s mediations of biological processes represents a failure of relational materialist imagination quite similar to ecosocialist naturalization of the environment and scientization of politics. Here, the regular appeal to women’s subordinate mediation of biological processes for men homogenizes both the historically and spatially-specific kinds of biological mediation women practice, as well as the forms of patriarchy and relational dynamics of materially gendering ecologies, bodies and spaces.

Furthermore, and from an ecosocialist perspective, capitalist commodification of the conditions of life means that markets, money and wages mediate biological processes under modernist and developmentalist conditions at least as much as men and women mediate different aspects of biological processes for and with one another. Not only do men mediate biological processes for women, but that which is “biological” is wildly diverse. Here, it seems to me, much of the problem is the transliteration of reproduction with the biological. Salleh suggests that ecofeminists focus on women and women’s oppression as “reproductive labor in the sexual, economic, cultural, and ecological senses of that word. They are associated with—but are certainly much more than—conditions of production.” Such an approach at least appears to replicate the production-reproduction binary against which Marx and so many feminists, particularly feminists from the global South and subaltern feminists of the North, have argued. In short, there seems to be a danger in this approach of limiting ecofeminist analysis to relations reified by patriarchy—of reproducing the patriarchal equation of nature, women, and the nature of women’s role in reproduction.

Biologizing Women’s Practices?

If patriarchy legitimates gender hierarchies with appeals to biosexual differences and biologicistic arguments, it strikes me as quite contradictory for ecofeminism to constrain itself to the analysis of women’s mediation of ecological, personal and communal biology. To advance this position is to fail to transcend the parallel dualisms of male:female and society:nature. Certainly, ecofeminists have taken on the physical, chemical, technical, social, political, economic and ideological implications of biologizing women’s practices in ways that undermine the overemphasis on women’s mediation of biological processes. Here, just as “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” embracing the master’s equation of women’s labor as reproductive and grounded in biology only serves to rearrange the furniture and appliances such that the kitchen and bedroom are moved closer to the front door... troping the ever-so patriarchal band, Led Zeppelin, the house remains the same.

Furthermore, the implicit suggestion in the argument that women are much more than “conditions of production” is either that 1) patriarchal moments in capitalism treat women as such or 2) that O’Connor’s theorization of “the second contradiction” treats women in such a manner. There is great evidence of the former and little of the latter, particularly if the theory of the second contradiction is approached as suggested by Martin O’Connor—where the concern is with the “conditions of life,”—or by Stuart Rosewarne, who stresses the new social movement side of the relation over O’Connor’s political economic emphasis. Conditions of life, or conditions of reproduction, are ecological—a materialist abstraction that encompasses far more than biology;

personal—a condition that is always already biological, embodied, subjective, and situated; and communal—a materialist realm of cultural practices and material infrastructures. That the history of modern relations with ecological, bodily and cultural phenomena is overly and overlappingly technoscientific, gendered, and ethnocentric seems to me to be the key to developing a shared ecosocialist/ecofeminist project more than stressing women’s biological mediations.

Just as the modes of production debate failed to resolve the status of global capitalism and/versus its local ecological, scientific, personal, medical, infrastructural and cultural mediations so, too, do ecosocialism and ecofeminism have a tendency to elide the uneven situatedness of interrelated forms of class and gender oppression as they relate to intertwined crises of ecological, health and infrastructural conditions. My reading of the intersection of O’Connor’s work on accumulation, legitimation and fiscal crises and his analyses of ecological, personal and communal crisis tendencies, insists on the locatedness of the former triad near the tail-end of Cold War monopoly capitalism and the theorization of the relation between the two triplets near the beginning of neoliberal globalization.

In some (or even many) places, the key to an ecofeminist socialism may just be the forced mediation of biological moments of ecological, bodily and cultural relations. However, my sense is that for many of us, and for most people in the explosively urbanizing South, the biological is too intertwined with different physical, technoscientific, subjective, non-reproductive, cultural, and political economic structures to either homogenize or simplify the questions to concerns with biological reproduction. Alternatively, it strikes me that socialist ecofeminism’s great strength lies in the analysis of the consequential gendering of ecological, personal and communal conditions as well as the disproportionately oppressive gendered divisions of labor embedded in the intertwined relations of ecological, personal and communal reproduction under capitalist conditions.

Here, the personal is political, and the politics of feminist ecosocialism or ecofeminist socialism is such that the personal is always already ecological, communal and political economic in character. The emphasis on biological mediations in Salleh’s editorial particularly de-emphasizes the communal (spatially and culturally situated) and political economic moments that genderings (of the feminine and the masculine) mediate. The argument that the personal and movement politics of ecosocialism and ecosocialists needs to be reflexively autocritical about our collective and individual gendered markings, habits and reconstruction is of course central to the development of ecofeminist socialism, as Salleh suggests. However, while “the psychology of masculinity *is* actively rewarded by the capitalist system,” and this does contribute to “keeping that economy intact,” the capitalist psychology of femininity—equally necessary for holding the economy together—is actively rewarded by the same system, however differently. It is stepping outside of the psychologies of femininity (for women) and masculinity (for men) that is not rewarded.

Looking for Site Specific Theory

Further, no more than there is a single ecosocialism or ecofeminism that can be treated as representative of the whole, there is no singular masculine or feminine psychology under capitalism. In the United States there are myriad contradictory masculinities. Here, the most obvious split is between the Cowboy Individualist and the Populist Communitarian. Simply put, the masculinities of the market—whether one is a wage worker, entrepreneur or scion of old money—are radically different from the masculinities of the family, community and church, however traditional each may be. Rape and gender violence may be prevalent in both locales, but the recent revelations about the

Catholic Church make abundantly clear that rape and the violence of gendering are about far more than traditional heterosexualist politics can contain. Finally, while male-dominated gender hierarchies are reasonably seen as more or less hegemonic across contemporary and historical social formations, the dynamics, relations and ecological, bodily, and communal consequences are different and vary widely.

This, it seems to me, points to a key problem for both ecosocialism and ecofeminism: that it is all too often the case that ecosocialism sees political ecological process as more or less homogenous across the planet, and ecofeminism sees eco-destructive patriarchy operating by the same dynamics around the globe. As meta-categories, capitalism and patriarchy are important heuristics, but it is the particularities of uneven capitalist and state development as well as histories of patriarchy in the United States, India, South Africa, Nicaragua, and so on that matters, literally and figuratively, when it comes to the intertwined politics of nature, labor and culture.

Along these lines, at the anniversary conference for *Capitalism Nature Socialism* in Toronto last summer, Noel Castree presented a summary of his attempt to analyze the operationalization of neoliberalism in recent studies of Third World political ecology. Castree found that no generalization could be made with respect to the meaning of neoliberalism—particularly with respect to its impact on nature—across the large number of studies he reviewed. His conclusion was that neoliberalism may not be sufficiently coherent to be worth naming as a singular phenomenon. Exchanging comments afterwards, it struck me that there were two problems, one in his analysis, and a second that was problematic, because it was not in the studies he analyzed. The problem with his analysis was that it assumed that content of neoliberalism—and its impact on nature—could be assembled by means of generalization from case studies. Like capitalism, however, neoliberalism is a materialist abstraction and a process or set of relations rather than a set of things one can point to or particular policies.

Parallel to the ways in which localist participants in the modes-of-production debate insisted that capitalism had no abstract content beyond its local mediations, Castree suggests that neoliberalism has no content due to the fundamental differences in its expression and consequences. However, the problem with the studies is that the baseline trajectories of the ecological, personal, communal, political and economic problems of prior rounds of modernist, developmentalist programs are not known. As such, the material consequences directly tied to neoliberal policies—even if they were imposed in the same fashion everywhere—are next to impossible to tease out.

Patriarchy is not a priori, but prior to ...

In this context, it is important to both distill the theories and politics of ecofeminism and ecosocialism, but equally important to do so in a fashion that generates materialist abstractions appropriate to particular sets of cases. Marxist ecosocialism, then, has utility relative primarily to the intensity of the capitalization of an economy. Any particular ecosocialist politics must then adjust to this variability and the dialectical patterns of economic, political, ecological, personal and communal homogenization and differentiation as they relate to particularities of capitalist uneven development. Any particular political activities by ecofeminists must address the wide variability of patriarchal institutions as they condition and are conditioned by other material and ideological moments in social life.

These same kinds of problems exist when it comes to the work of ecofeminists concerned with women's biological mediations of the social and natural world for men and ecosocialists focused on the contradictions for labor and nature of capitalist development. Until such time as ecofeminists and ecosocialists address the unevenness and particularities of gendering and naturalization, my sense is that synthetic practices may be impeded. De-situating the particular embodiments and contradictions of gender hierarchies within ecofeminism and naturalizing the complex relations between capitalist accumulation and political ecological re-production will make the ground for collective action shaky. Coalitions and cooperation will certainly continue but are as likely to be driven as much by personality, or by shared acknowledgment of the utility of the two projects, than anything else.

Other differences between my take on the necessary rapprochement between ecofeminism and ecosocialism lie in two related areas. The first pertains to Salleh's focus on an embodied materialism rather than an embodied historical materialism. The point here is not to insist on fealty to Marx or Marxist foundations but to focus on the spatio-temporal diversity of sex-genderism rather than the transhistorical biologism to which Salleh repeatedly appeals. This is not to say that capitalism is not patriarchal nor that patriarchy doesn't precede capitalism. It is, however, to say that both ecosocialists and ecofeminists need to be specific about the constraints on capitalist development engendered by the social system's patriarchal commitments *and* the enablement of capitalist development patriarchy fostered. Patriarchy is not *a priori* to capitalism, though it is prior to it. The first political moment that ecofeminists and ecosocialists must *each* share in this view—which is my own view and not necessarily that of Salleh—is a concern with the ways that capitalism has remade sexism and sexism has situated capitalist development. Rather than argue that sex/gender is a deeper oppression than class, the focus needs to be on their mutual interdependence... I think we agree on this, but it doesn't come out in the editorial. For me, it is the dialectical relation between sexism and capitalism that is at issue, not an insistence on a vertical ranking of the depth of oppressions that socialist ecofeminism must focus upon. For that matter, the contradictions of capitalist patriarchy for women's lives are nicely played out in the editorial, while the contradictions for ecological and political ecological relations are all-but absent.

No less than “capitalism,” “patriarchy” is a structural meta-category always unevenly negotiated on the ground. This does not mean that capitalism is not globally hegemonic any more than it means that patriarchy can, today, be anywhere escaped. What it does mean is that, for socialist ecofeminists, projects on the ground must work not only with a sense of capitalist patriarchal structures but with the specific and coevolved forms of these oppressions. Otherwise, the politics of socialist ecofeminism will be the same in East Lansing, Michigan, as in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, and will fail in both locales.

Gendering – Social or Natural?

The last area of difference between my analysis and Salleh's relates to the naturalistic biologism that undergirds Salleh's analysis. For Salleh, “[o]ur bodily energies are artificially configured and constrained by gender, and those dissociations, in turn, deform economic practices, social institutions, and cultural beliefs.” However, for me the “artifice” of gendering is as “natural” to humanity as biological sex in that human beings have always generated and will always generate genderings of biological sex difference. And in contemplating an alliance between ecosocialism and ecofeminism, it is “recognition” of this fact of sex-gendering that makes the collective practice of

Salleh's second political moment of "engagement" so pivotal for her third concern with "dialog and reconceptualization."

It is here that the implicit sex-ism—the anti-gender-ing—of Salleh's piece runs aground. It is not gender that is the problem but the ahistorical naturalization, the reification, of dualist, heterosexist and fictitiously biologicistic difference. Just as sex differences are phenotypically non-polar, so too are the modalities of gender... even if, historically, these equally non-polar moments in sex-gender have been dis-integrated. (That this discussion brackets the polymorphous sexualities that engage socio-phenotypic sex-gender dynamics ought also to be noted.) Similarly, Salleh argues: "In the old bones of capitalist patriarchal logic 'men are culture, women are nature'—a perfect rationale for economic externalization of 'the other half.'" But, here again, it is nowhere near this simple. On the one hand, in this same arena, men are often argued to be biologically driven to spread their seed, and as such, rape or just fucking around is naturalized. On the other hand, equatorial men have often been argued to be even closer to nature than Northern women. There certainly are gender-ed clouds in the global social atmospheres, but there is no natural, biological, embodied rainbow to uncover by properly angling the mutual reconstruction of ecofeminism and ecosocialism, as is implied in Salleh's editorial.

Salleh also finds the devastating consequences for women's lives under neoliberal globalization exacerbated by the fact that women's "*position as mediators of nature is a prior condition for the transaction that takes place between capitalist and laboring men.*" Again this is partially undeniable, and yet utterly without nuance. If this is the case, it is very difficult to explain the widespread preference for employing women in low-wage sectors of the Southern economy, as well as the ways that Northern de-skilling and union-busting often reduce the number of manufacturing jobs for men and increase those for women. Certainly, such a situation usually exacerbates women's experience of "the double shift," but it also transforms the ecological, bodily and cultural implications of capitalist patriarchy. An ecofeminist socialism must be able to address 1) the transformations in women's reproductive roles given the increased percentage of women in the workforce in the industrial North—whether deriving from feminist victories or the neoliberal death of the male family wage and union benefits, 2) the diverse political economic and political ecological implications of gendered employment in agricultural, service and industrial development in the global South, and 3) the rates at which women in the North are simply not providing their role as nature mediators through pregnancy and childbirth—or home cooking—such that neoconservatives are, and capital is, very worried about the combination of rising wages in the North and immigration from the South. Here, emphasizing the ways women have denatured their own agency and material mediations matters as much as anything else.

Salleh appeals to Federici's "*history of breaking and taming the female body* and how men have been complicit with capital in this," and to Turner's "*male deal*, struck by Western colonizers and local men, as they build economic development on the backs of Third World women" to support her arguments about women's biological mediations. While this is undeniably true, it is unambiguous and fails to address the contradictions for most working men of the breaking and taming of women's bodies and the ways the male deal has both increased resistance to colonialism and all but guaranteed failed economic development in the Third World. The self-destructive contradictions of imperialist capitalist patriarchy—something clearly part and parcel of feminist scholarship over the last 20 years—is absolutely missing here. Salleh's editorial stresses the contradictions for women of capitalist patriarchy but not the contradictions for capitalism for men. It is the coincidence of both

contradictions—and their ecological and communal correlates—that generate the clearest opportunity and strongest reasons for the ecofeminist socialism that we all seek.

My reading of Salleh's editorial assumes an audience of Old Left ecosocialists, when my sense of subscribers to *CNS* is that it represents a generation that has come to their politics as much through Gramsci, Horkheimer and Adorno, Baran and Sweezy, Habermas, O'Connor, and Harvey, as through Smith, Butler, Harding, Haraway, King, MacKinnon, Martin, Merchant, Plumwood, Salleh, and Soper. As O'Connor suggested in his 1988 Introduction to *CNS*, sadly, the issue at hand remains how class politics will be transformed by intimately engaging ecological, personal, and cultural politics as each of those engage each other such that all are transformed. The class politics of ecofeminism and the feminist politics of ecosocialism are going to radically transform each other. Salleh's editorial quite rightly points to how far we still have to go. To my mind, however, the proposal the editorial puts forward brackets materialist studies of and movements that contest the technoscientific foundations of our knowledge of the processes of ecological, personal and communal reproduction. These studies and movements both provocatively integrate—in nascent form—feminist, technoscientific, and socialist knowledges; knowledges, which importantly denaturalize and diversify our understanding of sex-gender, nature-society, and capital-conditions relations.