

Green Perspectives #11, October 1988

What is Social Ecofeminism? by Janet Biehl

North American ecofeminism originated around 1974 at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont as a dynamic attempt to broaden and transform left political theory to include both feminism and ecology.(1) Like the social ecology that so influenced it, ecofeminism's original promise was to expand left social and political analysis to include the relationship of all structures of domination. It inherited social ecology's critique of hierarchy as more fundamental than class; its potential was to integrate feminism with anarchism, libertarian socialism, and social ecology itself. Concrete, not idealistic in the philosophical sense, its impetus was to seek political, not individual solutions. Naturalistic, not supernaturalistic, in its potential, it was above all leftist.

Fourteen years later, this potential has not been fulfilled. Inundated almost as soon as it was conceived by "cultural feminism," ecofeminism's revolutionary potential has been neutralized in the form it has taken. Far from broadening left political theory, ecofeminism has in fact abstracted women and nature out of left political theory and has thereby narrowed itself, dismissing serious critiques of capitalism and the nation-state and emphasizing personal transformation and even goddess-worship as sources of social change. Far from creating a concrete political analysis, it offers mere metaphors about a presumed connection between women and "nature," and reifies the differences between men and women as a whole. At times, it has-become not only antileftist but even reactionary.

Clearly any revolutionary project must address both feminist and ecological concerns, and for this reason ecofeminism as a political movement must be reconstructed. But to understand how the present state of affairs arose, we must look briefly at the development of the body of ideas known as ecofeminism.

Women and Nature

The convergence of feminist and ecological thinking was not arbitrary. At many (although not at all) times in western culture, and in many (although not all) nonwestern cultures, women have been seen as having certain connections with nature that men do not have. Over the course of more than a decade, ecofeminists have made varying interpretations of the rather vague and loose formulation of "women and nature" or "the domination of women and the domination of nature." They may be said to have generally treated the theme in three basic ways.

The first treatment was that of two writers who heavily influenced ecofeminism in its early years, Mary Daly and Susan Griffin. They emphasized what they saw as the life-affirming connections between women and nature, the original "others" of a basically death-dealing patriarchal western culture. Daly, from a cultural feminist perspective, denounced "the necrophilic leaders of phallogocentric society" who "are carrying out their programs of planned poisoning for all life on the planet" in "fanatic indifference to the destruction they wreak upon the Other-women and 'Mother Nature.'" For Daly, "phallic myth and language generate, legitimate, and mask the material pollution that threatens to terminate all sentient life on this planet" She called for women to make a "spring into free space, which is woman-identified consciousness," a "Spring," like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, within women themselves that "makes be-ing possible." (2) In Griffin's poetical work *Woman and Nature*, a "chorus of women and nature" announces, "We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature." (3) Finally, an influential article by structuralist anthropologist Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?," maintained that cross-culturally women are regarded as closer to nature than men; her article thereby gave a certain validation to the ecofeminist use of the metaphor. (4)

Only in poeticizing such as Griffin's and in wordplay such as Daly's, however, could an association of women with nature – in contrast to culture as male – remotely be thought of in political terms. For no feminist in her right mind would hand over all of culture to men in the name of identifying women with nature. Women are obviously part of culture; one thing that clearly distinguishes humans from animals is the fact that they are cultural beings. To "equate" them with nature would not only situate them outside of culture and history altogether but would deprive them of their humanity itself. Ortner herself warned that "the whole scheme is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature. Woman is not 'in reality' any closer to ... nature than man-both have consciousness, both are mortal." The "woman-nature" metaphor is, in fact, a definition imposed by patricentric cultures to further the subordination of women.

A second treatment of the notion of "women and nature" avoided this trap and defined women as cultural beings. Writers like Charlene Spretnak sought out and celebrated cultures that did not try to dominate nature and that may have been matricentric, particularly those in eras that preceded the rise of state societies in the West, such as the Neolithic. (5) These writers linked the domination of nature in western cultures to the suppression of matricentric cultures. Women and nature, in short, were still "the other," as they had been for Daly and Griffin, but this "otherness" took a cultural form.

This train of thought was much influenced by the "cultural feminism" that gained ascendancy and executed an enormous reversal in feminist thinking shortly after ecofeminism was formulated (a progression that socialist feminists Alice Echols and Hester Eisenstein, among others, have pointedly traced [6]). Cultural feminists, in contrast to the radical feminists who preceded them, not only regarded women as differing biologically from men but reified women and men as having different essential natures, values, indeed cosmologies. Their reifications of "male nature" and "female nature" oddly resembled the "masculinity" and "femininity" ideals imposed under many patricentric cultures and that radical feminists had been fighting with such passion.

Ecofeminist writers influenced by cultural feminism also tend to see women as "closer to nature" than men, and women's essential nature as inherently more ecological than men's. They suggest that we may learn from Neolithic era a way of being that

simultaneously is gender-equal and does not dominate nature. They see possibilities for the generation of an ecological society in the infusion of "female" values into the present woman- and nature-hating culture.

It may be true that cultures preceding the rise of state societies were matricentric; and they surely had no ideologies of dominating nature. It may also be true that many women today, for not only biological but also historical and social reasons, retain characteristics of sympathy and care that many men, for social reasons, have lost (although men, as humans, are also biologically equipped for caring). However, reifying these differences into a "male" and "female nature" tends to exclude the possibility that men may become caring, and it imposes a moral agenda on women to somehow "save" society from the damage that some men have historically wrought. An oppressive cultural definition is retained, even embraced. By asking women to value their essential natures above men's, ecofeminism becomes an exercise in personal transformation rather than a concerted political effort.

This treatment also ignores the extent to which "biological" differences between the sexes have been socially constructed. In blaming men for the introduction of warfare and hierarchy, it disallows that women have anything but a "pacific" and egalitarian nature. In accepting the woman-nature analogy, albeit in cultural form, it ignores the extent to which hunting by men is ecological, postulating a nonhuman nature that is somehow always "benign" to all creatures.

Moreover, in emphasizing Neolithic and other cultures, this treatment falls into atavism, as if nothing that happened since about 3000 RC. were of particular importance to women. It ignores the degree to which Neolithic cultures had hierarchies and were even brutal in their own right. It ignores the question of individuality in communities ruled by custom and tradition, as well as the problems of organizing culture along biological lines of age and gender. Furthermore, it ignores not only the technologies that have since removed much of drudgery from women's lives, but also the long-abiding western revolutionary tradition, in which women participated and that should be the heritage of women today as much as it is of men. The tendencies to antileftism of cultural feminism are enlarged in this ecofeminist discussion by complaints about the left's opposition to "spirituality." (7)

Finally, these writers introduced into ecofeminism the worship of a "goddess" as a metaphor for the infusion of female values into society, a bizarre introduction of the supernatural into a movement ostensibly concerned with nature. This ecofeminism tends to regard the nonrational human faculties – intuition and mythopoesis – that are susceptible to belief in superstitions as more valuable than supposedly "male" rationality, and asks women to regard these as emancipatory. It fails address serious question of the oppressive nature of religion and religious hierarchies, from which the Enlightenment did much to free people, teaching that humans can apprehend realities using their own faculties without recourse to supernatural fantasies. (8) A heritage in which goddess-priestesses reigned over society is not a heritage worth rescuing, any more than the heritage of Bronze Age warriors is.

The third and perhaps the most sophisticated treatment of the women-nature question avoids the biologism of the second (although it retains its atavism and its reification of male and female) by accepting social constructionism. Although saying that biology is not to be feared or anathematized, ecofeminists such as Ynestra King advocate that feminists consciously choose to make use of this "woman equals nature" definition for strategic purposes, in effect as a myth around which ecofeminist political activity may be organized. (9)

But one must ask, is it possible that a patriarchal construct can be instrumentally used for purposes of female emancipation? The notion that woman-equals-nature, when reified either biologically or socially, clearly could have regressive potential for women seeking to be free of cultural definitions. Is it not possible for leftist women to be concerned about the liberation of both women and nature without the woman-nature burden perpetually on their shoulders?

I propose that feminists in the ecology movement put this notion of a special mystical connection between women and nature aside for a while and consider instead the relationship of women – and of men and of a whole plethora of social relations – to nature ontologically; that we consider the social realities of all these relationships and thereby seek to fulfill the original promise of ecofeminism as both contributing to and broadening leftism.

The "woman-nature" issue, however, is not the only problem of concern in ecofeminism; indeed, other problems are perhaps even more fundamental. These problems are not peculiar to ecofeminism but rather have bearing on the development of feminist theory as a whole since the late 1960s. Addressing the problems of ecofeminism, then, involves understanding the development of feminism as a whole. If we are to uncover the roots of a truly left ecological feminism, we must look at the development of early radical feminism as it was formulated in those years, both to build on its strengths and to avoid its errors.

For the strengths of early radical feminism were many.

From the late 1960s until 1974 and 1975, it advanced a concrete, materialist, broadly social feminist analysis. It above all sought to eradicate the social institutions and structures that, both by ideology and structurally, restrict women from developing their full humanity, including marriage, the nuclear family, romantic love, sexual repression, the state, and religion. If a new social ecofeminism (10) builds on these aspects of early radical feminism, it may also be broadly concrete and address itself to social structures of domination, leaving goddesses to the religious and facile reifications of "male" and "female nature" to the simple-minded.

The Question of Men

It is a fundamental and perpetual dilemma for the feminist project as a whole that as it seeks to liberate women, it must seek to change all of society; for women cannot be free unless all of society is free. But this simple premise has serious theoretical consequences. It means that either feminism must be emancipatory for men as well, or alternatively, that it must integrate itself into an overall left theory. Indeed, it is particularly important for an ecological feminism to address the question of men, for ecology deals with entities in their wholeness, and human society is a whole of which men clearly are a part.

Yet one question on which early radical feminism foundered was just this one, and it passed its premises on as an inheritance to most later feminist thought, including ecofeminism. From the beginning, as Ellen Willis (a founder

of Redstockings) has brilliantly shown, early radical feminists found themselves compelled by their circumstances to show that feminism could be a universal theory. Radical feminism, emerging in response to oppressive conditions in the New Left, accused New Left men of sexism; these men in turn flung back at them that feminism was a "bourgeois" ideology. The radical feminists in turn had to show that far from being "bourgeois," the domination of women is more fundamental than class domination, and they had to present feminism as a fundamental theory of liberation for everyone – for men and women alike – that went deeper than other left political theories. (11)

To do this, early radical feminists drew on the critique of hierarchy itself (first made by social ecology, a form of eco-anarchism), which states that hierarchy is a more fundamental social division than class. Radical feminists maintained that the domination of women was the first hierarchy, that the first division in human society was that between men and women, and that other divisions came afterward. "Very early in the game," Willis writes self-critically, "radical feminists [advanced] the thesis that women's oppression was not only the oldest and most universal form of domination but the primary form. We argued that other kinds of hierarchy grew out of and were modeled on male supremacy-were in effect specialized forms of male supremacy."(12) Furthermore, they maintained, male supremacy continues to be the primary oppression in present society.

This conclusion, as Willis notes, allowed radical feminism to regard itself as a universal theory, as in effect superseding existing leftism. If male supremacy is the primary oppression, the liberation of women would mean the liberation of men. Once sexism were removed, the reasoning went, other systems of domination would cease to exist; smash male supremacy, and capitalism would collapse under its own sexist weight. This formulation allowed radical feminism to present itself as a universally emancipatory theory.

Now, it is true that the liberation of women from sex roles promises the liberation of men from sex roles, and that this is emancipatory for men. It is true that, despite the obvious privileges that male supremacy gives men, gender roles confine men to being masculine, and that this keeps them from exercising all of their human capacities for love and cooperativeness and trust and a nurturing emotional life in general. In these senses, feminism is obviously liberatory for men. Similarly, "moral" and other injunctions to heterosexuality confine all people to sexual practices that may not be in keeping with their own preferences; the liberation of gays and lesbians, too, promises the emancipation of everyone from oppressive sexual norms.

But beyond this, a troubling set of questions arises. Can freeing men from "gender roles" free them – and women from domination under capitalism and the nation-state? Can feminism promise the liberation of men – and women – from all systems of domination? Are some men capitalists because they are misogynist and emotionally repressed, and if so, how can such a psychological explanation be either proven or provide hope for future change? Yet men are clearly not a unified whole; men also oppress men in their own right. How can it be that all men are not capitalists and statist if these oppressions arise from misogyny itself?

Before these questions could be addressed satisfactorily, "cultural feminism" biologized the issue, in effect freezing the notion of the domination of women as the primary oppression in feminist thought. Cultural feminism regarded pure male violence – particularly rape – as the kernel of the domination of women and thereby of all domination. Misogyny itself became the force with which cultural feminists were above all concerned. Discussions of the relationship of male supremacy to other forms of domination faded into an academicized socialist feminism.

Ecofeminism, although not always as biologicistic as cultural feminism, nonetheless continues the assumption that the domination of women is the primary oppression and is "prototypical" of all other forms of domination. An assumption remains inherent in ecofeminist thinking that it is somehow a universal radical theory, that all systems of domination in "patriarchal" culture can be overcome by infusing it with female values. Indeed, the discussion of the man question is not often heard in ecofeminist circles; and more than one ecofeminist simply avoids the question by saying that men must figure it out for themselves.

Looking over the course of this development, it is hard not to conclude that the notion that the oppression of women is primary raises deep problems. "This idea," writes Willis, "assumes that men in creating and maintaining these systems are acting purely as men, in accordance with peculiarly male characteristics or specifically male supremacist objectives." (13) If the oppression of women is primary, the prototype of all domination, then presumably men become capitalists and statist for the ultimate purpose of dominating women. Religious priesthoods, capitalism, the nation-state evolved secondarily from the original gender hierarchy and are in essence indirect, roundabout ways of dominating women.

The implications of this for radical political theory are serious. If gender is the primary oppression, ecofeminists don't have to be overly concerned about fighting capitalism or the nation-state directly; nor need they be overly concerned about integrating ecofeminism with left political theory. In effect, anticapitalism and anarchism are dropped from ecofeminist consideration as responses to oppression in their own right. Paradoxically, the theory of "primary oppression" assures not that ecofeminism is a theory of universal liberation but remains isolated from the left.

Yet it is not clear that the oppression of women was even the first oppression at all. In many cases, as evolutionary anthropology has shown, gerontocracies antedated male dominance. Nor is it clear that men dominate men for the ultimate purpose of dominating women. Indeed, men usually stand to gain very distinct things by dominating other men, such as material wealth and vast state power.

To be blunt women and nature are not the only "others." Men are very often "the other" for dominating men. They are not a unified whole, and some men dominate other men in their own right, for reasons particular to them, in ways that need not be inspired by or modeled on the domination of women, such as industrial and military hierarchies. The systems of domination that arise from this thus have a "history, logic, and struggle" of their own, as Susan Prentice puts it. According to Prentice, a critic of ecofeminism, "By locating the origin of the domination of women and nature in male consciousness, ecofeminism makes political and economic systems simply derivative of male thinking." (14) Yet the view that the domination of women is primary deprives other forms of hierarchy of this autonomy.

But capitalism and statism are conscious projects in their own right. Argues Prentice, "There is an internal logic to capitalism – for example, its relations and forces of production, commodity, fetishism, exploitation, domination, alienation, etc. – that makes exploiting nature a sensible thing for capitalism as a world-system to do. It is no mere failure or stunting of consciousness: it is consciousness directed and organized for a different end" (15) – an end that has little directly to do with the relations between the sexes.

Ecofeminism must learn well the lesson that some radical feminists learned from the early 1970s: that dropping capitalism and statism from direct consideration in feminist theory renders feminism nonrevolutionary. Liberal women, as Willis points out, were not radicalized by becoming feminists: they simply "seized on the idea of women's oppression as the primary oppression and took it to mean not that feminism was or should be inclusive of other struggles, but that left politics were 'male' and could be safely ignored." (16) Regarding capitalism and statism as secondary allowed liberals to become feminists, and the same could easily happen to a nonleftist ecofeminism, however radical its proponents envision their theory. It is high time that ecofeminists challenged the notion of "primary oppression" and thereby rekindled discussion of the relationship of feminism to the left.

In no way does it detract from the feminist struggle against misogyny to suggest that this is not their only struggle. Rape and other forms of violence against women are caused not by misogyny alone but also by men's oppression in their own right under other systems of domination. Even as it maintains a much-needed attack on male supremacy, ecofeminism must overcome its isolation in self-indulgent fantasies about primary oppression and take an anticapitalist, as well as an antistatist, position.

For a movement's analysis of the nature and causes of oppression are reflected in its forms of organization. Neither a separatist women's movement nor a dissolving of women's concerns into a male eco-anarchist or socialist political theory reflects a social ecofeminist analysis. Rather, an understanding of the interrelationships between misogyny on the one hand and men's forms of dominating men – and women – on the other requires integrating a feminist movement and analysis with other "male" movements, even while retaining their specific autonomy.

The fact is that some men are women's allies, even against other men. A feminist "ethic of care" is antithetical to male domination, but so are such traditional "male" notions as freedom, individuality, and the struggle for social justice. A feminism that is not explicitly anticapitalist and antistatist cannot fully fight all the causes of male supremacy. At the same time, no socialist or anarchist theory can truly be left without opposing sexism or supporting feminist aims. Ecofeminism must ground itself in an overall left political theory that challenges all the social structures that bear on the oppression of women. The integration of feminism into left politics is therefore absolutely crucial both to feminism and to other left theories and movements.

Biology and Society

Another question that plagues all feminism is the question of the nature of the differences between men and women. Just as some feminisms build biological differences into elaborate theories of "female nature," others minimize biological differences excessively and regard the present differences as wholly socially constructed, in effect anathematizing biology.

A social ecofeminism would not hesitate to acknowledge biological differences between the sexes, particularly the obvious differences in reproductive capacity: women menstruate, gestate, give birth, and lactate. Women also, on the whole, are not as tall or heavy as men of the same ethnic group. Many women are physically weaker than many men, and many women are more caring and supportive than many men. The extent to which these and other differences are attributable to biology and which to conditioning, however, is unclear. We do not really know which of these other differences between men and women are due to social conditioning and which are due to biology, and we must in all honesty take an agnostic position.

It is important to note that as men have dominated each other, the effects of social construction have been perhaps more marked on men than on women. For men have been pressed to forget their caring natures and to participate in systems of domination, and many have done so. Indeed, under the systems of domination that arose, women were more able to retain caring qualities, even pressured to do so; men were obliged to obliterate them in themselves. Women, ensconced in the private realm, were to a great extent "passed over" in the development of systems of domination among men and remain heirs to an ethic of care and support.

Under male dominance, nonetheless, too much is clearly made of biological differences between men and women, to the detriment of women. Women are still so constrained by gender role definitions that all possibilities must be opened up to them to develop all their capacities. Obviously, mystifying and reifying biological differences into an "essential male nature" or an "essential female nature" works against this. Social ecofeminism therefore unequivocally demands reproductive freedom for all women, including the freedom to choose to have an abortion on demand. Further, it calls for the fulfillment of women, intellectually, morally, sexually, and sensuously, for women's possession of these faculties is also a biological fact.

At the same time, to the extent that women are the social repositories of the ethic of care, they remain a stronghold for the values on which an ecological society depends. Social ecofeminism refuses to regard women as moral missionaries. But the need for a communitarian, caring society, in both its public and private realms, is undeniable; and many women (as well as men) are situated to contribute to a new synthesis.

Social ecofeminism affirms the dimension of social construction in women's lives that constrains them from fulfilling their human nature, but it regards a pure social constructionism ultimately as deterministic for women and men: for we could no more escape a purely social determinism than we could a biological determinism. Theories of social constructionism cannot, for this reason, explain resistance to existing social orders, including feminist resistance.

Social ecofeminism therefore rejects all determinisms, whether biological or social, and calls for a nondeterministic feminism, one that not only allows for but also requires human action. It proposes that biology, society, and individual will interact with and counter each other in human beings. Precisely because these aspects

interact, humans, unlike animals, may choose to make changes in their lives and in their societies. Social ecofeminism acknowledges that moral and political agency on the part of men and women gives them the revolutionary potential to challenge not only "biology as destiny" but also whatever social constructions and sociopolitical structures they encounter. Some biological facts, such as mortality, limit this agency; others, such as our capacity for development, enhance it.

Moreover, recognizing that biological differences do exist between the sexes, whatever their origin, need not inevitably lead to gender hierarchies and thereby to domination. Like social ecology, social ecofeminism seeks to abolish hierarchy, not differences; and no differences between men and women, whether biological or social, ought to provide a basis for domination. Like social ecology, social ecofeminism calls for the elimination from our minds of the hierarchical thinking that assumes acknowledging difference inevitably leads to hierarchy.

Public and Private

When social ecofeminists speak of the "social," they do not mean the social construction of gender and other ideologies alone; they mean social structures as well. It is basic social structures, as well as the ideologies that reinforce them, that maintain the oppression of women.

Women have been historically located in a particular realm in human societies: the "private" realm. Men, by contrast, have been historically located in what may be called for convenience the "public" realm. In their origins, these realms were based on biological facts, in eras when society was organized around biological facts, such as age and gender. Women's biology determined their social roles because society was organized along biological lines.

The ultimate biological facts on which the private realm was based were not only the biological facts of genetic parenthood or of women's reproduction but also the facts of human development: that all human beings have a "private" experience; that all undergo birth and infancy; that all undergo relatively long, deeply impressionable childhoods; that all undergo long periods of dependency and learning and have great needs for, among other things, – unconditional love (from someone of either sex) in order to develop a sense of individual self and basic trust as adults.

The private realm is the realm where this development of infant into child and child into adult takes place. It has a moral ethos particular to itself, not only to meet the needs of childrearing but also to meet adults' needs for emotional support and satisfaction, as well as for a vibrant sexual life. The "ethic of care" is particular to the private realm; and historically, it is women who have created the culture of the private realm, raising children, bringing them into society. (It is because they have done work of transforming nature into culture that women came to be seen as "closer to nature.") But women's location there is an historical fact, originally based on their biology but no longer necessarily so.

At the same time that all human beings have a private experience, they also all have a public experience; that is, they have relationships with people outside their private ethos. In the ideal public realm, mature individuals take responsibility for their community as a whole. This ability does not require unconditional love, but rather requires making moral, intellectual, indeed political choices for the entire community at the level of citizenship. Historically, based on their biology and on history, men have occupied the public realm; this too is no longer necessarily the case.

In making these decisions, differences between people inevitably arise and must be argued, both rationally and passionately, as children cannot, and ethical decisions and choices are made that children cannot be expected to make. Here, the ethic of care of the private realm is not adequate. Dealing with people who are not of immediate personal and caring concern, in the public realm the ethic of rights is essential. The public realm thus has a somewhat different ethos from the private, although public concerns should clearly be informed by the caring ethic of the private realm.

Many tribal societies, and likely Neolithic Europe, organized both the public and the private realms according to the blood tie – that is, according to genetic kinship, either the mother's or the father's. The public and private realms, accordingly, were also structured in accordance with the blood tie. The private realm was where the blood tie was maintained – that is, children were reared and socialized – by women. The "public realm" was the realm for dealing with people who did not share the blood tie of the tribe, that is, strangers. This was men's realm (which they managed either with or without fighting). These two realms, public and private, which were really two cultures between men and women, depended on a biological division of labor and of culture between the sexes for their very survival.

It may very well be an instance of our hierarchical thinking that we tend to see the relationship between the private and the public in tribal societies in hierarchical terms, for the relationship of private and the public is unquestionably hierarchical in our society. But tribal societies themselves do not always value the public more highly than the private. As some anthropologists have shown, although men may value their "public" culture more highly, even to the point of boasting about it, the women often do not share the men's view of themselves, even laughing at the men for inflating their importance. (17)

But ultimately the "public" did gain precedence over the "private." As tribal cultures grew, they came increasingly into contact with strangers. The blood tie ceased to have the overwhelming importance for the organization of society as a whole that it previously had, and the public realm became increasingly important. It was as this occurred that gender hierarchies and slavery most likely developed, and men's "public" realm eventually developed into chiefdoms and ultimately states. Women, located in the private realm originally for biological reasons, became fixed there for social reasons domesticated. The public and the private were separated when, in city life, the domestic realm came to be confined to the four walls of living quarters. Community was destroyed, and with it the possibility of a communitarian private realm, with communal childrearing. As the public realm ossified into bureaucracies and military machines, and classes and property emerged, the private realm was increasingly reduced to biological families.

There is little historical evidence that the rise of classes or state societies was a direct attempt to worsen women's condition, as theories of "primary oppression" hold; hierarchies among men developed for reasons too complex to elaborate here. (18) Nor is there evidence that states were modeled on the patriarchal family, the claims of

many feminists to the contrary; military hierarchies – an oppression of men by men – are much more clearly the "prototype" for the emergence of the state than the patriarchal family. But the rise those societies did affect women for the worse, even if they were not modeled on the oppression of women, and even if they were not a direct attempt to further dominate women. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, for example, women's status fell as monarchies and despotisms consolidated and militarized themselves.

Similarly, the later emergence of capitalism, although it was also not a conscious project to dominate women, nonetheless affected most women's lives for the worse (despite a rise in the standard of living of some women). It separated the workplace and the home and fragmented the private sphere into isolated nuclear family units, completing the process of isolating women from the public realm and from each other and rendering them powerless. It eroded the community life on which home-manufacturing family life had previously depended, a life in which women had been highly visible and no less central than men.

We must distinguish, then, between the idea that men instituted domination among themselves in order to dominate women, and the idea that the systems that men instituted to dominate men adversely affected women. Although not consciously intended to dominate women, the rise of the nation-state and capitalism had great bearing on the domination of women and on gender relations as a whole, as well as on racial and other social relations. Indeed, the systems of domination of men by men, which have histories and logics of their own, enormously exacerbate the oppression of women. The liberation of women therefore depends on the destruction of capitalism and the nation-state as well as on the destruction of male supremacy.

At the same time, a profound questioning of religion occurred during the Enlightenment that proposed that people could, by their own faculties of reason as well as passion, devise solutions to social problems without recourse to a deity. Social ecofeminism draws heavily on this humanist heritage. For only by examining them can the contributions of people from the public realm and the private realm, advocating a combination of care and rights, passion and reason, and individuality and community, can a society liberating for all be consciously devised.

Capitalism and the Nation-State

The domination of men by men perhaps most profoundly affected women's lives by restructuring communitarian public and private realms into near-unrecognizability. With the rise of capitalism, the private realm, already atomized into biological and then nuclear families, became reduced to an area of consumption. In recent years, the present invasion of the market economy into all aspects of human life, creating what Murray Bookchin has called a "market society," makes it increasingly difficult for the private, domestic realm to exist at all. (19) As corporations more and more provide day-care centers for the children – and elderly relatives – of their employees, domestic life moves increasingly into the corporations, indeed becomes organized around the demands of capitalism. The market economy has even invaded the womb, with the emergence of "surrogacy" contracts.

At the same time, whatever biological proclivities women have toward caring are now being overridden, just as they once were in men. As capitalism and statism draw on the abilities for all people to become competitive and exploitative, many women have shown themselves to be as capable of dominating as men are. As all people become homogenized as exploiters and exploited, the values of caring, particular to the private realm which women for millennia embodied, are being lost.

As this happens, many women who would prefer raising children to working to earn a "rotten piece of the pie" (as Bonnie Kreps once put it) find it increasingly difficult to do so. Far from being restricted from working outside the home, they work not because they want to but because they have to; nor are men any more able to stay home with children. Where once one income sufficed to support a family, two now scarcely do. As people who wish to raise children increasingly work outside the home against their wills, the existence of a private and caring realm of any sort becomes increasingly fragile.

Just as domestic life is becoming vitiated, so too is public life. The liberal nation-state has long since made a full political life impossible for most, offering those who would enter it mere bureaucratic positions and forcing them into the hierarchy. It creates bureaucracy instead of freedom; centralizes instead of decentralizes; seeks efficient, instrumental means rather than moral means and ends; and it solidifies the nuclear family when it does not absorb its functions. It destroys the very community life on which vital political and private realms depend. Just as the private realm is warped into nuclear families or absorbed into corporations, so the nation-state destroys the possibility of a truly political "public" realm.

Because of the destructive effects of the rise of nation-states and capitalism on gender relations and on all communitarian relations, social ecofeminism does not regard solutions to women's problems by either the state or corporations as ultimately benign. The liberal nation-states are presently responding to the demands of the women's liberation movement by legislation, setting up new bureaucracies and absorbing its petitioners; social ecofeminism regards these solutions as serving merely to strengthen the nation-state itself. Similarly, social ecofeminism regards the entry of women into the capitalism as participation in a system that erodes the community life on which their ultimate freedom depends, as well as one that dehumanizes them.

The ethic of care must be restored to both the private and the public realms (even as the ethic of rights of the traditional public sphere is retained; the two are not contradictory). Social ecofeminism seeks nothing less than the destruction of capitalism and the nation-state and the restructuring of society in a decentralized, communitarian fashion so that a full, caring healthy private and public life in a humane society are both possible for all. It advocates local solutions, close to the community, where the private realm meets the public, between which no great distance, geographical or emotional, must be traveled. It seeks community care for children and for the elderly, community solutions to the restructuring of society that the emergence of women from the private realm demands. It seeks to restore the community life that makes communitarian childrearing possible, as well as local, face-to-face assembly political life.

Social ecofeminism thus regards as crucial the distinction made by social ecology between "politics" as

statism and "politics" in its profound sense as popular, face-to-face democracy of local self-government. It adopts the libertarian municipalism of social ecology as an overall left political theory with which it can be integral.(20) Libertarian municipalism provides a framework for the emergence of the community life on which a healthy private and political life both depend: a framework for the democratization of the republic, for the reinvigoration of local community politics – ward assemblies, town meetings – by the people, including women.

This community life, however, would not depend on religion for social cohesion or organization, as earlier societies did. Rather, the highest ideals of the Enlightenment and the ideals of freedom of the western revolutionary tradition provide a secular, rational, and yet passionate and sensuous basis for individual life, private life, and political life.

Social ecofeminism accepts the basic tenet of social ecology, that the idea of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human. Only ending all systems of domination makes possible an ecological society, in which no states or capitalist economies attempt to subjugate nature, in which all aspects of human nature – including sexuality and the passions as well as rationality – are freed, and in which the role of the private realm in transforming "first nature" into "second nature" is regarded as crucial to human social evolution.

Social ecofeminism does not regard the biological fact of infant dependency as prescribing childrearing by women any longer, since society is no longer organized along biological lines of kinship, gender, and age, as it once was. It regards as a crucial human accomplishment the technologies that have made possible freeing women from confinement to this realm. Those who provide the needed caring and support may now be of either sex. Indeed, the activities of childrearing and other transformations of "nature into culture" is incumbent on all humans, and social ecofeminism demands a social and political organization that makes this possible. At the same time, it demands that women – and men – who wish to raise children be socially able to do so.

Social ecofeminism regards all people, both men and women, as capable of an ethic of care (as well as an ethic of rights and principles). If the ethic of care persists in the private realm today, it is not because of women's "inner nature" but because the bureaucratization and commercialization of "public" life have passed over this realm to a larger extent.

Social ecofeminism maintains that it is in the political realm of a self-governing community that solutions to the problems of the private realm – the entrapments and stultification of childrearing, the performance of degraded work, violence against women, and even rape – can be worked out by people themselves. There individuals are accountable to each other face to face. In a communitarian, ecological polity, communal childrearing would be possible, allowing all to participate in the rearing of all children. Decentralized social arrangements would make it possible to assure that all individuals, male and female, have complete access to both private and political life.

Battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, women's health centers have been created at the municipal level to address the oppression of women in the nuclear family. But only a massive influx of women into local political "forms of freedom" (in Murray Bookchin's language) could allow communities to consciously restructure their society to end male supremacy in both the private and public spheres. Moreover, their presence in a radical municipality would allow women, as well as gays and lesbians and people of color, to deal with the traditional concerns of the political sphere as well. The close integration of the political and the private at the local level makes possible a full integration of women as citizens. (21)

Social ecofeminism shares with social ecology the demand that economic life come under the control of the political realm by a municipalization of the economy and the creation of a moral economy, an economy of cooperatives and meaningful local work that addresses local community needs. In a local, municipal economy, where the workplace is located at or near the home, women's full participation in a moral economic life is possible.

Further, a municipalized economy challenges capitalism. It is not workers taking over the factories but people defending their communities and hearts and minds against the depredations of the market economy that poses this challenge. The market economy must be rolled back by a moral counterattack from its utterly amoral commercial grow-or-die trajectory that threatens to pervade every aspect of life. Women participate in this moral challenge to capitalism not because they are women per se and therefore innately more moral than men but because capitalism oppresses them in its own right, and because as human beings with moral faculties, women regard a market society as a desecration of the human spirit.

Historically, women have always allied with men at the grassroots level against their common oppressors and have made revolutions against religious, economic, and state hierarchies. Social ecofeminism has a revolutionary heritage in the work of generations of revolutionary women, from ordinary women who fought for food for their children and freedom for their comrades, to those of international revolutionary stature such as Rosa Luxemburg, whose internationalism bath transcended and included the particular oppressions of various groups. Social ecofeminism proudly continues this historical tradition of revolutionary women; it sees no contradiction between this and the full participation of women in all aspects of life.

Notes

I would like to thank the Burlington Greens for many discussions that contributed to the ideas in this article.

(1) At this time, no one at the Institute had ever heard of Françoise d'Eaubonne, who is commonly credited with originating the term "ecofeminism." For social ecology, see Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982).

(2) Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), pp. 9, 10, 12, 21, 26.

(3) Lacking an explicit statement that "we" refers to both men and women, the reader must assume it refers to women only. See Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 226.

(4) Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds. *Woman, Culture and Society*. (Stanford University Press, 1974).

(5) Charlene Spretnak, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1982).

- (6) Alice Echols, "The New Feminism of Yin and Yang," in A. Snitow, C. Stansell, and S. Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83," in C. S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); and Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983). (7) For cultural feminism's antileftist tendencies, see Echols, "Yin and Yang," pp. 443-44. For ecofeminist antileftism, see Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra, *Green Politics*, rev. ed. (Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1986), passim.
- (8) For further critique of atavism and the use of myth in ecofeminism, see my "Goddess Mythology in Ecological Politics," forthcoming in *New Politics*.
- (9) Ynestra King, "Coming of Age with the Greens," *Zeta* (January 1988), p. 19.
- (10) The phrase "social ecofeminism," to the best of my knowledge, was first used by Chiah Heller.
- (11) Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism." In S. Sayres, A. Stephanson, S. Aronowitz, and F. Jameson, eds., *The 60s Without Apology* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984.)
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- (14) Susan Prentice, "Taking Sides: What's Wrong with EcoFeminism?" *Women and Environments* (Spring 1988), pp. 9-10. (15) *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- (16) Willis, p. 107.
- (17) For example, Yolanda Murphy and Robert F. Murphy, *Women of the Forest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
- (18) On the rise of hierarchy, see Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*.
- (19) See Bookchin, *Urbanization*, for market economy and market society.
- (20) On libertarian municipalism, see Murray Bookchin, "Theses on Libertarian Municipalism," in *The Limits of the City* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986); *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (Sierra Club, 1987); and "The Greening of Politics: Toward a New Kind of Political Practice," *Green Perspectives* 1 (January 1986).
- (21) On women as citizens in the democratic tradition, see my "Women, the Polis, and the Western Democratic Tradition," forthcoming in J. Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds* (New Society, 1989), available from Green Program Project in the meantime; and Mary G. Dietz, "Context Is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship." *Daedalus* (Fall 1987): 1-24.