

Embodying the Deepest Contradiction: A Rejoinder to Alan Rudy

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On the agenda for an integrated ecosocialist-ecofeminist politics, Alan Rudy lists:

... transformations in women's reproductive roles ... gendered employment in agricultural, service and industrial development in the global South ... 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 capital is, very worried ...

Materialist ecofeminist studies of the international division of labor will be invaluable in this respect; in particular, Maria Mies' concept of housewifization of the male workforce under neoliberalism; Vandana Shiva's empirical data on agribusiness enclosures and the cost to communal viability in the South; and Silvia Federici's analysis of transcontinental migration, sex tourism, and reproductive surrogacy. These economic questions are central to our political work, though in another sense, they are mere manifestations of a deeper set of relations embodied in exchanges between—historically constructed—women and men. Ecofeminists contend that there will be no end to capitalism and its ecological crisis until the patriarchal component of that oppressive system is dealt with. Moreover, while old socialist feminist debates over how patriarchal and capitalist system/s are interrelated still have much to offer, these are overtaken by the ecofeminist introduction of a new element, “nature” so called.

Accumulation and the Originary Contradiction

Ecofeminism brings a third dimension to the two dimensional red-green ecosocialist analysis and asks for a fresh reading of Marx's epistemology. My editorial “Moving to an Embodied Materialism” calls on ecosocialists to engage with this emergent synthesis; so it is disappointing to find Rudy treating this appeal to *CNS* readers as an ecofeminist manifesto in itself—then criticizing its limited terrain! Rudy's interpretation of my call to readers bypasses entirely my more developed arguments in *Ecofeminism as Politics* and various articles; his critique is therefore, something of a debate with a straw woman. Even so, making rejoinder here is a good opportunity to discuss common prejudices about ecofeminism; and hopefully, this will not be the last chance that he and I, and interested others, get to talk through such important things.

Ecofeminism adds a third dimension to the dual term “eco-socialism”—and it adds another contradiction—complementing the “first and second contradictions” outlined in James O'Connor's pioneering work. In many societies, including modern capitalist patriarchal ones, this deeply intransigent “originary contradiction” is expressed through practices that establish relations of power and exploitation by recourse to the concept of “nature.” For instance, the eurocentric economic regime that “universalizes” itself across the globe today structurally and discursively privileges its own masculine subjecthood or identity, while women and other colonized subjects are diminished, primitivized, and resourced as mere nature. An interrogation of this hierarchy of economic violence and the hegemonic assumptions that maintain it is indispensable as ecosocialists and ecofeminists combine their class politics. But Rudy rejects the ecofeminist thesis that the most fundamental contradiction within the capitalist patriarchal world system is that which splits off humanity (*viz.* in patriarchal terms, men) from nature (*viz.* women, natives, children, animals, plants), effectively turning the latter into an extractive commons.

For Rudy “Patriarchy is not *a priori* to capitalism, even if it is prior to it.” Yet this distinction strikes me as an “ahistorical” reading of the mutual determination of the two components of our social system. Rudy concedes that “the dialectical relation between sexism and capitalism” is an issue; but what he objects to in any contradiction that runs deeper and informs both the first and second contradictions identified by O’Connor is a “vertical ranking” of oppressions. This surely collides with his judgement that patriarchy is “prior to” capitalism; for if it is “prior to,” then patriarchal relations must be “always already” embedded in capitalist economic practices and institutions as these begin to form. Meanwhile, during this historical process, old dualisms like Man=Mind versus Woman=Body or Native=Body, rationalize the colonization of women’s sexuality, indigenous labor, and so on. Rudy resists discursive examination of this “humanity versus nature” hegemony by claiming that the allusion to nature pulls ecofeminism into a transhistorical realm. This in turn, means that it goes against what he understands by materialist reasoning. Yet if he were to read ecofeminist analyses of the practices by which masculine power is maintained, he would come to see these economic institutions as sedimentations of “actions” taken by men over centuries.

Perhaps Rudy’s problem stems from an ambiguity in the word “transhistorical” itself? For Marxists, this tends to denote anything not explained inside the master framework. For materialist ecofeminists, it implies that there may be historically determined phenomena not so far accounted for by the master. Rudy seems to agree with the latter when he urges that our proper study should be “an embodied historical materialism.” Certainly, Mies’ *Patriarchy and Accumulation* or my own *Ecofeminism as Politics* demonstrate that an ecofeminist analysis does not necessarily annul the historical sensibility of Marx. Rather, ecofeminism can grow historical materialism by spelling out the connection between class and hitherto ignored sex-gender relations. Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* is a particularly fine explication of historical processes by which the “naturalization” and taming of “the body” came to be pivotal to capitalist accumulation. Finally, Rudy uses the adjective “transhistorical” to argue that ecofeminists rely on biological explanations. I am not aware of any ecofeminist text that does this; so if he plans to raise it as a serious point for future discussion, he will need documentation.

A Common Structural Position

While I come to epistemological questions through ecofeminist activism and a reading of early Frankfurt School critical theory, Rudy’s theoretical observations reflect his North American background as former student of ecosocialist James O’Connor and postmodern feminist Donna Haraway. The latter’s poststructural influence is very apparent in Rudy’s eschewal of universalizing concepts and preference for “spatial specificity” in theory. It is somewhat ironic then, that he uses a version of this argument to suggest that ecofeminism is not a coherent standpoint because of differences between “Griffin, Haraway, King, Mellor, Merchant, Mies and Shiva, Plumwood, Salleh, and Sturgeon.” However, differences of location, disciplinary technique, style, or emphasis is irrelevant when the shared object of these ecofeminists is to contest ways in which the exploitation of women’s embodied labors and nature’s resources are linked in the capitalist patriarchal unconscious and its practices. Materialist ecofeminists in particular, have much to say about the commodification of nature and of women’s bodies; and much to say about the sex-gendered character of the dissociated thinking that keeps this brutal economic system in place.

If Rudy claims that ecofeminist writing is too disparate, at the same time, he maintains that it is too homogeneous and will fail if it does not recognize differences in the experiences of women North and South. However, our central thesis is that autonomous and materially reproductive labor is a structural reality experienced in common by the majority of women across the globe. As work that directly manages biological exchanges of the humanity-nature metabolism, unwaged labor is at once “ideologically” outside of, yet “materially” essential to the originary and primal site of accumulation. This “meta-industrial working class” includes mothers and carers, but also peasants and indigenous gatherers—all deemed by capital, and sometimes workers—to be “inferior” groupings, “closer to nature.” I have argued elsewhere that in a time of social and ecological crisis, this burgeoning meta-industrial labor alliance now offers the most “universal,” inclusive, and radically motivated contestation of corporate globalization—at the World Social Forum and elsewhere. Moreover, those who mediate “biological processes—whether it be ecological, agricultural, or reproductive labor within families”—possess hard-learned practical insights into how equitable and ecological alternatives can be achieved. Unfortunately, Rudy twists my argument inside-out to suggest that in focusing on biological or metabolic questions, I accede to a reactionary patriarchal logic. To the contrary, the first step in our emergence from capitalist patriarchal exploitation is to acknowledge the irreducible significance of embodied labor. Further, if ecosocialists are to move from an anthropocentric to deeper “ecocentric use values,” then this engagement with the logic of reproduction is critical.

Rudy is right to point to local “transformations” in the sphere of reproductive labor under neoliberalism. But these developments simply displace rather than destabilize capitalist patriarchal accumulation processes. The fact that fewer middle-class women in affluent countries undertake reproductive labors is a direct outcome of global free market deregulation and re-locating populations. In the North, immigrant workers enable middle-class women to buy cheap domestic help, even surrogate parenthood. And since women are always already played off against each other, materialist ecofeminists North and South theorize together. Consider the trans-cultural essays in *There is an Alternative*, edited by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen; here is a wealth of historical and geographic “specificities,” bridging local and global conditions. These ecofeminist studies should inspire ecosocialists to engender their research into capitalism. For without sex-gender democratization, ecosocialist thought remains “essentialist,” proceeding as if “workers” all faced the same structural exploitations. To take a case in point: despite O’Connor’s fruitful work on crisis tendencies and “the second contradiction,” his “conditions of production” construct is very problematic for women.

The Problem with Postmodern Epistemologies

The *Capitalism Nature Socialism* conference hosted by York University in Toronto, July 2005, attracted a number of postmodern papers—and the arrival of this theoretic tendency at *CNS* hovers like an Oedipal moment in the journal’s history. It heralds a generational debate among ecosocialists that should probably be resolved separately from ecofeminist work to bring sex-gender to the table. Nevertheless, my own view is that setting out to find post-structural answers to questions about equality and sustainability will blur the ontological status of our political objects. Take Noel Castree’s position that one cannot generalize about the content of neoliberalism. Rudy too, notes that “... 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.” This disintegrative tendency in the postmodern preoccupation with “specificities,” serves the neoliberal status quo more than it serves ecosocialism, because it defuses our focus on parallel injustices encountered across socio-cultural contexts.

Another postmodern pitfall is the dematerializing, reified, and disembodied use of terms like “materialist” or “set of relations.” In moving to an “embodied materialism,” ecofeminists try to “ground abstract relations”—simultaneously—in historical structures and in sensuously lived experience. By contrast, Rudy’s capitalism and patriarchy belong to an idealized world of heuristic categories. Yet hyperstatized categories can neither motivate nor facilitate active struggles for change. For people in a toxic workplace or those who lose subsistence lands, capitalist patriarchal power is a physical—indeed biological—force, not a discursive fiction. Perhaps one way to cut through this postmodern scholasticism, is for ecosocialists and ecofeminists to agree on adopting a critical realist epistemology? For when we concede that what we see and feel is in large part “socially constructed” by our culture, class, and sex-gendering, a kind of common-sense courage is necessary to work through such “ideological givens” and act politically. It is precisely such courage that ecofeminists draw on when they tackle the “naturalization” of reproductive labor. But when ecosocialists turn this political work inside-out, closing off the conversation with contemptuous accusations of “biologism” or “essentialism,” they simply enforce old strategies of sex-gender power.

Rudy acknowledges the need for ecosocialists and ecofeminists to be “reflexively auto-critical,” because the structures of domination we would dismantle “out there” are also “in here,” that is to say, inside ourselves. But I sense an ambivalence on his part regarding the “interactionist” aspect of politics. This may derive from structuralists like O’Connor and Haraway, whose otherwise exciting work provides few tools for mediating the space between personal and political. But reflexive dialogue between ecosocialists and ecofeminists is not only about getting the words right. Our very “situatedness”—as “bearers” of uninvited capitalist patriarchal structures—is historically bound up with libidinal energies embodied in biological flesh. Rudy notes that

... 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.”

Yet with this unwitting statement, he moves to a pre-feminist stance, wherein the two sex-genders are said to be socially valued in complementary ways. This is a ruse. Women as a reproductively laboring class are not rewarded for embracing role socialization into “the capitalist psychology of femininity.” The most obvious evidence is the UN statistic that shows women putting in 65 percent of all labor globally for 10 percent of all pay.

Gendering Technologies

I am nonplussed as to how Rudy reads as “ahistorical” my claim that “bodily energies are artificially configured and constrained by gender, and those dissociations, in turn, deform economic practices, social institutions, and cultural beliefs.” He confounds this by going on to say that: “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.” Leaving Rudy’s naturalistic and essentializing fallacy aside, I enjoin his perception that in most societies, behavior that steps outside local norms of femininity and masculinity is punished and can sharply circumscribe the transgressor’s economic, social, and sexual opportunities. Rudy and I converge too, in recognizing that there are many “masculinities”—particularly in an affluent multicultural country

such as his. But there is a caveat: for when ecosocialists resort to this individualist pluralizing identity psychology, they risk dispersing the structural analysis of exploitation. Would Rudy, for example, want to accept an argument that since there are “many kinds of capitalist entrepreneur” it is unfair to treat them as a class?

If the application of postmodern deconstruction to neoliberal or capitalist patriarchal relations is politically unhelpful, its application to the intimate world of sex-gender is devastating. For without the gender process as a conceptual building block, feminism itself is made impossible. To retrace some ecofeminist understandings: the “historical” or cultural trick of gendering newborn infants regulates the natural variability of sexed bodies as “either/or,” as “pink or blue.” Conversely, against convention, I would agree with Rudy (and Freud) that sex differences are “phenotypically non-polar,” often polymorphous, in fact. My longstanding non-dualist position on this highlights the composite and changing quality of sex-gender in any individual lifetime. However, Rudy reverses this critical attitude, and in line with a recent post-feminist fashion in North American academic circles, he theorizes “identity gendering” as an existentially liberating “choice” to be “engineered” at will. Now benign as that highly geo- and class-specific option may be, it does nothing to shift structural oppressions encountered by the majority of women on earth trying to survive under the advance of neoliberal globalization.

Turning to the macro aspect of “the technological *a priori*,” I endorse Rudy’s judgment that “the nature-science-policy relation” is marked by “historical inequity, undemocratic institutional structures, and overly strong commitments to separating the natural and the social questions.” But I do not concede that my approach to ecofeminism is indifferent to “...materialist studies of and movements that contest the technoscientific foundations of our knowledge of the processes of ecological, personal and communal reproduction.

If my editorial did not touch directly on the interrelation of sex-gender and science, a great deal of my ecofeminist writing and activism does so. More to the point, the ecofeminist research of Carolyn Merchant was foundational to gendered science studies in academia; Vandana Shiva’s hands-on struggle with transnational technoscience is ongoing through the World Trade Organization. But one obstacle to the synthesis of such ecofeminist perspectives with a hybrid postmodern-ecosocialism of the kind that Rudy entertains is the latter’s too coarse-grained formulation of things that need to hold water in real life. For this reason, I’ve not found Haraway’s quasi-celebration of science useful when it comes to hands-on contestation of the technological *a priori*. Generally, ecofeminists oppose technologies that subvert people’s self-reliance; thus future discussions with ecosocialists might include: the ravaging of nature to manufacture and energize ecologically irrational technologies; the deeply sex-gendered fascination with these; the capitalist colonization and seduction of whole populations to a belief in the necessity of such gadgetry; the role of high tech in the ego maintenance of self-respecting middle-class men ... To grow new kinds of progress and civility beyond all this, we will have to delve into the libidinal reward structures that habituate people to high tech. Again, I emphasize that such a theorization is not about “biological fixtures”; libido is infinitely malleable; and materialist ecofeminist arguments are always made with reference to historical context.

Dialectics of Production and Reproduction

Rudy describes reproductive labor rather concretely as “women’s subordination,” perhaps reflecting the ecosocialist subsumption of women under “conditions of production.” Likewise, his

charge that my attention to women's roles in maintaining the humanity-nature metabolism limits itself to "relations reified by patriarchy" or "represents a failure of relational materialist imagination" affirms that he has not yet encountered the breadth of my or other ecofeminist criticisms of eurocentric economics, science, and culture. Most significantly, he misses the dialectical reasoning that frames my argument in *Ecofeminism as Politics* and in other embodied materialist writing. This is odd, because he, himself, authored an interesting article on dialectics in an earlier *CNS*. But Rudy's current postmodernist leaning positivizes ecofeminism as a static explanatory schema rather than embracing it as a materially embodied historical process—continually made and re-made by the "interactions" of women and men. By my reasoning, his criticism says more about the theoretic lens he is using than it does about ecofeminist political analysis.

Ecofeminist economists such as Hilikka Pietila, Marilyn Waring, and more recently Ellie Perkins, have written path-breaking exposés of the pivotal function of reproductive labor in the international system of accumulation. Yet though much of this work has been around since the 70s, it is apparently not read, or at least not acknowledged by ecosocialists, who continue to push ecofeminism away as "essentialist." This materialist ecofeminism details just how capitalist patriarchal institutions are entirely dependent on externalized "meta-industrial labors" and how the cosy complementarity of production and reproduction is a sham. If there is a taboo on the study of women's diverse reproductive labors as "biologizing," I suggest that this speaks the originary contradiction—not an eternal return, we hope, but certainly for the time being, a manly ghost that frightens off too many thoughtful efforts for change. The reproductive interface of humanity and nature must be addressed. Child rearing has massive biological and economic costs on women—and not only is child rearing unvalued, but women are even penalized by neoliberal governments for their "time out" commitment. Similarly, careful indigenous stewardship of forest stands and catchments is absorbed by a parallel drive to accumulation. In challenging such corrupt economic relations and in seeking to value what the worldwide majority of "workers" do, it is essential for ecofeminists and ecosocialists to theorize the reproductive labor sector.

Curiously, Rudy would exorcize what he imagines is an ecofeminist "transliteration of reproduction with the biological," while acknowledging that reproduction refers to a spectrum of sustaining cycles—biological, socio-cultural, and economic. But can reproduction simply be dropped as an "old binary" when the capitalist patriarchal prejudices it carries are alive and well in so much Marxist thought and action? To reconceptualize class politics in an "ecocentric" direction, we need to engage with this hegemony, while at the same time, disengaging our embodied attitudes from:

- the artificial distinction between nature and history;
- the conventional assumption that phenomena grounded in nature are necessarily regressive;
- and that historically produced phenomena are necessarily progressive;
- the historical gender differentiation between masculine and feminine that is superimposed over the natural continuum of sexual variation;
- the association of the masculine with the historical order by way of a productivist problematic;
- the association of the feminine with the order of nature by way of a reproductivist problematic;
- the identification of productive activity with the public sphere;
- the identification of reproductivity with the private sphere;

- the concomitant valorization of productive activity; and
- the complementary de-valorization of reproductivity.

Ecosocialist and ecofeminist thought will not reconcile until the full import of these absurd pairings is recognized.

For now, Rudy's commentary on my text is thoroughly enmeshed in this old patriarchal grid. He and I may concur that the division between nature and history is a cultural fiction. But we part ways at the second proposition viz. the standard masculinist assumption that phenomena grounded in nature are necessarily regressive and that historically produced phenomena are necessarily progressive. Many socialists are impatient with the ecofeminist focus on women's labor mediations of material nature, and usually they go on to rehearse the next several ideological propositions on this grid as well. Yet the analysis of "reproductive labor" is indispensable to an inclusive ecosocialism—not just in terms of sex-gender balance, either. In ecofeminism, the term "reproduction" also carries an ecological sense. Meta-industrial labor denotes working with natural processes to provision human communities in a way that allows ecosystems to reproduce sustainably as well. This labor involves a mutual "holding," as humans nurture nature and nature's cycles nurture us. The "ecocentric use values" generated in this labor are most clearly seen in subsistence economies managed by highly skilled peasant women in the not-yet-developed South. But to a modest extent, we begin to see it in the experiments of alternative men and women in the bioregional North.

Alan Rudy fears that ecofeminist focus on what he calls "the biosocial" fails to emancipate women, because it traps them in the present. But this only follows if people, as potential agents of history, are locked on to a one-dimensional plane of structuralist assumptions where all they can know is "always already spoken." Here there arises another weakness of postmodern theory: its inherently ahistorical conservatism. For the "structure" of discourse is only one facet of everyday reality, while the greater part of living is a "dynamic metabolism" in/with nature. Rudy considers that "capitalist commodification of the conditions of life means that markets, money, and wages mediate biological processes under modernist development at least as much as men and women do..." But I query this. Do these abstract dematerialized forces actually "mediate" nature? Or are they part of the instrumental mystification of nature, a controlling disjunction between signifier and signified, a crude ideological violence that helps bring our ecosystems down? For me, "mediation" carries a sense of reciprocal agency between laboring subject and materiality, something that is lost with "technologically advanced" economic provisioning but rediscovered by ecofeminists in meta-industrial labor. Speaking pre-figuratively, an embodied materialist politics would restore the pulse of nature to our fractured history. Here there is a convergence with the materialism espoused in Joel Kovel's book *The Enemy of Nature*—and so another conversation opens.