The Ecofeminist Ground of Ecosocialism

A Twofold Mission. The ecological crisis is too serious to be left to greenwashers, technocrats and reformers; it demands, rather, the “ruthless criticism” Marx set forward in 1843, criticism that fears neither the powers that be nor its own findings. We believe that the scale of what is now transpiring should fire the radical imagination to rethink the whole of existence and the entirety of our relations with nature. Such is the credo of CNS, which has since 1988 been home to radical thought about the crisis.

Much of the work we publish consists of analytic studies that track the intricate workings out of the crisis across the innumerable boundary points that define our relation to nature. Nothing human is alien to us, to reprise an ancient and still valid ideal. But we are also open to work that might be called expressive and is variously aesthetic, exhortatory, even prophetic—work that announces where we want to be going. These two types are also dimensions that appear in various proportions within each individual CNS article and immanently imply one another, inasmuch as any work’s basic intentions are embedded in its results. The New York Times’s “all the news that is fit to print” is news that fits into a worldview defined by investment in the status quo and desire to preserve its class structure. Consequently mainstream “environmental” reporting takes on a non-ecological cast: it is about what is outside us and never questions the essential assumptions behind the facts. Never making the vital connections that could point to a basic change, the mainstream presents the world as needing to be controlled and manipulated.

The CNS worldview is distinctly different, because it is grounded in the desire to preserve the integrity of life. Accordingly, if the dominant system turns out to be a menace to life, then to Hell with it. We strive, therefore, to be ecocentric in our work, by preserving interconnections, seeing the whole, not isolating the inside from the outside, nor the observer from what is observed. Fully realized, this vision becomes dialectical and emancipatory. It seeks to supersede what is, not to patch the given state of affairs and preserve it for further plunder.

We call the given system capitalism, as in Capitalism Nature Socialism, and claim that our reality makes the most sense when regarded as the workings out of an apparatus that subordinates all reality to the goal of accumulation. We reject postmodern ways of thought as evasions of this hard truth. And we also try to go beyond the half-measures that would locate the core problem as inhering in derivatives of capital, such as the corporations, or the industrial system. We take these phenomena very
seriously but regard them as essentially the instruments of capital. For capital is the monster\(^1\) that drives the ecological crisis and is our real quarry.

This commits us to a position that includes but also surpasses the discourses of political economy. We reject the notions of ecological economics, that oxymoron created out of the pathological need to commodify nature; but we are also open to work that goes beyond the framework of the economy as such. For capital is a way of being as well as an economy. It is the outcome of an ancient disorder, congealing into an overarching economism that represses all other aspects of existence. The critique of capital should therefore undo this repression and open onto a wider range of inquiry than is ordinarily comprehended by political ecology. This point is essential for the imagining of where we want to be going, as it opens our imagined “better world” to a wider and deeper realization than that comprised by the simple extension of legal mechanisms, regulatory codes, alternative currencies, etc. We see these as means to an end, posted at various distances along the way to a \textit{telos}, that, like all objects of human labor, must be imagined in the mind before it is realized in the world.

\textbf{Ecosocialism as \textit{telos}.} If we would consign capitalism to Hell, it is for the sake of some heaven, a heaven, moreover, on the earth and not pie in the sky. Thus our thinking is not merely utopian, but prefigurative. This destination beyond capital, this ecologically rational society, remains an open project. Nevertheless, to reject the capitalist system as life-threatening demands a working name in order to focus the mind on its alternative. It is in this spirit that we speak of socialism, as in Capitalism Nature \textit{Socialism}. The absence of commas between the three words of our title was the inspired choice of James O’Connor, founder of CNS. It opens the trio of terms, standing in ambiguous sequential splendor like the monoliths at Stonehenge, to the whole ambit of possibilities inherent in the bracketing of nature with capitalism and socialism.

I call socialism a “working name” because of all the words in our language it is best suited to signify capital’s antagonist and successor, because it summates a history variously glorious and doomed, a history full of lessons to be learned and turns both false and true in the road to ecological integrity. However, the remarkable example of Cuba notwithstanding, no one should regard those actual socialisms that arose over the last century through the struggle to emancipate labor as nearly adequate to define the ecologically rational society of the future. And if the socialism of the “first-epoch” was not able to encompass the ecological crisis, then there needs be a “next epoch” socialism that does. For this notion we reserve the word, \textit{ecosocialism}, to signify the “where we want to be going.” Ecosocialism is socialism made ecologically rational. It is both destination and the road to be built as we travel.

\(^{1}\text{Heeding Marx, who repeatedly and wonderfully refers to capital as a \textit{werewolf} or \textit{vampire} sucking the blood of living labor.}\)
Ecosocialism, it seems to me, will take shape out of three interwoven lines, the first two of which will simply be mentioned, and the third explored a bit:

§ Ecosocialism requires preserving and extending the core of socialism, which is to allow human beings to freely express themselves in self-determined, social labor. This means doing what is necessary to overcome the separation of the producers from the means of production, which in turn means, as ever, undoing the class system and the capitalist state that enforces that class system—and it means facing the dire implications of this. If we want peace, which is another word for ecological sanity, we need justice, which is another word for bringing down the system in which certain people accumulate wealth by exploiting others. A really just world still needs to be a classless world, beyond imperialism, militarism and the other accoutrements of accumulation.

§ Second, ecosocialism requires the development of a post-capitalist, ecological mode of production, one that replaces capitalist production with that freely expressed by emancipated labor. This entails a re-centering of production away from the commodity and toward the creating of flourishing, integral ecosystems. In practice, this begins with the restoration of use values within production (associated with the devaluation of exchange value); and it extends to the recognition of an intrinsic value beyond use value, for which end we need to comprehend ourselves in nature and nature in ourselves. The notion of an integral ecosystem is allied with that of a “moral economy”; it incorporates the human being as an active, transformative agent and not a demiurge standing over mute nature. Human ecosystems entering into the building of ecosocialism might include an organic garden, a “wilderness” park, a schoolroom, a labor union, a factory setting, or indeed, an ecosocialist movement. As these become integral they develop relations of wholeness, which, encompassing ever-wider regions of existence, become emancipated and develop revolutionary potential.

§ The third foundational line of ecosocialism is its gendered ground in human existence and is comprised under the name of ecofeminism, which signifies that branch of the feminist movement that regards nature and gender as deeply interrelated, so that the one cannot be emancipated without the other.

The gendered bifurcation of nature. Gender is the point at which human being interacts with nature according to the notion of difference. So long as humans have had self-consciousness and language, they have recognized two versions of themselves according to body plan. No other structure of difference is so profound, enduring, and grounded in the natural reality of sex.

We can—and should—imagine a world without class. And while many of the various constructions of race are related to nature through some physical sign or other, this is no real foundation for what divides people, but a false difference (a “splitting”) spelled out with the bad biology of pseudo-speciation. Hence we also can—and should—imagine a post-racist world, in which complex networks of social difference develop outside the ground of racialization.
We cannot, however, imagine a world without gender, as some postmodernists would have it—though we can—and should—imagine one with better gender relations. Gender remains the form of difference authentically grounded in nature, insofar as sex is a basic natural category. It is always constructed, yet always out of real materials—and the “always” reaches back to the origins of each person and the building blocks of the species itself. Hence it is the ground of difference, and like a proper ground, endures and holds up what rests upon it.

Our capacity to transform nature, i.e., to produce, is itself gendered, as is the language with which we account for reality. When we produce, we interact with nature to bring forth new form, which being new, is also a difference. Since thought is always interconnected through the endless plasticity of language, gender difference, however constructed under various historical conditions, is transferred onto all other differences. In one direction the process includes aspects of the human, produced world, and in the other, that of nature itself. The primary division of labor is therefore organized by gender; it “incorporates” body-plan and connects male and female functions with the sky, the earth, the sun, the moon, the wind and the waters, and the numberless creatures inhabiting nature.

None of this is inherently tied to domination and violence. Yet domination and violence also entered the world as gendered. I should think this happened through the mutation of male hunting bands into forcible expropriators of other humans and particularly of the threefold prizes embodied in the female—her productive labor, her reproductive power (also with “labor”), and her sexuality. From this point of origin patriarchy, class and the state derived through processes far too complex to be summarized, much less developed, here.

In the realm of gender domination, women stand between men and nature and mediate the two. In this scheme of things, the true human being became considered male (which is why the received and reactionary inventory of human nature is a simulacrum of male psychology, rapacity and all; and why Freud scarcely ever took mothers into account in drafting his psychology); meanwhile women, though formally recognized as human beings, experience their status as a tenuous and constantly undermined right. In civilization, then, women are sunk into nature, and nature and women are alike devalued, while men soar freely. The work of the genders is valued correspondingly. The woman is a mixture of earth and humanity, while the sky is reserved for the male. And the earth, or nature, is the devalued part of the female principle, variously considered wild and threatening or passive, inert and exploitable (for paired, split-apart opposites characterize this delusional way of being). Hence the

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2Hunting is a primary mode of the gendered division of labor, deriving from the momentous evolutionary development that underlies the special role played by sex and gender in human existence, in particular, the replacement of the annual oestrus that regulates sexuality in other mammals with year-round oestrus. Along with de-regulated sexuality, this brought in its wake menses, their associated blood loss, and a chronic threat of iron-deficiency anemia for women, the prevention of which accentuated the survival value of hunting and meat-eating and its subsequent potential for organized violence as carried out by bands of hunters. See Leonard Shlain, *Sex, Time and Power* (NY: Penguin, 2004).
gendered bifurcation: male is to female as humanity/civilization is to nature. Accordingly, nature forever remains outside, split-off from Man. In terms of our notions of ecological production, the gendered bifurcation imbues nature with the Otherness of repressed gender and blocks the recognition of intrinsic value. So long as this “conception” (for at a very deep level it is also a male parthenogenetic fantasy) is maintained the ecological crisis is not only inevitable but irremediable.

From its point of origin, all aspects of nature become stained with Eve’s curse, what Engels termed the “world-historical defeat of the female sex.” The curse entered into the history of capital and was further transformed by it. Capitalism, far from being a rational system of market relations, is a phase in the evolution of un-free, gendered labor. The new system carried forward the intense fear and loathing of the body developed in earlier stages of Christianity and transmuted this into the torments of Puritanism. It further widened the split between the sexes, through the intense degree of rationalization imposed by the new regime of generalized exchange and monetization, and became stained by hatred of the female principle to a degree scarcely ever matched in history. All of this burst forth in modernity’s grim underside, the Great Witch-hunt.3

Yet capital also ushered in another turn in the history of gender through the generalized commodification of labor power. In doing so, it paradoxically created the conditions for both socialism and feminism—the former by the growth of wage labor, which could be organized along socialist lines, the latter through the fact that the wage relation, being an extension of abstract exchange, is indifferent to body plan. Because exchange-value is immaterial and a mere mental figment, as capital expands it breaks down gender boundaries and opens up a path to a potential equalization of the sexes. It also does much else, by weakening communal ties, fracturing the family, and, through the consumerism that pervades its “advanced” stages, flooding society with desire.

The effects on gender are chaotic, with every conceivable tendency swirling across the map, including certain feminist advances. But there is a joker in this deck, which derives from the fact that first-epoch feminism, like first-epoch socialism, remains dependent upon the integrity of capitalism rather than its supersession. Therefore, the equalization of the sexes was, and remains, equality under bourgeois relations, just as the advancement of workers has been an advanced incorporation into the alienated ways of consumerism, debt, and the money economy.4

3For the definitive account of the intersection between gender and the rise of capitalism, the reader is advised to consult Silvia Federici’s Caliban and the Witch (NY: Autonomedia, 2004), excerpts from which appeared in CNS 58 and 59. See also Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) for an exploration of how gender bifurcation corrupted the history of modern science.

4Within the sphere of gender this would incorporate postmodern developments, inasmuch as this wrinkle in capitalist relations is predicated on the unfettered ascendance of exchange over use value. As for workers, we can grimly see the working out of the system logic by the Bush II administration, as when the President urges replacement of Social Security with private investment accounts for workers, such being the glorious road to an “ownership society.”
The soccer mom balancing domesticity and high-tech employment and the superexploited Chinese woman torn from the countryside who solders together the computer the First World woman uses to organize her busy schedule and make her Powerpoint presentations, occupy different spots along the continuum of female subsumption into capital, with varying degrees of repression within the current division of labor. The same applies to the growing flood of women sucked into the sex industries that feed from the abovementioned insertion of desire into social existence. In the midst of it all, bourgeois feminism languishes, ultimately, I should think, because it has never been able to imagine an alternative that encompasses a better world than that of capital, and therefore succumbs to the system’s extremely potent ways of absorbing its partial negations.

The necessity of ecofeminism. Long ago one could answer the question posed by the limitations of bourgeois feminism by pointing to the hope of socialism. But well before first-epoch socialism degenerated and collapsed, it demonstrated that its gender relations had done little to surpass the example of the ancien regime. The bold hopes of an Alexandra Kollontai and the genius of Rosa Luxemburg became associated with many remarkable stories of women who rose out of feudal bondage. But soon enough these became eclipsed by a bureaucratic reality in which women would swell the ranks of the technical professions but rarely ascend further. The same has proven the case for Cuba, socialism’s finest outcome.

First-epoch socialism, despite various initiatives toward an ecocentric position, failed to overcome the gendered bifurcation of nature and fell back with a thud on the capitalist metaphysic that regards both nature and the female as a passive reserve of resources with no intrinsic value. The dreadful results in terms of ecosystem integrity are well documented. But we also need to learn to recognize the profound connection between a society’s treatment of nature and its treatment of women. There needs to arise, then, a “next-epoch” feminism that avoids both the pitfalls of bourgeois feminism and (first-epoch) socialist feminism: an ecofeminism. And as ecofeminism requires a socialist development if it is to break free of the fetters binding bourgeois feminism, then this means that it needs to take place as an ecosocialism, which avoids the errors of first-epoch socialism. And since one of the greatest of these occurred at the nexus of gender and nature, an ecosocialist outcome needs to also be ecofeminist, for this is predicated on overcoming the estrangement between gender and nature, freeing both in the process. Thus the two mutually recognize each other—and mutual recognition is the sign of an integrally human ecosystem.

Ecological production posits the object produced as an ecosystem. At its center is neither a thing nor a fetish, but a living form, interrelated with others, made from the bringing together and holding together of mutually recognizing yet distinct elements.

5Because the patriarchal economy sees to it that female labor is remunerated at a lower level, while patriarchal culture sees to it that women workers are also more docile and easily controlled.

6See Arran Gare, “The Environmental Record of the Soviet Union,” Capitalism Nature Socialism, 13, 3, 2002, pp. 52–72. Cuba again provides a partial exception with its impressive ecological development after the collapse of the USSR. But this came too late in its development to constitute a complete social transformation.
This does not mean that nothing will be produced for exchange, or, that commodities will somehow disappear from the world, a quite unthinkable outcome. It does mean that as exchange becomes subordinated to use and intrinsic value, a different set of needs and productive relations will appear and take ecosystemic form: process will supersede product, direct sensuous appropriation will be valorized, subject-subject relations will proliferate, aesthetic considerations will be foregrounded. In the changed need structure that emerges, mutual obligation, respect for limits, and feelings of solidarity and spiritual wholeness arise; and these can overcome the hunger of possession and domination that propels the capitalist economy.

The labor entailed in this kind of production embodies the rising of what has been subjugated and segregated into mere woman’s work since the rise of male dominion. Ecological production is not the activity of a producer standing over dumb nature as a chaotic set of inert objects. Still less is it the labor of the alienated worker deprived of human power and following orders as a tiny wheel in the gigantic machine of accumulation. It is, rather, a revalorization of what had been degraded. The female principle, being differentiated rather than split from nature, and immemorially regarded in terms of caring for, or holding, or gathering, or providing, or of staying with, or of weaving together, is now restored, no longer marginalized, no longer the background to civilization, but dialectically brought to full being as the groundwork of integral ecosystems. We know empirically that the most vital eco-political movements arise spontaneously as collectives of women, often in the South and often working and living under conditions of subsistence. Now we can declare these ventures as prefiguring and announcing a new society.

In the ecofeminist path, women cease being object and Other to male desire and regain themselves as full human beings. Correspondingly, men regain connection to the earth, as the Other becomes others. Thus the bifurcation is undone. Neither of these emancipatory motions within gender will happen except as isolated and disconnected instances, however, so long as capital and the capitalist state rule. Thus ecosocialism and ecofeminism need to be in the thick of the struggle and will have to prove their bona fides by alliances and associations across the whole range of social and political movements.

The task for CNS. None of this can be taken up within the perimeter of this brief and necessarily abstract presentation. But as we began by considering the work of this journal, so may we end there as well. It goes without saying that neither ecofeminism nor ecosocialism loom large on the current landscape. We do believe, however, that we have something to offer a world tormented by impending ecological breakdown and barren of revolutionary hope. And so we press on, yet not in isolation from one another. I wrote this House Organ, more substantially theoretical than the previous ones, to express some ideas that have been brewing inwardly but also to underscore certain editorial priorities. These are first, that CNS will continue to strive for a vital mix of analytic and expressive work, the former addressing the workings of this world, the latter indicating in some manner, a better one; and second, that the
ecofeminist side of things will be welcome in these pages, not as an affirmative action program but as an integral aspect of the making of the better, ecologically rational world.

Ariel Salleh, coordinator of the ecofeminist working group within CNS, will further develop this idea.

—Joel Kovel