

Review essay

Watersheds in Marxist Ecofeminism

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Pamela Odih, *Watersheds in Marxist Ecofeminism*.  
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Pamela Odih's book *Watersheds in Marxist Ecofeminism* (2014) makes an important contribution to the literature of eco-socialism. Odih teaches cultural studies at Goldsmiths College, London, but she displays competencies in ecology, geography, social policy, history, literature, psychology, philosophy, Marxism, and ecofeminist theory. In a study of community efforts to protect the River Thames from the indifference of urban industrial London and old school engineers, Odih's text moves easily between these disciplines. At the same time, it draws on ethnographic interviews with grassroots activists to explore the roots of their commitment to the river. The book is lavishly supplied with annotated photographs of the Thames catchment and the care givers whose work inspires her.

As the book's title suggests, the ecofeminism that interests Odih is the embodied materialist strand articulated by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva ([1993] 2014), Ariel Salleh (1997), Mary Mellor (1997), and Ana Isla (2005). This literature works dialectically, both with and against Marxist categories. Along with these ecofeminist thinkers, Odih argues that Marx's profoundly gendered labour theory of value and equally gendered techno-Prometheanism fall short in providing tools for an inclusive politics of justice and sustainability. She digs deep into the embodied materialist analysis of regenerative labour and related exposition of reproductive time to reveal how Marx's ([1844] 2007) various comments on the theoretical status of nature were marred by inconsistency. Even so, he was pioneering in his observation of the metabolic loss incurred by drainage of human sewage into the River Thames.

Odih is concerned that under the European Union's *Water Framework Directive* (2000), the conservation NGOs that coordinate preservation activities along the River Thames are quintessential neoliberal organisations. They enlist volunteer labour, mainly women, to clean up after capitalism, and while Ulrich Beck (1995) suggests that this sub-politics has the potential to stimulate transformative agency, Odih is disturbed by its reliance on the imagery of gender roles. She draws a parallel with Mies' generalised concept of housewification, whereby women's labour in the global South is pulled into production for affluent countries. Mies argues that the housewife has always been the true proletariat. Odih pairs housewification with the local meta-industrial labour that maintains the conditions of existence for these same colonised workers. However, Mies' idea of housewification operates within the anthropo-centric production model and implies victimhood. Conversely, Salleh's meta-industrial labour thesis functions in the eco-centric sphere of metabolic transformations, drawing together both subjectively human and objectively ecological processes.

Although meta-industrial labour may be subsumed by the industrial system, in principle, and by definition, it stands outside of it. The term meta-industrial labour conveys an autonomy and creative agency that is not implied by housewification. Thus if river care involves enhancing ecosystem integrity, it is indeed politically radical, not just a dupe of neoliberal bureaucrats. In exposing the complacencies of management discourse in policy such as London mayor Boris Johnson's *Securing London's Water Future* (2011), Odih might pay more attention to the ecofeminist critiques of post-Enlightenment science. For the notion of an embodied materialism is designed for contesting the academic

hegemony of classical physics, its schizoid objectivity and imperious algorithms - not to mention physics envy on the part of economics and sociology. Odih (294) relies on Beck (1995) here: '... modernization displaces sensory perception as a basis for knowledge, ... the imperceptibility of environmental risk establishes irrational, erudite, knowledge and reintroduces an appeal to the mystical realm of the symbolic'.

Odih is not only concerned about the exploitation of community volunteers, but about the fact that the public emphasis on care labour as gendered may essentialise and reinforce oppressively traditional family structures. In turn, this may annul the relevance of ecofeminist analysis for post- or trans-gendered individuals. With this problem in mind, the book enters into a deconstructive reading of Carol Gilligan's (1982) thesis on the psychology of feminine attachment, relational logic, and care ethics. However, in moving from individual agency to collective praxis, it is essential to engage with gendered interests as these have shaped capitalist economic practices, legal and scientific knowledges. Since climate change is a result of such institutions and its causes and effects are gendered, so too, will political solutions need to be gender-savvy. When embodied materialists discuss care giving, the focus is on its origins in forms of labour that provide sensuous experiential learning - and that as basis for a tacit empirically grounded epistemology. In principle, meta-industrial labour is ungendered and carried out by peasants, gatherers, and mothers alike.

After an astute evaluation of postmodern feminist notions of time, identity politics, and social capital, Odih looks to poststructuralism to transcend the paradoxes of embodiment and to amplify her interest in the ethnic meanings of the river for Thames catchment dwellers. She approaches this by exploring what she calls the governmentality of symbolic mediation, spelling out the notion of heterotopology as a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of lived space. In Odih's words (350), whereas utopias are spaces without extension, 'Neoliberal rationalities configure river waterways as "sites", the dimensions of which are analogous to Michel Foucault's (1986) account of spatial heterotopias, as polymerous relations of propinquity between junctures'. It is not easy to grasp how poststructural constructs like this are useful in grassroots political praxis - without relapsing into a kind of eurocentric academic vanguardism.

Ideological capture and material appropriation of the body is the key to women's patriarchal diminishment - and this understanding is shared by all feminisms. But the political meaning of care labour varies according to whether it is viewed through the liberal cognitive "justice" lens, or framed by a radical holistic unity of "head, heart, and hand". The latter paradigm is clear in Odih's interviews, when women, and the other marginals who join them in river care, express pleasure in the mutuality of working together, hands in the soil. Here, exploitation is transformed into joy by commoning. Ecofeminists have always been aware that their geopolitics criss-crosses a major historical contradiction. The challenge inheres in translating this existential paradox into macro-political change.

It is impossible to do justice to the depth and multiplicity of Odih's work in a short review. She immerses her readers in a rich and powerful synthesis of contemporary ecological dilemmas. The book is invaluable in teasing out relations between water poverty, gender, and time poverty, and it brings to the fore theoretical tensions that hover within the diverse traditions of feminist thought, and other tensions between ecofeminism and Marxism. *Watersheds in Marxist Ecofeminism* should be on every class list in geography, political ecology, environmental philosophy, and cultural studies.

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