

# Ecofeminism Ecofeminism Ecofeminism

by Val Plumwood

Ecological feminism is a body of ideas and practices which has grown up over the last 18 years, especially in women's, peace and ecology movements. Ecofeminism has encouraged women's environmental activism both in the wider movement and in separate women's groups.

Ecofeminism is primarily an activist-based movement, but it has also inspired an impressive amount of cultural work, including poetry, art, numerous collections of essays, and, increasingly, more extended theoretical treatments.

Since the theory of ecofeminism results from the application of feminist perspectives to problems of ecology, it is as complex and diverse as feminism itself. Ecofeminists have a common vision of a society beyond militarism, hierarchy and the destruction of nature. But although ecofeminists are broadly in agreement about these goals, they often have different analyses and political strategies in mind for achieving them.

A major division has emerged in recent literature between versions of ecofeminism which inherit the outlook of cultural (or radical) feminism and versions which have closer affinities with socialist or anarchist feminism or with other radical political traditions. This does not, however, mean that there is no overlap between these positions or that they are in every area necessarily in opposition.

## Cultural Ecofeminism

These versions of ecofeminism (mostly characteristic of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s) close to cultural feminism stress the links, historical, biological and experiential, between women and nature, and see their joint oppression as the consequences of male domination. Cultural ecofeminism sees masculinity as

formed in terms of separation from and control of both women and what is associated with them, especially nature, and sees the dominance of male values in patriarchy as creating a society obsessed with dominance and control. Cultural ecofeminism aims to remedy ecological and other problems mainly through the creation of an alternative "women's culture" (the "authentic female mind" in the words of Charlene Spretnak) based on revaluing, celebrating and defending what patriarchy has devalued, including the feminine, non-human nature, the body and the emotions.

Cultural ecofeminism emphasizes the quest for a new spiritual relationship to nature, and stresses personal transformation and the (re)empowerment of women and women's values. Women are seen as having a superior relation to nature which is sometimes taken to be biologically determined, so that only a society in which women can limit or control the number and influence of men will be free from aggressiveness and the destruction of nature. For many, the new approach to nature also turns out to be an old one, that of celebrating fertility and creativity through feminist paganism, a religion celebrating community with the Earth as maternal and alive or as a powerful Goddess immanent in the world. Many cultural ecofeminists aim to combine spiritual and political activities, but still see the spiritual ones as central.

## Social Ecofeminism

Social ecofeminists tend to emphasize the social and political aspect of ecofeminism rather than personal and spiritual aspects (although many are also critical of the political/spiritual division). They do not see women's difference as either biologically based or as necessarily providing

a model to affirm. They reject any account of men as unchangeable or of the sexes as biologically determined in their relationship to nature or to one another.

Social ecofeminists would argue that it is not so much that women themselves are the model for a better relation to nature - women also are the product of patriarchy and have developed their attitudes and identity as subordinates in it - but that the entire development of the dominant culture and its relationship to nature has been affected by male and other forms of dominance, expressed in the dualism of nature and reason. The task is no less than the construction of a less oppositional culture. Social ecofeminists view nature as a political rather than a natural category.

Perhaps the key political difference between two approaches is that social ecofeminism does not attempt to reduce all forms of oppression to women's oppression, a feature characteristic of cultural feminism. Feminism has been increasingly moving towards a recognition of women's oppression as only one among many forms of oppression. Major recent trends in feminism have begun to see the threads of gender as interwoven with those of class, race and species. This view positions most of us at the intersection points of these networks of power, sometimes as oppressors, sometimes as oppressed.

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