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Ecofeminism

What is ecofeminism?

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This interview was originally published in *SolidaritéS* Switzerland with the following introduction:

In French-speaking countries there is not much literature on ecofeminism and the little that does exist is spiritualistic ecofeminism. Furthermore, ecofeminism is viewed with considerable mistrust, including in radical ecologist milieux. On the one hand, they see this incipient movement as a mystical return to the earth and on the other hand they do not share the idea that by the simple fact of being a woman there is a more direct and different relation with nature.

To enlighten ourselves a little, we interviewed Yayo Herrero, professor at the National University of Long-distance Education in Madrid and co-coordinator of Ecologists in Action (Spain) - JT.

Q. What is ecofeminism and what is its history?

Ecofeminism is a vast movement of women born from the consciousness of this double problematic and of the conviction that the struggles for both ecology and feminism contain the keys to human dignity and to sustainability in equality.

In the movements for the defence of land there were and are many women. We know the role of women in the Chipko movement in defence of the forests, in the movement against the dams on the Narmada river in India, in the struggle against the toxic residues of the Love Canal, at the origin of the movement for environmental justice in the United States, as well as their presence in the local movements of defence of communal lands, in the fight for urban public space or for healthy food. The ecologism of many poor women is an ecologism of those who depend directly on a protected environment to be able to live.

In the middle of the last century the first ecofeminism discussed the hierarchies established by Western thought and revalorized the terms of the dichotomy that had until then been depreciated: woman and nature. Masculine culture unleashed genocidal wars, devastation and poisoning of territories and the installation of despotic governments. The first ecofeminists denounced the effects of techno-science on the health of women and confronted militarism and environmental degradation. They understood these as manifestations of sexist culture. Petra Kelly is one of their representatives.

After this first ecofeminism, critical of masculinity, there followed other propositions, mainly coming from the South. These propositions considered women as bearers of respect for life. They accused Western "misdevelopment" of causing the poverty of women and indigenous populations, who are the first victims of the destruction of nature. This is perhaps the best-known ecofeminism. In this vast movement we find Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and Ivone Guevara.

Going beyond the essentialism of these positions, other constructivist ecofeminists (Bina Agarwal, Val Plumwood) see in the interaction with the environment the origin of this particular ecologist consciousness of women. It is the sexual division of labour, the distribution of power and property which have subjugated both women and the nature to which we all belong. The reductionist dichotomies of our Western culture must be broken in order to build a more respectful and freer way of living together.

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The feminist movement has seen in ecofeminism a possible danger, given the bad historical use that patriarchy has made of the links between women and nature. Since the danger exists, it is necessary to delimit it. It is not a question of glorifying domestic life as being feminine, of again locking up women in a reproductive space, of refusing them access to culture, nor of making them responsible, if they do not have enough to do, for the enormous task of saving the planet and life. It is a question of unmasking submission, of defining responsibilities and of making men and women jointly responsible for the work of survival.

Q. Does there exist an anticapitalist ecofeminism and does it seek convergence with other anti-system social sectors? Must any emancipatory project integrate this concept? What are the principal elements of this ecofeminism?

The conception of work as it existed in preindustrial societies corresponded to the idea of an activity which proceeded in a continuous way and which was an integral part of human nature. However, roughly two centuries ago, there emerged a new conception which was forged from the myth of production and growth, which reduced the former broad vision to the field of waged industrial production.

This reduction of the broad concept of work to the sole sphere of remunerated employment occults the fact that in order for society and the socio-economic system to continue, the realization of a long list of tasks associated with human reproduction is essential: looking after children, taking care of the elderly, the satisfaction of basic needs, the promotion of health, emotional support, encouragement to social participation... Ultimately it means an enormous quantity of working time whose purpose is to ensure the satisfaction of human needs and the wellbeing of people, and which because of the sexual division of labour imposed by patriarchal ideology falls mainly on women within the home.

Classical economists, even if they do not concede that there is any economic value in this effort, at least recognized the importance of family domestic labour, and defined wages as the historical cost of reproduction of the working class. They tended to recognize the value of domestic labour, without however incorporating it into the analytical frameworks of economic science.

This contradiction disappears almost completely with neo-classical economics, which institutionalizes definitively the separation between public and private space, between commodity production and domestic production, marginalizing and occulting the latter. It is this segregation of roles which allowed men to engage in full-time wage labour without the constraints that are constituted by tasks related to the care of individuals and the family and the maintenance of conditions of hygiene in the home. Thus a definition of the economy is imposed which is not concerned with the sexual division of labour and does not recognize the crucial role of domestic work in the reproduction of the capitalist system.

However, although care work is frequently regarded as separate from the productive environment, it ensures the production of a "raw material" that is essential for the conventional economic process: the labour force.

The capitalist system is incapable, within the framework of its own relations of production, of reproducing the labour force that it needs. Daily, but especially generational reproduction, requires an enormous quantity of time and energy which the system would be incapable of remunerating. The processes of education, socialization and care for the elderly are complex and imply affection and emotions which allow everyone to develop in a certain framework of security.

Anticapitalist ecofeminist thinking defends the idea that the socio-economic system has the form of an iceberg. The market is the floating and visible part of it. Under the surface, with a much greater mass, there is the work of

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maintenance of life. These two parts of the iceberg are well differentiated. The principal one is dissimulated, hidden from view, but both constitute an indivisible unity. The bloc of wage labour and the conventional economy rests on and is supported by the submerged ice of domestic work and regeneration of natural systems. The invisibility of the sphere centred on the satisfaction of basic needs and wellbeing, which absorbs tensions, is essential for keeping the system afloat.

We can say that there exists a major contradiction between the process of natural and social reproduction and the process of accumulation of capital. If social reproduction and maintenance of life were the dominant aspect of the economy, activity would be directed towards the direct production of goods of use value use and not exchange value, and wellbeing would be an end in itself.

To prioritise the two logics at the same time is impossible. It is thus necessary to choose one of them. Since the market does not have as its main aim the satisfaction of human needs, there is no sense in making it the privileged centre of social organization.

Making profits and economic growth should no longer condition the distribution of time, the organization of space and the different human activities. To build societies based on wellbeing, it is necessary to articulate them around social reproduction and the satisfaction of needs, without belittling the importance of the biophysical base that allows our species to exist.

Heterodox economic conceptions have a lot to contribute at a time when economic science is being reconfigured. Ecological economics shows us that a good part of economic activity is harmful to life, that it consumes significant amounts of resources without generating wellbeing, and that it even creates misery. Feminist economics inverts the category of work and puts back at the centre of things the historically scorned and underestimated activity of women, activity which is however the basis of daily life. With other sectors of critical economics, these different conceptions and approaches are essential to building a new model.

To recognize us as vulnerable beings requiring the attention of other people during our life cycle allows to redefine and supplement the concept of labour-capital conflict and to affirm that this conflict goes beyond just the tension between capital and wage labour and reflects a tension between capital and all labour, that which is paid and that which is carried out for nothing.

Let us also remember that, in an ecological perspective, the fundamental contradiction which exists between the present economic metabolism and the durability of the biosphere brings out an important synergy between ecologist and feminist conceptions. The ecological perspective demonstrates the physical impossibility of a society centred on growth. Feminism makes this conflict palpable in our daily lives and denounces the logic of accumulation and growth as being a patriarchal and androcentric logic. The insoluble and radical (at the root) tension which exists between the capitalist economic system and the sustainability of human life demonstrates, in reality, an essential opposition between capital and life.

Putting the satisfaction of basic needs and wellbeing in conditions of equality as the objective of society and of the economic process represents an important change of perspectives. It situates the satisfaction of the needs which make it possible for individuals to grow, to develop and to live with dignity, just like work and the production that is socially necessary for that, as a structuring axis of society and consequently of analyses. In this new perspective, women are not secondary beings, nor are they dependent, but active beings, actresses of their own history, who create cultures and values of work that are different from those of the capitalist and patriarchal model.