

Nature, development and inequality: are women the last colony?

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CONTENTS

- **Biological determination**
- **Nature as natural**
- **Sexual politics of science**
- **Standpoint theory**
- **Ecofeminism and nature**
- **Being and knowing**
- **Development and underdevelopment**
- **Population and eugenics**
- **Ecofeminist solutions**
- **Notes**

There is a widening gap between the First and Third Worlds, an increasing polarisation of wealth, a growth in the debt burden of the Third World. Is development per se the cause of such inequality? Or is it instead the type of capitalist development imposed by the First World and the strategies and policies imposed by the agencies set up by the First World like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank which accelerate such inequality? Does imperialism, as a distorted form of development, mask the potential benefits of development in the Third World?

These question are not limited to economics, because there are social and political implications to poverty: for education and literacy levels, health provision and life expectancy, infant and child mortality rates, hunger and malnutrition, increasing rates of disease, unemployment and underemployment, pollution and environmental degradation—to name only a few of the social parameters of inequality. These differences also mask the impact of social conditions on the quality of, access to and participation in political life: citizenship is devalued when the struggle for basic survival takes all one's time and energy.

Within this grim scene, basic statistics show that women are the most oppressed, the most illiterate, the most underpaid, the least likely to have or exercise citizenship rights, while race and ethnicity also generate further inequalities.

In this framework, some feminists argue that development itself is the problem, because development is male and part of the patriarchal system that oppresses women. Some feminists liken the situation of women to that of a colony. This type of argument developed quite early in the rise of the second wave of the women's movement.

The notion of women as colony or as a colonised people emerged in the Fourth World Manifesto at a Toronto conference in 1971. It argued that the struggle for women's liberation was inherently anti-imperialist because women constituted a colonised group—what they called the Fourth World. Previously some radical feminists had argued that women's liberation would subvert imperialism, especially US imperialism, given the anti-Vietnam War ferment out of which women's liberation emerged.

With the women as colony view came a redefinition of imperialism as male in order to claim the experience of colonisation as women's own. The manifesto denied women's differences of class or race, for example, as male imposed, and asserted that female universality is defined by woman's sexual caste, based, not in biology, but in colonisation. The goal of feminism should therefore be the assertion of the female principle based on emotion, intuition, love and personal relationships.

This view coexisted with the assertion of the power of a new feminist culture traced and related to the power of ancient matriarchies in which biology was the source, not the enemy, of feminism. Motherhood was seen as a potential imprinted on women's genes, so shared maternalism was the solution to women's differences of class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference.

These two views cross-fertilised into views on women, the role of imperialism, the situation of Third World women and interpretations of the ubiquity of "woman" in global patriarchy which underlie cultural feminism and intersect with strands of ecofeminism.

Do such theories explain the reality of underdevelopment today, or do they contribute to obscuring and diverting an understanding of global inequality? If the latter is the case, then the solutions offered by such theories will be as distorted as the theories themselves. Are such theories actually contributing, albeit inadvertently, to

maintaining the status quo of growing inequality and theories of “blame the victim”? This article seeks to explore and address these questions.

There are three main themes imbedded in the “last colony” notion:

- The cultural feminist analysis of the universality of patriarchy as male power and culture based on male sexuality, which is inherently violent and which operates to contain women through control of sexuality and reproduction. This analysis argues that in the United States and the advanced capitalist countries, the pornography and sex industries are the core of normalised sexual exploitation. Given US dominance in global politics and the economy, these industries, just like the US military, are imposed on the Third World. The colonisation process thus includes the sexual colonisation of women. The same line of argument is made for the imposition of reproductive control over Third World women’s bodies.
- That science and technology are inherently male and destructive to women, to the Third World and to nature, and that modern industrial society in particular is based on the exploitation of women and nature.
- That those deemed closer to nature—women and colonised peoples who have a unity or oneness with nature or the environment—can provide the way forward to a non-exploitative future. Their being, their caring, their harmony, their holism, their subjectivity and hence their lived experience, are the bases for a new vision of society.

Many who reflect these views consider themselves ecofeminists rather than cultural feminists, but there is a substantial overlap between the assumptions, analysis and areas of interest of these strands of feminism.

Presenting ecofeminism as a unified theory and/or movement does great damage to the insights of some of the different strands which lay claim to the name. There is as much diversity in ecofeminism as there is in feminism. But in one prominent ecofeminist strand there is a universalism and potential biological determinism similar to that in cultural feminism. This has to do with a view of “woman” as well as a view of nature.

Biological determination

For centuries there has been an ongoing debate about what determines human behaviour—is it inherent in our nature, or does it arise from the social and physical environment in which we live and interact? Recently there has been a growth of theories that seek to explain human behaviour in terms of the natural, which increasingly means the biological. Sociobiologists argue that biology shapes the behaviour of individual humans, and also determines the social and economic inequalities of status, wealth and power that characterise class societies.

Inequalities of race, ethnicity, class and particularly gender are due to our individual genetic makeup, according to the latest variant of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology. This argues, for example, that our genes determine our sexual behaviour and relations in order to maximise their chances of reproducing. Gender roles, social relations of marriage and parenting, sexuality, legal practices and the institution of the family are all driven by the genetic imperative to reproduce. This imperative operates unconsciously to shape society and human behaviour.

Such theories pose as science, but they are in fact partial and distorted viewpoints—ideological justifications for the status quo. They attempt to justify systems of inequality, exploitation and domination as inevitable, and therefore as natural and moral.

These ideological theories of natural difference were challenged and exposed by the second wave of the women's movement as obstacles to any change in women's economic and social position. But the strength and cultural embeddedness of these justifications for women's inequality in class society in general, and capitalism in particular, have allowed them to permeate into sections of feminist theory, reversing the hierarchy of moral worth from men to women. However, the explanatory value of such theories rests implicitly on a biological basis, which conflicts with the fact that culture, and thus women's role, including in child raising, is socially derived—neither instinctual nor naturally peaceful and nurturing, as such theories claim.

Such explanations ignore the complexity of the formation of the human species and provide a very simplistic view of "nature". Individuals are products of complex interactions between genetic heritage, environment and accidental events that are neither genetic nor environmental. Justifying differences in status, wealth and power by blaming obvious but superficial differences in skin colour or reproductive and sex organs masks systemic social inequality.

Nature is taken for granted, without any exploration of the complexity of the concept.

Nature as natural

Kate Soper draws the most general division between the various concepts of nature as that between nature-endorsing and nature-sceptical perspectives. There is a strong tendency in nature-endorsing perspectives to hold reductionist views of humans, overlooking important differences between human and non-human nature or between humans and other animals. Nature-endorsing tendencies also tend to assume that nature is a fairly self-explanatory concept and thus overlook the extent to which what counts as nature varies and is culturally produced. Nature-sceptical theories emphasise the cultural construction of humans and of nature itself. But there is a tendency to the anti-realism of social determinism in many positions which posit nature as purely a cultural product and ignore or deny a biological input in human beings.¹

These two perspectives are often counterposed and form the theoretical basis of opposed but also similar political movements. Nature-endorsement characterises many environmental or green movements, but it has also provided a foundation for anti-feminist, anti-gay and even fascist politics. Nature-scepticism is more common within sexual politics because it challenges the reactionary condemnation of feminists, gays and lesbians who promote behaviour perceived to be "unnatural". Cultural feminism and the strands of ecofeminism which encompass the elements contained in "woman as colony", fall clearly into the former category. Such viewpoints rest in part on the rejection of science as male and hence suspect.

Sexual politics of science

Judy Wajcman traces the development of an analysis of gender and science from the beginning of the women's liberation movement.² This has taken several paths. Initially feminists challenged the exclusion of women from the history of science, then traced the structural barriers to women's participation in science in terms of socialisation and the educational cultural content of appropriate feminine identity. To succeed in science, women would have to model themselves on men.

The next development in feminism was to critique the use of science by men, especially the various theories of natural gender differences, to explain the exclusion and second class citizenship of women. The "shaped by masculine bias" view of science portrayed it as bad science, leaving unquestioned whether science as a whole was the problem. This view paralleled the critique by radical political movements that science was part of the state and industry of capitalism and therefore neither neutral nor objective but ideological and part of the social relations of domination.

The view of science as patriarchal knowledge developed out of the women's health movements attempting to regain knowledge and control over women's sexuality and reproduction. The historical exclusion of women from the developing medical profession was documented.³ Critiques of male medical theories and practices coincided with critiques of psychiatry and diagnoses of women's mental instability as pathological.⁴ Medicalisation was challenged as impinging upon and usurping the naturalness of fertility, childbirth and motherhood.⁵

The biomedical model of disease came to be seen as imposed on social behaviour. This model is based on homeostatic assumptions and involves a concept of dysfunction as variations from a norm of health, implying long-lasting damage unless a "cure" is achieved. Kaplan and Rogers detail how homosexuality and transvestism have been diagnosed in terms of some biological deficiency of hormones or chromosomes.⁶ In the past, psychosurgery such as lobotomy has often been the "cure" for inappropriate behaviour, especially sexual behaviour. Chemical surgery or aversion therapy are more recent "cures". A more pertinent description is punishment for deviance.

The questioning of medical knowledge as patriarchal spread to the broader categories of science and technology. Merchant traced the use of dichotomised gendering of metaphors which emerged with the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the impact of Cartesian dualism: culture versus nature, mind versus body, reason versus emotion, objectivity versus subjectivity. She argued that science from the start was masculinised and nature feminised.⁷

The response to the development of a patriarchal analysis has been twofold:

- On the one hand, science and technology must become gender free. Therefore they must incorporate women's knowing and being. This has been referred to as standpoint theory.
- On the other hand, there has been a valorisation of the negative side of the dichotomy into a positive. Women's knowledge and ways of knowing are to replace patriarchal science.

Standpoint theory

Standpoint theory is not based on biological or psychological difference but instead seeks to attribute women-centred values to a socially and historically constructed gender division of labour. Harding groups authors such as Kellor, Rose and Hartsock as standpoint theorists who ground their experience in universal features of women's lives.⁸ In doing so, even while they reject essential male and female natures, they implicitly remain embedded in such a position. But because they ground their views in social and historical contexts, in fact many "standpoints" are possible. Wajcman argues that Rose and Hartsock fail to take account of the social construction of nature and of the potential for change in the division of labour—both of which would change women's experience and thus their standpoint. Thus they must ground their universality in biology.⁹

In an attempt to overcome the problems of essential women's nature, or imposing a privileged feminist position on women who have a variety of differing experiences and ways of knowing, Harding argues that feminist postmodernism or poststructural deconstruction is more appropriate. Instead of universal "woman" there are a series of "fractured identities". Therefore Harding argues for a feminist standpoint, not a woman's standpoint. But as Grant argues, this does not solve the problem either, because if feminism is grounded in women's experiences, then to look to feminism to interpret those experiences is tautological.¹⁰

Harding later attempts to clarify the difference between women's experiences and women's lives, in order to argue that both subjectivity and objectivity can be addressed. Women's lives can thus provide the objective basis from which research questions are designed for a female-valued science.¹¹ But in assuming an objectivity of women's lives, Harding is assuming that women's lives are essentially similar and thus a common female experience. A similar point can be made about her call to speak from a perspective

of women's interests. Grant argues that no such communality of experience or interest can exist prior to feminist consciousness raising:

That is, there are no universal features of women's existence until they are named as such by feminist theory and politics ... The notion of women's interests is therefore always a political goal of feminism, but in no way can it be a grounding for it.¹²

Ecofeminism and nature

The strand of ecofeminism under scrutiny here both valorises women's knowing and being and rejects science as patriarchal. Thus it fits the nature-endorsing perspective.

There are some who claim that there is an underlying unity of ecofeminism as a political perspective that unites women in struggle around the world. This general ecofeminist position centres on the basic premise that modern industrial society is masculinist, based on the exploitation of both women and nature: "The basic premise of ecofeminism is acknowledgement of the parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other".¹³

It is argued that such joint exploitation emerged out of the rise of amoral science and the domination of Judaeo-Christian religion. Both have led to a view of the earth as inert and available for exploitation by men. Usually this argument explicitly or implicitly assumes that the "inert" or "rape of nature" view was preceded historically by an opposing view, which saw the earth as alive—the Gaia hypothesis—or something to be worshipped and respected. There is an emphasis that through the ages the earth has been seen as female, as "Mother Earth". Loss of respect for the earth led to the assumption that it could be exploited without consequences and rested on the notion that man was separate from and superior to nature. There is a tendency to seize upon the Cartesian myth and use it outside of historical context, overlooking alternative views of man and nature that existed contemporaneously.

These ecofeminists stress the interconnectedness between human activity and the natural environment. But many hark back to an undeveloped/traditional/tribal social form as the preferred model, imposing on this a utopian view of the human-nature interaction. They fail to understand why people in these societies sought to conquer nature, how frightening they found its seasons, pests,

predators and uncertainties and the techniques, material as well as ritual, they used to achieve some control and predictability.

Similarly, they fail to examine the role that tribal, let alone peasant, society had in transforming nature into what we assume is natural today. Nature is not “natural”; it has been constructed by thousands of years of human activity.

But for many ecofeminists, this interconnectedness gives a closer relation of women and nature for one or more of the following reasons, which Mary Mellor calls the “four Ms”—material, mystical, matriarchy and motherhood.¹⁴

Material: This is based on a common experience of exploitation that women share with nature—the historical exclusion of women from positions of power, particularly in the scientific world. Therefore women carry no direct blame for the exploitation of the natural world. There are two aspects ignored by such a position: the indirect benefits obtained by women and the extent to which unequal access to such benefits among women is determined by other bases such as class, race or age.

Mystical: This is usually based on the preceding material reason. It is argued that because of their shared exploitation and domination by men, women and nature share a common consciousness of that exploitation. Women are claimed to have a different form of reasoning—intuitive rather than rational.

Usually this position forms part of the argument of those seeking to demonstrate women’s biological inferiority. It cohabits quite easily with the physiological arguments about women having smaller brain size and therefore less intellectual capacity than men. Similarly, there are those who argue that there are male and female sides of the brain and thus advocate an anatomically based disadvantage for those who operate predominantly from the “female” side.

Because of the shared consciousness of exploitation in this mystical relationship, women become a “voice” for nature. The arguments for this role are usually based on either or both of the last two “Ms”—matriarchy and motherhood.

Matriarchy: This assumes that there was a historical golden age preceding the onset of patriarchy. Matriarchal society was anti-hierarchical, with an equal division of labour and a harmony with nature. There is a speculative literature building up about when, where and how this changed, based on myths and legends and fragmentary images of women in what are assumed to be fertility icons.¹⁵

Motherhood: One of the more influential arguments advanced for women's closeness to nature is that they give birth and nurture. And of course there is a great deal of literature through history using the metaphor of earth as a womb giving life.

It is undeniable that through childbirth and nurturing, women are concerned with the preservation of life. But the notion of what constitutes life—meaningful life—has differed between different social groupings and historical periods. Religion, slavery, class, racism, sexism and wars of conquest expose the limitations of the notion of life as unchanging and universal. Appeals to life in times of war can be calls to war or calls to pacifism. Different societies have different views of which lives are worth preserving.

The biological function of giving birth does not always carry the romantic, rosy glow that is often assumed in this context. It is well to remember that before women were able to control their rate of reproduction, the naturalness of being a mother may not have been perceived as a blessing, as the figures on death rates from illegal abortions indicate. Childbirth was a very dangerous process, often resulting in death, as a quick walk around any nineteenth century English graveyard demonstrates. Wide access to contraceptive choices and safe abortion are of such recent origin, and in the case of the latter, today so under attack, that such rosy theorising can be quite dangerous in aiding those who would limit women's choices over their bodies and control over their own fertility. This can lead to some quite contradictory positions on the "population debate" and the rights of Third World women.

Transforming women's concern with the lives of their children into a generalised concern for life in all its forms is a heavy load to shoulder. It seems to let men off the hook. Is it a form of biological determinism that means men have no moral responsibilities for the preservation of life?

The mystical associations that usually overhang the notion of the "naturalness" of women make a virtue of the exploitation of women over countless generations. The view implies that if men had only listened to women, or women had spoken up at some point, the ecological crisis could have been avoided. Moral responsibility, and its associated burden of guilt, are thus thrust onto women. In this manner, women can be made into the shock troops for ecological change.

These points provide a brief summary of a spectrum of arguments that recur within the general category of ecofeminist theory. There

are major problems with such positions which parallel many of the problems with cultural feminism and its global analysis and practice.

Being and knowing

Neither cultural feminist nor standpoint theories adequately deal with the problem of feminist analysis based on the experience of “woman”—the universal pre-given before social structural and cultural factors come into play, shaping gender roles. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, for example, base their research methods on the “view from below”. They particularly emphasise Third World indigenous women as the basis of “real” truth, while science, as essentially male rationalist, is the seat of false truth since it is grounded on the exploitation of women, nature and the Third World. They pose the living relation between foetus and the bearing woman as a symbiosis—an organic living relationship which symbolises and provides the lived experience of organic unity.¹⁶

In this sense they reflect the early radical feminist view that Third World women are less contaminated by masculine ideology than women from advanced capitalist countries.

Shiva attempts to overcome the problem by distinguishing a “feminine principle” from actually existing women, but she asserts this rather than establishing an empirical base for it.¹⁷ She does this by linking the low value given to women’s essential procreative abilities and the seed and the soil as essential to the maintenance of life on the planet.¹⁸

Such a position rests on two assumptions: being or ontology is essential rather than contingent, so that the intrinsic communalities of women’s experience override their differences; and knowing emerges from such essentialist being. But is there only one view from below, and if there are many, who decides which is the valid one? The position ignores the historical and social reality that the biological capacity to give birth, to nurture and rear children, finds different expression in different societies.

The most general commonality of women’s experience is associated with giving birth and mothering. But there is no universal behavioural experience of maternalism. The physical act’s socially acceptable form differs widely. If the forms of biological birthing, while differing socially, have greater similarities in their anatomical dimensions, conflating this with parenting as universal and given is

completely invalid. The birth process and social parenting have been and still are quite different phenomena.

Neither is there a cross-cultural pre-industrial view of nature to provide a unity. Shiva's view of the feminist principle which united people with nature in pre-industrial India is based on Hindu conceptions of the world. Agarwal notes that this conflates Indian with Hindu and thereby glosses over the plurality of ideologies and different interests in pre-colonial India.¹⁹

Reproductive function has predominated in ecofeminism as the essential basis for knowing since the explicit woman-nature link made by Ortner, but she acknowledges that there is no uniformity of meaning attributed to male, female, nature or culture across cultures.²⁰ Yet reproductive biology is still central to many analyses. Salleh grounds women's consciousness in biology and nature:

Women's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature. However tacit or unconscious this identity may be for many women ... it is nevertheless a fact of life.²¹

The woman-nature relationship is similarly metaphysical in cultural feminism. It can be seen in the objection to the split between sex and reproduction, which is characterised as "alienative consciousness", where the consciousness referred to is the reproductive consciousness from mother's seed to mothering.²²

This is seen in the responses to male scientific interventions in reproduction as "taking away from women's power", as has been argued by feminist opponents of in vitro fertilisation, pharmaceutical contraceptives and ultrasound. So science is colonisation of women's bodies as well as biotechnological incursion into nature. The metaphor of "the seed" is appropriately used.²³ Science is also linked to the commodification and objectification of body parts—ova, embryos, body organs, wombs in surrogacy, sexual objects, for example.²⁴

Ecofeminists believe the current global crisis is a consequence of the traditional exclusion of women from patriarchal institutions; the most dangerous of these being "science" which replaces religion in our time as ruling myth ... to feminists in vitro technology is the last straw in a history of men's appropriation of women's productive power.²⁵

However, seeing the exploitation and despoiling of nature only in terms of the despoiling of women's bodies and reproduction is too narrow for the global ecological crisis.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 outlined the range and variety of ecological and social problems faced on a global scale—from emissions of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and acid rain-generating sulphur dioxide to deforestation, salination, desertification, species extinction and pollution.²⁶ To equate this with the violation of women's bodies is to reinforce those stereotypes that make women responsible and let men off the hook. This is even more true when population control and environmental damage are laid on women's reproductive capacity, as at the United Nations conference on population and development in Cairo in 1994.²⁷

Development and underdevelopment

Ecofeminism and cultural feminism provide an oversimplified view of the world, because society is seen primarily in terms of men's oppression of women in an ahistoric and individual manner. Such a position limits comprehension of the complexity of the world and today's ecological, social, economic and political situations. The notion of inherent male-female difference allows the other major social divisions of class, race, age and ethnicity to be ignored or relegated to minor importance. Even those who claim that the nature-culture dichotomy is false and a patriarchal construct used to maintain gender hierarchy accept the view that women are ideologically constructed as closer to nature because of their biology.²⁸ This leads to stereotyping, and cultural/ecofeminists seem to be able to hold quite contradictory stereotypes simultaneously.

On issues of development and the imposition of capitalist patriarchy, there is a tendency to over-generalisation. Mies argues that there is a divide between women connected with development bureaucracies of the United Nations and Western feminism (which presumably means cultural feminism, since she is active in FINRRAGE) over the importance of the issues of poverty and development.²⁹ Yet struggles by Third World women against dowry killings, sex selection and clitoridectomy indicate that questions of the direct structural violence of traditional or classical patriarchy are not and cannot be ignored by women in un development agencies.

The reverse is probably more accurate. Cultural feminism and its parallel strands of ecofeminism concentrate on reproduction and sexuality, neglecting issues of poverty. They are critically anti-development. They impose over-generalisations of the impact of development, the nature of the society on which colonialisation and/or modern development is imposed and the identity of Third World women. In doing so, they romanticise a utopian pre-colonial past and impose an identity on Third World women that elevates their power and potential as a future model and/or counterposes a stereotype of poverty, ignorance or victimhood.

The positive stereotype of an idealised pre-colonial past is not explored historically; it is taken as given. Yet many of the sexual and reproductive practices that are seen as expressions of male violence come from societies that are indeed patriarchal in the traditional and non-feminist or classical use of the word—where the male head of household has literal life and death power over those under his care. Or the practices come from societies in the process of industrialisation and modernisation, where citizenship rights for women are very curtailed. Such feminists ignore their own historic legacy. Gender allocation based on ascription was difficult for Western women to struggle against. The Enlightenment opened up a framework in which women could struggle for recognition and citizenship.

Moghadam argues that while development and modernisation conceal inequality—the relations of exploitation, the unequal distribution of wealth and environmental degradation—these processes have contributed to the dissolution of classic patriarchy in many parts of the world. Further socioeconomic development, she argues, will contribute to gender equity and the emancipation of women, not to increasing marginalisation.³⁰

Much of the evidence of the natural affinity and power of pre-colonial women has been challenged as mistaken in the detail of what struggle is about, whether it reflects a greater ecological awareness, or whether women are generating the movement. The Chipko struggle by tree-hugging women is often quoted as evidence of the nature-woman link.³¹ Yet Jackson argues that while women certainly participated, the struggle was primarily a peasant struggle over who would have rights to use the forest resources, which never questioned whether the uses of the women were environmentally sustainable.³²

The negative stereotype is equally invalid. Mohanty describes this as "Third World difference" theory, based on a universal gendered identity analysis which is assumed, not methodologically proven. This analysis produces an image of an average Third World woman whose life is sexually constrained by her gender and "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimised, etc. by being Third World".³³ This image, she argues, is in implicit contrast to Western feminists as in control over their bodies and sexuality, as modern or liberated.

Such Western feminists are privileged in the same way that standpoint feminists privilege their analysis of knowing "woman". The assumptions on which such a view is based can include over-generalisations of violence, of women as universal dependents, or of the imposition of particular policies of development for women in a particular region or country without seeing the potential differential impact within that region. It also robs these women of their historical and political agency by subsuming them into a preconceived homogeneous category. If a concrete analysis is applied, then descriptions may be contradicted by social reality.

Mohanty gives the example of wearing the veil, typical in a number of Muslim countries. Descriptively, this practice is widespread, but its symbolic and cultural meaning can change with the political context. It can be imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan or adopted by women as symbolic of an anti-colonial struggle. For example, during the 1979 revolution in Iran, middle-class women veiled themselves to demonstrate solidarity with their working-class sisters.³⁴

While being highly critical of development, increasingly cultural and ecofeminists have oriented to international bodies, trying to elevate the special impact of development policies on women and nature and to challenge dominant development models. A process of interpretation and confusion occurs in programs such as Agenda 21 at the UNCED Earth Summit in Rio. There appeared to be a united global sisterhood emphasising women's "special" relationship to nature and giving them a "special" role in solving the planet's environmental crisis. This apparent unity obscured heated debates concerning women and nature, essentialism and constructivism and very contradictory positions on women's relationship to the environment.³⁵

Population and eugenics

A similar international orientation has taken place on reproduction, especially in light of the link between population growth and sustainable development. Eugenic programs have increasingly been the major concern of United Nation agencies. Compulsory sterilisation programs have been imposed on the Third World and minority women since World War II as part of the US government's projects. In 1952 David Rockefeller compiled a report which concluded that a rise in the birthrate in the poorer nations would create instability and endanger US access to important resources.³⁶

In the late 1970s, R.T. Ravensholt, director of the US Office of Population, stated that the US was seeking to provide the means of sterilising a quarter of all Third World women.³⁷ By 1979, thirty-five per cent of women of child-bearing age in the US colony of Puerto Rico had been sterilised. In 1988 a military strategy document of the Reagan-Bush administration defined Third World population growth as a threat to US national security and argued for "draconian measures".³⁸

In 1991 the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) stated:

Sterilisation has made significant inroads in the Third World. The largest number of sterilisation users, 152 million, are in Asia and the Pacific. In Panama and Puerto Rico, 80 per cent of childbearing women could be sterilised in the near future. Other methods of growing importance include injectables and the number of women using contraceptive implants is expected to increase from one million to over 17 million in the next decade.³⁹

Population programs under the guise of family planning are not concerned with empowering women. Women have been sterilised without their knowledge, let alone their consent. Women have been encouraged to use injectable and implanted long-term contraceptive products with known side effects, without even being informed of the dangers. Inadequate follow-up, inadequate support services and poor quality of care compound the effects of new products and techniques. For example, immunological contraceptives have been used experimentally in India with very minimal pre-testing. Such vaccines carry a high risk of immune system disturbances, allergies and exacerbation of infectious diseases. They are also often administered without adequate human testing and without

explanation of the dangers. Many contraceptives banned in advanced capitalist countries are dumped onto Third World markets.⁴⁰

A planned eugenics program has been implemented for nearly half a century. These population control measures have been linked to aid packages and to structural adjustment programs through the IMF and World Bank. Many international women's organisations that have monitored and participated in raising the question of women's health and self-determination concerning fertility choices query the basis of the eugenics programs.

The way in which population control programs have been tied to environmental degradation intersects with cultural and ecofeminism in contradictory ways.

Jonathon Porritt, former head of Friends of the Earth and the Greens in Britain, argued that contraception is the issue and the solution, not development. He criticised organisations such as Oxfam because they address population growth by tackling poverty, improving the status and education of women and recognising their right to quality information and services.⁴¹ Yet World Bank figures support those Porritt criticises, and the 1974 World Population Conference noted that development is the best contraceptive.⁴² Birthrates drop as standards of living rise. This position was recognised by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, which supported access to education, health care and social opportunity for women. But by 1999 UNFPA funding was disproportionately allocated to reproduction rather than education and social opportunity programs.⁴³

By opposing development as patriarchal objectivistic science in the "colonised" metaphor, these feminists oppose reproductive technology, as well as the imposition of eugenics programs, validating instead women's natural family planning methods.⁴⁴ Yet the success of the developmentalist model is evidenced in the comparison made between the different Indian states by cultural feminists. In the state of Bihar, widespread and coercive population control methods have yielded little change in the birthrate, while in Kerala, where more than fifty per cent of women have access to basic education, the birth rate and infant mortality rates have dropped substantially.⁴⁵

Yet cultural feminists oppose demands for reproductive rights. Akhter states that to argue for such rights under patriarchal capitalist structures creates the illusion that women can indeed extend control over their bodies while these structures are in place.⁴⁶ Mies goes

further, arguing that these rights mirror the compartmentalised ideology of the capitalist marketplace. To demand rights is to objectify and fragment women's bodies into parts. She argues that the demand for self-determination is not appropriate in the Third World since the utopia of the isolated individual contradicts Third World women's experience of community.⁴⁷ Yet the content of "support" by the community is culturally variant. The lack of state welfare and necessary reliance on family as a safety net seems a more appropriate description. Again, economics and development are overlooked or replaced by generalisations.

At the same time, in their opposition to reproductive rights and reproductive technologies, cultural feminists adopt a stance very similar to that of some of the most anti-feminist religious forces. For example, the opposition by the Vatican and Muslim forces at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing United Nations women's conference of 1995 mirrored the opposition to reproductive technology and choice of cultural feminists.

Ecofeminist solutions

Ecofeminists, whether cultural or affinity ecofeminists of the nature-woman essentialism or social ecofeminists who see the relationship between women and nature as socially created, both practise radical exclusion by linking and naturalising gendered practices into a male-female dualism. This is universalised as the shared perspective or viewpoint.

Plumwood tries to deal with this dualism by proposing the reconstruction of both masculine and feminine identities at the same time as reconceptualising nature and human identities in non-hierarchical ways. She argues that ecofeminism cannot merely replace the masculine with a feminine ideal.⁴⁸ Instead of rights, which she sees as caught in the dualism of reason/emotion, Plumwood proposes an ethic of care similar to that of Gilligan, in which women have a different moral stance because of their socialisation and psychological development.⁴⁹ But this fails to resolve the issue.

If the male-female gender difference is coupled with a moral superiority of women, it becomes a celebration of difference that can be nothing more than an inversion of the sexist practices and ideology that have kept women in subordinate positions for

thousands of years, in particular an inversion of the social Darwinism of 100 years ago.

In the late nineteenth-century, although such a representation of womanhood [as the asexual Victorian lady] was both widespread and an ideal to which women were expected to aspire, it coexisted with other conflicting representations of women (including that of the sexual working class women). Late nineteenth-century evolutionary theory held that in the highest level of human development (Victorian society with its patriarchal monogamous family), evolutionary "needs" allocated woman to the private sphere in her role as reproducer and moraliser, man to the public sphere as competitor (latterday hunter). This stage of human development was believed to involve a heightening of gender difference, and one aspect of that difference was thought to relate to the "sex instinct": man's insatiable urge, women's virtual lack. Her instinct lay with motherhood. The work of Darwin explained and justified female asexuality in terms of women's evolutionary importance in harnessing and controlling male sexual energy. Darwin and following him, Freud, saw sex as an instinct rooted in our ancient animal heritage, the "beast in man", forever lurking and threatening higher and "human" developments of Reason and Civilisation. Woman's "civilising", "moralising" powers were believed necessary to curb man's animality and lust, to aid the development of his Will in conquering such urges.⁵⁰

Of course, as the same article goes on to explain, it was only in this one aspect that women were superior. In every other aspect they were inferior.

What is not explained is what this means for the process and direction of social change. How the female moral principle will suddenly transform the existing patriarchal society is never outlined. If some vision of the future society is elaborated, it is usually backward-looking to some golden age of matriarchy, some small-scale tribal experience, or some self-sufficient anarchist or utopian socialist vision. Such visions and their real life experiments fail because they evade the tough social questions that have to be faced if ecofeminists want to transform society.

Ecofeminists share Soper's "nature-endorsing" perspective with ecocentrists who assert the absence of dividing lines between categories of organisms and oppose anthropocentrism.⁵¹ Ecocentrists deny hierarchy in nature but can all too easily slide into the basic premises of deep ecology—the Earth First! positions held by those

who literally prioritise the planet over people. Human society's very existence is challenged, almost on an original sin basis, by deep ecologists. Some ecofascist and racist positions have explicitly been advanced by deep ecologists. For example, Bookchin cites an interview in *Simply Living* in which David Foreman, one of the foremost proponents of deep ecology, outlines the view that famines are nature's means of population control.⁵²

Earth First! carried an article titled "Population and AIDS" that advanced the argument that AIDS is desirable as a means of population control. Not only will AIDS claim large numbers of lives, asserts the author (who hides under the pseudonym of Miss Ann Thropy), but it "may cause a breakdown in technology [read: human food supply] and its export which could also decrease the human population".⁵³

Both ecofeminism and cultural feminism impose experience as "woman" through some consciousness-raising process of knowing. Both rest on assumptions that lead to reactionary drifts or positions parallel with those of reactionary forces.

A blanket rejection of the scientific viewpoint or of the whole period of the Enlightenment ignores the real gains for the mass of human beings. These gains have been gains for women too and were won by activists—by women struggling for legal, social and political equality. There is no need to rewrite history in terms of what has already been achieved.

Feminists, including cultural feminists, have outlined many of the problems of development and their gendered impact on women. But does the notion of women as colony help to clarify the political strategy to address these problems? The notion of colony rests on the imposition of an imperial or colonising power on the existing cultural, economic and political life of the pre-colonial unit. The colonising power then distorts this to its own material and political advantage. To apply the analogy of colony to women is to distort and divert the reality of women's oppression. There is no pre-existing women's culture, economics or political system. Framing women's situation in such terms is not a rhetorical claim of powerlessness. Instead, it gives credence to the underlying analysis that some pre-existing, pre-social and thus natural feminine reality is waiting to emerge from under the iron heel of patriarchy. This idea is explicitly or implicitly the basis of cultural feminism.

Ecofeminism and the ecologists have highlighted issues that political perspectives now find hard to ignore, but that does not

justify the great leaps in assertions and the reactionary implications of the arguments that underlie such eco/cultural feminist analysis.

Salleh argues that the ecological crisis has displaced modern political analysis and poses the possibility that women as a global majority could be the missing historical agents.⁵⁴ Yet the politics of ecofeminism and cultural feminism provide no progressive way out of this crisis, and exhortations to intrinsic feminine morality or sensibility based on reproductive experience are more likely to bolster the strategies of the traditionalist and religious right.

If the political strategy proposed cannot analyse without recourse to religiosity, spirituality and mythology, or to some variation of genetic, biologist, reproductive analysis, to explain social phenomena, then it will never find the way to the sought-for life-sustaining future.

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