

quence of both the failures of central planning and of models of market-socialism. His effort to establish a new paradigm called 'information economics' is of great importance for the elaboration of institutions which could enhance trust and overcome alienation.

Another challenge is to renew the ideas of democratic control and government. The increasing gap between the possibilities and the needs for democratic guidance must be bridged by new concepts and methods, such as international financial cooperation and taxation, democratically controlled funds,²⁷ worker share certificates which make firms more democratic and involve workers in economic risk-taking, as well as new types of local cooperatives and funds.

Probably the most demanding challenge is to integrate the concept of sustainable development with the ideas of the First and Second Left. This is the Achilles' heel of the Third Left. Sometimes the trade-offs between the environment and living standards seem to be overwhelming: to accommodate a doubling of the world's population and a five-fold rise in living standards in the South—along with no increase in the North—the technologies we use must become eight times less exhausting and polluting if we are not to increase the current pressure on the environment. Merely to employ the growing population at the existing level of productivity would require a dramatic ecological improvement in the technologies used. However, there need not be a trade-off between jobs and the environment. An appropriate use of new technical possibilities combined with institutional reforms can bring us towards a more sustainable economy, characterized by more jobs in the area of information and communication, in education, caring services, and in repair and maintenance. Such a perspective, which has been outlined by Chris Freeman and Luc Soete,²⁸ for instance, can give the Third Left the opportunity to become the main carrier of hope for the future.

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²⁷ An interesting attempt, worthy of careful study, was the establishment of so called wage-earners' funds in Sweden. They were dissolved after ten years by a bourgeois government. However, they never shifted power to the extent conceived of by their originator, Rudolf Meidner.

²⁸ See Chris Freeman and Luc Soete, *Work for All or Mass Unemployment? Computerized Technical Change into the Twenty-First Century*, London 1994.

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Man Bad, Woman Good? Essentialisms and Ecofeminisms

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Can socialists, radical environmentalists and feminists from other traditions safely dismiss ecofeminism? In this paper I offer both a critique of ecofeminism and a modified defence. On the one hand, I argue, ecofeminism is riddled with essentialism, and open to all the philosophical critiques levelled at any position which attributes timeless natures to women and men. I shall show that even 'social' ecofeminists, in Mellor's terminology,¹ who steadfastly denounce essentialism and dualism, frequently fall back on their own versions of these. Yet I shall also argue that ecofeminism must be taken seriously, both theoretically and strategically. I begin with that embodiment of dualism, Greenham Common.

At Greenham Common armed men guarded nuclear missiles behind three high perimeter fences topped with barbed wire. While men drove round in camouflaged vehicles and radioed to each other across the bare and muddy ground of the camp, peace-camp women slept on the ground, under canvas or plastic,

attached images of their children to the wire, picnicked among the trees, built fires to sit round, holes to crap in, sat in front of the lorries carrying the weapons, cut the wires to enter the base and danced on the silos. Global splits between men and women, between militarized states and the homes women make, between North and South, between authoritarian-hierarchical and cooperative ways of living, all seemed condensed in this powerful symbol.

For me, Greenham Common was my first meeting with ecofeminism. I was shocked, both by the place and the arguments. I used to visit with a friend and stay up all night on guard to relieve the women who lived there. I was surprised to notice that policemen and soldiers were now young enough to be my sons. One night some of the young soldiers threw live coals and a dead rabbit at the sleeping women. I ran to the wire and told them off, and realized in their shame-faced response that I now had a mother's authority. This was also the first time I really listened to the argument that women, as a sex, by virtue of our actual or potential motherhood, have a particular interest in saving the planet and are particularly well-equipped to do it. It was the first time that I heard, and pondered on, Frankie Armstrong singing 'Will there be womanly times, or must we die?'

The reason for taking ecofeminism seriously, even away from the visual spell of Greenham Common, is well expressed by Joni Seagar in her book *Earth Follies*:

Militaries, multinationals, governments, the eco-establishment. When I write down this list of institutions on a piece of paper, the first thing that I notice, as a feminist, is that these are all... controlled by men (and a mere smattering of women). The culture of these institutions is shaped by power relations between men and women, and between groups of men in cooperation or in conflict. Institutional behaviour is informed by presumptions of appropriate and necessary behaviour for men and for women. Their actions, their interactions and the often catastrophic results of their policies cannot be separated from the social context that frames them.²

I shall argue that Seagar falls into essentialism in her dependence on the concept of 'male culture'. But she is right, I think, to insist that the social reproduction of male domination and of ecologically destructive social practices are inseparable. We cannot explain environmental destruction simply by referring to capitalism's institutionalized greed, true as this is: such a schematic approach only begins the search for mechanisms producing this systematically blinkered agency. Ecofeminism points to a deep source of such mechanisms in gendered subjectivity. In other words, our ideas of ourselves as male or female, gender differences in feelings and habitual responses to the world, our gendered conceptions of our interests can all be seen as central to our participation in environmentally destructive practices.

In Plumwood's important book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, she

¹ M. Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries: Towards a Feminist Green Socialism*, London 1990, p. 51.

² J. Seagar, *Earth Follies: Feminism, Politics and the Environment*, London 1992, p. 5.

asserts the need for 'a cultural ecological feminism' which involves 'a great cultural revaluation of the status of women, the feminine and the natural', without falling into the trap of seeking in women the salvation-bringing 'angel in the ecosystem'.³ If Seagar and Plumwood are right to see these concerns of ecofeminism as strategically central to environmentalism in general, a 'critical ecological feminism' would have to give up the claim to represent only gendered interests, and I come back to this issue at the end of the paper. I begin, though, by explaining what I mean by essentialism and why, if environmentalists are to be ecofeminists, we should seek a non-essentialist, non-dualistic variant.

Essentialisms and Ecofeminisms

The term 'essentialism' used to be relatively straightforward. As applied in feminism, it referred to the naturalizing reduction of gender to sex; as if the meaning attributed to sexual difference in a particular socio-historical context had universal validity. Social constructionism has extended the meaning of essentialism. Diane Fuss describes it as 'the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determination'.⁴ For Fuss, I would be an essentialist, along with all realists who hold that extra-discursive reality exists and has a shape of its own, which affects the efficacy of our descriptions of it.

Social constructionist and deconstructionist feminists have trouble with the categories of 'women' and 'female', as evidenced by Wittig's claim that 'lesbians are not women'.⁵ For Haraway 'there is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourse and other social practices'.⁶ For Butler, sexed bodies are constructed as such retrospectively, from the standpoint of already dichotomized gender—that is, intersexed bodies are constructed, linguistically and medically, as male or female.⁷ By contrast, I maintain that sexual difference is real, though it is not merely dichotomous. However, it is no accident that human beings have been able to dichotomize it more or less successfully: sexual differences do have a bipolar distribution, explicable by evolutionary accounts of sexuality. There *are* real male and female capacities and liabilities, although whether and how these are instantiated in particular cases depends on the entire causal context.

The trouble with essentialism is not its realism, but its lack of depth and its simplification of causal processes. Essentialism understands some appearances and events as expressions of the *essence* of the things involved, which are understood as spawning simulacra whatever else is happening. Women (in one version) are essentially nurturing and caring, and in their doings produce nurture and care—of the environment, for instance. Of course, there are always so many exceptions. To retain the plausibility of this view, it becomes necessary to privilege certain outcomes as 'of the

³ V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London 1993, p. 9.

⁴ D. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, London 1989, p. 3.

⁵ M. Wittig, 'One is not Born a Woman', *Feminist Issues*, no. 2, 1981, pp. 47–54.

⁶ D. Haraway, *Sitians, Cyborgs and Women*, London 1991, p. 155.

⁷ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London 1990, p. 24.

essence', while others are contingent, 'beside the point'. Thus nineteenth-century biological essentialism maintained that women were 'naturally' weak, nurturing and ornamental, ignoring or pathologizing exceptions.⁸ Essentialism does not recognize that while sexual difference, for instance, permits some things and forbids others, its mechanisms work in conjunction with many others, which combine to codetermine what actually happens in specific cases and situations. No cause *always* produces the same effect, whatever is happening around it—that is, whatever other causal factors are operating, sometimes in a contrary direction. Women may or may not be nurturing, but even where they are, environmental destruction may result from their care.

Essentialism is key in maintaining the power of the linked dualisms that so many theorists have identified in Western thought. It is commonplace in ecofeminism to list these oppositional couples: man–woman, culture–nature, reason–emotion, male–female, and so on. As Plumwood points out, what is wrong with these couples is not the distinction itself, nor even the fact that they are dichotomous terms. We need to be able to *speak* of culture and nature, male and female, mind and body, humans and animals, even if we deconstruct these oppositions in our next breath. What makes these linked couples into dualisms is not that they posit differences, but that these differences are maintained through what Plumwood calls 'radical exclusion', a denial of continuity and mutual dependency, an essentialist polarization which justifies and reproduces certain social practices. These couples are construed as fixed hierarchies which are 'closely associated with domination and accumulation'.⁹ As 'the process of domination forms culture and constructs identity, the inferiorised group (unless it can marshal cultural resources for resistance) must internalize this inferiorisation in its identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre...'¹⁰

Linking postulates map the pairs onto each other—thus various cultural assumptions link the poor and/or the working class to animals (incapable of deferred gratification, interested only in instinctual satisfaction) and children (ignorant and unable to govern themselves), and thus to emotion, nature and body.¹¹ In this argument, Plumwood recognizes the political power of conceptualization, without embracing the absolute equation of power and knowledge that makes all conceptualization a hierarchical and restrictive act.

About these hierarchical dualisms there are two distinct positions, between which particular writers often vacillate. The first position is an ecofeminist view of these very dualisms with their value reversed—let us call it 'dualistic ecofeminism'. The second position views the dualisms as constructed and as having their own deleterious effects on the planet via the way they organize and reproduce social practices. This second position has a tendency to revert to dualistic ecofeminism, as we shall see. What then is ecofeminism's magnetic appeal, the dream of Greenham?

⁸ J. Sayers, *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspectives*, London 1982, p. 35.

⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Dualistic Ecofeminism

Dualistic ecofeminism is most straightforwardly held by those whom Mellor calls 'affinity' ecofeminists, who believe that women and nature are similarly treated by men, and perceived by all as linked, because of a *real* resemblance; and that there are real, inherent connections between women and the devalued side of each of the notorious couples.¹² On this view, men's opposition to nature, their instrumental use of it, is rooted in their lack of, and opposition to, such a connection. Thus Collard sees a *real* timeless resemblance between women and nature:

Nothing links the human animal and nature so profoundly as women's reproductive system which enables her to share the experience of bringing forth and nourishing life with the rest of the living world. *Whether or not she personally experiences biological mothering*, it is in this that woman is most truly a child of nature and in this... lies the well-spring of her strength.¹³

Similarly, Spretnak describes men as 'not feeling intrinsically involved in the processes of birthing and nurture, nor strongly predisposed toward empathetic communion', and as therefore turning their attention to death rather than life.¹⁴ This strong form of essentialist ecofeminism actually suggests a necessary causal relationship between sexual difference, its psychic correlates, and their expression in the ecologically destructive culture of patriarchy. Politically speaking, this is a pessimistic position, since if patriarchal culture is really an expression of the timeless essence of men, 'female culture' cannot change male nature, although by 'taking the toys from the boys' it may prevent the male principle destroying the planet and humankind with it. This position may permit us to imagine a good—female-dominated or even entirely female—society, but does not readily yield any strategy for getting there, other than the 'spinning' and 'sparking' and female bonding Mary Daly suggests,¹⁵ or the gradual spread of feminist spirituality.

One version of dualistic ecofeminism claims that—unless prevented by poverty—women's greater affinity with nature makes them tend to act in eco-friendly ways. This view is criticized by Cecile Jackson in a detailed paper which rejects the discourse of feminism in favour of 'gender analysis'. She writes: 'The false idea of the positive synergism of women's gender interests and environmental interests seems strongly related to an essentialist denial of the... historical construction of gender and nature.'¹⁶ Gender interests cannot be universalized, she (rightly) insists—though side-stepping the difficult task of theorizing 'interests'.¹⁷ The Chipko 'tree-hugging' movement, extolled by Mellor as 'inspirational' and showing women's 'clear affinity with the ecological needs of their region',¹⁸ is for Jackson one of the 'familiar icons' of ecofeminism,¹⁹ and, in reality, 'part of a broader current of peasant

¹² Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries*.

¹³ A. Collard with J. Contrucci, *The Rape of the Wild*, London 1988, p. 106.

¹⁴ C. Spretnak, 'Towards an Ecofeminist Spirituality', in J. Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: the Promise of Ecofeminism*, Philadelphia 1989, p. 129.

¹⁵ M. Daly, *Gyn/ecology*, London 1979.

¹⁶ C. Jackson, 'Gender Analysis and Environmentalisms', in T. Benton and M. Redclift, eds, *Social Theory and the Global Environment*, London 1994, p. 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁸ M. Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries. Towards a Feminist Green Socialism*, London 1992, p. 80.

protest. Chipko women can be seen as defending a conservative 'moral economy... rather than trees as such...'²⁰

Brandth, in her study of women's farming practice in Norway, similarly concludes that in their attitude to modern agriculture, despite some differences in actual practice, 'The way nature is socially conceived does not vary very much between groups of women and between women and men'. Even the differences in farming practice between groups of women, which do reflect different ideas of womanhood, do not differ in terms of the ideas of nature they express, nor in terms of their consequences for the environment.²¹

'Social' Ecofeminism

Dualistic ecofeminism has other less open proponents who would not fall into the category of 'affinity' ecofeminism, but rather into Mellor's second category of 'social' ecofeminism. These 'see the relationship between women and nature as socially created and therefore capable of being socially resolved... [rather than as] transcending particular societies and eras.'²² For 'social' ecofeminists, it is women's role in society which has given them a distinctive culture or a distinct perspective. This difference is historicized and seen as a temporary phenomenon. Its eventual transcendence, though, depends on its current strategic use. If 'male culture' is the source of danger, then 'female culture' may be a source of salvation. If both are socially constructed, male culture, and with it masculinity, may actually be transformed by women's insistence on bringing into the public sphere the nurturing values which women's culture usually practices in private, as a step towards abolishing this distinction. This is a common ecofeminist position. Thus Seager suggests that women's role in society has given them a distinctive culture which 'may suggest alternative 'ways of being' in the world'.²³ Ynestra King describes it as 'embodying what is best in women's life-oriented socialization'.²⁴ Some argue for replacing 'masculine' ways of being with 'feminine' ones, some for combining them.²⁵

'Social' ecofeminism can be understood as a variant of 'feminist standpoint theory', first elaborated by Hartsock, and widely discussed in feminist literature. Hartsock's original article offered a theoretical justification of feminist empiricism: 'like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy... which can ground a powerful critique of... the capitalist form of patriarchy.'²⁶ She falls into

¹⁹ C. Jackson, 'Radical Environmental Myths: A Gender Perspective', NLR 210, p. 134.

²⁰ Jackson, 'Gender Analysis and Environmentalisms', p. 139.

²¹ B. Brandth, 'The Social Construction of the Woman-Nature Linkage', in *Feminist Perspectives on Technology, Work and Ecology*, Conference Proceedings of the Second European Feminist Research Conference, 1994, p. 280.

²² Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries*, p. 51.

²³ Seager, *Earth Follies*, p. 12.

²⁴ Y. King, 'The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology', in Plant, *Healing the Wounds*, p. 26.

²⁵ M. French, *Beyond Power: on Women, Men and Morals*, New York 1985, p. 443.

²⁶ N. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in S. Harding and M. Hintikka, eds, *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, Dordrecht 1983, p. 284.

essentialism herself at one point, reading off women's experience from the female body as firmly as any 'affinity' ecofeminist: 'There are a series of boundary challenges inherent in the female physiology... challenges which make it impossible to maintain rigid separation from the object world. Menstruation, coitus, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation—all represent challenges to bodily boundaries.'²⁷ But for the most part she sees women's experience, and the knowledge it gives rise to, as a function of social positioning: 'The unity of mental and manual labour, and the directly sensuous nature of much of women's work leads to a more profound unity of... social and natural worlds than is experienced by the male worker in capitalism.'²⁸ With their hands covered with shit and their breasts leaking in response to babies' cries, women are supposedly more down to earth, more respecting of all forms of life; too sensible not to see that biodiversity and a future for our descendants must be valued above capital accumulation.

This putative epistemological vantage point has important strategic value, according to many 'social' ecofeminists. The woman-nature connection, constructed as it is, represents 'a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual and rational forms of knowledge embracing both science and magic in as far as they enable us to transform the nature-culture distinction.'²⁹ Yet the claim that women's position on the 'soft' side of the dualisms equips her to transcend them is itself an essentialist claim, a version of Plumwood's 'angel in the ecosystem'.³⁰ Greenham Common—and other women's camps—showed that the social position of women and its symbolic values can be used as a mobilizing focus for a section of women, and that this has useful tactical force. But as the widespread opposition from women also showed, there was nothing automatic about this response.

'Social' ecofeminists have no intention of remaining within dualistic modes of thinking, which they denounce. They would reject the term 'dualistic ecofeminism' as applied to their own views—and indeed, few are consistently dualistic. However, I shall argue that even in their treatment of current, socially constructed gender difference, they often practice the conceptual techniques of radical exclusion, identified by Plumwood. And in their advocacy of the bringing together of the split halves of humanity it is noticeable that the male half is usually treated as distorted and in need of modification, while the female half is perfect as it is.³¹ Although they recognize the dualistic couples as *constructed*—both conceptually and practically—these thinkers collude with dualism by driving a wedge between the two sides of the couple and attributing all the power and agency to the 'male' side, rather than seeing them as two sides of one coin. They want to have their cake and eat it—to reject dualism on the one hand, but on the other to explain its iniquitous domination in terms of the male principle: 'Men have not made a 'mistake' in their creation of nature and women as the dominated Other. The

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

²⁹ King, 'The Ecology of Feminism', p. 23.

³⁰ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 10.

³¹ R. Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, London 1992, p. 100.

feminine is not the missing half of the masculine; the feminine is what men need to create the masculine in a patriarchal culture.³²

Seager's work offers a good example of such essentialist thinking, just because she 'firmly reject[s] "biology is destiny" arguments in whatever guise they take'.³³ In *Earth Follies*, she examines the environmental impact of the military, of governments, and of science, pointing out that in all these institutions—and in the eco-establishment which opposes them—men are in charge and numerically overwhelming.³⁴ She notes the gender-specific moral terms, such as 'patriot' or 'honourable', which men in the military-industrial complex tend to apply to other men they approve of, and points to the rituals of 'male bonding' and their institutional effects. But then—and this is the essentialist move—she tries to sum up and link these gendered phenomena by attributing them to *male culture*, *male consciousness*, or by calling them *male constructs*. She asks, 'Are sovereignty, nationalism, territoriality and wars particularly male constructs?', and hesitantly implies that they are.³⁵ I think Seager's hesitation probably springs from the realization that to answer 'yes' to such questions will commit her to an essentialism she wants to avoid.

Essentially Male?

What work does the word 'male' do here? What does it tell us? It might mean that certain aspects of culture, certain jobs, certain ways of behaving, certain modes of speech and ways of thought, are considered appropriate for men and partially restricted to them, and that these gender-specific attitudes and practices are crucially involved in the social structures of militarism, industry and government. This is certainly true. It is also true, as Seager says, that militarism and warfare operate as enforcement systems for everyday patriarchy, and, further, that 'there is a synchronicity between "hegemonic masculinity" and ordinary manhood...gender hierarchies privilege all men...'³⁶ More powerful *in general* in the public sphere, men have also had an overwhelmingly greater say in developing the ideology and the practice of national sovereignty. At one level, it seems obvious that men bear the burden of agency in military-industrial systems, and must therefore also bear the burden of blame for the environmental destruction resulting from their actions. Theirs, after all, are the hands that made the bomb, that are even now tossing spent nuclear waste into the Sea of Japan. Easlea describes how the Los Alamos physicists started their work as a 'lesser evil' in order to pre-empt the Nazis but actually intensified it after the German surrender, also how mesmerized they were by the 'technically sweet', irresistible discoveries they were making, and how they celebrated the vindication of their efforts—the destruction of Hiroshima—with a champagne party.³⁷

³² Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries*, p. 81.

³³ Seager, *Earth Follies*, p. 6.

³⁴ For instance, *ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 42, 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 8.

³⁷ B. Easlea, *Fathering the Unthinkable: Masculinity Science and the Arms Race*, London 1983, ch. 3.

However, to slip, as he does, into deploring men's unfortunate nature—their womb envy, their substitution of death for life, their unattractive and destructive 'male culture'—is to naturalize the very dualism 'social' ecofeminists denounce. No litany of men's crimes can *explain* environmental destruction *unless* we take the essentialist leap to seeing men as inherently more likely to develop disastrous social forms, and as transhistorically sufficiently powerful to enforce them on women. Such destructive acts have to be understood in historical context, in the late capitalist mid-twentieth century world of warring imperial powers, a world in which institutionalized social practices allocated public positions and scientific research to men. While the men made the bomb, their women were cooking, cleaning and bringing up their children. They were not slaves, but motivated by the desire to fit in, to be respected and approved of, to have a home and a place of their own, economic security and the love of children. Ordinary motives, which resulted in non-accidental ignorance and consequent collusion. The women's motives complement the equally ordinary motives of the men: to help defeat Hitler, to be successful, perhaps famous, to be part of a team doing something big, to be accepted, approved of, admired, to have a place in history, economic security, and the love and admiration of women and children. The women's silence was not an 'efficient cause', but it definitely contributed to the total causal picture. To see women as not acting, and therefore as morally neutral, is actually to accept the oppressive assumption that they are but powerless victims who can do no other. To theorize the actual relationship between structure and agency in this case we need to analyze the mechanisms which produced these motivations. We need, in other words, to understand the creation of gendered subjects who actively accept their places in the division of labour, a process which is still a crucial element of the social reproduction of late capitalism and therefore of environmental destruction.

Seager describes how, on one occasion, the women of the Los Alamos community did assert themselves. Soldiers had been detailed to fell some trees that shaded the children's play area. The women sat under the trees, preventing this action, until they won their case. This is a sad but familiar story: women are often heroic where their children's lives, health or safety are at stake, but lack the confidence to know their power and to use it in the transformation of the public sphere. Women's knowledge that wasteful and destructive social practices are wrong tends to be

powerlessly ventilated in a running critique, a subordinates' critique, sealed off from the flow of formal historic events to which it refers. This societal safety valve...has channelled off potentially subversive female energy...letting the male-steered stream of public events move undeflected—and with substantial female consent, we must remember—toward what by now looks like all-but-inevitable...ecological hell.³⁸

Only a dualistic—and thus essentialist—theory can unequivocally attribute sole agency to the hand that did the deed, ignoring the role of the hands that were washing-up at the time, and the mechanisms which allocate sexed humans to these social positions. 'Social' ecofeminism is

³⁸ D. Dinnerstein, 'Survival on Earth', in Plant, *Healing the Wounds*, p. 197.

still in the realm of essentialism, still clinging to teleology to make sense of the senseless. The constant return to men's agency is reminiscent of Freud's vain attempt to separate 'active-passive' from 'male-female'.³⁹ Try as he might, the 'linking postulates' crept back in and mapped the couples on top of each other. But here we have man-woman constantly returning, as if magnetized, to its place on top of subject-object. Braidotti's description of the 'double trap which threatens feminism' sums up the dilemma of ecofeminism: 'on the one hand a sociologizing reductivism which, on the binary model of the class struggle, sets the female individual in opposition to the male patriarchal system ...'—as if an oppositional feminist standpoint were the simple result of women's oppression—'on the other, the utopian model which makes "women" an entity (on the) outside, foreign to the dominant system and not contaminated by it',⁴⁰ but offering female culture and 'the authentic female mind'⁴¹ as unguent for male-inflicted planetary wounds.

Gendered Experience, Gendered Interests

Feminist standpoint theory, widely drawn on by 'social' ecofeminists, has two strands. As we have seen, it claims that women are epistemologically privileged: their experiences allow them to see more clearly, and their oppression makes them less motivated to disguise the truth. Secondly, from this social positioning and communality of experience arise common interests. Before examining this second claim in its ecofeminist versions, I will sum up the argument for common, knowledge-yielding experiences.

The capacity to bear and suckle children, whether or not these powers are ever used, and their bodily signs—even though they may be misleading—are the criteria for allocation of humans to the category of woman. These capacities have tremendous salience for all societies. All have their dualisms, and almost all involve hierarchy. Although its forms vary tremendously, women's subordination is arguably universal, at least in societies with political structures. In the abstract, the capitalist mode of production needs no gender system, but all real historical forms of capitalism have forged their own version of male domination from the materials they inherited. I do not propose to discuss the roots of male domination, but it is significant that the most hopeful candidates for gender equality are pre-industrial gathering and hunting societies, on the one hand, and highly technological socialist societies, on the other.

If there were nothing more linking women than wombs and words, it would be a powerful connection. But there is more—subordination. Even though women are constructed as subjects on other dimensions, as black or white, as Jew or Gentile, as lesbian or heterosexual, as disabled or able-bodied, as workers, managers and so on, even at times and in places where class or ethnic group are the major determinants of life chances and solidarity, to be a black or working-class woman is always different from being a black or working-class man. We cannot talk of

'women's experience' in the singular. We are talking about the effect of gendered social practices—or what the French more accurately call 'social relations of sex'—on human subjects positioned in terms of sexual difference. 'Experience' is used to mean two things, related but non-identical: people's life events—what happens to them and what they do—and how they understand and respond to these. Being a woman in any one social context makes certain things more likely to happen to you and other things less likely or impossible; it offers you, as agent, a range of options and closes off others. It determines the sorts of interpretations that will be offered of your actions, and so on. And between social contexts this will still be true to varying extents, as many constituencies in the NGO Forum in Beijing demonstrated.

We can cautiously go along with standpoint theory this far: being positioned as a woman tends to lead to a recognizable range of life events, though this tendency is mediated through the effects of other forms of social positioning. It is not that the vantage point of the subjugated is true, unitary, or trustworthy, but that similar social positions both offer and produce certain similar happenings, similar sets of responses and ways of understanding, including ways of conceptualizing self and group identity. At any one time and place women's perspectives may take the form of a number of clusters of various or even conflicting ways of being a woman, that have inner coherence and intelligibility. Standpoint theorists usually end up idealizing one such perspective—a variant of feminism—as the right or true one, as an achievement rather than a given.⁴² This is, of course, what 'social' ecofeminists do when they privilege felt closeness with nature. As soon as you privilege one standpoint above others in this way, you can no longer claim it as the necessary effect of women's experience. It now needs its own separate legitimization, through the development of a theory explaining why it is true or appropriate. For the theory to have any strategic value, it also needs to specify conditions in which women are likely to take that standpoint. Ecofeminist versions of standpoint theory need to show, if they can, that women's experiences can enable them to know their connection to non-human nature, and therefore make them less liable to behave in ecologically destructive ways. They also need to specify the conditions in which this may happen. I do not believe they have done this.

The second strand of feminist standpoint theory is the claim that the dualistic modes of thinking which justify, express and reproduce practices of male domination were created by men in their own interests. Thus Hartsock argues: 'Men's power to structure social relations in their own image means that women too must participate in social relations which manifest and express abstract masculinity.'⁴³ This 'abstract masculinity' results from 'the reversal of the proper order of things characteristic of the male experience, the substitution of death for life'.⁴⁴ And Mellor, while realizing that 'very few people can realize their full potential' in the 'ME-world' of capitalist advanced technology, insists that 'it still represents male priorities and male interests', and, like Hartsock,

³⁹ S. Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, London 1962, p. 85.

⁴⁰ R. Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*, Cambridge 1991, p. 89.

⁴¹ Spretnak, 'Towards an Ecofeminist Spirituality', p. 573.

⁴² Haraway, Simians, *Cyborgs and Women*, p. 190.

⁴³ Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint', p. 302.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

speaks of 'a public world created in the one-sided, distorted and damaging image of male experience'.⁴⁵ But if gendered experience, including the split between public and private, is *constructed*, how can 'male experience' precede this construction? And if men's orientation to death and disconnection from nature is a tragedy for men as well as for women, how can it be in their interest?

Objective and Subjective Interests

The logic of interests is complex, and here I can only put forward one or two schematic points with the shameless intention of complicating the issue. Callinicos remarks that in trying to understand how agents use the capacities they have by virtue of social positioning, and how structures relate to agents' conscious experience, 'a great virtue of the notion of interests is that, properly understood, it allows us to connect the two without reducing either to the other'.⁴⁶ Concepts of 'objective interests' can only play such an explanatory role if they can theorize the conditions under which such interests may become 'subjective' and thus motivating. On the other hand, *purely* subjective concepts of interests have no explanatory potential at all. To say simply that men act in their own interests without offering any separate path to characterizing these would be as vacuous as the assertion that 'people do what they want'. Surprisingly, Callinicos' own treatment is only one step away from subjectivism. Following Giddens, he argues that someone has an interest in a given course of action if it would facilitate the possibility of achieving her or his wants. To act in one's interests is, therefore, to act as effectively as information and resources permit to realize one's wants.⁴⁷ We *can* use such an approach to speak of gendered interests, but it is inadequate. It allows us to describe men's actions to defend the destructive status quo in which they are dominant as in their interests, but it does not allow women to have any emancipatory interests in ending their oppression, or in stopping environmental destruction, until and unless they themselves *want* to do so.⁴⁸

Any interesting account which addresses what *could* happen, as well as what has happened and does happen, must problematize 'wants'. It is only in my interests to act to achieve my wants, if they are what I need—they will lead to my thriving. The logic of interests is nearer to the logic of needs than to that of wants, and similarly requires grounding in a theory of human nature, which sees humans as having species-characteristic needs, capacities and liabilities.⁴⁹ These only take concrete form in particular historical societies, and these forms will be correspondingly various. Even basic needs, like health, give rise to interests which are relative to social resources. And needs, wants and interests emerge from different social situations—academics need to be on the Internet. Projects, such as rock-climbing, produce their own needs and interests. Where people—such as women—are similarly disadvantaged on important dimensions by virtue of their membership of a group, we can certainly say, at a high level of abstraction, that it is in their interests to bring about social

⁴⁵ Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries*, pp. 259, 251.

⁴⁶ A. Callinicos, *Making History*, Cambridge 1987, p. 129.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ See E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London 1985, p. 153.

⁴⁹ L. Doyal and I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, London 1991.

change which gets more of their needs met. But as soon as we try to pin this down, complications appear.

Women's Diverse Interests

What are women's needs, and women's interests?

1) Women do have needs consequent upon their reproductive role: their need for health, common to all humans, gives them an interest in measures to prevent breast and cervical cancer, for instance, in societies where such prevention is possible. The essentialist claim that women—constantly reminded of their earthiness by menstruation and birth—identify with nature, and therefore have special interests in environmental protection, would fit in here.

2) Not only men, but also women have interests in the status quo of male domination. In fact, in all societies almost everyone has *some* interest in preserving the status quo. The known and understood almost always has *some* advantages, some way in which it does satisfy needs. Much of the female opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment to the US constitution took the tack that women were advantaged by dependence on men and should not be robbed of it.⁵⁰ We are creatures of our societies, necessarily constructed to find satisfaction in some aspect of them. For us to reject their values and set ourselves up in opposition to them can be painful and dangerous.

3) Relatedly, the status quo within which women have to seek satisfaction of their needs itself gives rise to gendered interests. If women are required to be ornamental, they have an interest in plenty of choice in make-up and fashion products. While women are the primary carers of children, they have a particular interest in good public child care—or in generous, reliable and loving husbands, or in incomes of their own... Mothers have an interest in good 'mother and baby' facilities in cafes, shops, stations and so on, and in technological advances which assist their task—and these, like disposable nappies, may well be environmentally disastrous. They have an interest in part-time and flexible working hours which is arguably in conflict with their emancipatory interest in equality in the workplace and labour market.

4) Women also have an emancipatory interest in social change which ends their relative disadvantage, although exactly what form such change would take is the subject of another discussion. Unless we take a subjectivist view, women's liberation must involve more scope for women to use their capacities and to satisfy their needs and wants in ways that help them to thrive. Jackson's evaluation of the effect of technology, or the market, on rural women's lives makes implicit use of a notion of emancipatory interests which includes self-determination.⁵¹ For much ecofeminism, women's emancipatory interests are in an ecologically sustainable society. A society which respected women and met their human and special needs would also be one which recognized the fragility and value of the ecosystems around us.

⁵⁰ B. Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, London 1983.

⁵¹ Jackson, 'Radical Environmental Myths', p. 133.

These various sorts of interests may and do conflict. There is a conflict between short-term interests—my interest in using the car to ferry my children around—and long-term and emancipatory interests—in replacing private cars with good public transport and better local facilities. There can be a conflict between my interests as an individual who happens to be socially positioned as a woman, but is also positioned on other, equally salient, dimensions; and the collective interests of women everywhere. I would argue that the work of the Fourth World Conference on Women and its accompanying Forum were in the interests of women in general (in sense 4), but it might be in the interests of particular women (in sense 3), or particular groups of women to sabotage that work. Indeed, the 'Boycott Beijing' campaign did try to prevent the Forum taking place in China. (Of course, the women in that campaign may have had sectional needs—as Tibetan exiles, for instance—which led to a real conflict of interests, or they may have had the same interests as the Forum supporters but a different strategic understanding.) A depth realist account can acknowledge such layered complexity, which does leave everything contested, but which also shows us how we can conduct the argument. However, such an account certainly forbids any simple assertion of the congruent interests of women and nature.

Men's Interests

What then of men's interests?

- 1) Obviously men, too, have special interests arising from reproductive difference. There is no reason to believe that men's sexual pleasure requires the control or abuse of women, or that men genuinely thrive when 'conquering' or destroying the natural world.
- 2) Men have an interest in preserving the status quo, because—like women—they have constructed their personal identities, values and ideas of themselves in terms of the options socially available. For men to become supporters of women's liberation, or to become committed to stopping environmental degradation, means becoming aware of the scale of both sexism and gratuitous destruction—both of which can be painful. The future is uncertain so, unless the present becomes unbearable, conservatism will always have points in its favour.
- 3) Men benefit materially from the oppression of women, from their privileges in the labour market, and in public life, and from women's greater share of unpaid labour.⁵³ But it would be strange to argue that the marriage of capitalism and patriarchy, in which most of the powerful positions in capitalist societies are distributed to men, gives *all men* an unequivocal interest in the capitalist system—and thus in the ecological destruction it produces. What about the workers? In any case, material benefits are not the only source of interests. True, in money economies almost everyone needs money—as the universal equivalent it represents access to an enormous range of use values. That does not mean we are all economic maximizers, as some versions of rational-choice theory would have it, or that the other things we value are similarly calculable. In the chapter on the working day in Volume I of *Capital*, Marx describes the

coercive process of the social construction of workers as economic maximizers, in terms comparable to Weber's in *The Protestant Ethic*.⁵³ Similarly, men's interests in using women's unpaid labour, in 'possessing' women and in controlling their sexuality, are rooted in needs and wants that are produced, not given. Women's and men's studies have begun to trace and describe the particular processes in particular historical contexts that give rise to these grim effects. These relatively contingent interests are in conflict with other, deeper ones.

4) Do men have any emancipatory interests as men? If women need social change in order to thrive, are men already thriving? Or are they thriving for their particular interests, given their attraction to death and domination? I find the ecofeminist idea that the military-industrial complex is in men's interests extraordinary, given the brutalization, abuse, wounding and killing of men in war. This idea rests on a deficit model of human health and thriving, which assumes that, since to be oppressed is bad for women, to be the agents of oppression must be good for men.⁵⁴ I suggest that men, as humans, as people in close relationships with women, as fathers and as sons, have themselves an emancipatory interest in ending the oppression of women and in putting a stop to the destruction of the environment. Undoubtedly the motivations in question may be hard to activate, and may require processes of some ferocity. The vested male interest in present structures under sense 3 is greater than that of women: this argument for women's leadership can be salvaged from standpoint theory.

As for 'social' ecofeminism, what we should save is a causal claim. In advanced capitalist societies, the social reproduction of the multiple forms of male domination is carried out through the *same mechanisms* as the simultaneous reproduction of environmentally destructive social practices. The processes that make boys and men reject their own weakness and hide their vulnerability—or entrust it to women—also inhibit clear awareness of the vulnerability of life on earth. I have been arguing that it is not just men's position on the top of the hierarchical dualisms that constructs them as the agents of destruction, but equally women's position on the lower side, the institutionalized splits themselves, and their cognitive and emotional hold. The enemy of women and nature is not men, but dichotomized gendered subjectivity itself. These causal claims, for there are several, need considerable teasing out, and the specification of socio-psychological mechanisms—though candidates for these already exist. Wherever this theoretical work was judged satisfactory, it would forbid the ghettoizing of gender issues in environmental politics. It would encourage the creative critique of current political forms and methods. It would require the extension of the practical critique of dualism to the overlapping dimensions of class, ethnicity and so on. It would offer, beyond the device of ecofeminism, alongside irreducibly real sectional interests, the ethical vision of grounded human solidarity, of human interests in reversing the current destructive trend.

⁵³ K. Marx, *Capital Volume I*, London 1938; M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Hemel Hempstead 1985, p. 62.

⁵⁴ C. New, *Agency, Health and Social Survival: the Eco-politics of Rival Psychologies*, London, forthcoming November 1996, ch. 8.

⁵² C. Delphy and D. Leonard, *Familiar Exploitation*, Cambridge 1992.