

ECOFEMINISM AND DEEP ECOLOGY: UNRESOLVABLE CONFLICT?

by Janet Biehl

Recently, a number of male deep ecologists have been claiming that there are theoretical affinities between deep ecology and ecofeminism. One deep ecologist calls deep ecology "that form of environmentalism which comes closest to embodying a feminist sensibility."¹ Kirkpatrick Sale, too, maintains, "I don't see anything in the formulation of deep ecology...that in any way contravenes the values of feminism or puts forward the values of patriarchy."² Bill Devall and George Sessions, co-authors of Deep Ecology, the authoritative text of the new ideology, even see affinities between the way women generically view the world and deep ecology: "Some feminists claim that deep ecology is an intellectual articulation of insights that many females have known for centuries."³

Indeed, as Ynestra King has pointed out, an unusually large number of male ecologists are writing articles as avowed adherents of ecofeminism these days. Many of them are advocating an alliance in some form or another between the ecofeminist and deep ecology movements.

Deep ecology's advocates repeatedly assure us that deep ecology's distinction is to ask searching questions. Writes Arne Naess, "The essence of deep ecology is to ask deeper questions. The adjective 'deep' stresses that we ask why and how, where others do not."⁴

In this spirit, ecofeminists have a number of deep, searching questions to ask of male deep ecologists about the alleged affinities between the two. These questions are central in any discussion of the prospects for a union between the two movements.

Differences Among Humans

Deep ecologists are critical of what they see as Western society's "anthropocentrism," which is defined by one deep ecologist, John Seed, as "human chauvinism ... the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things."⁵ In anthropocentrism, humans see themselves as separate from nature, we are told, and objectify nature in order to exploit it. In Michael Zimmerman's characterization, the anthropocentric world-

view "portrays humanity itself as the source of all value and ... depicts nature solely as raw material for human purposes."⁶ (emphasis added) Anthropocentrism is thus "deeply implicated in the global environmental crisis," say Devall and Sessions.⁷ Anthropocentric humans lose track of the "oneness" of all nature, we are told. They/we need to purge themselves/ourselves of deadly anthropocentrism to regain consciousness of the oneness of nature and thereby stop exploiting it.

For ecofeminists the concept of anthropocentrism is profoundly, even "deeply" problematical. It assumes that humanity is an undifferentiated whole, and it does not take into account the historical and political differences between male and female, black and white, rich and poor.

Ecofeminists, among others, have shown that historically not all of "humanity" has been privileged to be depicted as "the source of all value," to use Zimmerman's language. It is mainly economically privileged white males who have been seen as "the source of all value." Other humans--women, blacks, the poor--have, like nature itself, been depicted as "raw material for human [read male] purpose."

In Western culture men have historically justified their domination of women by conceptualizing women as "closer to nature" than themselves. Women have been ideologically dehumanized and called less rational than men, more chaotic, more mysterious in motivation, more emotional, more sexual, more moist, even more polluted. Far from being seen as a "source of value," women have been, like nature, seen as a source of "raw material for human purposes." Women's bodies have thus been freely plowed and mined like the earth for their reproductive capacity--the "raw material" in question.

Ecofeminists have tried repeatedly to show that women are no closer to nature innately than men are, and further that the fulfillment of women's human capacities has been denied them under patriarchy; that both men and women are capable of reason and emotion and sensuality; and that the human mind that evolves out of first or primal nature is both a female mind and a male mind.

Moreover, ecofeminists seek to attain their individual and social fulfillment in a way that does not accept the capitalist, industrial, patriarchal, managerial society that Western men have developed. Rather, they seek to create alternative, nonhierarchical contexts in which both male and female potentialities can truly be fulfilled.

Deep ecologists, by single-mindedly defining the human problem as anthropocentrism--the centrality of all humans and their "domination" of nature--ignore millennia of patricentric history and implicitly include women in their indictment. By not excluding women from anthropocentrism, deep ecologists implicitly condemn women for being as anthropocentric as they condemn

men for being--that is, for presuming to be above nature, for mastering it.

The problem is not simply that deep ecologists have failed to except women from anthropocentrism. It would not improve matters simply to "subtract" women from the ranks of anthropocentrists. This gender-blindness is symptomatic of deep ecologists' stubborn, willful ignorance of the social causes of problems. They assert that all our problems are primarily caused by our attitude toward nature and how we treat nature. They do not sufficiently emphasize that the way we view nature itself has a social origin, let alone explore what its origins are in history. They have no inkling that societies have existed that, as Murray Bookchin has pointed out, could "revere" nature (such as ancient Egypt) and yet this "reverence" did not inhibit the development of full-blown patricentric hierarchy.

Thus women are caught in a circular trap in deep ecology. On the one hand, they have been defined as closer to nature by patricentric culture (and, as we shall see below, continue to be so defined by deep ecology); on the other hand, they are held accountable for "anthropocentrism" and are blamed for being as removed from nature as men are. Women are left going around in circles in deep ecology. Clearly this body of thought was not formulated with women in mind.

Differences Between Human and Nonhuman Nature

Not only does deep ecology ignore differences among groups of humans, such as men and women. It also ignores differences between human and nonhuman nature. "The central insight of deep ecology," as expressed by Warwick Fox, is "the idea that we can make no firm ontological divide ... between the human and the non-human realms....[T]o the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness."⁸ Devall stresses as a principle of deep ecology "the identity (I/thou) of humans with non-human nature....There are no boundaries and everything is interrelated."⁹ According to Sessions and Devall, we must "cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans from our family and friends to, eventually, our species...to include the nonhuman world."¹⁰

One wonders just what happens to the significance of species in nature when we can make "no ontological divide" between or among them. If all is the same in nature, are all differences among species illusions? Is humanity's self-awareness as a species a delusion? Is anthropocentrism itself based on a delusion of separateness as a species?

Thus, just as deep ecologists ignore social history--especially that of patriarchy--they also ignore natural history. One wonders how deep ecologists explain any of the leaps, or discontinuities, apparent in the paleontological record, or the evolution of mind.

It is clear that deep ecologists' ignorance of social history is a major issue for ecofeminism. But why should deep ecologists' ignorance of natural history be of concern to ecofeminism?

The answer is that deep ecologists make use of what they see as female consciousness to buttress their ahistorical view of nature. In at least a decade of feminist theory it has been seen as both a nightmare and a blessing that women experience a "sense of relatedness," an attenuation of the boundaries between self and other, that men do not experience. A decade of feminist psychoanalytic work has shown that women develop "soft ego boundaries," whereas men develop "rigid ego boundaries." This has been both good and bad for women: good in the sense that connectedness is real and women are more aware of it; bad in the sense that the lack of clearly defined ego boundaries creates difficulties in women's individuation and development of autonomy, attributes that are necessary to become rational beings and to fulfill their potentiality. Thus, boundaries and lacks thereof have been a subject of profoundly ambivalent dialectical philosophizing by feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Jane Flax, among others.¹¹

Deep ecologists steam-roller over this dialectic between self and other, between the individual and the collectivity. A vague "connectedness," they seem to feel, is all important. Their solution is to forget all of the agonizing individuation so necessary for the development of women's personalities and sense of control over their destinies. Never mind becoming rational; never mind the self, they seem to say; look where it got men, after all; women were better off than men all along without that tiresome individuality; and women should give up their attempts to attain it. Presumably, women are supposed to be connectedness, women have no ego boundaries, and there are no boundaries in reality. We have to "cultivate ecological consciousness," according to deep ecologists. All of us need, we are told, "a more receptive, 'feminine' approach."¹²

Deep ecologists, who are often highly individualistic middle-class men themselves, in effect render the feminist dialectical discussion about boundaries irrelevant. Just as women naturally experience "connectedness" with other people, we are told, all humans must now experience "connectedness" with nonhuman nature. There is no boundary between human and nonhuman nature in deep ecology; a person is an "inseparable aspect of the whole system wherein there are no sharp breaks between self and the other."¹³

Deep ecologists are fond of adducing Eastern metaphysics as exemplary of the kind of self on which we should model ourselves. "Taoism tells us there is a way of unfolding which is inherent in all things.... People have fewer desires and simple pleasures.... 'To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others.'"¹⁴ Women and men alike are thus asked to efface themselves before nature, to ignore their identity as a species in a surrender to boundaryless,

cosmic "oneness." In reality, the fact is that women know from long experience that when they are asked to become "one" with a man, as in marriage, that "one" is usually the man. Ecofeminists should be equally suspicious of this "ecological" oneness.

Moreover, deep ecologists tend to promote a disregard of reason, even of subjectivity. Reason and subjectivity are what distinguish humans in nature, however. But for deep ecologists, to affirm them would be to uphold a boundary--and boundaries, as they have told us, do not exist in nature. Worse, in deep ecological terms: to give boundaries their due would be to be guilty of anthropocentrism. According to Bill Devall, we must "begin our thinking on utopia...by trying to 'think like a mountain.'"¹⁵ Just as there is no boundary between human and nonhuman nature, there is also no boundary between the consciousness of a mountain and the consciousness of a human being, for deep ecologists.

And here we are obliged to return again to social history. For it was precisely men who created the cultural boundary between men and women in constructing a gender barrier. Marginalized for millennia, passive and receptive for millennia, "connected" to the point of self-effacement for millennia, women are now intensely striving for subjectivity, precisely for selfhood and for a full recognition of their subjectivity and selfhood in a new society.

This aspiration is the revolutionary heart of the feminist and ecofeminist movements. Many of our lives now involve new and radical insight into our own condition of chronic oppression. We have come into subjectivity and consciousness of our oppressed situation in patriarchy, and we have affirmed our own rationality after millennia of being defined as irrational by patriarchy. We are becoming active where we had long been taught to be merely reactive, and we are becoming creative rather than passively receptive. We are externalizing ourselves into fully embodied and well-defined beings.

To ask women, with their new subjectivity, to "think like a mountain" is a blatant slap in the face. It asks women to return to the arena of their oppression--to their nonbeing and nothingness--indeed, even to embrace it.

Yet deep ecologists tell us to abjure the self and become "receptive" in the interests of a male-defined "nature." As Nancy Hartsock has pointed out, it is telling that now, just when women and other oppressed groups have come into subjectivity, subjectivity itself is suddenly condemned. Now we are asked to be "receptive," to return to oblivion in the name of the liberation of nature. It is, Hartsock points out, the privileged people at the center--white men--who are now obliged to be receptive and listen, and not those of us who have been marginalized and receptive by coercion in the past.¹⁶

To drop our recent, painfully attained recognition of the socially and historically created gender boundary would be to return to the oblivion of unconsciousness. Behind the smoke and mirrors of "goddess" worship is a terrifying renunciation of self, a retreat into oppression. Deep ecology requires, in effect, that women remain egoless, unformed, and supine, presumably in the name of a Taoist oblivion of the self. To feminist sensibilities, deep ecologists appear to be paraphrasing the Wizard of Oz, saying, "Pay no attention to that gender divide behind the curtain!"

Deep ecology denies the reality of difference, let alone the reality of gender oppression, at the same time that it appropriates an aspect of feminist psychology for its own quasi-religious purposes. Deep ecology trivializes the emancipation of women, a centuries-long revolutionary process of coming into self-awareness and individual freedom, when it talks of dissolving the self and the boundary lines of the self-determining ego. Indeed, it asks women to abjure the very selfhood that can resist the rationalization that produced the industrial crisis.

Wilderness

Deep ecologists' ignorance of the social becomes strikingly apparent in their discussion of wilderness, "[the] sacred place, [the] sanctum sanctorum" of nature.¹⁷ We are told that humans need the experience of wilderness, among other reasons, to "cultivat[e] the virtues of modesty and humility."¹⁸ Again, it is precisely humility, with its passive and receptive obedience to men, that women are trying to escape today.

Historically, especially in North America, men have responded to nature by defining it as wilderness--usually as a pretext for trying to master the natural world. Countless stories exist in American literature of men in the wilderness--of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and the like; their descendants in our day are John Wayne and the Marlboro Man. Just as nineteenth-century American literature expressed a cultural male desire to depart into the wilderness to escape from the overly domesticated Victorian woman's sphere--one in which women were denied personhood and therefore became tedious to men--so deep ecologists seek to escape into the wilderness to avoid an overly rationalized and mechanized society that denies nature's complexity and thus becomes tedious as well. In both cases men are trying to escape an oppression that they have created themselves, to escape in both cases from what is precisely a social problem: first, the domestication of women, and second, the rationalization of society. The point is to reclaim women and society as free, not to leap into an allegedly chaotic, nonsocial realm called "wilderness."

Although deep ecologists seek affinities with Native Americans, it is notable that Indians have no word for "wilderness."

Luther Standing Bear, an Oglala Sioux remarks, "We do not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful, and we were surrounded with the blessing of the Great Mystery."

The concept of "wilderness" and the egocentric male soloist--who sees "wilderness" as a challenge or an object of conquest or a realm of personal freedom--is connected to the Western male social mentality. Indeed, Luther Standing Bear's commentary reveals that the concept of wilderness has a social origin: "Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it 'wild' for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the 'wild west' began."¹⁹

To define nature as "wilderness" is to presuppose a separation between men (literally) and nature. Indeed, "wilderness" is precisely the nonsocial. Deep ecologists perpetuate this conceptual separation, even as they ask people to respond to it with "humility" rather than "mastery." Men are just as cut off from external nature, let alone internal nature, in deep ecology, as they ever were. Far from dissolving the boundary between humans and nature, deep ecology basically validates it.

(To his credit, Jim Cheney has criticized male deep ecologists for aggrandizing the male self by extending it to all of nature rather than denying it. He quotes Lewis Hyde: "the disappearance of the self is really self-aggrandizement on a grand scale."²⁰ Guyatri Spivak's criticism of postmodernism could also apply to deep ecology: she says it is "about men apologizing for their own mistakes; women, go elsewhere." An aggrandizement in false apology is still an aggrandizement.)

Just as white patricentric males define rational women as irrational as a pretext for their domination, so they define nature as a "wilderness" as a pretext for its domination. The prescription of "sacred" nature as wilderness--presumably "irrational" nature--is analogous to the conventional Western prescription of women as irrational humans. But only when men are separated from nature is nature perceived as irrational; and only when men are culturally divided from women are women perceived as irrational.

The point is that women are not "chaotic" but rational; and nature, too, is not "chaotic" but rather follows a logic of development toward increasing complexity and subjectivity, replete with differences, individual variations, and the slow formation of selfhood. If ecofeminists are serious about combating the domination of nature that they see as analogous to their domination, they must fight this conceptualization of nature as irrational and of selfhood as an impediment to natural evolution, just as they have fought their own conceptualization as irrational, egoless, and "natural."

Overpopulation

The implications of deep ecology for ecofeminism are more than theoretical. As deep ecologists themselves so confidently and correctly point out, there are political implications as well as theoretical ones in their viewpoint. "Certain outlooks on politics and public policy flow naturally from this [deep ecological] consciousness."²¹

At the March 1987 conference on ecofeminism at the University of Southern California, for example, George Sessions expounded the principles of deep ecology before an audience of ecofeminists. He read point number four, which states: "The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease."²²

It is a central thesis of deep ecology that there are "too many" people on the planet. According to Arne Naess, "I should think we must have no more than 100 million people if we are to have the variety of cultures we had one hundred years ago."²³ Deep ecologists invoke Malthus on this issue: "Malthus, in 1803, presented an argument indicating that human population growth would exponentially outstrip food production, resulting in 'general misery,' but his warning was ignored by the rising tide of industrial/technological optimism," lament Devall and Sessions.²⁴

Now, Malthus is notable for his view that population increases geometrically while the food supply grows arithmetically. This view has been repeatedly shown to be false since his day; even during his lifetime agriculture and industry were growing faster than the population.

But Malthus is also notable for the view that "natural" forces such as diseases and starvation will relieve "overpopulation" as if by natural law, and that nothing should be done to mitigate suffering from social conditions. This includes women's suffering at the hands of men: "It may appear to be hard that a mother and her children, who have been guilty of no particular crime themselves, should suffer for the ill conduct of the father; but this is one of the invariable laws of nature; and, knowing this, we should think twice upon the subject, and be very sure of the ground on which we go, before we presume to counteract it."²⁴ No friend of women would call obedience to men an "invariable law of nature"; yet deep ecologists ask ecofeminists to take this writer to heart on overpopulation.

At the USC conference, Sessions interrupted his own recitation to patronizingly ask ecofeminists "what they intend to do about the overpopulation problem: He stated that the ecofeminist position on overpopulation was as yet unclear to him.

Ecofeminists understand that men have historically mined women for their reproductive capacity as they have mined nature for its resources; the domination of women and the domination of nature have been parallel. As feminists of all tendencies

have stressed, childbearing and childrearing are often onerous and often obviate any other kind of work. The denial to women of reproductive choice has often entailed a suppression of their development and personality, a curtailment of their selfhood and freedom, and a foreclosure of any future but one of childrearing.

By denying women their selfhood in the name of a denial of the ego, men have often reduced women to mere baby-making machines, that is, to only one of their many biological functions. They have curtailed women's full participation in society's second nature--in culture--thus denying them the full exercise of both their first and second nature, their biological selfhood.

Which is not to say that many women don't choose to have children, or that their childbearing capacity is not important to them. The point is that in varying degrees throughout the world, men have tried to leave women little choice in life but to be childbearers. In some patriarchal cultures a plenitude of children enhances a man's status in society. The more children his wife bears, the higher his status among other men.

Fortunately, women have responded to this in recent years by demanding full control over their own reproductive capacities. Women do not want childbearing to be mandated by the status requirements of male culture. Whether women decide to have or not to have children, the decision must ultimately be theirs.

Apparently it must be spelled out to Sessions that a woman's participation in society as a political, social, intellectual, and emotional being often goes hand in hand with her decision not to have children or to have fewer than men want for their status needs. Amazingly, at a conference whose stated goal, among others, was to make the connections between deep ecology and ecofeminism, Sessions completely failed to grasp that the answer to the "overpopulation problem" was staring him directly in the face: feminism itself. Perhaps the most important single factor today in reducing population is the increasing control women have over their bodies and reproduction.

Sessions's inability to grasp this is more than just myopia. Although embracing feminism as a solution to "overpopulation" clearly would best solve what he sees as a serious problem, it would also wreak havoc on his sexist ideology, for an alliance with ecofeminism would entail including women as full, participating, individuated persons with rational selves into his political movement. But his ideology, which prescribes selflessness for women and asks them to "think like a mountain," could not contain this; indeed, this would blow it apart. For in deep ecology woman is the model nonbeing, the model "thinking mountain."

The solution to "overpopulation" that Sessions et al. propose is fertility programs. "Optimal human carrying capacity should be determined for the planet as a biosphere and for specific "

islands, valleys, and continents. A drastic reduction of the rate of growth of population of homo sapiens through humane birth control programs is required."²⁶

It is only too well known that so-called fertility programs often become programs to sterilize both Third World women and women of color in the United States. Far from granting women free choice in reproduction, these programs often attempt to coerce women into not having children at all. Because deep ecology lacks a commitment to the full actualization of all women's human potentialities, particularly their selfhood, there is no more in its recipes that would prevent the coercive rationalization of women into reproductive factories than there is in present patriarchal governments.

It would be arrogant and presumptuous beyond belief for a group of white men wandering around in a "wilderness," experiencing "humility" in a nature that they see as irrational--as irrational as they think women are--to tell women whether women should give birth. Moreover, it would be foolish beyond belief for women to allow them to do so, for indeed it would mean acceding to "fertility programs."

Despite all their piety about wilderness and nature, deep ecologists' "solution" to "overpopulation" would rationalize them in the same way that modern industrial society rationalizes nature, producing the very society that deep ecologists denounce.

Deep ecologists denounce industrial society in one breath and in the next demand the technique of fertility programs. They would rationalize women in the name of an emancipatory nature. They would deprive women of reproductive choice in the name of a spiritual connectedness with the natural world. They would ask women to abjure their selfhood and subjectivity in the name of a oneness with the natural world. They would ask women to do without individuality and control over their own lives in the name of "humility" toward the natural world. And they would ask women to give up their awareness of boundaries --and by extension of oppression--in the name of antianthropocentrism.

Conclusion

In the schism between deep ecology, with its avoidance of social and natural history, and social ecology, with its orientation toward these histories, male deep ecologists seem intent nonetheless on forming an alliance with ecofeminists.

Ecofeminists have nothing to gain in such an embrace. The alleged affinities between deep ecology and ecofeminism exist mainly in the minds of male deep ecologists. Deep ecology's strange mixture of macho John Wayne confrontations with "wilderness" and Taoist platitudes about self-effacement are suited more to privileged white men with a taste for outdoor life than to feminists and their struggle for selfhood, individuation, and a truly human status in both nature and society. Deep ecology

traps women in nonsensical and circular arguments.

Both social ecofeminists and spiritual ecofeminists have by and large resisted the attempted seduction by deep ecology. Ecofeminists roundly hissed Sessions at the USC conference in response to his question. Ecofeminism's affinities, if it is to have any, must be with a tradition that stresses ecological individuation and harmony rather than deep-ecological self-oblivion.

Notes

1. Kirkpatrick Sale, "Shades of Green: Kirkpatrick Sale Speaks on Ecological Politics." Kick It Over, Winter 1986/87, p.8.
2. Jim Cheney, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology." (Unpublished ms.)
3. Bill Devall and George Sessions, Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered. (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), p. 93.
4. Quoted in ibid., p. 74.
5. Quoted in ibid., p. 243.
6. Michael Zimmerman, "Feminism, Deep Ecology and Environmental Ethics." Environmental Ethics 9 (Spring 1987): 22.
7. Devall and Sessions, p. 182.
8. Ibid., p. 153.
9. Ibid., p. 68.
10. Ibid., p. 67.
11. Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering; Evelyn Fox Keller, Reflections on Gender and Science; and Jane Flax, in Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., The Future of Difference.
12. Devall and Sessions, p. 33.
13. Ibid., p. 65.
14. Ibid., p. 11.
15. Bill Devall, "The Deep Ecology Movement." Natural Resources Journal 20 (1980): 309.
16. Nancy C.M. Hartsock, "False Universalities and Real Differences: Reconstituting Marxism for the Eighties." New Politics (Spring 1987): 88.
17. Henry David Thoreau, quoted in Devall and Sessions, p. 109.
18. Devall and Sessions, p. 110.
19. Luther Standing Bear, in T. McLuhan, ed., Touch the Earth (1971).
20. Cheney, p. 16.
21. Devall and Sessions, p. 65.
22. Ibid., p. 70.
23. Quoted in ibid., p. 76.
24. Ibid., p. 46.
25. Quoted in John L. Hess, "Malthus Then and Now." The Nation, April 18, 1987, p. 498.
26. Devall, p. 311.

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